

Sweet to a Broken Heart: *Oinos Meliphrōn* as Motif in the *Iliad*

A pivotal moment in the encounter between Hecuba and Hector in *Iliad* 6 follows the mother's kindly request: "Stay, so I can bring you honey-sweet wine... you'll feel better if you drink" (μέν' ὄφρα κέ τοι μελιθδέα οἶνον ἐνείκω... ὀνήσειαι αἶ κε πίησθα, 6.258-60). Her son refuses, saying, "Do not bring me heart-sweet wine, Lady Mother, lest you deprive me of my might, and I forget my courage" (μή μοι οἶνον ἄειρε μελίφρονα πότνια μήτηρ, μή μ' ἀπογυιώσης μένεος, ἀλκῆς τε λάθωμαι, 264-5). In this paper I examine the significance of the small but noticeable shift in language that distinguishes the drink that Hecuba offers Hector—*oinos meliēdēs*—from that which he refuses to accept—*oinos meliphrōn*. To do so, I first evaluate existing interpretations of each word, as well as of this scene, in scholarship and scholia. I then turn to a close reading of *meliphrōn* in the *Iliad* and its relationship to Hector's character, and suggest that this unassuming epithet is more meaningful than previously thought.

Hector's response and the motivation behind it remain contentious among commentators: the bT scholia consider that wine might make Hector unsuitably jovial during battle (Erbse 2012, 179n264), and that drinking may be beneficial only after toil and not before (Erbse, 178n260); Eustathius suggests it is the wrong time of day to be drinking wine (Stalbaum 2010, 108n265); and Porphyry that it would not benefit one so weary as Hector (MacPhail 2010, 119n265). Similarly, scholars have alternatively read Hecuba's gesture as a temptation to tarry away from battle (Murnaghan 1992, 251); pointless, as Hector is in fact not tired at all (Nappi 2015, 38); and as a test of Hector's restraint and social competence (Graziosi and Haubold 2010, 268).

By emphasizing the disjointed adjectives in this passage, it seems at first that I have simply exchanged one interpretative problem for another: Düntzer (1872) argues unequivocally

that only meter and never meaning determined Homer's epithets for wine (514), and *meliphrōn* is often considered generic, a contention largely unchallenged by lexicographical works such as the *Lfgre* (see Snell 1993, 110). Indeed, though less common than *meliēdēs*, it is used variously to describe sleep (2.34) and wheat (8.188) as well as wine (6.263, 8.506, 8.546, and 24.284). Again, however, there is a notable current of uncertainty: Ebeling (1885, 1041), like the bT, considers that *meliphrōn* may uniquely imply the alteration of the mind (from μέλι and φρήν), and Redfield (1994) goes so far as to conclude that Hector's words are an "exact observation of the physiological facts" of imbibing alcohol (277)—in other words, Hector wants to avoid becoming drunk.

Moreover, as Graziosi and Haubold argue, *meliphrōn* is not merely "a common epithet of wine, food and sleep," it is "one of Hector's favourite words" (270). Of its six uses in the *Iliad*, five are closely linked to his character and three occur in his speech. Read in contrast to the ubiquitous use of *meliēdēs* elsewhere, it becomes plausible, then, that just as the language of *oinos meliphrōn* is tied to Hector's character, so too is its meaning to the narrative fulfillment of his tragedy. Over the course of the poem its presence becomes powerfully symbolic of his cares, his fears, his social ties; to the determination and desperation that define his life and the all-consuming grief that follows his death. By the time that *oinos meliphrōn* finally reappears within the cup that Hecuba now offers to Priam before he departs to ransom their son's corpse, it has come to signify not only a loving relationship untimely severed, but also the striking complexity of Homeric poetics and the vibrant internal lives of the characters it creates—hiding, as it were, just beneath the surface.

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