

“Unhappy Are Those Whose Sons”: The Pathos of Iliadic Hector

“Unhappy are those whose sons match warcraft against me” is Lattimore’s version; more literally: “Of unfortunate ones do sons oppose my μένος/strength-in-war.” The deadliest of the Achaeans speak this formulaic line, Diomedes (*Iliad* 6.127) and Achilles (21.151), sample of a broader pathetic theme, the misery a warrior’s death in battle entails for his nearest and dearest.

In order to exploit such emotion-laden loss at least one figure long *hors de combat* is recalled (Protesilaus, 2.698-701, where his bride-mourner Laodamia is not named) and others appear only to be killed off (e.g., Simoeisus, who didn’t return θρέπτρα to his parents, 4.477f).

In the abstract, this topic is especially associated with Diomedes (Nestor’s comment on the widows he makes, 8.155f; his own boast to Paris, about widows and orphans, 11.393f). In the concrete, however, it is by far most elaborate in relation to Achilles himself *and Hector*.

Whatever we think about Kullmann’s theory on *Quellen der Ilias* (1960) and *Aethiopsis-Iliad* parallelisms or M. L. West’s solution to its problems (*CQ* 53 [2003], 1-14), comparison of the two epics’ climactic duels, viz. Achilles-Memnon and Achilles-Hector, tellingly paired on a splendid crater in London by the Berlin Painter (E468), shows that a hypothetical “*Memnonis*” addressed as central theme a fateful clash of young, demigods and its sequel in goddess-mothers eternal mourning, first that of Eos, soon thereafter Thetis’, both also famous subjects in vase-painting. Memnon’s father Tithonus, however, is out of the story, growing old elsewhere (like Peleus in distant Phthia) and unmentioned in the Epitome of Proclus. Memnon evidently had neither wife nor child. (A son of Achilles does exist, Neoptolemus on faraway Scyrus—by interpolation in the *Iliad*, as West postulates? So that Achilles may have both father and son, I would say, in addition to his “wife” Briseis, himself becoming a tragic family man!)

The developed Achilles-Hector story, on the other hand, in the gradual build-up to the death of the Priamid prince, in immediate context before and after that death, and in the sequel through to the very last line of our *Iliad*, all seems designed to serve two other grand themes, an ideological opposition Athena-and-Achilles versus Apollo-and-Hector *and* a maximum elaboration of the family-pathos theme, which comprises not only survivors’ anticipated suffering, but the angst of the hero in face of death, afraid not only for himself but also for those whom he will leave unprotected behind.

Iliad introduces us to several intimates whom Hector’s death will ruin. It dramatizes their affective relationships with him, even that of baby Astyanax who bawls at the sight of Daddy’s helmeted head and face. Book 6’s extended urban episode is pivotal, showing Hector first with mother Hecuba, then with brother Paris, finally with wife Andromache and their infant son. In the famous scene that gives the book its ancient title Ἐκτορος καὶ Ἀνδρομάχης ὀμιλία the hero anticipates his death, echoing Agamemnon’s assurance that Ilium, Priam, and Priam’s people are doomed (4.163-65 = 6.447-49). Paris’ brother knows the dreadful consequence of the broken truce, earlier that day, under terms of both sides’ solemn oath at 3.299-301; see Agamemnon’s prediction for the offending Trojans, their wives and children at 4.162.) Hector fears for his nation generally, for Hecuba and Priam and his brothers, but most for Andromache (6.450-463), then prays, suppressing fear for their little son’s *life* too terrible for him to speak (which Andromache will speak only after Hector’s death: 24.726-739), that the boy grow up to be an even greater warrior than his father and make his mother proud. (476-481).

Before Hector’s fatal confrontation with Achilles both his parents plead that he fall back into the city, Priam foreseeing among other pitiful events (22.61-65) his own corpse’s defilement (66-76), Hecuba the unlikelihood that she and her daughter-in-law Andromache will be able to mourn her son duly (22.86-89); afterward come first the parents’ apostrophic laments for their slain son (Priam’s, 415-428; Hecuba’s, 431-436), then Andromache’s premonition of her husband’s death (454-59), her physical reaction to sight of his corpse being dragged away (463-74), and her prediction of a hard life for their orphaned son—if he outlives the war (484-507).

Book 24 brings us back to Hector’s parents under anguish of his recent death (160-321), then to the interview of father Priam and son Achilles, and to wife’s farewell (725-745)—and even, in Andromache’s apostrophe (732-739) son’s—and mother’s (748-759). Demigoddess sister-in-law, immune to such pains in her life, blissfully unaware of her brothers’ death (3.236-244), eulogizes him, too (24.762-775). The last word, however, belongs to patriarch Priam, ordering a funeral that is his family’s and his city’s (778-781).