

Wellsprings of Grief: *Iliad* 9.14-15 and 16.3-4

One of the eight repeated similes in Homeric epic, depicting a dark spring pouring from a rock, is found in two scenes of weeping by a prominent Greek hero upset by the sufferings of his fellows after Achilles withdraws from battle. At *Iliad* 9.14-15, this simile precedes a speech by the tearful Agamemnon as he addresses an assembly of the beleaguered Greeks, initially proposing to leave Troy (17-28) but persuaded by his comrades to have a meal instead. The simile appears again at *Iliad* 16.3-4, describing the weeping Patroclus before Achilles – under the guise of asking Patroclus why he is crying – takes him to task for sympathizing with their Greek comrades (7-19). While these two contexts share a simile and the tears of a key Greek speaker at a crucial juncture, they have a number of differences as well. In particular, the same stream simile emphasizes both tears that bind the Greeks together (Book 9) and emotions that separate close comrades (Book 16).

Many analyses of this simile have focused on whether the repetition should be seen as an intentional feature of the poem's composition. Moulton 1977: 103 sees the repetition as an invitation "to consider the contrast between Achilles' greatest friend and his arch-enemy," but Hainsworth 1993: 60-61 finds it "hard to imagine" that an audience would be capable of such large-scale acts of memory and comparison. Others have delved into the underlying meaning of the image, while acknowledging that no firm conclusions can be reached about a data set with only two members: for instance, Ready 2011: 173, with bibliography, speculates that this simile motif conveys the message, "a character faces a terrifying situation and is willing to resort to measures that he never would have considered before." If we focus on the details of how each simile is connected to its adjacent story context, we see how a given simile vignette can create two quite different emotional atmospheres between a tearful person and his interlocutor(s),

without reference to unanswerable questions of whether these two passages are intended to shed light on each other or what the underlying meaning of this motif might be.

In Book 9, Agamemnon addresses a gathering of Greeks that he has summoned to discuss the plight in which they find themselves in the absence of Achilles. At each end of the simile, the “as” and “so” expressions feature a main verb whose subject is Agamemnon weeping in the presence of a group of Greeks whom he is about to address. Before the simile, Agamemnon stands up among the Greeks (ἄνδρ' ἴστατο δάκρυ χέων, 13-14), a behavioral accompaniment to speech that is linked to assemblies in particular (Beck 2005: 222-25). The formulaic speech introductory verb μετηύδα (16) that follows the ὥς exit of the simile is used for a speech to a group of people. Moreover, the assembled Greeks are explicitly said to share Agamemnon's grief (ἴζον δ' εἰν ἀγορῇ τετιηότες, 13). Thus, the simile focuses consistently on Agamemnon as part of a group of Greeks, depicting him and the Greek assembly here as united in their basic feelings about the Greek plight. The simile helps us to see Agamemnon's tearful speech as the first step toward finding a way forward in response to those feelings, even while the assembly provides a mechanism for airing divergent views about what to do next.

In the conversation between Patroclus and Achilles in *Iliad* 16, in contrast, the simile suggests that Patroclus' grief alienates him from his comrade. Patroclus' tears appear to prevent him from speaking at all, insofar as the speech introduction immediately following the simile precedes a speech by Achilles rather than Patroclus himself (τὸν δὲ ἰδὼν ᾤκτιρε ποδάρκης δῖος Ἀχιλλεύς, / και μιν φωνήσας ἔπεα πτερόεντα προσηύδα, 5-6). Moreover, the emotion that prompts Patroclus' weeping does not unite him and his interlocutor. On the contrary, it rouses the scorn and impatience of Achilles (e.g. 17-18). Perhaps the most vivid sign of Achilles' complicated emotions about Patroclus' weeping emerges from the simile that he uses to describe

those tears, a comparison in which Patroclus features as a νηπιή tearful girl (8) who wants her mother to pick her up (7-11; Porter 2010 offers a superb overview of the range of strong and perhaps contradictory feelings of Achilles that are captured by this vivid yet elusive scene).

Bibliography

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