A memorable passage in Book 2 of the *Iliad* describes the physical features of Thersites, 'the ugliest man to come to the walls of Ilion,' in greater detail than those of any other character in the epic (2.212–19). But the traditional language of heroic epic was not so well equipped to describe his unheroic characteristics: the language is notably unformulaic, the passage is remarkably high in enjambment, and *hapax legomena* are extraordinarily frequent. One of these *hapax legomena* is the adjective φολκός used of Thersites at 2.217:

> Θερσίτης δ᾿ ἐτι μοῦνος ἀμετροεπὴς ἐκολὼ, ὃς ἔπεα φρεσίν ἕσιν ἀκοσμά τε πολλά τε ἦδη μάψι, ἀτὰρ οὐ κατὰ κόσμον, ἐριζέμεναι βασιλεύσιν, ἄλλα οὐ τι εἰσαίτο γελοίϊον Ἀργείουσιν (215) ἐμμεναι· αἴσχιστος δὲ ἀνὴρ ὑπὸ Ἴλιον ἔλθε· φολκός ἤν, χωλὸς δ᾿ ἄλλον πόδα· τὼ δὲ οἱ ὁμόφυλοι κυρτὰ ἐπὶ στῆθος συνοχωκότε· αὐτὰρ ὑπερθέ φοξὸς ἤν κεφαλήν, ψεδνὴ δ᾿ ἐπενήνθη λάχνη.

The adjective φολκός is an absolute *hapax legomenon* in the Greek language: it occurs only here and in some ancient scholia, lexica, and commentaries on this very passage. The ancients are almost unanimous in deriving the etymology of φολκός from ὁ τὰ φάη εἰλκυσμένος ‘one who draws up the eyes,’ i.e., a στραβός ‘squinter.’¹ A minority draw upon the same etymology but conclude that the adjective describes someone who ‘draws the eyes of others to oneself,’ i.e., out of pity.² Finally, it is reported that some, for unexplained reasons, understood the adjective to mean ‘circumcised.’³ Though this ancient association of φολκός with φάη seems morphologically and phonetically unlikely

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³ Reported by Hesychius sub φολκός-στραβός, οἷ ὁ λιπόδερμος. No explanation is given.
(for φα- + ἐλκ-, εἰλκ-, or ὀλκ- would not have resulted simply in the short omicron of φολκός), the association with ἐλκω (‘draw’ or ‘drag’) alone seems to have considerable merit, as I will argue below.

Modern lexicographers, commentators, and translators have largely abandoned the ancient view that φολκός refers to Thersites’ eyes in favor of the view that it refers to his legs, and, more specifically, to the curvature of his legs, i.e., that he is ‘bow-legged,’ ‘bandy-legged,’ or perhaps ‘knock-kneed.’ This interpretation is primarily based on the context of the passage: i.e., the fact that the phrase is followed by a reference to Thersites’ lameness, after which follow descriptions of the upper body and head. Of the various etymological cognates that are proposed—e.g., Greek φάλκης ‘ribs of a ship,’ φάλος ‘boss of a helmet,’ φαλός ‘stupid,’ φαλίπτειν ‘to be stupid,’ φαλωθείς ‘turned aside,’ and Latin falx ‘curved blade’ (hence falco ‘someone whose toes are curved in’), fallo, -ere ‘to mislead,’ valgus ‘knock-kneed’—none is both phonologically and morphologically sound and semantically attractive. Moreover, most of these proposed cognates are no more explicable etymologically than φολκός. H. Frisk—GEW sub φολκός—is patently honest in declaring that the word is unbekannter Bedeutung and ohne Etymologie.

Yet, the modern view seems to be at least partially correct. The context of this Iliadic passage seems to call for the meaning ‘dragging.’ The lameness in Thersites’ foot is the subject of the next clause, and then the description works its way up his body to his shoulders, chest, head,