

ILIAD 24.547–549: BLAMELESS ACHILLES¹

At the great meeting between Achilles and King Priam in the last book of the *Iliad*, Achilles replies to Priam's appeal only after he has been able first to overcome his astonishment at suddenly finding at his feet his wretched enemy cowering in supplication and then only after he himself has given way to weeping for his own parallel reasons. When he is finally ready to speak, he exclaims his admiration for Priam's courage and for how much grief Priam has been able to bear up under (518, ἄνυχτο, as second person indicative). He offers Priam the consolation of theology; he confides to him the hidden griefs of his own father and his own feelings about these (538–542), and he urges Priam to (get up from the ground and take a seat and) bear his pain (549, ἄνυχτο again, this time imperative).

Even if, in some light, Achilles' statements can seem contradictory, no one doubts the emotional coherence of this great scene, any more than, for instance, in the next moment, when Achilles will leap from his throne threatening to kill Priam, but storm outside instead to prepare the corpse of Hector for respectful delivery. Nevertheless, although we do not require it, there is a certain less conspicuous logical thread beneath all the turbulence of Achilles' discourse that adds a further poignant aspect to what he says.

Consider first the myth Achilles proposes of the storage jars (πίθοι) set into the floor of Zeus' palace. They contain granules of misery or blessing which Zeus serves up for each human life: misery and blessings mixed or pure misery, but never a life of blessing unmarred (525f.)². For 25 lines Achilles expounds and applies the myth to the life of Priam and to what he remarkably argues to be the equivalent case of his own father, Peleus (to which we shall return). He concludes, 547–549,

1) I am grateful to T. Corey Brennan for his encouragement and help, and to Mabel Lang, David Daube, and Walter Burkert for their comments, and to Pamela Lackey and Elizabeth Woeckner for assistance in the Bryn Mawr College Classics Seminar Room.

2) M. M. Willcock, "There is worse suffering than that of Priam or Peleus, the suffering of the hungry and destitute." *The Iliad of Homer*, xiii-xxiv (London 1982) ad 560–70, p. 318.

αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ τοι πῆμα τόδ' ἤγαγον Οὐρανίωνες,
αἰεὶ τοι περὶ ἄστυ μάχαι τ' ἀνδροκτασίαι τε.
ἄνσχεο, μηδ' ἄλίσστον ὁδύρεο σὸν κατὰ θυμόν·

The period the OCT puts onto line 548 causes this and the preceding line to be understood as Achilles' chronological account of Priam's life. Priam once enjoyed opulent blessing and prosperity,

But from the time when the gods brought you this woe,/there are
battles and killings constantly around your city./Bear up! don't keep
on weeping and weeping with all your heart.

The imperative ἄνσχεο, "bear up", "pull yourself together," of the next line is abrupt and disjunct. But it is, of course, just this imperative that Achilles has been aiming for throughout, and Priam is quite right to reply to the whole disquisition on the myth and its application to life, with the words, "Don't ask me to sit!" Achilles' purpose is to get Priam to compose himself and sit, just as his purpose in the nearly as lengthy discourse he soon produces on the myth of Niobe is to get Priam to stop weeping and eat (602–618)³. But then for Achilles to emphasize the chronology of Priam's reversal of fortune (τὸ πρὶν . . . ἐπεὶ) is surely to strike the wrong note. To say to Priam, previously you were fabulously wealthy and happily presided over a huge family, now your people and family and land are ravaged by war, hardly seems to be the right backdrop to exhort him to refrain from tears.

If we may permit ourselves to ignore and read through the period (full stop) at the end of 548 (and the particles suggest we may)⁴, then it appears that Achilles is not underlining for Priam the turning point in his fatal history, but concluding with an argument (beginning with αὐτὰρ),

Now, since the gods brought you this woe,/that there are, you know,
battles and killings ever around the city,/bear up! (endure it: weeping
will accomplish nothing).

3) George Held, "Niobe, traditionally a prototype of inconsolable grief, is made into her opposite, someone who despite her grief accepts consolation in the form of food." Phoinix, Agamemnon, and Achilles, CQ 37 (1987) 255.

4) Homer did not, of course, have our punctuation marks. He made do with grammar and small helping words or particles. In this case the combination τόδε . . . τοι does the job. One use of ὅδε is to indicate that a full-line clause, subject in the nominative, will follow to spell out what has just been mentioned, LSJ s.v. III 2 (p. 1198a), e.g. Iliad 1.41–2. The subsequent τοι will then indicate that the amplifying words the τόδε signalled would come are now in place.

This is now a direct conclusion drawn from the description of Zeus' storage jars with which Achilles began. On this reading ἐπεὶ will retain its more usual meaning, 'since,' 'seeing that,' and the key word ἄνυχο is no longer asyndetic, but the prepared climax⁵.

Line 548 is now just a parenthesis to πῆμα τόδ' of 547, "this woe," and is not strictly necessary⁶. We already understand that "this woe" refers to the Trojan War⁷. The particle τοι, "you know," not only helps the line serve its function as a parenthesis, but gives it a certain reticent tone, a note of hesitancy⁸. It is a reticent and not strictly necessary reference Achilles is making to the "battles and killings, you know, ever around the city." What is he trying to say to Priam?

We will appreciate the delicacy of Achilles' formulation once we sense that the phrase περὶ ἄστν is an allusion to the defeat of Hector. Achilles chased and Hector fled three times "around the city" (τρεῖς περὶ ἄστν) before Hector took courage to stop and face up to Achilles' attack⁹. "Das ist nicht bloße Örtlichkeit," observed Wolfgang Schadewaldt, "the place is not a mere detail"¹⁰: περὶ

5) Friedrich August Wolf (Leipzig 1804) punctuated with an *ano teleia* at the end of line 548 (followed by W. Dindorf, Leipzig 1878). H. A. T. Köchly (Leipzig 1867) also tightened the sense of logical argument, but by deleting line 548 altogether (Leaf [see n. 6] approved), at the cost, that is, of diminishing what I find to be a tone of veiled anguish in Achilles' utterance (*infra*). Paul Cauer (Leipzig 1891) retains 548 and punctuates, best of all, with a comma.

6) "548 is rejected as superfluous by Köchly: the sentence is certainly improved by its absence." Walter Leaf, *The Iliad* (London 2nd ed. 1902) II 576 ad loc.

7) Although on the usual (OCT) reading, with the full stop on 548, "this woe" cannot be identical with the "battles and killings," but something else prior, of which the battles and killings are the consequence (apodosis): the complaisance of Helen, the randiness of Paris? A true apodosis that will also satisfy ἐπεὶ arrives only with the next line.

Concerning the word πῆμα: Agamemnon uses it of Hector, 17.688–9, during the great onslaught of the 'Trojan Day' that culminates in the death of Patroclus; Priam uses it of Achilles, 22.420–421, for a decade of raids at outlying sites in which he has lost one son after another, culminating in the death of Hector beside the city wall; and Demodocus in the *Odyssey*, 8.81–82, can use it to summarize the entire course of events for Trojans and Greeks alike.

8) J. D. Denniston, *The Greek Particles* (Oxford 21954) 357; H. W. Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Cambridge, Mass. 1916, repr. 1976) 2985. Taking τοι as the particle produces quite a different nuance from taking it as the dative pronoun ("battles and killings around your city") which, I think, goes together with observing a full stop on line 548 and, as I am arguing, flattens the sense of Achilles' words.

9) 22. 250–253, cf. 173, 230.

10) Von Homers Welt und Werk (Leipzig 1944) 222: "Als Achilleus wieder der Stadt zueilt ... [steht Hektor] unten an der Mauer ... Man kann die Wahl gerade dieses Schauplatzes, die Schaffung gerade dieser Lage, so natürlich sich alles

ἄστυ is the signature of Hector's death. The generalizing plurals, "battles and killings," have a euphemistic function to dilute and dull Priam's grief over Hector with the whole long woe of the war, as indeed the even more generalizing adverb αἰεὶ seems even to evoke again that storage jar of ineluctable misery that is "forever" part of our human lot. For all that line 548 is a reticent, not strictly necessary parenthesis, it contains the heart of the proposition Achilles is trying gently to have Priam take in: Priam's wretchedness, the death of Hector he must bear up under, was ineluctable, part and parcel of having received benefits from the gods: Achilles is not responsible for this misery, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, the gods are.

In his anxiety that grief will overcome or derange old Priam right in front of him, Achilles even loses his temper. Achilles' flash of anger at line 560–570 is not because Priam has dared to answer him with an imperative, nor is it enough to observe that Achilles' leonine nature will have subjected him to outbursts. If he were still inwardly unwilling to give up the body of Hector to Priam, acting only 'under compulsion' of Zeus' order transmitted to him by his mother, and thus bristling with sensitivity to any hint (wrongly detected) of presumption on Priam's part to tell him how quickly to get on with it, he would probably then not say, forty lines later, "(the body of) your son, sir, has been released to you, just as you bade/ordered (ὥς ἐκέλευες), and lies [out] in your wagon," "everything shall be, venerable Priam, as you bid/order (ὥς σὺ κελεύεις, 599–600, 669)¹¹." Colin MacLeod noted that Achilles' whole speech prior to the anger (lines 518–551 we have been considering) "shows how he has come to terms with grief over [Patroclus]...¹²." In fact, Achilles has clearly been acting under a deep

ergibt, nicht genug bewundern. Troja, das Kampffeld, die Schiffe sind in der Ilias überhaupt die drei Sammelplätze des Geschehens ... Jetzt ist das Kampffeld an die Stadt herangerückt, und Stadt und Kampffeld bilden *einen* Schauplatz. Das ist nicht bloße Örtlichkeit." 247: "... [Hektor kämpft] vor allem, um seine Stadt zu retten..."

11) Leaf (see n. 6) ad loc., p. 577: "The explanation is surely that the terrible struggle which Achilles is going through cannot be more vividly indicated than by his intense sensitiveness to even the most innocent word which can be supposed to imply hurry or doubt. He must work the matter out in his own way and at his own time, if it is to be carried through at all. And it is natural that a man should feel some irritation at repeated prayers to do a thing which he has already, under compulsion, decided to do."

12) Iliad book xxiv (Cambridge 1982) 131. Charles Segal even emphasizes, "It is significant that the gods do not intervene [to arrange restoration of the body] until such an action is already intelligible in terms of the human motivation," The

impulse to be kind to Priam, but Priam, quite understandably, has not been quick to penetrate Achilles' feelings¹³. For Achilles to hand over the body right away and on the spot, as Priam implores, will exacerbate Priam's agony to its highest possible pitch – and be excruciating for Achilles, we are meant to perceive, unless he removes himself and breaks off the contact with Priam he evidently wants to prolong. Well after the moment of anger has passed and Achilles has prevailed on Priam to spend the night, he is still anxious that "Priam not see his son" (583) while at the Greek camp. We can leave out of account that if Priam had had his way then the question of the state of the corpse and the miraculous intervention of the gods to preserve it might have dissolved the deeply human focus the poet has achieved in the meeting of Achilles and Priam. As it is, Achilles' burst of anger came about because Priam was unknowingly thwarting Achilles' effort to be gentle and kind. The situation could scarcely be more human.

Achilles' moment of fury at Priam contains a paradoxical counterpart to his previous long speech of consolation. There he had proposed that "this woe" crushing Priam was, appearances apart, really the gods' doing or, to go back to earlier lines, the doing of Zeus, proprietor of the storage jars. Now (570) he fulminates that he can defy Zeus: he is no mere agent. While this defiance is overtly the threat to kill Priam, who is under Zeus' protection as a suppliant, Achilles proceeds instead at this moment to give orders for the washing of Hector's corpse and himself then places it in Priam's cart, "... now himself performs that office for a

Theme of the Mutilation of the Corpse in the *Iliad* (Leiden 1971) 55, 60–61. Elizabeth Minchin, on the contrary, upholds the position of Leaf: "... in handing over Hector's body at Priam's request, he will be obliged at the same time to give up his vengeance: for Hector's body has ultimately become the focus of all Achilles' grief and frustration upon his loss of Patroclus. Indeed, Achilles must forgo not only the body but also his grief; he must come to terms with his grief, as should any mortal, and, in doing so, accept the fact that although he is the son of an immortal mother he is nevertheless a member of the human race (24.46–49). It is this inner turmoil, this complex of emotion and perception which the singer is attempting to represent. Consequently, Achilles' consent to the courteous request is brusque and intimidating...". The Interpretation of a Theme in Oral Epic: *Iliad* 24.559–70, *G&R* 33 (1986) 14. These are plausible considerations, to be sure, given Achilles' character, but in point of fact, the scene before us does not appear at all to turn on the (gradual?) overcoming of Achilles' resistance to allowing the ransom. What moves Achilles throughout this scene is his own response to Priam's condition, and this is virtually immediate with Priam's appearance.

13) Leaf (see n. 6) astutely suggests that Priam may even doubt, despite Zeus' assurance, that Achilles will really go through with the ransom.

grieving father¹⁴,” as if in fact proposing and demonstrating that it is at his own autonomous command, irrespective of Zeus’, that the corpse is being handed over. Achilles is engaged in a poignant effort through a kind of subliminal, implicit logic to reverse the plain facts that have led up to this great scene – not really responsible for the death of Hector, but, yes indeed, for the courteous restitution of the corpse.

After describing the storage jars of Zeus, Achilles had gone on to describe the situation of his own father, Peleus. Priam’s misery is not unique, he assures him. Peleus too had received all the gleaming gifts of the gods; magnificently prosperous, he ruled over the Myrmidons, and the gods gave him a goddess wife (535–37). But Zeus also put harm upon him (*κακόν*), not unequal to what he has done to Priam,

ὅττι οἱ οὐ τι

παίδων ἐν μεγάροισι γονὴ γένετο κρείοντων,
 ἀλλ’ ἔνα παῖδα τέκεν πανάωριον· οὐδέ νυ τόν γε 540
 γηράσκοντα κομίζω, ἐπεὶ μάλα τηλόθι πάτρης
 ἤμαι ἐνὶ Τροίῃ, σέ τε κήδων ἡδὲ σὰ τέκνα.

... because there was no succession of powerful off-spring born in his palace, but only one son he sired, utterly short-lived, and I don’t even/ take care of him in his old age, since far away from home/ I hang around here causing grief to you and your children.

Achilles pictures himself as the ineluctable misery the gods have sent Peleus with all the blessing¹⁵. He is the only son, and Peleus’ lack of many sons is meant to be heard as parallel to Priam’s loss of many sons. But even Peleus’ only son, worse than short-lived, is already lost to him because Achilles is not there, but at the war. This will echo Priam’s sense that in Hector he has really lost his “only son” (499). There is a marvelous balancing here as to which father has “lost” his “only” son virtually or absolutely.

In a phrase of flashing candor that contrasts abruptly with the whole sidelong approach of Achilles’ discourse thus far, he speaks demeaningly, contemptuously of his heroic exploits against Troy (ἤμαι ἐνὶ Τροίῃ, I “hang around” here causing grief to you and your children instead of doing what is right)¹⁶. Of course, overall,

14) Segal (see n. 12) 65.

15) MacLeod (see n. 12) ad 542, p. 134: “It is also a fine touch that Achilles sees both Priam’s and Peleus’ suffering as embodied in one and the same person: himself.”

16) Ibid., cf. Il. 18.104f.

what Achilles is arguing to Priam is that performing these exploits he has effectively bereft Peleus of his only son! The woe the gods have inextricably mixed in for Peleus is what he, Achilles, has been doing, his all but complete destruction of the House of Priam!

If this were not the *Iliad* of Homer, we would easily recognize that Achilles displays intense guilt-feelings, confronted, as he has suddenly become, by Priam's wretchedness. What he has done to Priam, Achilles can freely despise as wrongs he is inflicting on Peleus. But when he comes to the corresponding place where he must enunciate the misery of Priam and where, from what he has said under Peleus' column, we are fully braced for more scathing and abysmal self-accusation, we hear instead the aloof and reticent line we have already analyzed,

that there are, you know, battles and killings ever around the city.

Along with the striking psychological displacement characteristic of guilt-feelings, there is finally Achilles' great insistence that Priam sit and listen. He is detaining Priam to hear these intimate regrets concerning (apparently) Peleus. He is, initially at least, imposing on Priam's last fibre of strength to follow patiently as he feels his way step by step through his seemingly objective "applied theology of human misery" with its tortuous blend of exculpatory proposition and damning aside. He seems, in short, to be attempting to coerce Priam's attention to what he is not quite saying, but yet trying to get across.

The notion of submerged or displaced guilt-feelings leads straight to the phrase 'modern psychology' and the danger of anachronism. In his famous Sather Lectures, E. R. Dodds took up the anthropologist's distinction between 'shame-culture' and 'guilt-culture' and applied it to the study of archaic literature. The Homeric world has been pronounced a shame-cultural world¹⁷. Can it be at all possible for an ancient epic poet to represent guilt-

17) The Greeks and the Irrational (Berkeley 1951) chapter 2, esp. 45ff. J. W. Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad: The Tragedy of Hector* (Chicago 1975) 116f. The terms come from Ruth Benedict's influential book 'The Chrysanthemum and the Sword, Patterns of Japanese Culture' (New York 1946). Dodds' application has been received with scepticism, A. D. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility, A Study in Greek Values* (Oxford 1960) 49, and has been received as inspiration, Redfield 116; cf. S. C. Humphreys, *Anthropology and the Greeks* (London 1978) 20f., an anthropologist. The terms have been of use in the discussion of biblical literature as well: David Daube, *The Culture of Deuteronomy*, Orita (Ibadan 1969), and id., *Shame-Culture in Luke-Acts, Paul and Paulinism, Essays in Honor of C. K. Barrett* (London 1982).

feelings on the part of the hero for having triumphed over the enemy?

The mere distinction between shame and guilt illuminates the scene by throwing into relief how irrelevant it is that in killing Hector Achilles has avenged Patroclus. For all the intensity of Achilles' ill-ease, this is not a thought that can help since there is not the slightest public shame attaching to what he has done. Priam, of course, has no accusation to make. The intensity is really a matter of Achilles' inward remorse.

Professor Dodds argued from anthropology to literature that the setting for feelings of guilt is the family, the relationship to the father. That insight gives us something of a control against anachronism in following Achilles' thought. Achilles may not find words for the direct expression of guilt-feelings, and perhaps the epic poet of a shame-cultural milieu cannot find them either. But it is not a matter of interpretation to say that Achilles has conceived, with no little strain, that there is a similarity between Priam and Peleus. He has argued that similarity, however unconvincingly, over the 17-line comparison we have taken up (534–551). But the poet has given us much more of the same. The similarity is, of course, directly and piercingly appealed to on two occasions by Priam himself (504–7; 486–92). The god Hermes had advised Priam to win compassion from Achilles by putting him in mind of his father, his mother, and his son (465–7). Priam's omission of the last two emphasizes his appeal in the person of father. Indeed, when Hermes first approached Priam he came in the form of a young man whom Priam found threatening (358–9). Hermes put Priam at ease by saying, "I won't hurt you ... you remind me of my father" (370–71)!

Priam's appeal to Achilles in the person of father is a persuasive ploy, a device he has been advised to use, the effectiveness of which he has just had occasion to note in the encounter with Hermes disguised and which he can well appreciate and handle on his own. It is repeated and stressed so much in these contiguous passages, however, that it has become as well an emphatic motif, indeed the poet's own metaphor for Achilles' feelings. Achilles feels toward Priam as toward the father, distant or deceased, he has wronged. The poet has evoked what might be the primordial instance of guilt-feeling without the use of a label, and it is this instance evoked, without the convenience of a label to stretch, that he has, with difficulty and repetitious emphasis, applied to the quite separate situation of Achilles looking into the face of the enemy he

has defeated. Therefore it would not do to have sent Polydamas or Deiphobos, best-beloved of Hector's brothers, to beg for the body, although Achilles might still have softened and discovered 'a common humanity' with the foe after all the mutual slaughter and loss. The poet has had in mind an even rarer scene.

Thirty five years ago in a famous essay Adam Parry taught that Homer was not inevitably and irrevocably confined to the 'heroic' or, we might add now, 'shame-cultural' values and concepts the epic vocabulary seems to imply. "Homer uses the epic speech a long poetic tradition gave him to transcend the limits of that speech."¹⁸

Naturally Homer did not have our refined or even technical vocabulary for asserting the presence of guilt-feelings. But he did have a sense of the feelings toward a remote and wronged father – that seems ancient enough. Our epic poet has been able to evoke this in order to characterize private guilt-feelings in the conquering hero after the glory of triumph. It is a matter of inward guilt-feelings at the far end of the scale from the sense of offense, feeling of shame, or the spirit of revenge that have gone into and come out of the Wrath of Achilles up to this point. To accomplish the representation of such guilt-feeling is, of course, a further, astonishing and admirable extension of the limits of epic experience. To do so under the circumstances of Homeric verse would hardly seem possible except by having the hero confront the conquered, broken enemy who is, at the same time, old enough to be his father, and, at the end of the epic, that is just what the poet has contrived.

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18) *The Language of Achilles and Other Essays* (Oxford 1990) 9 (cf. Held [see n. 3] 250); Joseph Russo, *Homer against his Tradition*, *Arion* 7 (1968) 275–95.