

THE WORLD OF THE HERO: HOMER, *ILIAD* AND *ODYSSEY*

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1. Violence and Epic: from small detail to the grand scale and wider worlds through the paradigm of Achilles

Bibliography (hard copies and electronic pdf available):

William Thalmann. 2015. “Anger sweeter than dripping honey”: violence as a problem in the *Iliad*.’ *Ramus* 44: 95–114.

***Iliad* 18.94–116:** (Gk text: West, Teubner; translation: Fagles, Penguin)

τὸν δ' αὖτε προσέειπε Θέτις κατὰ δάκρυ χέουσα·
“ὠκύμορος δὴ μοι, τέκος, ἔσσεαι, οἶ' ἀγορεύεις· 95
αὐτίκα γάρ τοι ἔπειτα μεθ' Ἴκτορα πότμος ἐτοῖμος,
τὴν δὲ μέγ' ὀχθήσας προσέφη πόδας ὠκὺς Ἀχιλλεύς:
“αὐτίκα τεθναίην, ἐπεὶ οὐκ ἄρ' ἔμελλον ἐταίρωι
κτεινομένωι ἐπαμῦναι· ὃ μὲν μάλα τηλόθι πάτρης
ἔφθιτ', ἐμέο δ' ἐδέησεν ἀρῆς ἀλκτῆρα γενέσθαι. 100
νῦν δ' ἐπεὶ οὐ νέομαί γε φίλην ἐς πατρίδα γαίαν,
οὐδέ τι Πατρόκλωι γενόμην φάος οὐδ' ἐτάροισιν
τοῖς ἄλλοις, οἶ δὴ πολέες δάμεν Ἴκτορι δίωι,
ἀλλ' ἦμαι παρὰ νηυσὶν ἐτώσιον ἄχθος ἀρούρης,
τοῖος ἐὼν οἶος οὐ τις Ἀχαιῶν χαλκοχιτώνων 105
ἐν πολέμωι· ἀγορήι δέ τ' ἀμείνονές εἰσι καὶ ἄλλοι. —
ὡς ἔρις ἔκ τε θεῶν ἔκ τ' ἀνθρώπων ἀπόλοιο
καὶ χόλος, ὅς τ' ἐφέηκε πολύφρονά περ χαλεπῆναι,
ὅς τε πολὺ γλυκίων μέλιτος καταλειβομένοιο
ἀνδρῶν ἐν στήθεσσι ἀέξεται ἠῦτε καπνός, 110
ὡς ἐμὲ νῦν ἐχόλωσεν ἄναξ ἀνδρῶν Ἀγαμέμνων.
ἀλλὰ τὰ μὲν προτετύχθαι ἐάσομεν ἀχνύμενοί περ,
θυμὸν ἐνὶ στήθεσσι φίλον δαμάσαντες ἀνάγκη· —
νῦν δ' εἴμ' ὄφρα φίλης κεφαλῆς ὀλετῆρα κιχέω,
Ἴκτορα. κῆρα δ' ἐγὼ τότε δέξομαι ὀππότε κεν δὴ 115
Ζεὺς ἐθέληι τελέσαι ἠδ' ἀθάνατοι θεοὶ ἄλλοι.

But Thetis answered, warning through her tears,
“You’re doomed to short life, my son, from all you say!
For had on the heels of Hector’s death your death
must come at once—“

“Then let me die at once” —
Achilles burst out, despairing—“since it was not my fate
to save my dearest comrade from his death! Look,
a world away from his fatherland he’s perished,
lacking me, my fighting strength, to defend him.
But now, since I shall not return to my fatherland ...
nor did I bring one ray of hope to my Patroclus,
nor to the rest of all my steadfast comrades,
countless ranks struck down by mighty Hector—
No, no, here I sit by the ships ...
a useless, dead weight on the good green earth—
I, no man my equal among the bronze-armed Achaeans,
not in battle, only in wars of words that others win.
If only strife could die from the lives of gods and men
and anger that drives the sanest man to flare in outrage—
bitter gall, sweeter than dripping streams of honey,
that swarms in people’s chests and blinds like smoke—
just like the anger Agamemnon king of men
has roused within me now...

Enough.

Let bygones be bygones. Done is done.
Despite my anguish I will beat it down,
The fury mounting inside me, down by force.
But now I’ll go and meet that murderer head-on,
That Hector who destroyed the dearest life I know.
For my own death, I’ll meet it freely—whenever Zeus
And the other deathless gods would like to bring it on!

Cf. e.g. *Il.* 11.10–14 (Thalmann 102); also Nestor introduced at *Il.* 1.245–9:

ὡς φάτο Πηλεΐδης, ποτὶ δὲ σκῆπτρον βάλε γαίην
χρυσείοις ἥλοισι πεπαρμένον, ἔξετο δ' αὐτός·
Ἄτρεΐδης δ' ἐτέρωθεν ἐμήνιε· τοῖσι δὲ Νέστωρ
ἠδυεπῆς ἀνόρουσε λιγύς Πυλίων ἀγορητής,
τοῦ καὶ ἀπὸ γλώσσης μέλιτος γλυκίων ῥέεν αὐδή·

Down on the ground
He dashed the sceptre studded bright with golden nails,
then took his seat again. The son of Atreus smoldered,
glaring across at him, but Nestor rose between them,
the man of winning words, the clear speaker of Pylos...
Sweeter than honey from his tongue the voice flowed on
and on.

2. Standing Still: formula as gesture, and the structure of epic space and time

Bibliography (hard copies and electronic pdf available):

Alex Purves. 2019. 'Standing', in *Homer and the Poetics of Gesture*, ch. 5, 117–52. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

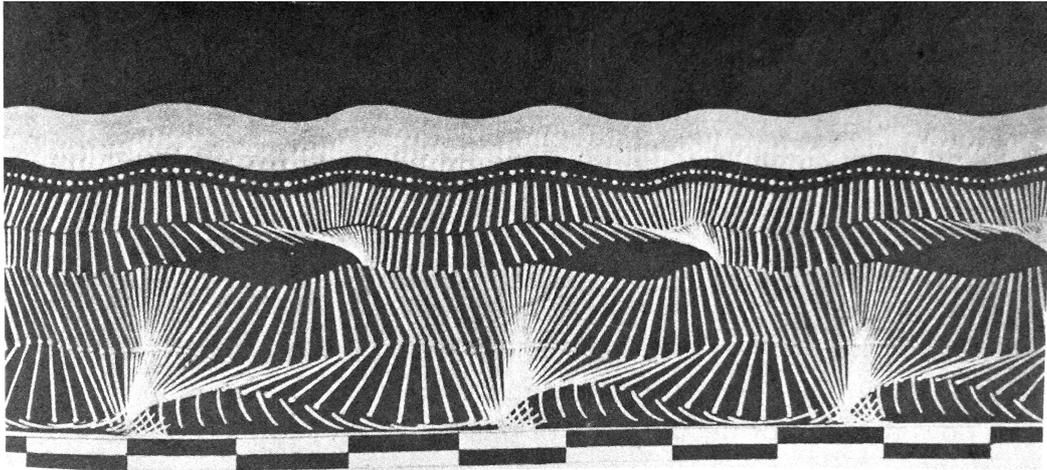


Figure 1.2. Étienne-Jules Marey, “Marche de l’Homme: Épure; Graphique obtenu au moyen de la chronophotographie géométrique partielle,” 1882–1886. *Source*: Collège de France. Archives.

Purves 2019 on posture, gesture, poetics, formula: Introduction pp. 2, 3, 5, 6

‘I ... use specific bodily positions or actions as starting points for interpreting the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Each chapter begins from a movement phrase (falling, running, leaping, standing, or reaching) and then traces the iteration of that phrase through on or both of the poems. By reading a single or limited number of postures per chapter, I track the sequences and modulations into which a gesture can fall.

...

Like Muybridge, I have been drawn to forms of pedestrian activity whose intricacies are only fully revealed when they are isolated or reframed. Indeed, many of these types of activity occur so many times in Homer that they rarely stand out as marked sites for interpretation and analysis. We might instead describe them as providing a background rhythm to the poems, a kinetic structure that is intricately tied to Homer’s engineering of temporality and plot while they in themselves pass largely unnoticed. Action of this kind often blends so imperceptibly with formulaic language (“he came up to him at a run”; “he jumped down with his armor from his chariot to the ground”; “she stood beside the pillar”) that their familiarity man condition us to paying barely any attention to them at all. My aim is to challenge that notion by isolating gestures and attempting to capture their kinaesthetic effects within the poems as a whole.

The sweep of the image produced by Marey’s photographic experiments perhaps goes partway to explaining my own emphasis on gesture as “poetics,” as I put it in this book’s title, insofar as I want to suggest that bodies move in formal patterns in Homer and that these movements weave together complex patterns of meaning. The repeated actions and various nuances that make up these gestures have a way of gathering key elements of Homer’s narrative logic into their own sweep or arc. I do not use gesture’s various parts or units, therefore, as an attempt to think of the body as something that exists in pieces, but rather as an attempt to explore movement’s connection to the body (and the poem) as a whole.

...

Although gestures matter to the critical reading of any text, it is my contention that they matter in a distinctive way to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, since they bear a special relationship with, and are indeed in many ways analogous to, the structure and sequence of formulaic speech.’

Achilles/*Iliad*: bodies juxtaposed

Iliad 1.6–7 (trans. Lattimore, Chicago) (Purves 119)

ἐξ οὗ δὴ τὰ πρῶτα διαστήτην ἐρίσαντε
Ἀτρεΐδης τε ἄναξ ἀνδρῶν καὶ δῖος Ἀχιλλεύς.

Since that time when first there **stood in division** of conflict
Atreus’ son the lord of men and brilliant Achilles.

Penelope/*Odyssey*: a body in relation to (the same) space

στῆ ῥά παρὰ σταθμὸν τέγεος πύκα ποιητοῖο :
Odyssey x5: 1.333, 16.415, 18.209, 21.64 (Penelope);
8.458 (Nausicaa, in a farewell gesture to Odysseus):

She **stood beside** the pillar of the well-built roof...

See esp. Purves 120 , and 139:

‘I do not mean to suggest that Penelope has no effect on her audience when she stands beside the house’s central roof pillar, but I do want to draw attention to the equation *female is to nothing as male is to heroics/power/doing something* that standing – as a quintessentially neutral pose – particularly illuminates. It gives us one way, for example, of parsing the difference between Achilles and Penelope as epic characters who adopt a standing position at crucial moments in their respective plots, but also of differentiating between Odysseus and Penelope in the *Odyssey*; for Odysseus too stands repetitively (if less formulaically) within the Ithacan household, but on the threshold rather than by the roof pillar. From their respective positions, Odysseus stands and *acts*, while Penelope stands and speaks, often ineffectually.

...Penelope – as the proverbial long-standing wife and preserver of the home – is also the *Odyssey*’s eternal iterator: the figure who retraces the same pathway back and forth across her loom or up and down between her bedroom and the great hall (*megaron*) below. Her placement in the frame of the stathmos scene signals – through its return to the same - the persistent unchangeability of formulaic time when, as here, it is somehow left unaffected by the contingent circumstances of each separate appearance.’

and 145:

‘Nausicaa’s form of self-presentation – as a potential bride, but also a potential warrior [6.141: στῆ δ’ ἄντα σχομένη, ‘she stood opposite, holding her ground] – shows through variation and repetition the choices that are no longer available to Penelope.’

and 146: Penelope static like a photograph

and 152:

‘Like those interstitial fractions of time between the frames of a moving image, perhaps Penelope’s presence by the roof pillar registers a different form of time for the poem, one that usually remains hidden beneath the reel of movement and action but that Homer here brings insistently to the surface.’

Purves’ conclusion to book, 182–3:

‘In each chapter, by focusing on a vividly suggestive configuration of the body, I have tried to point to the liveliness of gesture, its ability to act beyond the body, and most of all its ability to act *between* bodies. Gesture’s special capacity to escape the boundaries of the individual subject, to take on a sense of autonomy or agency, speaks to a capacity for limbs to move according to their own deep-seated habits and inclinations. Nowhere is this capacity more on display than within the formulaic system of Homeric epic, especially because in Homer the body is the essential core or sum of the self.

I want to conclude this book, therefore, by highlighting what we might call gesture’s quiet potential to act on its own accord and to exhibit its own forms of will or agency. When Penelope stands still, Achilles pushes his sword back into his scabbard, or Priam kisses his enemy’s hands, they – like the body falling in death – all act under the pressure of external forces. Yet what is important about these gestures is their ability to introduce different forms of temporality and different ways of thinking about narrative into our understanding of literary texts. If one way of understanding epic plots, along Aristotelian lines, is as a continuous sequence of causally necessary events, then gesture can be seen to work alongside this sequence, through a different kind of somatic necessity and over discontinuous intervals. By returning to the same static pose again and again, Penelope exhibits her own peculiar agency over the structure of the *Odyssey*, which holds the poem in the right temporal register until Odysseus leaps onto the threshold at the beginning of Book 22. Similarly, the minor discrepancies between catching up and overtaking, between how close or how far apart you stand from a warrior, or between whose hands touch whom at the moment of supplication, in one sense hardly matter at all to the plot of the *Iliad*. But in another sense they do, insofar as they incline us toward an underlying **poetics of form and feeling** that is integral to **epic’s position of the body in space**.’