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THE SIMILE OF THE FUGITIVE HOMICIDE,  
*ILIAD* 24.480–84:  
ANALOGY, FOILING, AND ALLUSION

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HOMER ELABORATES “the most dramatic moment in the whole of the *Iliad*”<sup>1</sup> with a unique, disturbing, and pathetic simile. Only in the scene of Priam’s unheralded arrival in Achilles’ lodging does the predicament of a murderer seeking refuge in a strange land ever provide the material for a Homeric illustration.

τοὺς δ’ ἔλαθ’ εἰσελθὼν Πρίαμος μέγας, ἄγχι δ’ ἄρα στάς  
χερσὶν Ἀχιλλῆος λάβε γούνατα καὶ κύσε χεῖρας  
δεινὰς ἀνδροφόνους, αἶ οἱ πολέας κτάνον νῆας.  
ὥς δ’ ὅτ’ ἂν ἄνδρ’ ἄτη πυκνὴ λάβῃ, ὅς τ’ ἐνὶ πάτρῃ  
φῶτα κατακείνας ἄλλων ἐξίκετο δῆμον,  
ἄνδρὸς ἐς ἀφνειοῦ, θάμβος δ’ ἔχει εἰσορόωντας,  
ὣς Ἀχιλεὺς θάμβησεν ἰδὼν Πρίαμον θεοειδέα·  
θάμβησαν δὲ καὶ ἄλλοι, ἐς ἀλλήλους δὲ ἶδοντο.  
τὸν καὶ λισσόμενος Πρίαμος πρὸς μῦθον ἔειπε·  
“μνήσαι πατρὸς σοῖο, θεοῖς ἐπιείκελ’ Ἀχιλλεῦ . . .” (II. 24.477–86)

The simile explicitly compares only the wonder experienced by the fugitive’s host in the simile and by Achilles in the main narrative as each gazes upon his unexpected visitor. But since the narrator withholds this

<sup>1</sup>Richardson 1993 ad loc. In addition to the other studies cited in this article, comments on the simile will also be found in Peppmüller 1876, 227–32; Duchemin 1960, 365; Deichgräber 1972, 63–65; and Seaford 1994, 70.

link until the end of the simile, the implicit analogy between Priam and the murderer, both suppliants in a stranger's dwelling, seems at least equally prominent. Yet the tenor and the vehicle of this comparison are more notable for their dissimilarity than their resemblance: Priam is not a murderer,<sup>2</sup> he is not in a foreign land but in his own, the man he supplicates is an enemy.<sup>3</sup> According to MacLeod, "The simile heightens the moment by contrasting a more usual situation with this one."<sup>4</sup> Mark W. Edwards writes of the "shock effect" produced by the reversal of roles between Priam and Achilles.<sup>5</sup> While these authors see dissimilarity as a functional element of the simile, they do not explore the effects, or potential effects, of an emotional intensification achieved through the particular contrasts presented by this simile alone.<sup>6</sup>

Upon close examination, the simile of the fugitive homicide reveals a multitude of internal and external associations that suggest mysterious, even uncanny interpretive density. It is hardly to be imagined that these associations could have been accurately recognized, much less interpreted, on a single hearing. Indeed, less acute listeners might not even have been troubled by the simile, while the more acute would have registered different disturbing subtleties and pondered them differently. Discussion here, therefore, does not aim at reproducing a single ideal reading of the passage, or at imputing to the poet techniques for eliciting such a reading. Instead it exposes a range of provocations which the simile offers to its audiences and suggests a range of interpretive responses.

<sup>2</sup>As Eustathius observed; see Richardson 1993 ad loc.; Moulton 1977, 115; Bonnafé 1983, 94.

<sup>3</sup>MacLeod (1982 ad 480–84) mentions these and other dissimilarities. On the reversal of roles between Priam and Achilles see Redfield 1975, 215. Lynn-George (1988, 239–40) astutely notes that while the simile effects change of places between the wealthy king and the slayer, the subject matter of the simile is itself the fugitive's change of place. For a subtle analysis of "reverse similes" in the *Odyssey* see Foley 1978.

<sup>4</sup>MacLeod 1982 ad 480–84.

<sup>5</sup>M. W. Edwards 1987, 107; see also idem 1991, 33.

<sup>6</sup>Contrast in Homeric similes has received surprisingly little attention from scholars. The best treatment is that of Porter (1972), who does not, however, discuss 24.480–84. Damon (1961, 261–71) has suggested that Homer's contrasting similes may have imparted an oriental flavor to his poetry; but he too does not discuss the simile of the suppliant. See also Fränkel 1921, 106; Silk 1974, 5; and M. W. Edwards 1987, 106–7. For discussion of contrast between pairs of similes, rather than between similes and their contexts, see Hubbard 1981 [1983]. Rauber (1969) sees Homer's contrastive similes as yielding unexpected resemblances.

The concept of foiling seems promising for the interpretation of sharp contrasts such as those in the simile of the fugitive homicide. In foiling, one or both contrasted qualities are emphasized through their juxtaposition. We find this technique constantly employed in the priamel, a structure that Homer could combine with similes.<sup>7</sup> Fränkel perceived that “an interplay of polar (absolute or extreme) opposites is a basic constituent of early Greek (especially archaic) thought and feeling. . . . as a consequence thought constantly operated with contrasting foils.”<sup>8</sup> But he scarcely applied this insight to Homeric similes, despite his extensive study of them.<sup>9</sup> Porter has convincingly argued that in the numerous similes in the *Iliad* in which the carnage of the battlefield is compared to scenes of peace, “the grimness and bloodiness of the battlefield are inevitably rendered darker and more tragic by the constant brief glimpses we get in the similes of a world where milk flows, etc. . . . Conversely, these momentary glimpses of the world of peace are made more idyllic and poignant by the panorama of violence and destruction which surrounds them.”<sup>10</sup>

The simile of the fugitive homicide is a bit more complicated than most of the juxtapositions discussed by Porter. Rather than comparing a scene of war to one of peace, this simile compares a scene comprising two elements, one violent, the other not (Achilles, Priam), to another scene of two elements, one violent the other nonviolent (the suppliant homicide and his host). Thus the comparison of violent and nonviolent is doubled. But Porter’s basic principle of the mutual emphasis of peace and war through contrastive juxtaposition still applies. The comparison of Priam to a murderer seems to serve as a foil that emphasizes the harmlessness, indeed victimhood, of the elderly Trojan king. Priam’s juxtaposition with the violent man he is supplicating would have the same effect: never could he be more powerless than when prostrate before the killer of his sons. Likewise the tenderness of Priam’s gesture of kissing Achilles’ hands (24.478) is emphasized by the killing attributed

<sup>7</sup>As at *Il.* 24.157–66. On the priamel in Homer see Race 1982, 31–42.

<sup>8</sup>Fränkel 1973, 525.

<sup>9</sup>Fränkel 1973, 41: “The similarity of the two pictures is not limited to single traits; rather, there is resemblance in the structure of the scene or course of the action as an entirety.” In general see Fränkel 1921; on contrast in similes cf. his brief remarks (106) and his interpretation of the simile of the fugitive (95–96).

<sup>10</sup>Porter 1972, 19.

to those hands (δεινὰς ἀνδροφόνους, 479); the doubling of adjectives and their enjambement intensifies the effect.

At the same time, the implied analogy between Priam and the fugitive could suggest that Priam's relative innocence makes him equally deserving of the sanctuary that a murderer might expect to receive, or even more so.<sup>11</sup> This is underscored by Priam's appeal to Achilles to pity him: he compares himself to Peleus, also an old man beset by enemies (486–92). But when he adds that he is even more pitiful than Peleus (ἐλκεινότερος, 504), he enhances his claim upon Achilles' mercy. Therefore if it is just that a murderer's plea for sanctuary be heard, a fortiori the innocent Priam's plea should be so much the more deserving of fulfillment.

While the act of supplication suggests comparison between Priam and the fugitive murderer, the murderous hands of Achilles, which had killed many of Priam's sons (κτάνον, 479), also suggest comparison between the Greek hero and the fugitive (κατακτείνας, 481). The links between Achilles and the killer reverse those between Priam and the killer: both Achilles and the killer have shed blood, but Achilles is not a suppliant. Here the abjection of a person who has killed only one man, and that in error (ἄτη πυκινὴ, 480), serves as a foil for the power and pride of Achilles. His "terrible, mankilling" hands, far from grasping the knees of another in supplication, receive the kisses of the humble Priam. Priam is the suppliant, yet it is Achilles whose abuse of Hektor's corpse has brought the disapproval of Zeus and Apollo upon himself (see esp. 24.53–54, 113–14). Achilles now needs Priam to remove the corpse from his dwelling, and he could well have been supplicating Priam to restore him in the sight of the gods. At this point, however, he is only following the orders of Zeus. Thus Priam and the killer, as foils, emphasize the hitherto unrepentant savagery of Achilles that has caused the gods to intervene on Priam's behalf. This emphasis on the monumentality of Achilles' cruelty may in turn intensify the poignancy of the compassion that he learns to feel as the scene progresses.

Yet the image of the murderer seeking refuge has associations within the *Iliad* and within heroic mythology that further deepen and complicate the resonances of this simile. Peleus, Achilles' father, was famous as a kindly host of exiles:<sup>12</sup> the *Iliad* mentions Phoinix (9.447–84),

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Bonnafé 1983, 94–95.

<sup>12</sup>See Leaf 1892, 398; Beck 1964, 224–26; Schlunk 1976; Moulton 1977, 115–16 and n. 68; Richardson 1993 ad 23.85–90; Crotty 1994, 81 n. 7.

Epeigeus (16.570–76), and Patroklos (23.85–90) as his beneficiaries; the latter two were homicides. The simile of the fugitive murderer is therefore open to interpretation as an allusion to the career of Peleus, an indefinite trace that may engage the imagination of Homer's audience in pursuing its source and its implications.<sup>13</sup> By comparing Achilles to a man who gazes in wonder upon a suppliant who has arrived at his home, the narrator suggests that Priam, who is about to appeal to Achilles to treat him decently because *he* is like Achilles' father (24.486–87), has fortuitously placed Achilles in a situation where *Achilles* is implicitly called upon to resemble his own father and act as Peleus would have acted.<sup>14</sup> In this way too the simile of the murderer intensifies the emotional and moral urgency of the passage, both for Achilles and for Homer's audience. For in tracing the allusion to Peleus as suggested, Homer's listeners would become like those characters in the epic, Odysseus, Phoinix, and Nestor, who have cited the explicit ethical instructions of Peleus to Achilles in their efforts to modify his conduct (9.252–58, 9.443–44, 11.783–84).<sup>15</sup> Here again the prescriptions of Peleus are needed to guide his son; but the text furnishes nobody who can utter them. Instead they may take shape, to a greater or lesser degree of consciousness and specificity, in the imaginations of the audience, who have no way of communicating them to the hero who needs their instruction. The greater the audience's awareness and understanding of the simile's allusion to Peleus, the greater their sense of tension and frustration at the divide between what Achilles needs to hear and what the poet chooses to say. And yet, as the scene plays out, Achilles does act as his father would have acted. That he does so without the specific prescriptions of his father that could have been furnished enhances the sense of difficulty miraculously overcome in the reconciliation of Priam and Achilles.

Myth associated Peleus with exiles in another way as well. The lost epic *Alkmaionis* told the story of how Peleus and Telamon murdered their half-brother Phokos.<sup>16</sup> Later sources (Paus. 2.29.10, D.S. 4.72.6) indicate that Peleus was sent into exile by his father Aiakos. According to

<sup>13</sup>Iser (1980) has argued that the reader's involvement in identifying and filling in gaps of meaning in a text represents the basis of the aesthetic response to literature.

<sup>14</sup>Schlunk 1976, 209; cf. Beck 1964, 224–26; Moulton 1977, 116.

<sup>15</sup>On the citation of Peleus as the inculcator of heroic values see Crotty 1994, 27–28.

<sup>16</sup>For the text see Davies 1988, 139. For discussion see Gantz 1993, 222.

Apollodorus (3.13.1–3) Peleus took refuge with Eurytion of Phthia, who purified him. Later Peleus committed a second homicide: he accidentally took the life of Eurytion during the Calydonian Boar hunt. This time he fled to the court of Akastos, where he was received and purified a second time.<sup>17</sup> The earliest testimony for this incident is in Pindar (fr. 48 SM), but it is entirely possible that much or all of Apollodorus' version goes back to Homer's time.<sup>18</sup> It would certainly be a strange coincidence if Homer, without any knowledge of an exiled Peleus, had compared Priam to a fugitive and followed the simile immediately with the words "remember your father." Nor should Homer's abstention from explicit reference to a myth be taken as proof that he did not know it or did not consider it relevant.<sup>19</sup> The *Odyssey* never explicitly mentions any episode narrated in the *Iliad*, but it is hardly conceivable that this is due to ignorance:<sup>20</sup> deliberate avoidance seems a more likely explanation. We cannot reject the possibility that Homer and his audiences knew the stories of Peleus' homicides and exiles. If they did, the simile of the homicide would have suggested that Achilles was beholding a man like his own father, even before Priam asks to be regarded in that very way. The father of Achilles had not only bestowed but also received the kind of decency here requested of his son.

As the shadow of Peleus passes across the face of the kneeling Priam, it may appear that it is Peleus too whose life Achilles holds in his hands to take or give back, and Peleus whose son he keeps from his father. And this is true: for Achilles' absence at Troy entails severe consequences for his father. As Priam says, with Achilles in Troy, Peleus has nobody to protect him from the destruction of war (οὐδέ τις ἔστιν ἀορὴν καὶ λαιγὸν ἀμῦναι, 24.489). Achilles himself will soon after (540–42) link his absence at Troy with his aging father's unfulfilled need for care.<sup>21</sup> By choosing to remain at Troy and indeed to die there (1.169–70

<sup>17</sup>Gantz 1993, 226.

<sup>18</sup>Gantz 1993, 227.

<sup>19</sup>For a different view see Schlunk 1976, 200.

<sup>20</sup>Slatkin 1991, 15.

<sup>21</sup>In the *Odyssey* (11.494–503) the shade of Achilles asks Odysseus whether Peleus suffers violence from enemies and wishes he could be alive and present to help him. He explicitly contrasts his impotence to protect his father with his success at killing Trojans (11.498–500). A. T. Edwards (1985, 53–55) discusses the continuity between this passage and Achilles' concern for Peleus in the *Iliad*. In an unpublished lecture Mark Edwards has suggested that the words τοῖος ἐὼν οἷός at *Od.* 11.499 might have been construed as an al-

and 9.356–63, 410–16), Achilles has condemned his father to the mercy of his enemies. Added to this is the grief that weighs on Peleus as he awaits, not his son's return, but the report of his death (19.335–37). Such grief can be fatal, as the example of Odysseus' mother Antikleia shows (*Od.* 11.202–3). Here it has been inflicted by the choice of Achilles himself. Thus, even as Achilles spares Priam and responds to his plea, he does nothing to help the father who depends upon him, and who, for all he knows, may already be dead (19.334–35). Achilles' compassionate response to Priam may remind us that he could also have reunited Peleus and *his* son, had he chosen to do so when it was still possible.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, I mention Stanley's proposal that the simile of the fugitive homicide be viewed in the context of Priam's symbolic *katabasis*.<sup>23</sup> The suggestion of a *katabasis* in which the soul of the deceased would be welcomed with kindness in the Underworld would be important as hinting at a dispensation such as the establishment of the Eleusinian mysteries, perhaps occurring later than the Trojan War in mythical chronology,<sup>24</sup> in which the gods might relieve the cares of mortals at their death and not merely end them. This hint would imbue with even greater poignancy the limited reconciliation of Achilles and Priam and the temporary relief it brings to their suffering. In its entirety the concluding book of the *Iliad* displays the concern of Zeus for a pitiful mortal like Priam, his memory of a pious man like Hektor after his death, and his ability to intervene on their behalf. As miraculous as the reconciliation

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lusion to *Il.* 18.105, where Achilles uses the same phrase to express his guilt at his failure to protect Patroklos when he could have done so. Edwards points out that the phrase does not recur in the *Iliad*, and, in the *Odyssey*, is used by a character of himself only by Achilles in this passage.

<sup>22</sup>Not that Achilles, a character in the poem, could have changed its plot. But the *Iliad* presents Achilles' behavior as contrasted with an alternative course of action whose consequences, though unrealized, can be imagined (as Achilles does at 9.394–400 and 23.144–49) and weighed. This contrast implies responsibility for the path actually taken.

<sup>23</sup>Stanley 1993, 239. On Priam's journey as a *katabasis* see Whitman 1958, 217; Nagler 1974, 184; Nethercut 1976; and Stanley 1993, 237–40. Hermes' escorting of Priam and the description of Achilles' surprisingly palatial dwelling are among the details of the passage that suggest a journey to the king of the dead.

<sup>24</sup>On mythical chronology see Clay 1989, 11–16. On suggestions in Homer that Zeus may eventually provide mortals with a better afterlife than that depicted in the *Iliad*, see Heiden 1997, 228–31. The relative dating of the composition of the *Iliad* and the establishment of the Eleusinian mysteries cannot be determined, and it is entirely possible, though not provable, that Homer and his audiences already knew of mystery cult.

of Priam and Achilles was, even greater miracles may have been in store.

In the encounter of Priam and Achilles Homer shows us two men who penetrate all the barriers that separate them to find the experiences of love, grief, and endurance which they share and can respect in one another.<sup>25</sup> The full measure of these feelings does not come easily to Priam and Achilles, and their poet has contrived that they challenge his audience as well. The simile with which he prepares this moment suggests a variety of lenses which have the potential to affect one's view of the scene in myriad ways and disclose much more than the immediately visible. Through close attention and searching participation, Homer's audience may accept into themselves the difficult confrontation that culminates the suffering of the *Iliad*.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Schein (1984, 159-63) presents a sensitive overview of the passage.

<sup>26</sup>My thanks to Mark Edwards and an anonymous referee for *AJP* for their helpful comments.

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