THE 2011 HOEFER PRIZES
FOR EXCELLENCE IN UNDERGRADUATE WRITING

IN RECOGNITION OF WRITING ACHIEVEMENT IN THE
UNDERGRADUATE FIELD OF STUDY

STANFORD UNIVERSITY
MAY 18, 2011
Androgyny As Liminality: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Achilles’ Gender in the *Iliad*

DAVID ROSENTHAL

Classics 176

*The Iliad, The Aeneid, and the Ancient Art of Persuasion*

MAUD GLEASON
CLASSICS
In one ancient Greek tale, Achilles wears a dress. In this epi-Homeric story, Odysseus finds him on Skyros disguised as a maiden in an attempt to escape recruitment into the Trojan War. Achilles betrays his feminine costume, however, when he cannot suppress his excitement for Odysseus’ armor, and he returns to his male identity by joining the Greek campaign against Troy. Whether or not this story predates Homer, it provides a clue for how to read Achilles’ gender in the *Iliad*. Achilles does not wear a dress at any point in the *Iliad*; however, Homer’s characterization of Achilles and his gender contains, on a figurative level, echoes of the more literal gender crossing found in the Skyros myth. In the *Iliad* Achilles is a liminal character—he occupies and crosses the boundaries that separate child from adult, warrior from deserter, and even god from human. Above all, I will argue that Achilles crosses the boundary between male and female, for his withdrawal from battle is a withdrawal into the symbolic domain of the feminine and his subsequent return to battle restores him to masculine, even hyper-masculine, behavior and identity. Only in the *Iliad*’s final book does he resolve to normalcy.

In this essay I chase the clue of the Skyros legend using feminist psychoanalytic theory to analyze how Homer characterizes Achilles’ withdrawal and return in gendered terms. The paper consists of three parts, each subdivided into smaller sections. The first part argues that Agamemnon strips Achilles of his masculinity and prompts his withdrawal into femininity. In this part, I first describe how Agamemnon’s violation relates to ancient Greek conceptions of boundaries, and then I describe Achilles’ liminality of gender using the language of object-relations psychoanalytic theory. In the second section, I argue that with Patroclus’ death and Achilles’ subsequent return to battle, Achilles’ femininity dies as well, resulting in a hyper-masculine form of engagement. This second section contains two major arguments: first, that Patroclus’ death prompts Achilles’ psychological realignment with his father at the expense of his relationship with his mother; and, second, that in the *Iliad*’s final books Homer uses the
symbolism of fire and water to amplify Achilles' gender realignment to the point of recasting it
as a cosmic struggle. In the third and final section, I conclude that in the end of the Iliad, having
experienced the margins of gender, Achilles finds cosmic and psychic balance when he returns
Hector's body to Priam.

I. Achilles’ Loss of Masculinity

**Gendered Boundaries and Male Control**

The Greeks ascribed cosmological importance to boundaries; Anne Carson explains that
the Greeks viewed boundaries as “guarantors of human order.”\(^1\) The Greeks therefore instituted
rituals of supplication, hospitality, gift exchange, and especially rites of passage as cultural
“mechanisms for defining and securing the boundaries of everything in the habitable world.”\(^2\)
Failure of these cultural mechanisms and resulting transgressions of boundaries could lead to
psychological and even cosmological crises. Such transgression, beginning with the abduction of
Helen, is at the root of the Trojan War and the havoc it wreaks on humanity.

Specifically, the abduction of Helen constitutes a transgression of the boundaries and
mechanisms that secure male authority in ancient Greece. One of these mechanisms is the
institution of xenia (“guest-friendship”), part of a set of socially sanctioned relationships enacted
through the space of the oikos (household). When Paris abducted Helen as a xenos in Menelaus’
oikos and kingdom, the institution of formal guest-friendship failed to secure the boundaries of
Menelaus’ personal and political domain. Moreover, what has begun as a transgression of
Menelaus’ private sphere, its boundaries and ordering mechanisms, soon expands into a matter
of even greater public concern, as it collides with another ordering mechanism: the oath of that

---
\(^1\) 1990; 135  
\(^2\) ibid.
all Greek princes swore to defend the marriage of Helen and Menelaus. When Menelaus gathers troops to defend his disrupted oikos, the violation of his authority then spreads to upset the boundaries that secure each warrior’s public and private authority. Every one must completely abandon his family, oikos, and kingdom to chase after the stolen bride.

Achilles’ loss of Briseis to Agamemnon recapitulates the rape of Helen. Briseis and Achilles’ tent are the closest Achilles has to a wife and an oikos at Troy. He even refers to Briseis as his bride (9.407). When Agamemnon strips her away, he damages Achilles’ masculine authority. Agamemnon’s action traumatizes Achilles and disillusiones him into complete withdrawal from the patriarchal order. Rendered powerless by this dysfunctional system, Achilles not only retreats from it but actively takes a stand against it. When he smashes the scepter (1.288), he rejects the entire social system it represents.

Withdrawal as Femininity

Achilles’ retreat consists of an utter rejection of patriarchy and so compels him toward femininity. Throughout the Iliad Homer makes the connection between retreat and femininity clear through his characterizations of other heroes. In this way, he is able to comment obliquely on Achilles’ withdrawal. At times this connection appears in the form of taunts on the battlefield. In Book 7 when none of the Greeks volunteer to fight Hector, Menelaus berates them as “women, not men of Achaea” (110). Later, when Diomedes retreats from Zeus in Book 8, Hector taunts him as “a woman after all” and jeers, “away with you, girl, glittering little puppet” (185-6). Elsewhere this implication is subtler. For example, in Book 6, when Hector withdraws from battle to visit the Trojan women, Andromache calls him “my father now,” and also “my noble

---

3 As Rush Rehm writes of such violation, its “ripples spread with increasing force” to shake the public sphere, “probing its social and political underpinnings” (Rehm, 1994: 9).

4 All Iliad citations refer to Fagles (1990) and employ Fagles’s line numbering.
mother” (6.509; emphasis added). In Book 11, it is when a wounded Agamemnon is in retreat that he experiences his wound as a woman: “spear-sharp as the labor-pangs that pierce a woman,/ agonies brought on by the harsh, birthing spirits,/ Hera’s daughters who hold the stabbing power of birth” (11.315-8). This passage stands out as the only instance in which Homer describes a character’s subjective experience of pain.\(^5\) In this way, the passage’s form highlights its unusual content. Ultimately these examples frame Achilles’ withdrawal as feminine.

**Achilles’ Gender: an Object-Relational Approach**

Feminist, object-relations psychoanalysis provides a useful theoretical basis for exploring Achilles’ gender psychology. From an objects-relational perspective, Achilles seems to define himself and relate to those close to him in a uniquely feminine way (until he returns to battle and hyper-masculinity). Object-relations research in the 1970s and 1980s characterized the differences between male and female social development. Generally, as Foley (1994) explains, this research found that “women more often than men define themselves relationally,” that is, by their intimate relations in a family, whereas men “tend to define themselves to a greater degree by bonds outside of the family and mature in relation to their peer group.”\(^6\) At the same time, as opposed to women, “men are more likely to approach problems abstractly and formally, and male maturity involves greater detachment from the bonds of intimacy.”\(^7\) Along these lines, Achilles shifts his identity and relational approach from male to female when he withdraws from battle.

This transition can be traced through the different ways Achilles speaks about Briseis and her separation. At the very beginning, he refers to Briseis as his “prize,” (1.421, 1.465) or “some

---

\(^5\) Gleason
\(^6\) Foley (1994): 115
\(^7\) Ibid 116
scrap, some pittance” (1.196). Therefore, he seems to protest Agamemnon’s possession of Briseis simply on the grounds that it leads to an unfair distribution of booty. By the time of the first embassy in Book 9, however, Achilles adopts, by object-relations theory, a more feminine way of speaking about Briseis as he begins to emphasize the emotional value of the relationship. He sees her as a “bride” (262), whom he loves. Agamemnon’s violation is now a violation of amor rather than of honor, a “heartbreaking outrage” (9.473; emphasis added). Achilles rants: “Are they the only men alive who love their wives, those sons of Atreus?...Never! Any decent man,/ a man with sense, loves his own, cares for his own,/ as deeply as I, I loved that woman with all my heart,/ though I won her like a trophy with my spear” (9.413-7). In this androcentric epic, this is the only passage in which a man’s feelings for a woman are described in emotional terms. When Achilles asserts that “any decent man, a man with sense” feels such love, he is not in fact stating a predominant ethical norm. Rather, he backhandedly criticizes a patriarchy that has no room for emotional love or “relational identities.”

As a domineering representative of patriarchy, Agamemnon actively feminizes Achilles and asserts his own masculinity in object-relational terms. When he offers gifts to Achilles to compensate him for the offense, in typically male fashion (according to object-relational theory) he seeks a rational compromise that overlooks the relational value of Briseis; he computes her value in purely material terms. Moreover, after cataloguing the gifts he offers Achilles, he concludes with the command, “let him submit to me... I am the greater king... the greater man” (9.189-193). For “submit,” he uses a form of the verb damadzô, a word used for the “taming of a

---

8 Foley (1994): This is “more generally characteristic of women (and the powerless)” (116).
9 The only comparable passage occurs in Book 6, when Hector describes the pain of knowing that his wife will be raped with the inevitable siege of Troy (534-556). Nevertheless, unlike Achilles, Hector speaks in concrete and objective terms. He imagines the concrete scene of her abduction, and curses the day he might “hear” her “dragged away” (rather than the day he might feel the pain of the loss) (556). Nor does he once use a word for “love.”
bride by a man” as well as the “subjection of a people to a ruler.” With this word choice, Homer emphasizes A gamemnon’s masculine domination of feminine Achillea. A chilles must submit to A gamemnon like a bride, and so the power play becomes imbued with gendered meaning.

Achilles’ Fluid Ego Boundaries

Psychoanalysis has traditionally viewed the feminine personality, founded on relation and connection, as the product of an inextricable unity between the mother’s and the daughter’s psyche. Object-relations theory, building on Jung, conceptualizes this unity as “fluidity of ego boundaries.” As Chodorow explains, the mother treats the boy “as other than herself and fosters his independence,” whereas she typically treats the girl as “like herself and even an extension of herself.” This confluence of egos has been observed to impede “breaking of dependence and the establishment and maintenance of a consistently individuated sense of self” in Western women. The concept of fluid ego boundaries is particularly applicable to Achilles, whose flexible ego becomes more like a daughter’s than a son’s.

As Achilles withdraws, his psyche and sense of self seem to become confluent with his mother’s. The first evidence for such blurring of ego boundaries appears towards the end of Book 1. When Thetis asks Achilles, “what sorrow has touched your heart?,” Achilles replies enigmatically, “You know, you know,/ why labor through it all? You know it all so well” (427-48).

11 Chodorow (1974), 257; for Jung the word “psyche” connoted all conscious and unconscious psychological entities, including the ego. In his analysis of the maiden/mother archetype in the Demeter legend, Jung writes: “the psyche preexistent to consciousness (e.g. in a child) participates in the maternal psyche on the one hand, while on the other it reaches across to the daughter psyche” (Foley, 1994: 119).
12 ibid 121-2
13 Chodorow (1974): 257
32). Homer provides no explanation for how Thetis would “know it all so well,” or if she did know, why she would ask Achilles to explain. Perhaps she is omniscient but hides it to let Achilles vent (a kind of talk therapy!). In any case, Achilles assumes that Thetis knows what he knows, that they are of the same mind, even though Thetis’ initial question seems to indicate otherwise. Therefore, Achilles seems to view himself as an extension of his mother.

Achilles demonstrates his identification with his mother most strikingly in Book 9, when he compares himself to “a mother bird hurrying morsels back/ to her unfledged young—whatever she can catch—/but it’s all starvation wages for herself” (392-4). The mother bird to which Achilles compares himself actually resembles Thetis, who “hurries” between heaven, sea, and earth for Achilles, her “unfledged,” unmarried son. Just as the mother bird, she has won a “morsel” for him, the honor granted by Zeus, and yet she gains nothing for herself; she can do nothing to avert her son’s imminent death. Achilles seems therefore to imagine his struggles as his mother’s and his mother’s as his own. In his rhetorical self-characterization, he becomes his mother.

Later, the fluidity of Achilles’ ego boundaries develops to a supernatural extreme. When Achilles cries out for Patroclus in Book 18, Thetis feels Achilles’ grief from under the sea and cries out with him before she has even comprehended what has happened. In this vignette, Achilles’ psyche seems to extend not only into his mother’s, but even through her cortege of Nymphs (her sisters) who mourn “all in one mounting chorus beating their breasts” (18.58).

Not only is Achilles’ ego continuous with his mother’s (and her sisters’), but it seems continuous with Patroclus’ as well. Their ego boundary blurs most notably in the moments framing Patroclus’ death. Patroclus, while donning Achilles’ armor, fights to “win great honor, great glory” for Achilles, not for himself. He fights as Achilles’ proxy. Even more, he seems to

14 This entire interaction could also be a meta-literary joke on formulaic repetition in Homer.
embody a part of Achilles. It is fitting then that when Patroclus dies, Thetis mourns for Achilles. When she senses Achilles’ anguish from under the sea, she immediately bemoans Achilles’ death (18.64). Then, while consoling Achilles in person, she cradles his head in her hands (18.83), an ancient Greek mourning ritual, as if he, not Patroclus, has died. In this way, Homer demonstrates Achilles’ and Patroclus’ affinity and congruity. In fact, in the next section, I will argue that Achilles projects onto Patroclus the feminine aspects of his personality and that the death of Patroclus finally compels Achilles to reassert his masculinity.

II. Death of the Feminine, Rebirth of the (Hyper)Masculine

The Death of Patroclus; the Death of Feminine Achilles

Patroclus’ death spurs Achilles out of feminine withdrawal and into masculine engagement. When he first hears of Patroclus’ death, Achilles vows to suppress the emotions that have defined him up until this point (“Let bygones be bygones. Done is done./ Despite my anguish I will beat it down” [134]), and he finally chooses to return to battle (“Now I’ll meet that murderer [Hector] head-on” [137]). In addition, since Hector has stripped Achilles’ old armor from Patroclus’ corpse, Achilles obtains new set of armor, crafted by Hephaestus. This change in armor signifies a change in identity. Ultimately, Patroclus’ death represents the death of the feminine within Achilles and marks his shift towards hyper-masculinity. 16

15 Nagler (1974): 156
16 It is interesting to note that Achilles’ koûreion (sacrifice of hair) to Patroclus in Book 23 may be seen as a passage rite. Therefore, with this act he commemorates the death of his own former self and his rebirth into patriarchal society (for the association of koûreion with death and rebirth see Haland (2009): 125). Moreover, just like a nymphê, commemorating the end of maidenhood, Achilles has dedicated the outfit of his youth, his armor, to Patroclus along with his hair. For the association of koûreion and androgyny see Paus 8.20 and Dowden (1989).
Achilles' shift in gender is foreshadowed in Book 16 as Achilles and Patroclus project multiple gender identifications onto each other. When Achilles sees Patroclus returning from the Greek camps in tears, he chides:

"Why in tears, Patroclus? Like a girl, a baby running after her mother, begging to be picked up, and she tugs her skirts holding her back as she tries to hurry off— all tears, fawning up at her, till she takes her in her arms... That's how you look, Patroclus, streaming live tears! But why?...Out with it now! Don't harbor it deep inside you. We must share it all." (7-21).

Nevertheless, Achilles is the one who cries to his mother in the Iliad, not Patroclus; Achilles' analogy better describes his relationship with Thetis than Patroclus' relationship with him. Note that Achilles describes Patroclus as a girl coping with separation from her mother (“begging to be picked up, and she tugs her skirts holding her back as she tries to hurry off”). This is significant because Achilles himself is about to separate from his own mother— both in returning to the world of patriarchy and ultimately in death. In fact, it seems Achilles projects onto Patroclus an image of his former self, childlike and effeminate. This is the part of Achilles that will die with Patroclus. Achilles' projection onto Patroclus therefore provides the vehicle for Achilles to disown in himself what he resents in his alter ego.

If here Patroclus plays the role of Achilles, then Achilles plays the role of Thetis. When Achilles asks Patroclus, “Why in tears?” and urges, “Don't harbor it deep inside you. We must share it all,” he uses the exact words his mother has previously spoken to him (“why in tears?...Don't harbor it deep inside you. We must share it all.” [1.428, c.f. 18.86]). Nevertheless, though maternal in form, his interaction with Patroclus is paternal in function— the gender identity has shifted. He uses the very same words that Thetis has used to console him to scorn Patroclus' expression of emotion. Therefore, in Book 16, in a sense, he begins to distance himself from his mother; as he plays her role, he becomes her polar opposite.
Crippling the Maternal Genealogy

Irigaray asserts that “patriarchy functions to separate women from each other and to cripple or suppress the transmission of a maternal genealogy.”\(^{17}\) This is certainly true in the *Iliad*. When, after Patroclus’ death, Achilles returns to battle and so to patriarchy, he begins to distance himself from his mother and realign himself with his father. For example, in Book 18, he wishes his mother had never borne him, but that his father had “carried home a mortal bride” instead (101). Later, about to drown in the Skamander, he appeals to Zeus, his great-grandfather, and blames his mother for his predicament—“And no god on high/ none is to blame so much as my dear mother--/how she lied, she beguiled me” (21.311). Up until this point Thetis has been Achilles’ advocate; now he turns to his paternal side for help instead. In fact, Achilles actively subverts his oceanic maternal genealogy in favor of the his “fiery” paternal ties when he boasts over the corpse of Asterpaeus, the descendant of a river god, that his own birth “from Zeus himself” is superior to any water lineage: “even the ocean shrinks from the mighty father’s bolt” (21.226). In this way, he suppresses his own water genealogy and the maternal bond inherent to it.

With his return to battle, Achilles seems to align himself psychologically with his father as well. For example, he copes with Patroclus’ death by comparing the tragedy to his father’s death, a patriarchal system’s most grievous sorrow. Moreover, upon hearing the news of this friend’s death, Achilles envisions his own father weeping for him about to die (19.384)\(^{18}\). Similarly, in Book 24, he imagines his father weeping for him when he shares tears with Priam (24.598). This moment of paternal connection indicates that the bonds of patriarchy have

\(^{17}\) in Foley (1994):123

\(^{18}\) It is also worth noting that the only mention of Achilles’ son, Neoptolomus, occurs in these lines.
replaced his maternal bonds. His imagining his father’s tears in moments when he himself cries suggests a blurring of father/son ego boundaries, an effective juxtaposition to earlier instances of feminine identification.

**Hyper-Masculine Engagement**

In fact, Achilles returns to masculine engagement with an intensity that undermines not only his relationship with his mother, but even his very humanity. In his berserked aristieia he resorts to grotesque and demeaning violence. He spares no suppliant and taunts his enemies’ corpses. When Lycaon begs, “I am your suppliant, Prince, you must respect me!” Achilles responds, “Come, friend, you too must die” (21.119). Looming over his corpse, Achilles then taunts, “Make your bed with the fishes now;/ they’ll dress your wound and lick it clean of blood-/so much for last rites!” (21.139-141). Most famously, Achilles affronts the corpse of Hector with the highest form of disrespect. He allows the Greek soldiers to stab his body once already dead (“not a man came forward who did not stab his body” [438]), and then, stringing a rope through Hector’s tendons, he drags the body from a chariot around the walls of Troy.

**Gender Principles in Nature: Achilles on Fire**

Achilles’ gruesome power also undermines his humanity in another way, for it escalates to the point of rendering him a force of nature: Achilles returns to masculinity by fire. In ancient Greece, dryness, heat, and fire were associated with masculinity on both a psychic and physiological level whereas water was considered feminine. For example, Hippokrates wrote, “whereas females flourish more in an environment of water; the male flourishes in an
environment of fire.” Homer too makes this association. As Carson notes, Zeus’ logical, male
mind is denoted by the epithet “dry-minded” (14.165). Similarly Hector, in a moment of glory,
is described as “storming fierce as fire” (18.179), his masculine aggression like the destructive
dry heat of fire. On the other hand, Homer describes both Agamemnon (in the moment before
his second attempted surrender), and Patroclus (crying to Achilles) as “streaming tears like a
dark spring running down some desolate rock face, its shaded currents flowing” (9.16, 16.3).
This comparison not only hyperbolizes the quantity of their tears but, on an abstract level, seems
to exploit a symbolic connection between wetness and feminine emotion, between unbounded
bodies of water and the female body, in order to highlight the characters’ lapses of femininity.

Homer emphasizes Achilles’ return to masculinity by repeatedly comparing him to fire.
For example, Homer describes his new armor as “full of the god’s great fire” (18.169) and later
to “a raging fire or the rising, blazing sun” (22.160-1). In addition, Homer describes him in battle
as “inhuman fire raging on through the mountain gorges / splinter dry... the wind swirling the
huge fireball left and right— chaos of fire” (18.554-6). The dryness of the gorge implies
masculinity while the vastness of the blaze emphasizes Achilles’ unbridled masculine
aggression. At the same time, the synergistic combination of wind and fire anticipates his joining
wind and fire against the River Xanthus in Book 21.

Homer identifies Achilles with fire most dramatically in Achilles’ “epiphany.” When
Achilles, unarmed, first exposes himself to the Trojan enemy, Athena crowns his head with “a
fire to blaze across the field.” Homer elaborates:

As smoke goes towering up the sky from out a town/ cut off on a distant island under siege... /
enemies battling round it... but soon as the sun goes down the signal fires flash,/ rows of beacons

---

19 Carson (1990): 137; Carson provides a review of the history of this thinking in ancient Greece,
from Hesiod, to Hippokrates, to Aristotle.
20 In Carson (1990): 137
blazing into the air to alert their neighbors... so now form A chilles’ head the blaze shot up the sky (18.239-148).

This simile emphasizes A chilles’ masculine power as a destructive force of nature; however, Homer also implicitly compares A chilles to a town under siege. It is perhaps unusual that the fire, which the audience would expect to portend Trojan doom, should connote A chilles’ demise as well. The comparison seems to indicate that A chilles’ prowess is self-destructive; it will lead to his death before the walls of Troy. Moreover, the conquered island seems a metaphor for A chilles’ former isolated self, which his blaze of masculine fury now burns into submission, consuming his femininity.

In Book 21, A chilles seems to assert his masculinity most powerfully. His battle with the rivers in Book 21, a melee of wind, fire, and water, is the mythic climax of the epic.\(^{21}\) At the same time, A chilles’ fight with the rivers is the culmination of his genealogical struggle: in fighting water with the fire that forges Zeus’ thunderbolts, he actively aligns himself with his father’s genealogy in opposition to his mother’s. Moreover, this battle of the elements externalizes a conflict internal to A chilles. A chilles is a man closely tied to rivers: Nagler notes his autochthonous connection to the river Spercheios and his etymological one to the river A chilôos.\(^{22}\) In fighting against this river, he opposes the watery forces within himself.

Nagler argues that A chilles’ fighting water with fire is in fact a cosmogonic act. By this view, the flooding of the Scamander is a deluge-creation myth; the river, even A chilles himself, becomes an instantiation of the “inchoate disorganized condition of the cosmos which threatens to return” (151).\(^{23}\) In this way, the chaos that the Trojan War unleashes upon gods and mortals

---

\(^{21}\) Nagler (1974): 152
\(^{22}\) ibid 151; it is also interesting that one of his horses is named Xanthus!
\(^{23}\) It is fitting then that A chilles’ name may in fact be derived from the A chilous, a river with its own deluge-creation myth (c.f. Arist. Meteor. in Nagler (1974): 151).
infiltrates the mythic infrastructure of the epic. A chilles’ androgyny and his liminality all become a part of this greater balance between chaos and order. With this in mind, we may turn to Eliade’s characterization of androgyny as “a symbolic restoration of chaos, of the undifferentiated unity that preceded the creation.”24 Perhaps then A chilles’ androgyny is his personal experience of the boundaries between earth and sea, fire and water, god and mortal, all of which the Trojan War has transgressed and rendered “undifferentiated.” A chilles must initiate himself into this chaos and ultimately sacrifice himself to it in order to restore order, not only to Helas but to the entire universe.

Restoration of Order

When A chilles returns to battle, he enters into hyper-masculinity, and he dedicates himself to chaos. In his aristeia, he dehumanizes his enemies with extreme violence, and he transcends his own humanity as his struggle expands into a battle of the elements of nature. In the final book of the Iliad, however, in returning Hector’s body to Priam, A chilles behaves in a more humane and human way. A chilles treats his mortal enemy’s father, Priam, with compassion; he hides him from the Greek captains and agrees to forestall the war for the twelve days required for Hector’s funeral rites (24.785). Above all, when A chilles returns Hector’s body to Priam and shares food with the father of his mortal enemy, A chilles restores himself to psychic and cosmic order.

A chilles’ transformation in the Iliad can be seen as his substituting feminine rage over one injury with masculine rage for another. In the final scene, A chilles seems to finally return to normalcy when he urges, “Let us put our griefs to rest in our own hearts” (610). In fact, through the story of Niobe, Homer creates the effect of A chilles’ grief and feminine identity fading into

24 Jones (2000)
the background. As Achilles encourages Priam to feast with him, he recalls Niobe as a parent who “remembered food” even after the death of her children (708). Achilles relates, “And now, somewhere, lost on the crags, on the lonely mountain slopes, on Siplyus where, they say, the nymphs who live forever, dancing along the Achelous River, run to beds of rest—there, stuck into stone, Niobe still broods” (722-6). This passage, appearing soon after Achilles and Priam share tears, parallels the way Homer has described Patroclus and Agamemnon earlier, “streaming tears like a dark spring running down some desolate rock face.” Nevertheless, here Homer relegates this image to the periphery, to some indefinite “somewhere” in the distant universe of a story within a story.

In this passage, the emphatic delayed position of “Achelous River,” etymologically similar to the name “Achilles,” intimates the passage’s relevance to Achilles. In fact, Niobe’s metamorphosis seems to echo Achilles’. Just like Achilles’ feminine identity, weeping Niobe has died. As opposed to the Achelous river, whose unbounded wetness connotes feminine emotion, she remains solid, inert, and unchanged by the water that runs across her. Unlike Achilles, however, in her final form Niobe is perpetually weeping and perpetually withdrawn; her emotion materializes into the permanent landscape. In using this story to persuade Priam to eat, Achilles accomplishes an end to such emotion. He shares foods instead of tears with Priam, and in this way resolves to a healthy mode of patriarchal communalization.

This scene stands in sharp contrast to the mourning scene in Book 18, when Achilles communalizes his grief almost exclusively with women. Then, he mourned surrounded by weeping nymphs and female captives; only one man, Antilochus, is mentioned (36). Now, it seems his transition into masculinity is complete.
Over the course of the Iliad, A chilles transforms into female and then back to male, passing through inhumanity along the way. It is true that the story of A chilles at Skyros contains the essence of the Iliad; however, A chilles does not merely appropriate and shed new clothes, or even external identities. Rather, A chilles changes at his very core. As he copes with the loss of his lover, the death of his friend, and ultimately the loss of his own life, all for the sake of an unrelenting patriarchal system, his psyche becomes wounded to the point of warping his humanity.

Perhaps the greatest victory in this epic is that any semblance of order returns in the end. So great is the trauma of the war that it infiltrates and overturns every aspect of human experience. In the end, only communitas has the power to mitigate this trauma. Specifically, A chilles engages in the cultural practice of xenia with the Trojan enemy, whose initial failure is what caused the war in the first place. In this way, A chilles comes to terms with the offences of the past and reestablishes functional boundaries within his society and within himself.
Works Cited


Carson, Anne 1990, “Putting Her in Her Place,” Before Sexuality ed. Halperin, Stanford Classics Course Reader


Gleason, Maud 2011, Personal communication.


Nagler 1974, Spontaneity and Tradition, Berkeley.

Rehm, Rush 1994, Marriage to Death, Princeton.