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Achilles' Self-Address: Iliad 16.7-19

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The exchange between Achilles and Patroclus at the opening of book 16 is a crucial turning point in the plot of the *Iliad*. In a scene of extraordinary force and complexity, the poet articulates the volatile emotions of both men in language that is rich with underlying tensions and associations. The Greek losses have been so devastating that Patroclus is overcome by tears. Achilles greets him with a simile that only ambiguously expresses the frame of mind from which the narrator tells us it springs. By comparing Patroclus to a little girl clinging to her mother’s dress, Achilles mocks him, and yet the narrator tells us that Achilles’ response is a gesture of pity (5). The series of rhetorical questions Achilles then poses is so cutting and ironic that it causes Patroclus to groan heavily and launch a furious attack that, again, takes no account of the pity Achilles has supposedly just shown. He curses Achilles’ excessive anger and denies that Thetis and Peleus are his parents, since only the rocks and sea could have produced such a pitiless nature. Achilles is moved by Patroclus’ appeal, but also “deeply troubled” (48). The abrupt shifts in his speech represent dramatically the struggles of an unsettled mind. He decides on a compromise that is not so much a resolution as it is a misguided result of his competing feelings of anger and compassion. Though he will not comply with Patroclus’ request to reenter the battle, he will allow Patroclus to fight in his place; and thus, with the illusory hope that Patroclus will emerge from the battle victorious, Achilles sets in motion the course of events that unfold in the rest of the poem. With the foresight inaccessible to Patroclus and Achilles, the narrator poignantly reminds us that Patroclus, in his great innocence, did not realize that “he was entreating his own death and evil destruction” (47).

We can begin to address the complexity of this scene by asking two questions that raise themes central to the whole of book 16. First, granted that Patroclus assumes the role of Achilles in battle, is there
any further sense in which the two men are identified? Some scholars, for example, argue that Patroclus can be viewed as a ritual substitute for Achilles,1 or as his alter ego.2 Second, how does the text depict the nature of Achilles’ inner struggles, which after all form the powerful thematic and psychological background for so much of the poem?

Several scholars link the answers to these two questions: Patroclus represents the compassionate side of Achilles, who is himself racked by a conflict between compassion and anger.3 This approach sometimes leads to more specific psychological speculations. Is Achilles denying or repressing his compassionate side?4 Does he recognize something of himself in Patroclus?5 Does Patroclus function throughout the poem as a metaphor for one aspect of Achilles’ personality?6

While the text depicts Achilles’ vacillations between compassion and anger with considerable plausibility,7 the further move that Patro-

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2 Nagy, Best of the Achaians 33–34, 292–93, suggests that Patroclus is called “best of the Achaians” (17.689) and “best of the Myrmidons” (18.10)—titles otherwise reserved for Diomedes, Agamemnon, Ajax, and Achilles—“because he has taken upon himself not only the armor but also the heroic identity of Achilles” (34). Developing Van Brock’s arguments, he supports his view with the linguistic evidence that the word *therapōn*, used of Patroclus in book 16 (165, 244, 653) and elsewhere, derives from the Anatolian languages, where it originally meant “ritual substitute.” Beginning with book 16, then, Patroclus can be seen as the alter ego of Achilles, and ultimately his substitute in death. See also Sinos, The Meaning of Philos 29–37.

3 Whitman, Homer and the Heroic Tradition 197–200, provides the classic formulation of this position. In book 16 Achilles is torn between the defiant expression of his anger, and a genuinely compassionate nature represented by Patroclus. Patroclus thus externalizes one component of Achilles’ inner conflict. Whitman also saw this conflict in terms of a tension between Achilles’ will to transcendent glory (which has been achieved insofar as Zeus had granted his request for the Trojans to inflict destruction on the Achaians), and his will to take action in the human sphere. Achilles achieves transcendent glory by removing himself from the sphere of human action, but his compassion for humanity demands that he reenter that sphere.

4 Van Nortwick, Somewhere I Have Never Travelled 56, claims that in Achilles’ speech in the opening of book 16 we “find the by now familiar attempt to cover genuine concern with a cavalier tone, a sign of stubbornness, or perhaps denial.”

5 In his psychoanalytic study, Childlike Achilles 150, MacCary sees the simile Achilles uses at 16.7–11 as especially revealing: “What of himself does Achilles see in Patroklos, in Patroklos’ eyes, when they sit apart by themselves and talk? It must be his own weakness; it must be the diminished, effeminized, socialized image of himself that Hektor accuses Diomedes of having become.”


7 See my discussion of 16.49–100 below.
cllus represents his compassionate side is not as firmly grounded; it is based on the fact that the compassion Achilles often lacks forms the essence of his most intimate friend’s character. It is not clear that we are justified in inferring from this that Patroclus represents or is to be identified with the “compassionate side” of Achilles.

I argue, however, that by exploring the issue from a different perspective we find the precise evidence, which has so far been lacking, in favor of this view. My interpretation relies fundamentally on a repetition which, when recognized, activates a number of interpretive possibilities and textual nuances. The opening of book 16 (1–100), I suggest, recreates the scene in book 1 between Achilles and Thetis (357–427) through the repetition of language, theme, and emotional tone. By simultaneously evoking and inverting the familial context of the scene in book 1, the opening of book 16 identifies Patroclus with one side of Achilles and defines Achilles’ conflict in terms of a tension between compassion and ironic distance. This ironic distance is in part a manifestation of Achilles’ anger. When viewed in relation to book 1, Achilles’ speech thus maps out his relation with Patroclus and the nature of his conflict. This repetition adds a dimension to the beginning of book 16 that at once provides a firmer basis for interpretation and uncovers a further level of literary subtlety in the text.

In the beginning of book 16 the verbal repetitions of book 1 are brief but striking. Achilles addresses Patroclus with the same words Thetis addressed to him in book 1 when he was weeping: ἔξαυδα, μὴ κεῦθε νόω, ἵνα εἴδομεν ἀμφω (16.19; 1.363). Insofar as these are the only two instances of this complete line in the Iliad, there is an exclusive connection between the two scenes (ἔξαυδα, μὴ κεῦθε appears once more at 18.74, again spoken by Thetis to Achilles). In addition, Homer prefaces Patroclus’ reply to Achilles with the same formula he used to describe Achilles’ response to Thetis: τὸν δὲ βαρὺ στενάχων προσέφης, Πατρόκλεες ἰπτεῦ. (16.20); τὴν δὲ βαρὺ στενάχων προσέφη πόδας ὦκυς Ἀχιλλεύς· (1.364). This repetition not only evokes the former scene between Achilles and Thetis, but it also reverses the role played by Achilles; instead of the child seeking comfort, he is put into the role of the parent, or more precisely, the role of his mother.⁸ Patro-

⁸This is not the only time Achilles is put into the role of the parent. Schein, The Mortal Hero 107, notes that Achilles’ “special sensitivity to parent–child relationships” is revealed in a series of similes in which he assumes the role of a parent. At 9.323–27 he compares himself to a bird bringing back food for her young; at 18.318–22 he grieves for
clus, on the other hand, is put into Achilles’ former role as the child in distress.

This repetition and reversal of roles is vividly reinforced by the language, imagery, and emotional context of the scene. As Achilles wept in book 1, Patroclus is here weeping (16.3) and Achilles asks him why: *tipte dedakrusai* (16.7). So too in book 1, Thetis asked the weeping Achilles *tekon*, *ti kliaeis* (1.362). Here in book 16 Achilles is, in fact, identified with a mother (*mētrī*, 8) when he compares Patroclus to a young girl who looks tearfully into her mother’s eyes and begs to be picked up (16.8). The imagery Achilles uses thus suggests that he steps into the role of the parent whose attention is being sought by Patroclus, and Patroclus takes on the role of the child Achilles was—or is. And so, in addition to the verbal repetition in lines 19 and 20, the thematic links between these two scenes are such that book 16 reenacts the exchange in book 1 between Thetis and Achilles.10

We can now consider the implications of this repetition. Achilles

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Nagler, *Spontaneity and Tradition* 135–36, points out that when Patroclus is compared to a female he conforms to a pattern of successful supplication, since in a common form of the Embassy motif all male attempts at supplication fail and a woman finally succeeds. (The Meleager story, *Iliad* 9.573–99, typifies this motif. On the possibility that Patroclus’ role corresponds to Cleopatra’s, and the related possibility of a correspondence between the names Patroclus and Cleopatra, see Schadewaldt, *Iliasstudien* 140, and Kakridis, *Homerica Studies* 28–31.) But see Martin, *Language of Heroes* 62, whose arguments suggest that Patroclus is not portrayed as a successful supplicant. There is, according to Martin, a suggestion in the text that Patroclus’ powers of persuasion are very weak: the only other person in the *Iliad* who weeps “like a black–watered stream” is Agamemnon (9.14–15), who Martin claims is the *Iliad*’s weakest orator.

and Patroclus are both identified with female characters, a mother and a daughter. While this unites and distinguishes them from the male sphere, it also suggests a particular kind of relationship, that of parent to child: and so we find (or rather, Achilles condescendingly puts) Patroclus in the subordinate role of the helpless child petitioning her mother (Achilles), who stands aloof from her child’s highly emotional state. What, then, is the significance of the stance Achilles adopts toward Patroclus, and is it really the same stance Thetis adopted toward him in book 1?

While there is a kind of intimacy and compassion implied by Achilles’ and Thetis’ words—ἐξεύθε, μὴ κεῦθε νόφ, ἵνα εἶδομεν ἀμφω (16.19, 1.363)—Achilles’ tone differs from Thetis’ in that it has a strong element of irony. Whereas in book 1 Thetis sits beside Achilles, strokes him, and asks him what sorrow has come to his heart (360–63), in book 16 Achilles provokes Patroclus with a series of questions to which he knows the answers:12

\[\text{ὁ υἱὸς θυατερὸς, ὥστε γὰρ Ἀργείων ὀλοφύρεσά, ὥς ὀλέχονται νποὺν ἔπει γλαφυρῆσαν ὑπὲρβασίσας ἔνεχα σφῆς};\] (16.12–18)

Whereas Thetis’ questions can be understood as a means of comforting Achilles,13 the questions Achilles asks are sharply ironic. He says, in effect, “Could it be that one of our fathers has died, or are you weeping over the Achaians, whose destruction is their own fault?” Achilles must know that Patroclus is weeping for the dying Argives, since he himself has been viewing their destruction (11.609–10, for example). His ques-

11 Martin, Language of Heroes 210, notes that exauda, ἀδινεθε... “characterizes the tender relations between Achilles and Thetis, and Achilles and his companion” and suggests that these words signify that the speech which follows them will be the “candid outpourings of the speaker who is addressed.” Foley, Immanent Art 136–89, makes a similar claim when he suggests that other Homeric phrases have an “immanent,” traditional meaning which pervades each of their particular uses.

12 Just as Thetis already knows the cause of Achilles’ distress—Achilles asks her, “since you know, why must I tell you all this?” (1.365)

13 τέκνον, τι κλαίεσ; τι δὲ σι φφένας ἢκετο πένθος; (1.362). But see note 19 for a different reading of Thetis’ tone.
tions are not to be taken at face value. Achilles would take it badly if Peleus or Menoitois had died, but the destruction of the Achaiansthe cause of Patroclus’ grief—elicits only scorn and contempt from him. \(^{14}\)

Achilles’ ironic questions are thus consistent with the patronizing attitude already demonstrated when he put Patroclus in the position of a pitiful and vulnerable nepios.\(^ {15}\)

Achilles’ emotional tone is, however, too complex to be described as unequivocally ironic, for he also pities Patroclus (oiktire, 5). It is unclear whether Achilles’ ironic mode of expression undermines or is somehow compatible with his pity. Achilles’ tone is, moreover, complicated by a double significance. His irony is both a response to Patroclus in particular, and a manifestation of his anger toward the Greeks. These two objects, in fact, become indistinguishable when Patroclus alone bears the brunt of the anger Achilles directs explicitly against the Greeks, who are losing “on account of their own arrogance” (18). There is, then, not only a link between Achilles’ ironic stance and his anger, but also a moment of identification.

Patroclus’ response to Achilles’ rebuke—mē nemesa (22)—may

\(^{14}\)Willcock, A Companion to the Iliad 177, sees in Achilles’ speech “a delicate combination of gentleness and irony.” The simile of the little girl is, according to Willcock, a gesture of comfort (I disagree; see note 15 below). The irony comes at line 12, when “Achilleus knows perfectly well why Patroklkos is weeping but affects to believe that it may be some bad news from home of which he is unaware.” Owen, The Story of the Iliad 146–47, sees no tension between Patroclus and Achilles in this scene and claims that the tone of Achilles’ speech is one of “familiar friendship.” While it may be true that oiktire (16.5) makes it clear “that conditions are favorable for the success of Patroklos’ appeal” (147), there are strong indications that Achilles’ attitude is initially quite petulant and that Patroclus resents it.

\(^{15}\)Von Scheliba’s view that Achilles compares Patroclus to a little girl in order to comfort him (Patroklos 317–18) assumes that the common negative implications of nepios are absent here. Consider, for example, Hektor’s rebuke of Ajax in book 7: μη τι μεν ήτε παιδὸς αφαιροῦ πειρήτεσζε, / ἢ γυναικός, ἢ οὐκ οἶδεν πολεμία ἔργα. / αὐτὰρ ἐγὼν εὐ οἶδα μάχας τ’ ἄνδροκτασίας τε. (235–37). Nepios can also signify a certain pathetic ignorance or foolishness and, in the Iliad, is often used of adults who are about to die but are unaware of this fact. Edmunds, Homeric Nepios, has argued that the “primal sense” of nepios is not “child” or “without speech,” but rather “not—connecting/connected” and that this derivation is borne out by a consideration of the contexts in which this word is used in the Iliad. Some kinds of “disconnectedness.” Edmunds claims, are characteristic of the adult and child nepios and are relevant to Patroclus and the simile used to describe him at 16.7–11 (see 55, 67). For example, he is pathetically unaware of his approaching doom and thus disconnected from his future (the narrator’s use of nepios to describe him at 16.46 certainly suggests this).
be meant to address the anger of Achilles, which has had such dire consequences for the Achaian. But it may also refer to the immediate context, that is, the attitude Achilles has just exhibited to Patroclus with his ironic questions and simile. *Nemesis* usually means “angry” in the sense of feeling righteous indignation (cf., e.g., 10.129, 10.145, 13.293, 23.494). Patroclus’ words at line 22—μὴ νεμέσα: τοῖον γὰρ ἄχος βεβίηκεν Ἀχαίοις—suggest that Achilles is misguided when he ironically teases Patroclus, since he has not fully realized the gravity of the distress that has befallen the Greeks. We have already seen that Achil-

les’ piercing irony is closely connected with his anger. Thus, when Patroclus groans heavily and tells Achilles not to be angry, his words have the force of, “there is no reason to berate me, Achilles; the situation is more serious than you think.” The only other occurrence of this line in the *Iliad* (10.145) has the same sense. There Nestor startles Odys-

seus by waking him in the middle of the night, yet assures him that there is no need to be annoyed or find fault with this disturbance, since there is a just cause: μὴ νεμέσα: τοῖον γὰρ ἄχος βεβίηκεν Ἀχαίοις. Patro-

crus’ response thus acknowledges the irony of Achilles’ tone in lines 7–19 as a manifestation of his anger, and a typical demonstration of the harsh and pitiless (*nēlees*, 33) nature he faults Achilles with at 21–45. Achilles thus repeats his mother’s words, yet irony colors his role of compassionate mother, and in this sense he deviates from the example set by Thetis. His repetition of his mother’s role is modified by his own particular character.16

There is another significant respect in which Achilles’ response to Patroclus differs from Thetis’ response to him. When Patroclus comes to Achilles and sheds plentiful tears (16.3) it evokes the weeping Achilles of book 1 (1.357). In that scene, Thetis sheds a tear in response to Achilles’ predicament (1.413). But in book 16, Achilles (assuming the role of his mother) is not moved to tears by Patroclus’ grief and in fact, as we have seen, plays the role of the compassionate mother rather badly. Once we recognize the opening of book 16 as a repetition of the scene in book 1, the fact that Achilles fails to cry becomes significant. As the scene in book 1 shows, Achilles is capable of weeping, but the cause of his tears is instructively different from the cause of Patroclus’

16 It is perhaps significant that Patroclus ironically questions Achilles’ parentage at 16.33–35. As Nagler, *Spontaneity and Tradition* 137, points out, it is appropriate that Patroclus attacks Achilles’ genealogy at a time when Achilles’ identity is especially in question (since Patroclus is about to take his armor and followers).
and Thetis' tears. Thetis weeps out of compassion for Achilles,17 and Patroclus out of compassion for the Achaians. But Achilles weeps for himself because he has been dishonored; and so, in the context of these two scenes, his compassion for Patroclus is again brought into question. Achilles does pity Patroclus, but as we have seen, that pity is expressed neither in tears nor in words of consolation.

The opening of book 16 repeats the exchange between Achilles and Thetis in book 1 in such a way that Achilles assumes the role of Thetis, while Patroclus assumes the role of Achilles. It is in this sense, then, that Patroclus and Achilles become identified. This identification suggests that Achilles shares Patroclus’ compassionate nature. But Achilles’ actual words suggest something different; his attitude is provocative and ironic. This scene’s deviations from book 1 reinforce the impression of Achilles’ lack of compassion, and throw into relief the decidedly more compassionate attitudes of Patroclus and Thetis.

But if Achilles is simultaneously identified with and distinguished from Patroclus, a kind of split in his personality is dramatized in this scene. Patroclus is here playing the role of Achilles. The repetitions of book 1 allude to Achilles’ unexpressed compassion by implicitly identifying him with Patroclus. Patroclus could thus be said to externalize one component of Achilles’ character. In this sense, Achilles addresses himself when he speaks to Patroclus. In his adopting an ironic attitude toward Patroclus, Achilles’ compassionate side is not only distinguished from his ironic behavior, but the two are in conflict; Achilles berates his “compassionate side.”18

The conflict apparent in the opening of book 16 is representative of Achilles’ vacillations between anger and compassion in the rest of his speech to Patroclus (49–100). There, Achilles’ swelling anger is punctu-

17Thetis is compassionate in part because she has knowledge of Achilles’ fate (1.416–18). By contrast, Achilles lacks knowledge of Patroclus’ fate, and this ignorance invests the whole scene with a pathetic irony. When this scene is recognized as a repetition of the Thetis scene in book 1, Thetis’ privileged knowledge as a goddess is poignantly juxtaposed to Achilles’ imperfect, mortal knowledge.

18The analysis of Homeric psychology by Russo and Simon, “Homeric Psychology,” is compatible with my interpretation, although my argument does not require such a view. They see a strong tendency in Homer to externalize inner mental processes and express them as interchanges between a hero and a god, a hero and some external agent, or a hero and one of his organs (e.g., the thumos or kradie). In this particular case, Achilles’ unexpressed compassion is externalized by Patroclus.
ated by gestures of concession that indicate, but do not always directly express, feelings of compassion. Achilles begins by acknowledging the great force of Patroclus’ appeal: “what a thing you have said” (*hoion eeipes, 49*). He then repeats the wrong he has suffered at the hands of Agamemnon and emphasizes the bitter sorrow he still feels (52–59). He has been treated like a “dishonored outcast” (*atimēton metanastēn, 59*). There is a startling shift at 60–61: ἀλλὰ τὰ μὲν προτετύχθαι ἐάσσομενοῦδ᾽ ἄρα πῶς ἦν ἄσπερχες κεχολῶθαι ἐνι φρείν. It is likely that compassion is one of the emotions underlying these words, since Patroclus is the one who has moved Achilles, and as we have seen, Patroclus is here an Achilles–figure. Achilles’ change of heart is, however, very brief. What begins as a factual reminder that he has promised not to give way until the fighting has reached his ships (61–63) gradually builds to a sinister and detailed vision of the suffering troops (66–79). The vision seems for a few moments to absorb him completely. Achilles’ *Schadenfreude* at Greek and Trojan suffering may, as Janko (Commentary 324) suggests, be mixed with true alarm at the desperate situation. Released from the grip of his anger, Achilles again yields to Patroclus and instructs him to enter the battle (80–82). Achilles’ honor, however, will be diminished if Patroclus continues fighting too long (90). At this point Achilles directly expresses concern for Patroclus. When Patroclus has driven the enemy from the ships he should not continue the slaughter, since one of the gods sympathetic to the Trojans may crush him (91–96). Achilles’ tone again shifts, and his speech ends on an especially harsh note. He prays for nothing less than the destruction of all the Greek and Trojan troops and hopes that only he and Patroclus will emerge from the slaughter alive (97–100).

Achilles’ shifts between anger and compassion at 49–100 are adumbrated in his “self–address” at 7–19. The tension between compassion and anger in 49–100 is mirrored by the conflict between compassion and irony in 7–19. The beginning of book 16 thus subtly dramatizes a theme that is eventually brought out more explicitly.

My reading of Achilles’ speech shows how the mechanism of repetition can invest the concrete verbal and thematic features of a scene with an implicit, yet precisely delineated level of meaning: by inviting us to consider the ways the opening of book 16 is similar to and different from the Thetis scene in book 1, the links between the two scenes demonstrate how Patroclus and Achilles are in one sense identified and in another sense distinguished. Achilles’ conflict is thereby articulated
in terms of compassion and irony. In offering such an interpretation we raise the larger question of whether repetitions are primarily the literary tools of the poet, or are due rather to the exigencies of oral composition. Although there are good grounds for thinking that this question actually assumes a false dichotomy, it is worth noting that the repetition I have pointed to has interpretive implications that correspond so well with the main themes of book 16, and in fact articulate those themes in such precise terms, that it would be less plausible if the repetition were merely accidental.

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19My reading of Achilles' speech in book 16 may have implications for the interpretation of the book 1 passage. I interpreted Thetis' words in book 1 as an expression of compassion and as evidence of an intimate relationship with Achilles. This reading seems initially quite plausible; she asks him to share with her his sorrow (1.362–63), and she laments his cruel fate (1.413–18). But when Achilles assumes his mother's role and displays an ironic distance, it suggests a different interpretation of book 1. Achilles' repetition of Thetis' words raises the following questions: Is Thetis really compassionate, or is she just feeling sorry for herself? Is Achilles' response to her questions — oĩθα τι ταῶτα ἰδνὴ πάντει ἐγορεῖοσ; (1.365)—meant to suggest that her attitude is ironic? Is Thetis more distant from Achilles than she may at first seem? After all, her divine status inevitably removes her from the realm of mortals, and even though Achilles is half divine, his mortality is at the forefront in this scene. Thus, by offering another perspective from which to view Thetis' relationship with Achilles, book 16 may question or destabilize the meaning I attributed to book 1.

20Foley, Immanent Art 12, 57, argues that readings like mine are necessarily limited and superficial because they focus on the horizontal axis of repetition within the text instead of on the metonymic, vertical relation between text and tradition. This vertical interplay is, Foley claims, the dominant aesthetic feature of the Iliad as oral poetry, and infuses all of the particular words, lines, and scenes with their immanent meaning, thus placing them within the broad, "extratextual" context of the tradition. I think not only that horizontal, "literary" readings can be fruitful, but that they often complement vertical readings. I would argue, in fact, that the "literary" reading of Iliad 24.337 and 355, which Foley claims removes "the possibility of hearing traditional resonances" (148), is compatible with and enriches the vertical reading. My consideration of books 1 and 16 tries to show how vertical readings work together with the linear repetitions to generate a coherent interpretation (see note 11 above, which suggests that the traditional meaning of exauda mé keuthe... may be at play with the particular situations in books 1 and 16).

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BIBLIOGRAPHY