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The Narrative Function of Battlefield Supplication Scenes in the *Iliad*

Six times in Homer's *Iliad* vanquished warriors beg their conquerors for mercy. None of these pleas for compassion are successful, however. Many scholars view this lack of quarter as an indication that the ten-year Trojan War became more brutal as the conflict progressed. In this paper, I will show that this view misinterprets the function of the scenes of battlefield supplication in the *Iliad*. Nothing in the poem indicates it was ever customary to spare battlefield suppliants. I believe that the chief purpose of these episodes of combat supplication is to characterize the heroes involved. Each instance tells the reader something about the personality and state of mind of the victorious warrior.

The first occasion of battlefield supplication in the *Iliad*

(6.37-65) sets the tone for the subsequent scenes, as Menelaos encounters the Trojan Adrestos helpless on the ground. Adrestos begs to be spared by seizing Menelaos' knees and offering his captor a worthy ransom. Menelaos is persuaded by Adrestos' words and is about to spare him when Agamemnon strongly rebukes his brother for showing mercy to the Trojans. As a result of this fraternal scolding, Menelaos pushes away the suppliant. Agamemnon then promptly spears Adrestos. The personalities of the two brothers are masterfully revealed in this scene. Menelaos is irresolute and soft-hearted, and the ease with which the Spartan king is swayed by Adrestos' plea is suggestive of how he was duped by Paris. Indeed, Menelaos is the only character in the *Iliad* whose purpose is deflected by a battlefield entreaty. It is left to Agamemnon to dispatch Adrestos. Agamemnon's implacable hatred of the Trojans is later reinforced by his killing of two suppliant brothers (11.128-42).

I will also discuss the capture of the Trojan spy Dolon and his unsuccessful supplication of Diomedes and Odysseus, as well as Achilles' slaughter of three surrendering Trojans during his rampage after the death of Patroklos. All these examples will highlight how Homer uses battlefield supplication episodes to breathe life into his characters.