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Book Reviews

Emily P. Austin, *Grief and the Hero: The Futility of Longing in the Iliad*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021. Pp. 192. Cloth (ISBN 978-0-472-13232-4) \$54.95.

In this stimulating book, Emily Austin explores questions so basic to the *Iliad* that we may forget to ask them. For example, why *does* Achilles' anger arising from his grief for Patroklos become so excessive? Well, one might reply, excessive anger is central to Achilles' semi-divine heroic persona—witness Books 1 and 9. Yet Austin's analysis explores a richer investigative vein, opened through a single, striking textual observation: that “the *Iliad* describes Achilles' grief, and his alone, with the language of *pothê* (or longing)” (2). The character of the grief, she goes on to show, explains the character of the anger, as well as many related features of the narrative.

Grief and the Hero is a deeply humanistic book. A “broadly literary” (3) study, it seeks both to illuminate the *Iliad* and to discover what that text can teach us—*i.e.*, human beings—about grief. The book concludes with the thought that Achilles' “fundamental desire for companionship” makes him, “for all his otherworldly features, a paradigmatically human figure, capable of speaking to diverse audiences at the core of who we are” (154).

This approach is in keeping with certain robust traditions of Homeric criticism. It also offers a useful corrective to any readers of Homer who, like me, have sometimes found ourselves so mesmerized by Achilles' awful inhumanity as seen from a Trojan point of view, and so dismayed by his willingness to wish harm on his own people, that we forget to ponder the humanity of his responses to the death of a dear friend. On the other hand, some readers may wish that this book gave some consideration to questions of cultural and historical context. The Introduction's subsection “Achilles' Story: Singular, yet Universal” (10-14) is excellent on how unique or representative Achilles' story might be for Homeric warriors, but does not take up the question of how Achilles' story (or Austin's reading of it) translates across cultural borders, modern or otherwise.

Chapter 1 lays the groundwork by surveying all Iliadic occurrences of ποθή, ποθέω and πόθος, under the umbrella term *pothê* (justified at 6-7 and 28 n. 32). The chief results: *pothê* terms are found typically to express a sense of felt absence (‘x is missing’) combined with a psychological shading (‘I miss x’), in a particularized way (‘and no one else will do’): as when Hektor tells Helen that his men long (ποθὴν ἔχουσι) for him (18).

Turning to contexts of grief, we find that *pothê* language is used four times for grief for Patroklos: twice of Achilles' own emotions; once each of his immortal horses and of the Myrmidons. Austin argues plausibly that the latter two cases should be read as extensions of Achilles' own grief. True, a single occurrence of *pothê*-grief is felt not by Achilles, but by Diomedes' wife in a hypothetical (5.414). But this exception underlines the marked character of the restriction to Achilles (22-23 n. 17), by showing the motif's potential for broader application (similar to Penelope's *pothê* for Odysseus in the *Odyssey*, 8).

The chapter concludes by exploring what Patroklos meant to Achilles. Austin emphasizes their camaraderie and the intimacy of a shared life. One excellent close reading discovers in Achilles' silent signal to Patroklos in Book 9 evidence of the “closeness ... born of many years of shared life. In a poem where speech is prominent, it is striking to see Achilles and Patroklos able to communicate silently.” (39) All of this is important for Austin's larger points, because what Achilles will long for in his grief is not just Patroklos but the life they shared (26-27). On this analysis rests Austin's oft repeated formulation that Achilles' grief reflects a feeling of “sundered wholeness.”

Chapter 2 contextualizes Achilles' anger as just one of his several responses to grief. All of these responses "share qualities of relentlessness, unpredictability, and futility," (50-51) as a result of their common origin in longing for "a ruptured shared life" (82). Their futility reflects a basic mismatch between "function (what is achieved) ... and purpose (what is sought)." The poem invites us to contemplate the mismatch between Achilles' grief-driven actions and the longing that drives them: "not even thus did [Achilles] raise [Patroklos] up," says Hekabe as she laments for Hektor (68, citing *Il.* 24.756).

Chapter 3 reads the story of Achilles' grief-driven wrath in light of the earlier chapters' results. It considers and rejects two possible explanations for the vastness of Achilles' rage in Books 18-22: 1) that rage is part of his character, and 2) divine intervention. Instead, Austin maintains, "the magnitude, volatility and relentlessness of Achilles' anger are best accounted for when we read this narrative in light of its roots in *pothê*" (82). Thus, while Achilles' onslaught is superhuman in its destructiveness, it is his humanity, especially his capacity for grief, that explains his anger's continuation beyond Hektor's death, and its mitigation in Book 24. This last topic is a highlight. Though some see a "reconciliation" between Achilles and Priam, Achilles' anger and grief are still evident at the end of their meeting. Austin threads the needle by arguing that the quality of insatiety, derived from longing, is what has vanished. Achilles thus releases, not his anger or his grief, but his *pothê* (111). To explain this release, we should look not to any "new understanding of the universal experience of suffering" on Achilles' part (115), nor to sheer "weariness," as some have argued, but rather to "the moderating force of his underlying desire for shared life" (118).

Chapter 4 asks why the Trojans' grief for Hektor is never described with *pothê* language. It answers in terms of narrative aims. In the case of the Trojans, the poet emphasizes civic grief over personal grief: "the story of a communion of persons, captured by *pothê*, is subsumed to a story of civic survival" (119). There is a temporal dimension to consider too: while Achilles' grief represents the "yearning for a lost past," in the Trojans' grief we see a "dread for the future" (146). While *pothê* language underpins Achilles' "vacillation between motionlessness and frenzied activity," the Trojans by contrast grieve passively in the face of coming doom (148).

A brief Conclusion treats the story of Niobe told by Achilles to Priam in Book 24. Niobe's grief resembles the Trojans' in its passivity, in contrast with Achilles' volatility. Achilles' choice to tell this story to Priam underscores that he has released his *pothê*.

Even after Chapter 4's discussions, there remains something paradoxical about concluding that the Iliadic Achilles becomes paradigmatic of all humans (154) on the basis of a motif notable precisely for being restricted to him "alone" (2). Perhaps exploration of this paradox could launch further research.

On the whole, I found this book clear, thought-provoking, and refreshingly streamlined. It exhibits only the rarest, minor typos and infelicities. The slim section on 'Scholarly Context' (14-16) is limited, but many future footnotes help fill in the picture (I found note 54 on page 76 particularly helpful, as well as engagement with Holst-Warhaft on page 80). Appendices with detailed tables presenting Homeric *pothê* usage may assist future research. *Grief and the Hero* is recommended not only to Homerists and advanced students, but to any scholars with an interest in Homer — including, given the importance of Austin's work for central themes of the *Iliad*, all those who teach Homer in translation.

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