

The Queer Menace (*menis*): Achilles as Affect Alien

Sara Ahmed argues that societies construct a “promise of happiness” as a reward for performing behaviors which those societies deem to be “happiness-causing” (Ahmed 2010, 55). Such behaviors generally represent the normative ideal in their respective societies and are termed “happiness scripts”. Undesirable behaviors, in turn, are “unhappiness causes” which are attached to queer identities that are seen to cause unhappiness through their deviation from the happiness scripts and destabilization of the normative social order (Ahmed 91). As result, Ahmed argues, societies have a vested interest in maintaining the viability of the happiness scripts and alienate those who deviate from them.

Using Ahmed’s theories, I argue that Achilles undergoes a process of isolation and disillusionment with the societal expectations and rewards of his script, namely that his participation in the Trojan war at the cost of his life will result in the obtainment of *timē* and *kleos apthiton* (Zanker 1994, 77-78). This process characterizes him as an “affect alien” as he experiences “a gap between the promise of happiness and how [he is] affected by objects that promise happiness” (Ahmed 42). Ahmed argues that this alienating experience often results in “a narrative of rage, where the object that is supposed to make us happy is attributed as the cause of disappointment... Anger can fill the gap between the promise of a feeling and the feeling of a feeling.” (Ahmed 42). Achilles’ rage is therefore a queer response to the failure of his social capital to return the promised emotional reward.

For Achilles, the promise of happiness is embodied by the material and social returns of the honor economy – his reputation among the Greeks as *aristos achaion* and his right to Briseis as a spoil of war (Il.1.391-392, 411-412). By denying Achilles’ absolute right to the latter,

Agamemnon challenges the surety of the former. In questioning the status of Achilles' *kleos*, Agamemnon's rape of Briseis and Achilles' resulting experience of rage allows for the 'opening' of perspective which Ahmed argues is the natural byproduct of the queer orientation away from happiness as an absolute good with an absolute script for its obtainment (Ahmed 20). The promise of happiness, or of *timē* and *kleos*, has been proven to Achilles to be a lie (*Il.* 9.315). Not only has Agamemnon corrupted the balance of the honor economy in Achilles' eyes (Slatkin 1991, 19; Zanker 77), but the entire Greek army, in their failure to unreservedly support Achilles' position, has demonstrated a disregard for the system by which Achilles has, until this point, chosen to live his life.

From this point, Achilles' narrative focuses on his reckoning with this position and his participation in the honor economy, from which he is eventually entirely alienated, first by Agamemnon's actions, then by Patroclus' death. The latter results in a renewed experience of rage at the failure of martial glory to return the promised emotional reward, heightened by the loss of the competing nonnormative object of desire – Patroclus (Lesser 2022: 187-188) which ultimately highlights the failure of the happiness scripts to actually cause happiness.

Works Cited

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