



"The mother, so sad it is, of the very best": The lament of Thetis in Iliad 18

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“The mother, so sad it is, of the very best”: The lament of Thetis in Iliad 18

October 29, 2015 By Gregory Nagy listed under [By Gregory Nagy, H24H, HeroesX](#)

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In this posting, I show the thinking that went into a self-evaluation exercise that I had put together for “Heroes X.” In putting together the wording for this exercise as I wrote it in 2013, I was thinking of things that never made it into the book version. So, my thinking about Iliad 18.54–56 is being shared here in public for the very first time.



1778 marble relief by Thomas Banks, Thetis rising from the sea to console Achilles for the death of Patroclus; image © [Victoria and Albert Museum, London](#)

§1. In this posting, I show the thinking that went into a self-evaluation exercise that I had put together for “Heroes X.” This thinking goes back to 2013, which was the date of publication for my book [The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours](#), which I abbreviate hereafter as H24H.

§2. The original reference for this self-evaluation exercise in “Heroes X” is Hour 4 Annotation Exercise question 1, and it focuses on Iliad 18.54–56. In putting together the wording for this exercise as I wrote it in 2013, I was thinking of things that never made it into the book version, that is, the thinking I am about to show here cannot be found in H24H. So, my thinking about Iliad 18.54–56 is being shared here in public for the very first time. I start with my translation of the Iliadic text:

|₅₄ Ah me, the pitiful one! Ah me, the mother, so sad it is, of the very best. |₅₅ I gave birth to a faultless and strong son, |₅₆ the very best of heroes.

|₅₄ ὦ μοι ἐγὼ δειλή, ὦ μοι δυσαριστοτόκεια, |₅₅ ἦ τ' ἐπεὶ ἄρ τέκον υἷὸν ἀμύμονά τε κρατερὸν τε |₅₆ ἔξοχον ἠρώων.

§3. In the interpretation that follows, I introduce my Annotation Exercise question in a “reader-friendly” way, hoping to help the participants in “Heroes X” organize their thinking before they write down their

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close-reading responses. First I will quote the entire text of the Annotation Exercise question, after which I will proceed to explain the rationale for my own interpretation.

What is the biggest reason for the sadness of Thetis about being the mother of the best of all heroes in the Iliad? How do we know that Thetis is really singing a lament and not just quoted as saying sad words? Here are some comments that might help, at least indirectly . . . At line 51 of Iliad 18, shortly before the passage that is being quoted in Text G, Thetis starts to perform a lament, the word for which is goes here. Then, at line 54, where we read what Thetis is saying in her lament, she refers to herself as *dusaristotokeia*. I have translated this complex word as 'the mother, so sad it is, of the very best'. The part of my translation that reads 'the mother of the very best' corresponds to *-aristo-tokeia*, where *-tokeia* means 'mother' and *-aristo-* means 'of the very best'. As for the part *dus-*, it means 'bad', which we can see in such English borrowings as "dys-functional," "dys-entery" (= 'bad gut' in the original Greek), and so on. This 'bad' is like a parenthetical commentary on the wording *aristo-tokeia*. The part of my translation 'so sad it is' is an attempt to convey the effect created by *dus-*. For Thetis, it was a bad thing that Achilles was so good that he was the very best. And there is a relevant sound play that happens in the original Greek here. When women lament, as we can see in the language of Greek tragedy, they sometimes make the mournful cry *otototoi*—and other such sounds. Such a mournful cry is echoed when Thetis says *dusaris-toto-keia*. So the sound-effect here is also conveyed by the parenthetical expression 'so sad it is'.

§4. Having thus prompted the close-readings of the participants, I invite them to reflect on their analysis by asking them to choose a text "tag" that best corresponds to their understanding:

In your response to this question, which tag below corresponds to the sadness expressed by the mother of Achilles? (choose only ONE tag, here and elsewhere):

She feels grief because Achilles as the best hero is not being treated as the best.

She feels grief because Achilles feels grief.

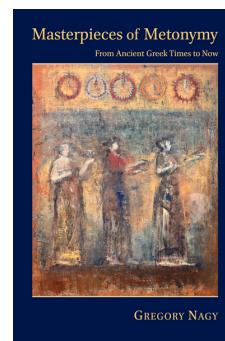
She feels grief because Achilles is doomed to die.

§5. At this point, in terms of the "Heroes X procedures," I go on to offer my own interpretation of the interpretations already written down by the participants. I do this by writing down my own analysis *in the process of* ranking the text tags that had been made available for the participants. This way, the participants can rethink the choices that they originally made when they wrote down the tags that they thought had best matched their original thinking:

If you answered [by choosing the tag that matches the wording] "she feels grief because Achilles as the best hero is not being treated as the best," you were not following the "logic" of what she is saying here. Although it is true that Achilles feels grief because he was not being treated as the best when Agamemnon insulted him, the immediate cause of the mother's grief here is that her son is doomed to die: what a pity, for the best of the best to die so prematurely! So if you answered [by choosing the tag that matches the wording] "she feels grief because Achilles is doomed to die," you chose the best of the three formulations offered here. If, however, you answered [by choosing the tag that matches the wording] "she feels grief because Achilles feels grief," you would certainly not be wrong. As you keep reading this passage, you see that Achilles will feel grief for the remainder of his very short life, and that Thetis feels helpless because she cannot stop his grief. So I can't quarrel with your answer. But I think that this answer is not as good as the answer [by choosing the tag that matches the wording] "she feels grief because Achilles is doomed to die." As I indicated in my explanation of the background, Thetis is performing a lament, and this is spelled out in line 51 of Iliad 18. Further, as we learned in Hour 2, laments are sung, not just spoken. Thetis is singing while crying, crying while singing. Still further, the grief that she expresses in her lament is caused by the fact that she already knows that Achilles will die young. When she hears her son crying, from far away, in the depths of the sea, she already knows why he is crying: Patroklos has died, and, once that happens, Achilles will inevitably die soon thereafter. That is why Thetis cries for Achilles, once she hears Achilles crying. And, as she cries, she sings her lament. This lament of Thetis is a preview of the lament that she will sing at the funeral of Achilles, as narrated in Odyssey 24.58 (the description is quoted in Hour 4 Text H).

Here I follow through on what I said in H24H Hour 2§78 about the inevitability of the death of Achilles. Let me restate what I said there:

In the Embassy Scene of the Iliad, when Achilles says he must choose between two *kēres* or 'fated ways' (9.411), either a *nostos*, 'homecoming', or a *kleos*, 'glory', that will last forever (9.413), he is actually not yet ready to make his choice: the two alternative fates had simply been foretold for him by his mother, the goddess Thetis (9.410–411). Now, after Patroklos has been killed, Achilles is facing the same choice, but now he will finally make his decision. In the lines that follow the text that we are examining here, Achilles will say that there cannot be a homecoming for him (*nostein* 18.90) because he must kill Hector in order to avenge the death of Patroklos, and, once he kills Hector, his own death in battle



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will become a certainty (18.90–93), just as his mother had foretold—and as she will now foretell again (18.96–97). By choosing to kill Hector, Achilles will choose to die young on the battlefield, and he will refer to this death as his inevitable *kēr* or ‘fated way’ (18.115). As his compensation, however, he will now win *kleos*, ‘glory’, for himself (18.121).

§6. So here I have shared with the participants in “Heroes X” my own interpretations about the lament-word *dusaristotokeia* without (I hope) intruding on the interpretations of the participants. My hope is to promote their thinking, not to preempt it.

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