

SOME NOTES ON THE FUNERAL GAMES: ILIAD 23

This paper will deal with the function and significance of the funeral games for Patroclus in the poetic design of the Iliad. Special attention will be given to the chariot race. This study will agree with the general consensus of Homeric critics that the games are an effective contrast to preceding and following events and are essential to the transition of the Achilles of book 22 and Patroclus' funeral to the Achilles of book 24 (1). However, this paper will attempt something which, surprisingly enough, seems not to have done before, i.e. to examine in detail those thematic elements which link the funeral games to the rest of the Iliad (2) and thus shed more light on a portion of the Iliad praised even by analytic critics like Munro, Leaf and Bayfield who suspected that the games were not part of the original design of the Iliad and believed that they clashed in tone with their immediate context (3).

There is a beauty and noble dignity about the games in which human conflicts are allowed the possibility of resolution without tragedy, a possibility which does not exist previously in the Iliad. This condition of the games is especially welcome after the profound tragedy which human conflict has brought about, i.e. the death of Patroclus. The disorder which begins with the great quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon in book 1 is gradually resolved into the harmonious order of the funeral games. Achilles, who had fostered the earlier disorder, in the games becomes an agent of order.

Undoubtedly the main function of the funeral games is to act as a contrasting interlude. The tone of the games is certainly lighter in comparison with surrounding events. There is as much human laughter and good humour in the games as in the rest of the Iliad (4). Achilles reacts

(1) See E. T. Owen, *The Story of the Iliad*, Ann Arbor 1966, 235-6 and J. T. Sheppard, *The Pattern of the Iliad*, London 1922, 201.

(2) M. M. Wilcock's recent article, *The Funeral Games of Patroclus*, "BICS" 20, 1973, 1-11, does briefly discuss the function of the games in the Iliad but ultimately gives much more emphasis to the poet's method and his sources for the games.

(3) See the fourth edition of D. B. Munro's commentary on the Iliad, Books XIII-XXIV, Oxford 1897, 397-99 and the second volume of Leaf and Bayfield's commentary on the Iliad, London 1898, 541-2.

(4) The only human laughter and smiles outside of book 23 occur in 2. 270, 6. 404, 7. 212, 11. 378.

with a smile to Antilochus' anger at the loss of the second prize to Eumelus (555). Later in the book Antilochus smiles and speaks good humoredly of his inability to defeat older men in the foot race (786-92). All the Achaians laugh at the lesser Ajax when he slips in the dung during the foot race (784) and at the performance of Epeius in the iron-throwing contest (840). This is the only laughing the Achaians do as a group in the Iliad, outside of the incident in book 2 when they laugh at the plight of Thersites. However, the games are by no means totally comic. As we shall see later, the most farcically comic scene in the games, Ajax's slipping in the dung, has serious meaning in its context.

The games represent for the Achaian heroes a return to life and its concerns after the morbid gloom of Patroclus' funeral. The energies of the heroes are turned again to their normal interest in life, the pursuit of *τιμή*. The only difference here is that *τιμή* is won not by victory in battle but by success in athletic contests. The games are indeed play but not frivolous play. The arguments which arise in the competition for prizes show how seriously the heroes take these contests. The prizes are coveted with the same emotional intensity as the spoils of battle. In the chariot race Antilochus worries about the disgrace of losing (408) and Menelaus says that his *ἀπερή* has been sullied by Antilochus' unfair tactics in the same event (571). The serious nature of the games is also demonstrated by the fact that the gods take as lively an interest on behalf of their human favorites in the games as they do in war: Athena's decisive help to Diomedes when he is hindered by Apollo (383-400), Athena's assistance to Odysseus by making him light and causing the lesser Ajax who was leading Odysseus to slip in the dung (771-75) and Apollo's aid to Meriones in the archery contest by making Teukros miss and answering Meriones' prayer favorably (865-81).

However, there is one essential difference between the games and battle: the careful avoidance of the risk of serious injury or death in the games. This is in evidence in the wrestling match (735) and the armed contest (820-5), both of which are stopped before any serious harm can come to the contestants. It is obviously good common sense not to allow a hero to risk life and limb in athletic games when there is a war still to be fought. But from the point of view of the composer of the poem death must be excluded from this world of the games. There is a definite need for relaxation from the emotional tension of preceding disastrous events. The tragic potentialities of human life must be at least temporarily suspended. Even Achilles, who has dedicated himself to death in order to avenge Patroclus, seems during the games to forget his obsession with death and turns his complete attention to the manage-

ment of the games. Admittedly, Achilles does not himself enter the games as a contestant presumably by reason of his grief for Patroclus (cf. 274-9) and no doubt also because his relationship with Patroclus requires him to preside over the games as a dispenser of prizes. But Achilles is no disinterested observer or judge: he shows an earnest interest in the disputes which arise in the course of the games and tries his best to solve them amicably.

Of all the funeral games the chariot race is the most prominent in terms of length of narrative and action. But this is not the only reason for its importance. The chariot race has a thematic significance in that it contains a number of indirect reminiscences of the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon in book 1. As we shall see, the basic conflicts of book 1 are presented in somewhat altered form and worked out again in a non-tragic context. Before the chariot race begins, Nestor advises his son Antilochus with regard to strategy in the race. His advice to Antilochus emphasizes the need to use skill rather than physical force since the young man's horses are the slowest of all. Antilochus is urged to employ rational technique to overcome the inadequacy of his physical resources. The plan suggested by Nestor is to stay as close as possible to the turning post. However, in practice, Nestor's wisdom is ignored as it was ignored by Achilles and Agamemnon amidst their quarrel in book 1. In the race, when Antilochus and Menelaus are striving for second place, the former tries to pass Menelaus at a narrow place in the road even at the risk of a collision. Menelaus accuses Antilochus of acting foolishly (426), a charge which recalls Nestor's advice to use good horsemanship and to drive carefully so as to avoid an accident (340-3). But Antilochus with his youthful impetuosity throws caution to the winds and forces Menelaus to give way in order to prevent a collision (434-7). The poet points up Antilochus' youth and his use of purely physical force instead of skill by comparing him to a stripling testing his youthful strength in the discus-throw (431-2). As in book 1 the indiscretion of youth is moving along a road to angry conflict and potential disaster.

At the end of the race Diomedes finishes first, Antilochus second, Menelaus third, and Eumelus, an excellent horseman (289) comes in last because Athena has fouled his horses to help Diomedes. Thereupon, Achilles in his capacity as presiding officer of the games, dispenses the prizes. He shows his unwillingness to let excellence go unrewarded even when it falls short of victory by proclaiming that Eumelus will receive second prize despite the order of finish. Eumelus indeed might have been expected to finish at least second had it not been for divine intervention.

Only Diomedes, who before the race is called the best by far all the contestants (357) and enjoys the advantage of horses of divine ancestry taken from Aeneas (cf. 5. 265-72 and 23. 290-2), could be expected to defeat Eumelus. This decision is approved by all the Achaeans (540) except Antilochus, who vehemently protests his loss of second prize (543-54). Antilochus urges that Achilles, since he has many other prizes in his hut, give one of these to Eumelus (5). The youth asserts that he will use physical force to defend his right to the prize, bringing to mind the violently angry Achilles of book 1. Violence threatens the peace of the games, but Achilles, acting as arbitrator much like Nestor in book 1, tries to satisfy Antilochus' demand while still recognizing the *ἀπερὴ* of Eumelus. He accomplishes this by accepting Antilochus' suggestion that he give a consolation prize to Eumelus and allow Antilochus to retain second prize. Thus, thanks to Achilles' concern that justice be done, a potentially dangerous situation is avoided. The gentle goodwill with which Achilles settles the problem is seen in his smile (555) and even Eumelus is delighted with the solution (565).

This affair recalls by contrast Agamemnon's rejection of Achilles' suggestion in book 1 that he wait until the Achaeans sack another town before receiving a replacement for Chryseis (127-9). Also recalled are both Agamemnon's fear of going prizeless (1. 119) and Achilles' complaint concerning the unfair distribution of prizes after battle (1. 162-8). In the funeral games Achilles does his best to see that no deserving hero goes prizeless and that the prizes are distributed as fairly as possible. Achilles' just dispensation of prizes is one of the important signs that order has been restored to the heroic world of Achaeans. Achilles, who has been one of the primary agents of disorder earlier in the poem, now becomes the chief agent of the reestablishment of order (6).

Another quarrel follows quickly on the heels of the first when Menelaus lodges his protest. This dispute resembles rather closely the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon in book 1. As in the earlier dispute the conflict concerns a prize and is between a younger and an older man, between a less kingly and more kingly man (9. 160-1). Menelaus

(5) Cf. Sheppard, *op. cit.* In this statement "we hear an echo of far-off talk about Briseis" 201.

(6) See Motto and Clark, *Ise Dais: The Honor of Achilles*, "Arethusa" 2, 1969, 119: "When some degree of measure and balance return to the world of the Iliad after Hector's death satisfies the man prize, Achilles emerges thereafter, not only as most inspired warrior savage, not only as the sympathetic and tractable companion, but also as the great archetype of honor and fair proportioning: he becomes the hero in the fullest sense of the word"

charges Antilochus with having disgraced his ἀρετή and appeals to his honor by asking him to take an oath that he had not taken unfair advantage in the race. Antilochus, faced with the necessity of perjury to retain his prize, quickly apologizes to Menelaus. The young man is described as employing a good sense (586) in making this apology which had been characteristic of his behavior up until the chariot race (570). We can assign at least a portion of Antilochus' decision to apologize to the influence of Achilles' goodwill and sense of fair play. Antilochus, given the example of Achilles' sympathetic reaction to his earlier suggestion of compromise in his dispute vis à vis Eumelus, almost cannot help but act in the proper spirit by recognizing the justice of Menelaus' claim. The young man admits that his youthful rashness had let him astray and gives the prize to Menelaus, and says that he does not wish to fall out of favor with Menelaus or to offend the gods (589-95). Again one is led back to book 1 in noticing that Agamemnon by rejecting Chryses' suppliance risked forfeiting the goodwill of the Achaeans (they had urged the acceptance of Chryses' suppliance: 1. 22) and had angered a god (Apollo) in order to indulge his selfishness. Antilochus' admission of guilt then leads to a very unexpected act of noble generosity on the part of Menelaus, who is moved to give the prize back to the young man. Menelaus says that he accepts Antilochus' supplication for forgiveness (609) to show that his heart is neither arrogant nor harsh by using the word ἀπηνής (611), which had been appropriately applied both by Achilles to Agamemnon's attitude (1. 340) and by Patroclus to Achilles' intransigence (16. 35) (7). As the disorder which forms the main story of the Iliad had as its source the ignoble behavior of one man, Agamemnon (8), in book 23 the harmonious order of the games similarly has its origin in the sympathetic justice of one man, Achilles.

Achilles' promotion of harmony is seen also in one other dispute which arises in the course of the chariot race between Idomeneus and the lesser Ajax. Idomeneus' report of the race is challenged by Ajax, who gratuitously insults the former by calling his report false in rather abusive language — despite the fact that Idomeneus was clearly in a better position to judge the issue (450-1; 474-81). A nasty argument which threatens to become even more serious ensues, but is stopped gently by Achilles without favoring the view of either participant (492-8). One

(7) Ἀπηνής is also used in reference to the lesser Ajax' behavior in his argument with Idomeneus (23. 484).

(8) Not that Achilles does not contribute to the disorder with his violent anger but his ire was first aroused in reaction to Agamemnon's petty selfishness.

is again brought back to the quarrel of book 1, which was caused by similar gratuitous insult given by Agamemnon (9) to Achilles, the latter's fierce anger in reply, and Nestor's attempt at reconciliation. Again things go better here than in book 1. The quarrel is calmed before any harm can result. However, Ajax's ignoble behaviour, so out of place in these games which are otherwise characterized by heroic courtesy, does not go unpunished. His violation of the spirit of the games is atoned for in an act of pure poetic justice: during the foot race Ajax slips in the dung through Athena's intervention (774). Ajax's mouth and nose are filled with dung, a sight which causes the Achaeans great amusement. The imbalance which Ajax has created by his ignoble act is here corrected comically. This scene, however, never degenerates into total farce. It cannot be forgotten that these are *funeral* games. In the midst of this comic scene Patroclus' death is recalled when we are told that Ajax had slipped in the dung of the oxen which Achilles had slaughtered in honor of Patroclus (775-6).

In the events described above Achilles finds himself in the position of an arbitrator of quarrels. He is given a chance to deal with problems similar to those which involved him and Agamemnon in book 1. Achilles in the games is a kind of ruler, a position parallel to that of Agamemnon in the Trojan war. A ruler has as his primary function the maintenance of order through impartial justice. Agamemnon had failed conspicuously in this regard; but Achilles in his presidency of the games shows that he has benefited from the experience he has just gone through. He has seen the tragic result of Agamemnon's stubborn selfishness and his own irate intransigence. Achilles now knows that compromise is necessary to the smooth functioning of human life. Heroic society with its extremely self-willed heroes so jealous of their *τιμή* seems especially to require many compromises in order to avoid violent conflict. Achilles twice in the course of the chariot-race episode helped effect a fair compromise which avoided the danger of physical violence without lessening the *τιμή* of the heroes involved.

Achilles, no doubt still remembering the dishonor which he had received at the hands of Agamemnon in book 1, seems determined to give every hero his due honor. He accomplishes this in the funeral games through an equitable distribution of prizes. As we have already seen, Achilles achieves the rather difficult allotment of prizes after the chariot race to everyone's satisfaction. But even more notable is his giving

(9) The gratuitous insult seems to be characteristic of Agamemnon: cf. 4. 338-48, 370-400.

of an honorary award to Nestor since old age prevents him from competing (618-23). Honor and recognition are given to Nestor even though his prowess in athletic contests is a thing of the past (cf. 626-50). Now Nestor can only display his *ἀρετή* by giving advice which always is characterized by good sense even if a bit wordy. It is not Nestor's fault that his advice is often ignored as in book 1 and here in 23. Youthful imprudence has a way of disregarding the wisdom of age.

It is perhaps the most touching moment of the funeral games when Nestor expresses his gratitude for Achilles' recognition of his *τιμή*. Nestor reveals a delight with Achilles' action (626; 647) which we have seen also in the case of Eumelus when he receives the consolation prize (565). Here we are treated to a vision of heroic life in ordered balance. Amidst the almost nihilistic tragedy of the Iliad we catch a glimpse of the beauty of human happiness which results from the fulfillment of this ideal. In the games heroic life admits of other than tragic potentialities.

Achilles' final dispensation of prizes takes place at the end of book 23 when Agamemnon appears to compete in the spear-throwing contest, which has been artfully saved by the poet for last. Dramatically it is fitting that the meeting of these two men whose quarrel began the Iliad comes at the end of the games. Achilles has dealt fairly with the other Achaean heroes. But how will he treat the man who had disgraced him, and whose ignoble action had led eventually to the death of Patroclus? Achilles' acceptance of Agamemnon's apology had been rather coldly perfunctory and somewhat awkward (19, 146-53). But here the reconciliation is complete and sincere. Achilles awards first prize to his old enemy even before the contest begins (890-4). Achilles shows by example what it means to give due honor to one's fellow heroes. Agamemnon, as the most kingly of the Achaean heroes, must not be allowed to risk a loss in this contest to a hero of lesser rank (Meriones). This magnanimous act forms a fitting climax to the games and is in consonance with the spirit of good will with which Achilles has presided over the games.

With this act of generosity we have been prepared for the even greater act of generosity which Achilles performs when he returns Hector's body to Priam. In the light of his behavior in the funeral games Achilles' acceptance of Priam's suppliance is neither inconsistent nor surprising. There are indeed external forces which have some effect on Achilles' decision to return Hector's body, i.e. Zeus' order reported by Thetis (24. 133-37) and Priam's moving appeal (24. 486-506). But Achilles does not act in reluctant obedience to Zeus nor does he respond begrudgingly to Priam's request. Achilles is emotionally ready to obey Zeus. One can almost say that Zeus' command gives Achilles an excuse

to stop his disgraceful treatment of Hector's corpse. His fierce hatred of Hector has gone as far as it can. Now faced with Priam's overwhelming sorrow Achilles is ready to extend the noble generosity he displayed in the funeral games beyond the pale of his own society of heroes to encompass even the father of his greatest enemy. This noble generosity is the result of a mature wisdom hard won through suffering: the knowledge that all human life is subject to sorrow (24. 527-33). Achilles has seen the appalling mutability of human affairs and the vanity of his own wishes. Aided by his new understanding of the inherent tragedy of human existence he can view Priam not only as the father of the man who had killed Patroclus, but also as a father who has lost his son, just as Peleus, his own father, has in effect lost Achilles (24. 534-51).

Perhaps, the most prominent theme of the funeral games is the triumph of order over disorder. When every hero receives his due, heroic life functions well. The order of the games has as its source Achilles, around whom, as Whitman says, "order slowly spreads... in a widening ring" (10). We see in the games a model heroic world in which the ideal of human behavior according to the heroic code is consistently brought to realization under the presidency of Achilles. No doubt the charm of the funeral games derives from this vision of human order and happiness introduced amidst the profound tragedy of the Iliad.

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(10) Homer and the Heroic Tradition, New York 1965, 215.