

Mothers and Men: A Reexamination of Mother Similes in the *Iliad*

A particular group of Homeric similes that has recently become a subject of especial scholarly interest is that of the “mother simile.” In the *Iliad* there are a few curious comparisons drawn between the soldiers fighting at Troy and the mothers and children of the domestic sphere. In Book 9, Achilles compares himself to a mother bird bringing food for her young, the Achaeans, even at her own expense (9.323-7); Book 17 involves a scene in which Menelaus guards over the body of Patroclus like a “mother cow”(17.133-7); and in Book 16, Achilles describes Patroclus as a young, foolish girl who begs her mother, here Achilles himself, to hold her (16.7-11). This last simile (in Book 16) presents a problem for the reader, as it compares two mutually exclusive social spheres, the opposition of which has led many readers to focus on the contrast or irony of the simile, rather than the ways in which this simile maps onto the relationship of Patroclus and Achilles.

Thus, interpretations of these similes have tended to, rather than elucidating the implications of their congress in these passages, contrast the image of the mother with that of the soldier. For example, Kathy Gaca has argued that the simile in Book 16 forebodes the infiltration of the domestic sphere by the Achaeans, as the scene reflects later images of captured women in Attic drama (Gaca 2008). In response to her work, David Porter has argued that the image is also an endearing contrast to the war at hand, calling back to the families away from the war (Porter 2010). Yet this approach is very limiting of the complexity a simile can convey. Whatever such division may bring to bear on our understanding of the poem as a whole, these compared subjects do not convey all of their meaning in their contrasts. What does the blending of the image of the mother with the image of the soldier signify? What does it say about the bonds of

soldiers, particularly the bonds of Patroclus and Achilles? How does this reversal indicate a relationship of power between Patroclus and Achilles?

In this paper, I shall argue that the figurative image of the mother and her child in Book 16 of the *Iliad* plays a role in creating a simultaneously hierarchical and affectionate relationship between Achilles and Patroclus, which gives the reader insight into the pederastic elements of their friendship. Through close reading of other mother similes from the *Iliad* and discussion of the secondary literature from *Symposium* to modern readings of Achilles and Patroclus, I will elaborate on the texture of the mother simile at *Iliad* 16.7-11 and its implications for our understanding of the complexities of the relationship between Patroclus and Achilles.

Bibliography

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