

2023

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### Recommended Citation

Maloney, Alison (2023) "The Struggle over Patroclus's Body and the Stretching of Leather," *Parnassus: Classical Journal*: Vol. 10, Article 20.

Available at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/parnassus-j/vol10/iss1/20>

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## The Struggle over Patroclus's Body and the Stretching of Leather

Alison Maloney '23

Throughout the *Iliad* by Homer, different heroes repeatedly strip armor from the bodies of their opponents. Not only was the armor expensive and could be used in future combat, the action of taking off the armor and then wearing it was a way to publicly assert one's glory on the battlefield. While there are many instances of stripping armor off opponents in the *Iliad*, equally of note are the scenes where a hero does this and *beyond*—taking, and often desecrating, the newly stripped body. Despite this, character dialogue seems to reveal there are certain codes of conduct regarding killing, and violating the opponent's body after death seems to oppose—to some degree—these unwritten rules of war. What are the motives that go behind action like this, and how can it contribute to Homer's telling of the Trojan War? Book seventeen may provide some unique insight as it tells in immense detail the fight over Patroclus' body with a simile. As Trojans and Achaeans both seize hold of Patroclus' body in a massive tug-of-war, the struggle is likened to the grueling process of stretching a cowhide for leather. Upon close-reading, it seems that this scene's language and graphic simile work together for two purposes: emphasizing the inhumanity of war and, as a result, the ways in which codes are broken and renegotiated for other motives.

The simile runs from lines 384-414 in book seventeen, first detailing the length of the struggle and the toll it is taking on both sides:

τοῖς δὲ πανημερίοις ἔριδος μέγα νεῖκος ὀρώρει  
 ἀργαλέης: καμάτω δὲ καὶ ἰδρωῖ νωλεμὲς αἰεὶ  
 γούνατά τε κνήμαί τε πόδες θ' ὑπένερθεν ἐκάστου  
χεῖρες τ' ὀφθαλμοί τε παλάσσετο μαρναμένοιιν  
 ἀμφ' ἀγαθὸν θεράποντα ποδώκεος Αἰακίδαο.  
 (So all day long for the men of war the fighting raged,  
 Grim and grueling, relentless, drenching labor, nonstop,  
 And the knees, shins, and feet that upheld each fighter,  
 Their hands, their eyes, ran with the sweat of struggle  
 Over the great runner Achilles' steadfast aide-in-arms  
 An enormous tug-of-war)(Fagles).

First, from this brief section of the text, it becomes clear that Patroclus' body is of great importance to both sides of the war. The fighting has been going on "all day long," and the soldiers on both sides are fighting with extreme determination with no signs of stopping. Neither side wants to lose possession of the body, and they exert themselves to the maximum as evidenced by the detailed descriptions of the sweat running down different parts of their bodies. To further emphasize how far the soldiers are willing to go to keep the body, Homer really brings out the details of the physical toll of the fight—using words like "ἰδρῶ" (translated by Fagles as "drenching," but also can be taken as "sweating" or "perspiring") and then describing all the parts of the body with sweat for further effect. It is interesting that the line discussing the sweat running down the "γούνατά τε κνήμαί τε πόδες" (knees, shins, and feet) seems to follow the natural path sweat would roll down, further bringing out the very physical, laborious nature of the struggle to readers with this detailed imagery. Perhaps equally significant is the way the bodies of the soldiers are reduced to just parts—knees, shins, feet, eyes, hands—producing an effect that brings out the confusion of the fight around the body; from far off, it may look like limbs flying about, each one trying to grab parts of Patroclus' body or fight an opponent. The word "παλάσσετο," taken by Fagles as "ran with the sweat" also can be translated as "defiled" or "sullied," perhaps starting to emphasize the grotesque nature of what this fight is about and how its corrupting the soldiers. Overall, Homer's vivid description here makes clear that both Achaean and Trojan soldiers are willing to physically strain themselves in a dangerous frenzy over a long period in the hope of possessing the stripped body of Patroclus. It is evident that even without armor both sides see some value in seizing the corpse.

The passage continues; this time revealing a striking illustration of what this "tug-of-war" really looks like through a simile:

ὥς δ' ὅτ' ἀνὴρ ταύροιο βοὸς μέγαλοιο βοεΐην  
 λαοῖσιν δώη τανύειν μεθύουσιν ἀλοιφῆ:  
 δεξάμενοι δ' ἄρα τοί γε διαστάντες τανύουσι  
 κυκλός', ἄφαρ δέ τε ἱκμάς ἔβη, δύνει δέ τ' ἀλοιφή  
 πολλῶν ἐλκόντων, τάνυται δέ τε πᾶσα διὰ πρό:  
 ὥς οἱ γ' ἔνθα καὶ ἔνθα νέκυν ὀλίγη ἐνὶ χώρῃ  
**εἴλκεον ἀμφότεροι:** μάλα δέ σφισιν ἔλπετο θυμὸς

(As when some master tanner gives his crews the hide of a huge bull for stretching,  
The beast's skin soaked in grease and the men grab hold round in a broad circle,  
Tugging, stretching hard till the skin's oils go dripping out as the grease sinks in,  
So many workers stretch the whole hide tough and taught—so back and forth in a  
cramped space they tugged, both sides dragging the corpse and hopes rising)(Fagles).

In this simile, Patroclus' human body is reduced to a cow's hide. This comparison of human to animal seems to emphasize how this tug-of-war has really disrespected Patroclus' corpse, dehumanizing a part of his once living form. The comparison of a domestic activity, stretching a cowhide, to this horrific sight of war adds a sense of deeper shock, as something normal and easily imaginable is juxtaposed with a nearly unimaginable sight. This scene may have been meant to surprise an audience with its horrifying descriptions, further brought to life with this easily imagined simile. The animated verbs, like μεθύουσαν ("soaked"), "ἐλκόντων" (Here: "tugging," can also be translated as "tearing" which is even more violent), and "τάνυται" ("stretching") further bring this sense of shock to the scene. Also significant is the verb "εἴλκεον." Fagles translates it as "dragging" in references to the corpse. However, according to Liddell Scott Jones, this verb can also be translated as "doing violence to." Given this meaning, "εἴλκεον" could help to further convey the horror of this war scene, and directly indicate that Patroclus' body was being wronged and maimed. In a similar way, the description of the oils, grease, and liquids coming out of the hide—and thus Patroclus' body as well—further add to the sense of desecration that is being done to the body.

The scene concludes with a final picture of the struggle as well as the reaction of the onlooking Olympians:

Τρωσὶν μὲν ἐρύειν προτὶ Ἴλιον, αὐτὰρ Ἀχαιοῖς  
νῆας ἔπι γλαφυράς· περὶ δ' αὐτοῦ μῶλος ὀρώρει  
ἄγριος· οὐδέ κ' Ἄρης λαοσσόος οὐδέ κ' Ἀθήνη  
τόν γε ἰδοῦσ' ὀνόσαιτ', οὐδ' εἰ μάλα μιν χόλος ἴκοι·  
τοῖον Ζεὺς ἐπὶ Πατρόκλῳ ἀνδρῶν τε καὶ ἵππων  
ἦματι τῷ ἐτάνυσσε κακὸν πόνον·

(The Trojans hoping to drag Patroclus back to Troy,  
Achaens to drag him back to the hollow ships  
And round him always the brutal struggle raging.  
Not even Ares, lasher of armies, not even Athena  
Watching the battle here could scorn its fury,

Not even in their most savage lust for combat, no—  
 So tense the work of war for the men and chariot teams  
 That Zeus stretched taut across Patroclus this one day...)

Here, the lines reveal that both sides want to bring Patroclus' body away from the battlefield. Though each side probably has differing purposes of dragging the body away, this further explains the tug-of-war nature over the body since both sides are trying to leave in opposite directions with it. Also significant within these lines is the shift to discuss Ares, Athena, and Zeus. Ares and Athena—both immortals associated with war—take note of the fierce struggle over Patroclus' body and the devastation it is doing to the body. The sight of the men pulling the body and vehement fighting is a sight both Olympians cannot ignore or disapprove of. These lines seem to imply that Ares and Athena seem to pay attention to and approve of violence and war, and this ferocious scene is something even divine sponsors of battle are surprised by. The fact that neither Ares or Athena can deny the fury of the fight and its gruesomeness speaks to the bloodiness of this scene and the fact that this might be defying norms surrounding the treatment of bodies after death. Finally, important to note is the way that this scene ends using the word “ἐτάυσσε,” which Fagles translates as “stretched taut.” Liddell Scott Jones mentions that this word can sometimes be used in a more domestic context—stringing a bow, stringing a harp, and even weaving. The use of “ἐτάυσσε” reflects continuity with the simile of stretching a cowhide. Just as the domestic scene of making leather was used in the form of a simile earlier in this passage, here a verb used often outside the context of war is brought in. Both the simile and this verb serve to compare the unlike scenes of domestic life and war, bringing to life a grotesque and nearly unimaginable scene with something more imaginable.

Though there may be codes surrounding the treatment of a body after death, these graphic lines indicate that rules may be ignored in pursuit of other motives. For the Achaens, keeping Patroclus' body intact and bringing it back for proper burial is probably of utmost importance. Letting the body be taken and further violated would be shameful to them. The Trojans may want to acquire the body for this very reason—not letting the Achaens give Patroclus a proper burial would be a huge blow to Greek morale, which would be at the advantage of the Trojans. Finally, this overall practice of taking the body and

further disrespecting it after death may be a final way to triumph over an enemy and gain glory. On the battlefield, simply killing and stripping armor may not be enough, and norms and humanity can be ignored in this pursuit.

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