

Lycaon, Priam, and the Death of Patroclus

The killing of Lycaon at the opening of *Iliad* 21 has been read primarily as an example of unsuccessful supplication and as an expression of Achilles' violent grief and rage. In this paper, I argue that formal obligations of *φιλία* are also a critical subtext to Achilles' response. Thus read, the passage highlights the fundamental tensions resolved in *Iliad* 24.

In rejecting Lycaon's plea, Achilles clearly identifies Patroclus' death as a defining event: the former exchange of life for ransom is no longer possible (21.99-102). Richardson (1993: 61-2) emphasizes the contrast between "normal" conditions of war and the "passionate revenge" that now drives Achilles. Similarly, Wilson (2002: 115, 170-2) emphasizes Achilles' anguish and the rhetorical strategy of Lycaon's plea of innocence; Gould (1973: 80-1) and Naiden (2006: 131-3), his act of releasing of Achilles' knees. I argue that Patroclus' position within the house of Peleus is a critical subtext here, one that illuminates Achilles' responses and anticipates the resolution of book 24.

Peleus had accepted the suppliant Patroclus, exiled for killing a playmate, and made him a *θεράπων* to Achilles (23.84-90). The details appears late in the *Iliad* but it is clear from the *scholia* that the essentials of the story were well established. This adds an element of *ἀνάγκη* to the situation that is undervalued in current scholarship. In addition to expressing affection, Achilles' identification of Patroclus as *φίλος ἑταῖρος* evokes this bond through Peleus. Had Patroclus fallen in battle fighting beside Achilles, no shame would have attended his death. But for Achilles to send him forth as a surrogate and fail to defend him is a very different matter (see 18.98-100). Betrayal of promises to suppliants was unheroic and offensive to the gods (see Naiden: 122-9). This evokes a double bind worthy of the Attic stage. Should Achilles cut losses and return home, as threatened in *Iliad* 9, he would do so in ignominy. But restoration of familial

honor means killing Hector, the one act that will seal his own demise. Moreover, in the case of Achilles, it will mean an *aristeia* without parallel. Other warriors are aware that they *might* die imminently; Achilles fights in the sure knowledge that he *will*, but not on this particular day. Such knowledge voids most forms of human reciprocity, for one cannot exchange with the living from the house of Hades. It leaves no cause for restraint or pity, for there is no reason to be mindful of human frailty in this particular battle.

As Crotty (1994: 84-5) and Wilson (171) have both recognized, appeal to φιλότης (prior commensality) is a key aspect of Lycaon's plea, a status that Achilles acknowledges by addressing him as φίλος (21.106). It is, however, a doomed strategy given Patroclus' superseding claim on this count. We need not join Richardson (60) in attributing Achilles' response to mere "loss" of αἰδώς and ἔλεος. As Richardson (57) rightly notes, Lycaon's freedom had been purchased with a gift given to his liberator by Patroclus. Lycaon's attempt to engage Achilles through reference to normal modes of exchange recalls the earlier bond between Patroclus and reciprocity, together with its implications for Achilles. Thus, Achilles responds by redefining φιλότης in reference to the only aspect of human experience that he, Lycaon, and Patroclus can share: death (cf. Crotty: 84-5).

Similar themes emerge in Priam's supplication at the close of the poem, but with a critical difference. Where Lycaon appeals to φιλότης, Priam evokes family and the duties thereof (24.486-9). Put another way, he evokes the bond, apart from death, to which Achilles can most directly relate. We need not suppose that Priam understands fully the degree to which Achilles is a dead man walking. The *katabasis* elements in the narrative signal provide the audience with the necessary framework. Priam then turns to death, but locates it within the inevitable turn of fortune to ruin (493-502). This reverses Lycaon's failing. His appeal was rooted in hope of a

second escape from death. Priam, by contrast, embraces the inevitable from the outset, a strategy that mirrors Achilles' own situation. Only then does Priam turn to offer of ἄποινα and the request for ἔλεος (502-3), but with a final appeal to shared familial obligation as the basis for acceptance (504-6). Thus, he furnishes Achilles with a framework for re-engaging, for such time as he has remaining, with the human community and we see, once again, the deadly but noble hero described by Andromache in book 6.

Bibliography

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