

Imminent Doom and Immanent Art: A Traditional Explanation for Laughter in *Iliad* 6

Iliad 6.471 provides audiences with one of the most famous instances of laughter in classical literature when Hector and Andromache laugh in response to their son Astyanax's reaction to the terrible tight of Hector's plumed helmet (Halliwell, Graziosi and Haubold). Although this scene has been typically regarded as either a touching reprieve in the midst of war or one of the only positive instances of laughter in ancient Greek literature (cf. Levine), this paper argues that this instance is not only consistent with the *Iliad*'s and especially the *Odyssey*'s use of laughter as a signal of imminent doom, but is also part of a wider pattern in Homeric epic that signals a discrepancy in awareness on the part of mortals, especially masculine heroes, in their attempts to control their own fate and *kleos* (Arft). Application of oral poetic methods reveal a consistent patterning in the deployment of laughter in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* that not only changes our perception of the tenor of this moment but also reinforces a wider pattern of traditional referentiality that reveals the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to be more similar than not in their treatment of mortals and their limitations in epic.

Treatments of laughter in classical literature, especially those focused on epic and tragedy, note the generally paradoxical nature of laughter not as something funny or joyous, but as something more unnatural, negative, or ominous (Levine, Dillon). In Homer, there are 32 instances of the verb γέλαω (and related forms) or the noun γέλως, both of which signify laughing, and while some of these instances (especially in the *Iliad* and those involving the gods) are derisive in nature, most instances in the *Iliad* are more fundamentally linked to the plot's fulfillment and knowledge (or lack thereof) concerning characters' fate in relation to the plot or larger Trojan War tradition. For instance, Hera's laughter at *Iliad* 15.101 is a direct response to

Zeus' harsh admonishment about the ensuing plot to heal Hector so that he will kill Patroclus, resulting in Achilles' return, and at 19.362, the earth itself laughs as Achilles arms himself about to further fulfill this plot of Zeus. Even more pointedly, at *Iliad* 23.784, Ajax is the object of laughter following Odysseus' victory over Ajax with Athena's help, an ominous signal of Ajax's future fate following a similar intervention at the hands of both Athena and Odysseus.

The *Odyssey*, however, shows us more clearly the ramifications of mortals' laughter, especially in the face of limited perception of unfolding events. Throughout books 18 and 20, several instances of laughter not only signal the imminent demise of the suitors (Levine), but more pointedly reveal their inability to perceive the reality before them. The blood feast of *Odyssey* 20 in particular juxtaposes the suitors' madness with both their laughter and their grief (346–49), showing that laughter becomes an unsettling bodily reflex in the face of imminent doom.

Overall, the traditional referentiality (thus immanent meaning [Foley, Arft]) of laughter's patterned use in Homer allows us to reinterpret instances of laughter in *Iliad* 6 not only when Penelope and Hector laugh at Astyanax's terror at the sight of his father—who in that moment is prognosticating about his demise—but also Penelope's own weeping through tears, not unlike the suitors' mixture of grief and laughter in the face of death. In short, this moment of laughter is a reflex that indicates the ultimate cyclic fate of Astyanax, thrown from the walls of Troy.

While this interpretation of laughter in *Iliad* 6 is grim, it not only adds dimension to the nature of Hector's and Penelope's emotions in this scene, it also places this scene in a much wider network of episodes wherein characters are unable to perceive what the audience can. While this phenomenon is demonstrable with male heroes (Arft), this pattern suggests that

Andromache, too, is unable to see this fate for her son as well, adding to the depth of grief in this powerful episode.

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