

**Jonathan READY**

**The Erotics of Supplication: *Iliad* 22.123-8**

As Achilles approaches, Hektor considers stripping off his armor and offering to return Helen and give the Achaians the treasures of Troy. But he quickly rejects this option:

"I, not will I approach him going to him, and he, he will not pity nor reverence me, but will kill me since I am naked (**gumnon**) without effort just as a woman, when I strip off my armor. In fact it is now not possible in some way from a tree or from a rock to whisper to him the kinds of things that a maiden and an unmarried young man, a maiden and an unmarried young man whisper to one another."

*Iliad* 22.123-8

The two similes in Hektor's soliloquy exploit an erotic undercurrent in the Homeric theme of supplication. Hektor himself suggests such a connection when he couples the language of supplication with the adjective **gumnos** in which associations of vulnerability and sex cohere.

Scenes of supplication in the Homeric poems can cast the supplicandus as sexually dominant. We can compare the narrator's recounting of Achilles' earlier abduction of Lykaon (21.35-6) to Hades' snatching of Persephone in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (19-20). Further, Lykaon is "unarmed/naked" (**gumnon**) before Achilles (21.49-50), and Achilles kills him with a blow portrayed as a violent penetration (21.115-8). In other scenes of supplication, the deathblow takes on a sexualized tone (cf. 6.64-5). Suppliants' gestures in the epics reify this power dynamic. By embracing the knees of the supplicandus, the suppliant aims to subordinate him or herself to the sexual authority of the supplicandus (cf. Gould 1973, 96, following Onians 1951, especially 174-99).

With the simile "as a woman," Hektor conjures this connection between supplication and sexual dominance. He imputes this reading of his potential supplication of Achilles to the Myrmidon himself. The ultimate focalizer of the image, Achilles would view the suppliant as sexually subservient. Hektor provides one reason for his refusal to supplicate Achilles. It would be contrary to Hektor's heroic aspirations to abase himself in such a manner before his opponent.

The Trojan then describes an alternative approach to the erotics of supplication that contrasts with the dominant interpretation of the ceremony throughout the poem. Supplication could be reconfigured as a lovers' dialogue. In stark contrast to the dynamics of the first simile, the maiden and young man interact on more equal and mutually interested terms. If Achilles understood supplication as an erotic dialogue, if he could be converted into a non-violent, desiring interlocutor, rather than a rapist or conqueror, Hektor might be spared. But Achilles could not, so Hektor cannot hope to approach him. Hektor contends that Achilles has no access to the realm of sexual and affective relationships so integral to defining Hektor. Therein lies a challenge, as the

Trojan excludes Achilles from his world. Hektor's second simile is further explanation for his decision to fight and ultimately an attack on Achilles.