The Poetics of Lament

- Main words: akhos and penthos. Both mean grief, but not just grief, “song of grief.”
  Even natural feelings can be expressed in what we moderns might consider an artificial way (song). Grief is sometimes referred to as lament. It’s not just sorrow, but physically crying. It’s everything that is going on while you’re crying. In Greek culture, you would sing when you cry and cry when you sing, so it’s both natural and artificial at the same time. We study this because Achilles has a natural propensity to cry in all sort of ways. Achilles was a major figure in Ancient greek culture – people would cry when they heard his name. The Olympics began with women crying over Achilles. He is truly “the man of sorrow.”
- Passage A: This passage is saying that at the moment Achilles is feeling this intense sorrow/grief, this emotion metastasizes into a red-hot anger. There are many different words for “anger,” kholos – is the type of anger you have when you just blow up. The anger in the first line of the Iliad is a cosmic anger, which is very different. Athena stops Achilles and says not to have that kind of anger (kholos) but to sit it out and have another kind of anger – the cosmic anger. Akhos goes to kholos.
- There was a female version of Achilles whose name was Penthesileia, and she was an Amazon. Just as akhos has to do with Achilles, penthos has to do with the name of Penthesileia. Just as Achilles evidently means “He who has akhos (sorrow) for the people,” Penthesileia is the feminine counterpart (she who has sorrow for the people). There was an epic that has not survived except for an ancient plot outline, but in that outline we see that Penthesileia was a very important figure in the epic “Song of the Ethiopians.” Achilles and Penthesileia battle it out, and Achilles kills her. This idea of Achilles and Penthesileia having a fight to the finish (a battle of epic proportions – the best male fighting the best female) is interesting because of the ideas of sex and death being combined. Achilles falls in love with Penthesileia just as he is plunging his sword into her body.
- A lament can very easily morph into a love song and vice-versa.
- Kodly recorded a Hungarian lament of a poor widow whose son was killed during the war. She is singing a lament while crying the whole time. The woman starts imagining her son when he was a child and begins singing to this child. She then sings about the poor father of the two boys who died during the war must feel – that his blood was ripped out of his veins.
- Laments can turn out to be X-rated, erotic because they explore the depths of emotion.
• It turns out that Achilles can cry both like a man and a woman. (side note by me: interesting parallel in terms of duality? Achilles can cry like both a man and woman, a lament can be both artificial and natural at the same time.)

• The second lament of Andromache, where she sees Hector’s dead body. She takes the headdress from her head and flings it. This is huge! (Think back to “Blade Runner” parallel)

• The first lament of Andromache. Hector isn’t dead yet, but Andromache is sort of “dress-rehearsing” the lament she will sing when Hector is really dead. Andromache goes through an ascending scale of affection, starting by saying that her parents, and brothers, are all dead because of Achilles. Finally she says that she couldn’t bear to lose the one dearest to her – Hector.

• Korean film – lament by woman. The parallels to stories like the Iliad is very evident here. You have a master narrator, and he is so engrossed in his story than when the camera moves from depicting the story he is telling to simply showing the master narrator singing the story, you hardly notice. The power of storytelling that must have existed with the Greeks and other ancient cultures is beautifully captured here.