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Doom and Sorrow: Achilles' Physical Expression of Mourning in the *Iliad*

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Achilleus' first reaction to the news of Patroklos' death is to deface his own body with dirt and ashes: a spontaneous act of grief for his fallen beloved.¹ His grief sinks further. The hero refuses to wash the dirt, blood and grime from his own self-defiling, from war and from his retributive battle with Hektor, until he himself has cast Patroklos' body into the fire and cut off his hair in mourning. Day by day, as Achilleus' physical pollution cakes onto his body, he further aligns himself with the now decomposing body of Patroklos; becoming a shady half-living pollutant with Patroklos as his half-dead counterpart. The two are so closely linked at the stage that they become one and the same, and when Achilleus presides of Patroklos' funeral he is really presiding over his own burial.

This paper is presented in two sections. The first is a brief exegesis on historical funerary ritual practices, particularly focussing on the performance of grief and the concept of death-related pollution; following this is a close reading of Achilleus' performance of grief after Patroklos' death in the *Iliad*. Many of the common, historical formalised performances of grief and mourning are played out in Achilleus' narrative but – as in many aspects of his life and being – these are played out to an extreme extent.

1. Grief and funerary ritual

In normal circumstances death, funerary rites and expressions of mourning follow a highly rigid pattern. In order to ensure that death was completed properly, multiple ritual stages were required of the deceased's surviving relatives. Death was an on-going separation from the world of the living, and the shade could only enter the

¹ This paper was originally presented as the final paper in a collaborative panel on the corporeal existence of Achilleus. Many thanks to Siobhan Privitera, and to the two anonymous reviewers of *Rosetta*, for their helpful comments. All translations are from Murray/Wyatt (1999).

underworld after correct burial.² In other words: 'death is not completed in an instant.'³ Death was, in many ways, an equaliser.⁴ The procedure of death involved three main ritual acts: the prosthesis, or laying out of the body; the ekphora, or conveyance to the place of interment; and finally the deposition of the cremated or inhumed remains.⁵ These three stages occur in Patroklos' funeral, and each stage is officiated over by Achilles rather than the customary close female relative.

The most important aspect of funerary rites was the ritual cleansing of the house and body, which took place during the prosthesis and began the process of cleansing the pollution caused by death. Death-pollution was not necessarily considered to be a negative force, but was rather 'just one aspect of the state of mourning.'⁶ The level of associated pollution cast over a person by the deceased was, usually, directly related to their relationship in life, with women normally more affected than men. In the case of mourning for Patroklos, although the female servants, and Thetis and the nymphs mourn, Achilles incurs the brunt of Patroklos' death-pollution. Purificatory periods may also have held a correlation to the length of time it was believed that the psyche of the deceased spent between the worlds of the living and the dead. Pollution surrounding death was not only sentimental in nature but founded in practical, hygienic considerations which needed to be addressed when moving around the decomposing corpse.⁷

The performance of personal grief mirrors the sentimentality of death-pollution. Although there was an acceptance of personal grief over the loss of a family member, grief was tempered by an understanding of the inevitability of death. Public

² Sourvinou-Inwood (1981: 18)

³ Vermeule (1979: 2)

⁴ In Homer, for example, the two *Nekuia* scenes of the *Odyssey* show that there is no distinction made between 'heroic' dead and 'regular' dead: the suitors who travel into the underworld at the opening of book 24 mingle indiscriminately with the shades of Agamemnon, Aias, Achilles and Patroklos (Hom. *Od.* 24.1-15), likewise, the shades that Odysseus encounters in his journey into the underworld/necromantic ritual include Elpenor and his mother Anticleia, who mix indiscriminately with soldiers, young women, and, of course, the famous seer Tiresias (Hom. *Od.* 11.51-96). In 6th C BCE Athens, funeral legislation was passed which placed cost and noise prohibitions on funerals and banned professional mourners; this provided an additional equaliser for the late archaic period, see Dem. *Mac.* 43.62, Plut. *Solon* 21, Cic. *Leg.* 25.63; Garland (1989: 1-15)

⁵ This is an amalgamation of the slightly different tripartite systems offered by Garland and Vermeule. See Garland (1985: 21; Vermeule (1979: 19) For a full discussion of each ritual stage of funerary rites see Garland (1985: 21-27; Kurtz and Boardman (1971: 142-161)

⁶ Parker (1983: 35)

⁷ Garland (1985: 43)

grief was not a long-lasting personal trauma that overtook a person indefinitely but was highly controlled and channelled into a ritualistic outpouring. Violent outbursts, like ripping at hair or clothing, are a good demonstration of this: on the surface they appear to be spontaneous acts of grief, but they are highly performative ritualised aspects of formal lamentation.⁸ Personal grief, however, can be separated from these highly ritualised acts of lamentation, which were considered to be owed to the dead, forming a part of their γέρας θάνατον – honour for the dead – as ‘lament was one of the ways through which the deceased’s social persona was articulated and given value, and his importance stressed.’⁹ To leave the deceased without such praise and honour was both highly disrespectful to him and a personal insult to the gods, who may cause the deceased to turn on his relatives and friends. When Odysseus speaks with the dead, Elpenor pleads with the hero that he should not be left:

μή μ’ ἄκλαυτον ἄθαπτον ἰὼν ὄπιθεν καταλείπειν
νοσφισθεῖς, μή τοί τι θεῶν μήνιμα γένωμαι

unwept and unlamented... lest I in some way become a source of god’s wrath for you.¹⁰

Lamentation began during the prothesis, after appropriate offerings had been made to the deceased, but were mainly expressed during the ekphora, while the body was in transit and grief could be most publically expressed.¹¹

2. Achilles’ grief and Patroklos’ death

When Achilles first learns of Patroklos’ death, he covers his face and hair with dirt:

ὣς φάτο, τὸν δ’ ἄχεος νεφέλη ἐκάλυψε μέλαινα:
ἀμφοτέρησι δὲ χερσὶν ἐλὼν κόνιν αἰθαλόεσσαν
χεύατο κακ κεφαλῆς, χαρίεν δ’ ἦσχυνε πρόσωπον:
νεκταρέω δὲ χιτῶνι μέλαιν’ ἀμφίζανε τέφρη.
αὐτὸς δ’ ἐν κόνιησι μέγας μεγαλωστί τανυσθεῖς

⁸ Stafford (2000: 6)

⁹ Sourvinou-Inwood (1995: 177; cf. 171, 175) cf. Jones (2010: 103)

¹⁰ Hom. *Od.* 11.72-73.

¹¹ Stafford (2000: 6)

κεῖτο, φίλησι δὲ χερσὶ κόμην ἤσχυνε δαΐζων.

So he spoke, and a black cloud of grief enfolded Achilles, and with both hands he took the dark dust and poured it over his head and defiled his face, and on his fragrant tunic the black ashes fell. And he himself in the dust lay outstretched, mighty in his mightiness, and with his own hand he tore and marred his hair.¹²

The 'black cloud of grief'¹³ that envelops Achilles represents his first movement into the world of death. Death is often described as a black cloud overcoming the dying warrior,¹⁴ the most common metaphor for death in the *Iliad* is darkness covering the eyes. Darkness and blackness also represent the underworld – the world where Achilles is going, which Patroklos' death foreshadows.

Achilles' initial self-defilement is not met with shock; self-pollution was sometimes used as a physical way of externalising emotional pain. Following Hektor's death, Priam similarly aligned himself with the state of his son's body when he κυλινδόμενος κατὰ κόπρον ('rolled in the muck')¹⁵ and when Iris delivers the gods' message to him, she finds him similarly defiled:

ἀμφὶ δὲ πολλή
κόπρος ἔην κεφαλῇ τε καὶ αὐχένι τοῖο γέροντος
τὴν ῥα κυλινδόμενος καταμήσατο χερσὶν ἔησι.

On the old man's head and neck was filth in abundance which he had gathered in his hands as he grovelled in the earth.¹⁶

Physical pollution is aimed at assimilating with the state of the deceased, particularly when that person has not been given proper funerary rites and is still in a transitory

¹² Hom. *Il.* 18.22-27.

¹³ cf. Hektor mourning, *Il.* 8.124, 316; *Od.* 17.83, Laertes mourning Odysseus' 'death' at *Od.* 24.315-317.

¹⁴ Metaphors include death covering, being poured over, seizing and arriving at the victim. See Garland (1981: 46)

¹⁵ Hom. *Il.* 22.414.

¹⁶ Hom. *Il.* 24.164-165.

position between the worlds of the living and the dead. 'Dirtiness, which compromises a person's physical integrity, is a visible sign of the existential disorder affecting those who have lost someone close.'¹⁷ In other words, it is nothing more than physical lamentation. But, Achilles' assimilation to Patroklos goes further than being a physical representation of his grief. Bathing in dirt is symbolic of death on the battlefield, as the body is ground into the dirt, mud and blood, and mutilated by the enemy. Achilles' self-defilement begins the process of integration with Patroklos' body, and this transformation will be complete once he enters battle, when, refusing to wash, his body will be stained with mud and blood. Integration between Achilles and Patroklos is reinforced by Thetis' and the Nereids' lamentation, who act as though they are actually grieving for Achilles, confusing this with the warrior's own upcoming death.¹⁸ Achilles' own mortality has been well established in the poem: he was μινυνθάδιος ('short-lived')¹⁹ and ὠκυμωρῶτατος ('early dying.')²⁰ Achilles has received a dual prophecy of his death, of which he must choose the path he wishes to follow:

μήτηρ γάρ τέ μέ φησι θεὰ Θέτις ἀργυρόπεζα
διχθαδίας κῆρας φερέμεν θανάτοιο τέλος δέ.
εἰ μὲν κ' αὔθει μένων Τρώων πόλιν ἀμφιμάχωμαι,
ᾤλετο μὲν μοι νόστος, ἀτὰρ κλέος ἄφθιτον ἔσται:
εἰ δέ κεν οἴκαδ' ἴκωμι φίλην ἐς πατρίδα γαῖαν,
ᾤλετό μοι κλέος ἐσθλόν, ἐπὶ δῆρὸν δέ μοι αἰὼν
ἔσσεται, οὐδέ κέ μ' ᾤκα τέλος θανάτοιο κιχεῖη.

For my mother the goddess, silver-footed Thetis, tell me that twofold fates are bearing me toward the doom of death: if I abide here and war about the city of the Trojans, then lost is my home-return, but my renown shall be imperishable; but if I return home to my dear native land, lost then is my glorious renown, yet shall my life long endure, neither shall the doom of death come soon upon me.²¹

¹⁷ Guralnick (1974: 64)

¹⁸ cf. Patroklos being mourned by Achilles' immortal horses, Hom. *Il.* 17.426-428, 23.280-284.

¹⁹ Hom. *Il.* 1.352.

²⁰ Hom. *Il.* 1.505.

²¹ Hom. *Il.* 9.410-416.

Achilleus' death begins with the choice that he makes at this time. Patroklos' fate becomes entwined with Achilleus' and his death becomes a marker which signals the hero's death. Achilleus knows that his death is tied to Hektor's and by vowing to avenge Patroklos he is condemning himself.²²

Following the pledge to avenge Patroklos, Thetis forbids her son from re-entering the battle until she has returned with new armour for him. This new armour may represent Thetis' attempt to begin the process of ritual cleansing of her son: new, clean, god-forged armour which represents Achilleus' heroic prowess, in exchange for old, worn-out, stolen armour which represents Patroklos' mortal weakness. In dying in Achilleus' armour,²³ Patroklos assumed a shadow-identity of the hero; his death is the death of both men, Achilleus' heroic image in Patroklos' fragile body. And yet, through Achilleus' grief-possessed physical alignment with the corpse of Patroklos, they both live as well. Until Achilleus completes Patroklos' funerary rituals and he can pass into the underworld, the slain warrior still exists in a state of half-death. Likewise, until Achilleus can extricate himself from the shadow of his beloved, which must occur before he dies himself; the hero can only exist in a state of half-life.

Achilleus has, from learning of Patroklos' death, refused to eat and drink:

ἦ τ' ἄν ἔγωγε
νῦν μὲν ἀνώγοιμι πτολεμίζειν υἴας Ἀχαιῶν
νήστιας ἀκμήνους, ἅμα δ' ἠελίῳ καταδύντι
τεύξεσθαι μέγα δόρπον, ἐπὴν τεισαίμεθα λώβην.
πρὶν δ' οὐ πῶς ἄν ἔμοιγε φίλον κατὰ λαιμὸν ἰεῖη
οὐ πόσις οὐδὲ βρῶσις ἐταίρου τεθνηῶτος
ὅς μοι ἐνὶ κλισίῃ δεδαϊγμένος ὄξεϊ χαλκῷ
κεῖται ἀνὰ πρόθυρον τετραμμένος, ἀμφὶ δ' ἐταῖροι
μύρονται: τό μοι οὐ τι μετὰ φρεσὶ ταῦτα μέμηλεν,
ἀλλὰ φόνος τε καὶ αἷμα καὶ ἀργαλέος στόνος ἀνδρῶν.

²² Schein (1984: 132)

²³ Even Hektor, leading hero of the Trojans and slayer of Patroklos, is killed wearing Achilleus' armour; there is an undeniable link in the fates of Hektor and Achilleus, and Hektor's death also prefigures Achilleus'. cf. Holoway (2012: 153)

Surely for my own part I would even now command the sons of the Achaeans to do battle fasting and unfed, and at the setting of the sun to make ready a great meal, when we have avenged the outrage. Until then, down my throat, at least, neither drink nor food will pass, since my comrade is dead, who in my hut lies mangled by the sharp sword, his feet turned toward the door, while round about him our comrades mourn; so it is not at all these things that concern my mind, but slaying, and blood, and the grievous groans of men.²⁴

This is another physical manifestation of this half-life: the living-dead, the walking-corpse needs no nourishment other than death. Even when he does begin to eat, following Patroklos' funeral, the idea is abhorrent to him, and sustenance only serves to get his body to the final milestone. This is demonstrated very clearly in the first ritualised act of Patroklos' funeral which occurs some way after Achilles' initial outpouring of grief, and is manifested in a distinct way. The traditional elements of funerary ritual are undertaken: feasting, ritualised lament – it is even called the γέρας θάνατον ('honours for the dead.')²⁵ and Patroklos' separation from the world of the living begins when his body is removed from Achilles' hut and moves toward the funeral's ritual space. This is where Achilles first eats. Funerary banquets included offerings to the deceased, and Achilles is able to eat here because it is appropriate for the dead to eat, and it was even believed that the deceased acted as a funerary banquet's host.²⁶ That is, because of his alignment to Patroklos he has taken on the characteristics of being dead and can therefore only participate in the 'normal life' of the deceased. The elements of the funeral do not occur in the order in which they would historically occur, in particular holding the banquet prior to burial. In one sense, this is to facilitate Achilles' alignment with Patroklos, but the subversion of Patroklos' funeral rites mimic the subversion of Achilles' death: banquet before burial and funeral before death. Achilles' army, the Myrmidons, are being told not to lament Patroklos' death, to allow him to move swiftly into the underworld, but by perverting and prolonging the funerary rites, Achilles is keeping Patroklos in the upper world longer than necessary. Following Patroklos' death, references to Achilles' own death become more numerous in the poem. Achilles seems

²⁴ Hom. *Il.* 19.205-214. Holoway (2012: 14)

²⁵ Hom. *Il.* 23.9.

²⁶ Artemidoros 5.82 T; Garland (2001: 39)

impatient for it to arrive,²⁷ and yet he prolongs his own life by prolonging Patroklos' funeral in this way, knowing that he must wait for his own destiny to be fulfilled before the two can be together in death, both their shades in the underworld and their remains mingled together in one urn.²⁸

Achilleus is also rebuked for delaying Patroklos' burial. The shade appears to the hero in a dream asking for swift burial, even though it is he himself who requests that their remains be buried together. This is the first time in Homer, and the first time in extant literature, that the idea that burial was required for entry into the underworld is expressed so obviously. At the moment he appears to Achilleus, Patroklos inhabits a transitory space that belongs neither to the world of the living nor the world of the dead. His status as a dream-figure only highlights this transgressive status. Achilleus' reluctance to grant his friend a proper funeral demonstrates his clear unwillingness to let Patroklos go. Funerary rites – and along with them, the shade's admittance into the underworld – symbolise the final separation; once Patroklos enters the underworld he can no longer enter the world of the living.

Following the appearance of Patroklos in his dream, Achilleus does conduct funerary rites for him. Achilleus himself presides over the burial, and the ritual culminates with Achilleus shearing his hair to dedicate to his lost friend. The lock had been previously promised to the local river god of his home. Cutting his hair, he says:

Σπερχεῖ' ἄλλως σοί γε πατήρ ἠρήσατο Πηλεὺς
κεῖσέ με νοστήσαντα φίλην ἐς πατρίδα γαῖαν
σοί τε κόμην κέρεειν ῥέξειν θ' ἱερὴν ἐκατόμβην...
ὥς ἠρᾶθ' ὁ γέρων, σὺ δέ οἱ νόον οὐκ ἐτέλεσσας.
νῦν δ' ἐπεὶ οὐ νέομαί γε φίλην ἐς πατρίδα γαῖαν
Πατρόκλω ἥρωϊ κόμην ὀπάσαιμι φέρεσθαι.

Spercheius, in vain did my father Peleus vow to you that when I come home there to my dear native land I would cut my hair to you and offer a holy

²⁷ Burgess (2009: 55)

²⁸ Hom. *Il.* 23.83-84.

hecatomb... since I will not return to my dear native land, let me give this lock to the warrior Patroklos to take with him.²⁹

This speech highlights the inevitable fact of Achilles' own impending death. When the hero officiates over Patroklos' funeral he is also officiating his own funeral, remembering that the urn that will hold Patroklos' burned bones will also hold his own, and the mound that covers Patroklos' grave will be his own burial mound.

The only thing left for Achilles to do is mourn. His friend can pass into the underworld, no longer inhabiting the transgressive space between the worlds, and who cannot therefore have any further contact with the world of the living. Mourning takes over Achilles' life, he gets no rest and only manages to rise out of the depths of despair to defile the body of Hektor, slayer of his beloved, and this goes on for several days.³⁰ The act of dragging Hektor's body three times each day around Patroklos' gravesite is reminiscent of a ritualised act of mourning. In their first ritual act, the Myrmidons had driven their chariots around Patroklos' slain body.³¹ Likewise, the gods' preservation of Hektor's beauty highlights the grimy, dirt-encrusted, muddy, bloody deadness that is encrusted on Achilles' skin: the deceased warrior appears beautiful as in life, and the living warrior is nothing more than a shade.

3. Conclusions

The truly extraordinary thing about this situation is Achilles' devotion to the pollution he carried. He refuses to wash the marks and stains of fighting from his body until Patroklos' death is properly avenged, his funerary rituals complete,³² and the hero's personal anger quenched. This physical pollution is a manifestation of the grief he feels for his fallen friend and signals a deeper shift in the hero. The pollution that cakes on Achilles' body is not just an outward expression of grief, or merely the ordinary pollution one would incur by coming into contact with the dead. It is, in many

²⁹ Hom. *Il.* 23. 144-46, 149-51.

³⁰ 'Up to verse 11 the description seems to refer to a single night, but the frequentative verbs in 12-17 evidently describe Achilles' actions over several nights: cf. especially *ἠθεσκεν* of Dawn (13), and the fact that the next stage (Apollo's protest to the gods) only occurs on the twelfth day (31).' Richardson (1993)

³¹ Hom. *Il.* 23.12-14.

³² Hom. *Il.* 23.44-46.

ways, the pollution of Achilleus' own forthcoming death – the slow decline of a warrior who is already partly dead. Patroklos' death is, then, the performance of the death that Achilleus does not have in the *Iliad*.

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