

Patroklos and the Pity of Achilles

The central question of this essay is what Achilles' choice to allow Patroklos to enter battle in Book Sixteen teaches us about pity's role in the heroic ethic. As I examine this question, my primary influence is Jinyo Kim's dissertation "The Theme of Pity in the 'Iliad'" in which she challenges the notion, evinced in Redfield's *Nature and Culture in the Iliad* among other sources, that pity is antithetical to the heroic ethos because it hinders the hero from fulfilling his purpose or function (Kim 1992, 10; Redfield 1975, 104; Scott 1974, 1). Kim, on the other hand, divides pity into two types: pity toward friends and pity toward enemies (Kim 1992, 10-11). She argues that, while the latter undoubtedly hampers the hero in the pursuance of his role, the former is absolutely critical to it, since the Greek notion of pity includes action. Pity for endangered or fallen comrades is what sets the hero in motion displaying valor in battle (Kim 1992, 12-4). Thus, making use of Redfield's idea that the hero's function determines his ethic, Kim shows that some pity is integral to the heroic ethic.

In light of this observation from Kim, I examine the events of Book Sixteen and argue that Achilles' great mistake at this juncture is a failure to effectively change his attitude toward the Achaians from that of *φίλοι* to that of *ἔχθροι*. Because Achilles, as a hero, has strong instincts of pity toward comrades, he struggles to banish these instincts when he is no longer on the same side. As a result, when Patroklos comes asking Achilles to let him assist the Achaians, Patroklos' own pity works on Achilles' pity of Patroklos and his former comrades, and causes him to take a step that is inconsistent with his official stance. Because some would argue that Achilles does not act out of pity in this scene, my essay examines the textual evidence, concluding that he does (Thornton 1984, 133). Achilles' mistake, then, is that his heroic instincts of pity continue to

control him when they no longer help him fulfill his function, at least the one he has determined for himself.

Finally, Achilles will lose his sense of pity completely only to regain it in a fuller and more surprising way at the conclusion of the epic. This misfire of a once-appropriate pity response in Book Sixteen is what leads to Achilles' own doom: Hektor kills Patroklos and Achilles kills Hektor, sealing his own fate. Prior to this, Achilles had been characterized by another form of *ἔλεος*, that of pity towards conquered enemies (Deichgraber 1972, 99). While the consequences of Achilles' unbridled pity of the Achaians—Patroklos' death—temporarily robs him of this leniency toward the vanquished, it returns in Book Twenty-four, as he allows Priam to ransom Hektor's body. This type of pity does not serve a practical function for the hero yet it is the culmination of the epic; thus, I suggest that the conclusion of the work offers a value for pity that goes beyond the heroic code itself to what is more fundamentally human.

Bibliography

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