

The Dirt on Hector: Homicide Pollution in the *Iliad*

This paper revisits the idea of homicide pollution and purification in the *Iliad*. While shedding human blood in Archaic and Classical Greek religion was usually thought to incur pollution (*miasma*) requiring ritual purification, the Homeric epics show little obvious concern with pollution risk. A view influential among scholars since the 19th c. has been that Homer is tellingly “silent” regarding homicide pollution: this view was advocated by Erwin Rohde and especially E. R. Dodds, who saw in the “Homeric Silence” evidence for a large-scale societal shift from the “shame culture” of epic to a “guilt culture” pervaded by pollution anxiety in the Archaic and Classical periods. Building on critiques of this interpretation by Robert Parker and Bernard Eck, I argue instead that homicide pollution is present in the world of the *Iliad*, but strategically deemphasized in service of the epic’s subject matter. Drawing on Mary Douglas’ anthropological analyses of purity and pollution, I suggest that pollution risk appears in ways that accentuate key boundaries in Homeric narrative (city/battlefield) and society (female/male). Ultimately, the variable formulations of “dirt” and pollution risk in Homer and other literary genres reflect narrative requirements rather than a diachronic development.

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