Achilles’ Remorse

Considering its role in the dénouement of the *Iliad*, it is surprising that only a few modern scholars have attempted to define Achilles’ reaction to his causal role in Patroclus’ death. Whitman (1958) and Lloyd-Jones (1983) both see Achilles as blaming himself for sending Patroclus into battle. As Lloyd-Jones (1983: 22) says, “he finally sacrifices his life….out of remorse for his responsibility for the death of Patroclus.” Redfield (1975: 22), on the other hand, claims that “Achilles does not speak about his responsibility for his acts….he says only *ton apolesa*, ‘I have lost him.’”

In this paper, I argue that Whitman and Lloyd-Jones are correct and that Lloyd-Jones’ word-choice (though he does not support it in any way) is precise: Achilles’ reaction is best defined as ‘remorse’. I further claim that this reaction gives us a glimpse into the way the bard constructs his individual heroes by contrasting them with each other (cp. Pucci 1998: 82-91). I argue that Redfield’s reading of the text is incomplete. Achilles does not only say that he has lost Patroclus; rather he expresses a wish to die because he did not save Patroclus from being killed (18.98-102). The bard does not identify this emotion as remorse; indeed early Greek does not have a word close to this concept. Griffin (1980: 50-80, especially 60-6) has however shown that the bard often portrays emotions that he does not name, and Gaskin (1990: 2-6) has shown that he can employ concepts for which he has no word. In this light, I argue that Achilles does not feel shame/*aidos* (the feeling that one is diminished in status by a failure to live up to standards) or guilt (the feeling that one is stained by wrongdoing), but the emotion defined as ‘remorse’ in modern English philosophical discussion (Taylor 1985: 53-107, especially 97-107): a reaction to one’s own failure in which “the concentration…is not on the self, but on its actions and their consequences” (Taylor 1985: 98) and which leads the sufferer not to seek rehabilitation (as shame does) or forgiveness (as guilt does) but to offer reparation.

There has been much dispute over whether the Iliadic heroes are characters in the sense in which characters in modern novels are, or types (Collins 1988, especially 14-18; Dickson 1995.20-5). This paper responds to this debate by giving an example of the way in which the bard uses contrast to construct the type of characters that he deploys, however one defines them. Several of the heroes in the *Iliad* have to react to their own failures. Achilles, Agamemnon, and Hector, in particular, must all cope with having made decisions that led to others’ deaths. Hector and Achilles are clearly contrasted: both decide that they must die to make good their failures, but Hector does so out of shame/*aidos* (22.104-7), while Achilles does so out of remorse without shame. This accords with other aspects of the bard’s portrayal of these heroes. Hector is so consistently motivated by *aidos* that Redfield (1975: 119) calls him ‘a hero of *aidos*’. While Achilles, on the other hand, is concerned with others’ *aidos* towards himself (1.149, 11.649), both Ajax (implicitly,9.639-40) and Apollo (explicitly, 24.44) criticize him for lacking *aidos* towards others. Finally, Agamemnon, whose military failure parallels Hector’s (in that both fail to reckon with Achilles’ superior powers and thereby cause the deaths of many of their troops) displays neither of these emotions. At 19.137-8 (cp. 9.119-20), he accepts responsibility for his failures, but, as many have noted, he does so in a relatively shallow way: he offers to pay for his failure with goods, not with his life, and he places the blame for his action on the gods — which either of the other heroes could equally do but do not. Thus Achilles’ remorse helps to define him by contrast with other key heroes.

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