

Lament in the Speech of the Iliadic Narrator

This paper argues that the feminine discourse of lament is more pervasive in and characteristic of the speech of the Iliadic narrator than previous analyses have demonstrated. Many scholars have remarked upon the thematic importance of lament in the poem (Bakker; Murnaghan; Tsagalis; Dué). Nagy writes in passing that “the themes and diction of lament appear to have shaped the *Iliad*” (69-71). However, the full extent to which this proposition is true with regard to the speech of the narrator, and, if true, how it should affect our reading of gender in the poem, has not yet been explored. In ancient Greece, lament was a ritual speech genre practiced by women at funerals, and examples of lament in epic and tragedy are thought to draw heavily upon this female oral tradition (Alexiou; Murnaghan; Dué). To posit that the *Iliad* has been shaped by lament is to posit that the poem has been shaped by a specifically feminine speech genre, originating from the performances and lived experiences of ancient Greek women. In this paper, I demonstrate how numerous characteristic features of lament appear throughout the speech of the narrator and examine whether these features should lead us to reconsider the gendering of the Iliadic narrator’s voice as univocally “masculine.”

One place in which characteristics of lament have been observed in the speech of the narrator is in the “short obituaries” for dying warriors. Tsagalis observes that both laments and short obituaries emphasize premature death, genealogical information, and ring composition. I suggest that other fundamental similarities can be found. Crucially, the short obituaries are characterized by antithesis used to increase pathos (cf. Griffin), which is a key feature of Greek lament (Alexiou). Laments use spatial and temporal deixis (Tsagalis) to juxtapose the mourners with the mourned, the homeland of the deceased with the foreign land of his

death, and the happy past with the mournful present. They also narrate significant life passages such as births and marriages (Alexiou). Similarly, short obituaries use temporal deixis to juxtapose the warrior's death on the battlefield with his life before the war (cf. 5.49-58; 6.21-29; 16.570-80), while the dead warrior's separation from his loved ones is emphasized by verbs of motion and locative and spatial adverbs (cf. 5.148-51; 5.543-53; 11.218-47; 17.301; 17.611). Many of the accounts of fallen warriors pay particular attention to the circumstances of their births (4.473-89, 6.20-28, 14.442-45, 20.381-92) and their marriages or betrothals (11.218-47, 13.170-81, 13.363-69, 13.427-44), highlighting the pain their deaths will cause. Such emphasis on the pain of loss for those left behind is also characteristic of lament (Murnaghan).

Lament's usage of antithesis to increase *pathos* appears not only in the short obituaries, but throughout the speech of the narrator. For example, in the *teichoscopia*, the narrator juxtaposes Helen's expectation that her brothers are alive with the reality of their deaths far away (3.34-42), as a lamenting Helen herself might have done had she known their fate. Similarly, during Achilles' pursuit of Hector past the springs of Scamander, the narrator tells that it was in this spot that the Trojan women used to wash their clothes "in peacetime, before the sons of the Achaeans came" (τὸ πρὶν ἐπ' εἰρήνης πρὶν ἔλθεῖν υἱᾶς Ἀχαιῶν, 22.156). In the context of Hector's imminent death, the peaceful landscape before the war is juxtaposed with the current scene of violence and the foreshadowed destruction of the city and its people. We hear in this description a fragment of a lament for Troy by the narrator, who speaks long after the city has fallen.

These examples demonstrate concrete ways in which the speech of the Iliadic narrator is characterized by the themes and diction of lament. Since lament is a traditionally feminine speech genre, and since the Iliadic narrator has, as De Jong has pointed out, "no name and

no body (and strictly speaking no sex!)” (45), I suggest that it is appropriate to read a gendered polyvocality into the narrator’s speech, a complex layering of gendered perspectives rather than a monologic masculine voice.

Bibliography

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