"Engendering Immortality: The Childbirth Simile of Agamemnon's retreat in *Iliad* 11.269-72"

As the wounded Agamemnon retreats from battle in *Iliad* 11.264-83, the simile concretizing his pain (269-72) employs an unexpected, unique referent: a woman in labor. This incongruity has puzzled scholars, who debate whether it validates Agamemnon's retreat, ironically scorns his brutality, or both. Recently, however, Holmes 2007 changed the conversation, arguing that the simile participates in a larger theme, the *Iliad*'s "economy of pain". I use a similar approach to suggest another new thematic reading, that Agamemnon's childbirth simile culminates his sustained, indirect characterization as a woman. Indeed, Agamemnon's depiction parallels that of Hesiod's Pandora/first woman: Like Pandora, who only *mimics* a sense of shame (*WD* 71) with her "bitch's mind and thievish nature" (*WD* 69, 80), and like *Theogony*'s insatiable woman, who sits idle as men struggle to provide for her (592-601), Agamemnon, "greediest of all" (1.122), is utterly shameless (1.23, 149, 158) and, like a dog (1.159, 225), avoids effort, having his men toil for him so he can steal the fruits of their labor (1.152-68, 225-30). Similarly, just as Pandora's decision to open her jar — a metaphor for her wanton sexuality — brings disease and death to men (*WD* 91-96), Agamemnon's lack of sexual restraint unleashes a plague that kills Achaeans (1.1-120). Finally, Pandora, woman, and Agamemnon each introduce 'pregnancy' (mortality) to their all-male settings.

These parallels, then, reinforce the *Iliad*'s cosmologic framework. How? Agamemnon's retreat generates "the beginning of [Patroclus'] doom" (11.604), i.e., Patroclus ultimately fights as Achilles because he grieves Greek casualties from the very Trojan rally that Zeus advises Hektor to begin *after* Agamemnon retreats (11.185-90). Thus, Agamemnon's simile recalls the primordial moment when men became mortal; it 'births' Patroclus' doom *cum* Achilles' death/poetic immortality, ensuring Zeus' sovereignty. It also exalts epic immortality — born through strife with men — over that gained *via* women bearing sons.

Word Count: 300

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*This presentation will not require audio-visual aids.