**You, Patroclus: the Effect of the Apostrophe on the Sympathetic Reception of Patroclus**

By Odessa Cadieux-Rey

“Remember Patroclus now, our stricken comrade.
That gentle man, the soul of kindness to all
While the man was still alive…”

*Iliad* 17.754-6

These lines are spoken by Menelaus as battle rages over the corpse of Patroclus, a brief eulogy to the fallen soldier. Achilles’ dearest comrade will be remembered above all for his gentleness—by his comrades within the story of the *Iliad* but also by the hearers and readers of Homer. This is a legacy that very few, if any, of the other warriors at Troy can boast. Through a number of devices, he is depicted in the *Iliad* in such a way that we are almost forced to receive him sympathetically. These devices include the description of his actions and words, the attitudes towards him as expressed by other characters, and the story’s intricate construction with its foreshadowing and irony. There is one other device that is more peculiar and, as I will argue, has the most profound effect on the final reception of the character of Patroclus. This is the apostrophe, a direct address to a character by the author, used with Patroclus’ name 8 times, all in Book 16, out of a total 19 apostrophes in the *Iliad*. While there has been some scholarship on the reasons for Homer’s implementation of this incongruous device, they are not my concern, although I will briefly touch on the arguments and where they refute or support my hypothesis. I will examine the other sources for Patroclus’ character in the *Iliad* and then compare them to and consider the 8 apostrophes in Book 16 and finally attempt to demonstrate that the apostrophe is the most significant contribution to the uniquely sympathetic response to

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1 All line numbers correspond to the Fagles translation.
2 See Matthews, V.J. “Metrical reasons for the apostrophe in Homer.” *Liverpool Classical Monthly* Vol. 5 No. 5 (1980). The others are to Menelaus (7), the Trojan Melannipus (1), Achilles (1), and Phoebus (2). The *Odyssey* uses the apostrophe only in reference to Eumaeus, 15 times. Matthews provides a detailed overview of all 19 apostrophes, including his explanations for them. They are also listed (in Greek) and categorized by R.M. Henry in “The Use and Origin of the Apostrophe in Homer.” *The Classical Review* Vol. 19, No.1 (1905).
Patroclus. By stepping out of his role as narrator and speaking to the character directly, Homer establishes a connection with Patroclus that we come to share. Our opinion of him as a likable character, which is enforced elsewhere in the poem, is sealed by this relationship.

For the few who have considered the apostrophe in Homer the aim has been to explain away the bard’s mystifying addresses to his characters. There seems to be a division between those who attribute it simply to metrical convenience, those who see it as communicating sympathy, and those who attempt to reconcile the two. On the one hand, it is true that, were someone reading or listening to Homer in the original Greek, there are instances where the formula with the apostrophe seems akin to an epithet. In other words, they argue that the vocative with a second person verb was the simplest way to fit the metre. On the other hand, it is also true that the characters that are apostrophized and the times at which apostrophes occur are often too appropriate to be dismissed as metrical convenience. Elizabeth Block notes the similar traits of loyalty and vulnerability among the characters most frequently apostrophized by Homer: Patroclus, Menelaus, and Eumaeus in the Odyssey. E.S. Zyroff works through each instance of apostrophe and explains how each was a deliberate choice by the poet to provoke sympathy in the audience. But as Adam Parry puts it, the “splendid coincidence of meaning and form” are a result of a long tradition, of a performance that was perfected over generations.

Regardless, the fact remains that meaning has been and will continue to be attributed to these so-called metrical devices. The apostrophe sounds different to the hearer, it looks strange to the reader, if not consciously then subconsciously. It is even more so for those reading Homer in

6 Parry, p. 22
That is not to say that there are not other justifications for liking Patroclus. By the time we come to Book 16 we have already been presented with a number of reasons to sympathize with Achilles’ dear comrade and after his death our sympathy is reinforced by the testimonials of other characters. Before he has even participated in the action we know Patroclus is going to die. In Book 8, Zeus informs Hera of the impending battle of Patroclus’ corpse (8.548-51), so that as we follow the development of Patroclus’ character we are already aware that he does have long to live, making his sweetness all the more poignant.

Although Patroclus is present in Book 9, he merely stand by silently, uninvolved in the heated conversation. His presence is not strongly felt until Book 11, where Homer paints a tender scene to showcase Patroclus’ greatest virtue and weakness: intense empathy. This episode begins with another reminder of his doom. Achilles, surveying the battle, calls Patroclus up and “forth he came from his shelter… but from that moment on his doom was sealed.” (11.712-14). Although we were already informed of this in Book 8 we continue to be reminded that Patroclus is about to die, even as our sympathy for him grows. Nestor then hatches the plan that will be the death of Patroclus (11.949-61) and Patroclus makes a display of the empathy that will push him to carry it out, as he travels back to Achilles tent and stumbles upon the wounded Eurypylus. “And moved at the sight, the good soldier Patroclus burst out in grief with a flight of winging words…” (11.972-3) and so he launches into a moving speech. We have seen no such empathy from the likes of Agamemnon or Achilles, which makes Patroclus’ a welcome change. Patroclus continues to show us his gentleness as he pauses in his haste to heal Eurypylus’ wounds, “bracing the captain, arm around his waist, he helped him toward his shelter…” (11.1006-7) and we may find ourselves wishing that more such men wandered the Achaean camp.
Book 16 opens immediately with another grand display of Patroclus’ empathy. He comes running to Achilles and we are told that he “wept warm tears like a dark spring running down” (16.3), pleading with his friend to relent, admonishing Achilles in a way that the other heroes would not have dared (16.33-40). Again Homer interrupts the flow of action with an ominous reminder that this kind soldier whom we have grown to respect is on the brink of death, “lost in his own great innocence condemned to beg for his own death and brutal doom.” (16.55-6). It is soon after this, now that our sympathy for the character is at its height, that the apostrophes to Patroclus are brought into the narrative.

Before discussing them let us move beyond Book 16 to the laments which serve to explain the sympathy Patroclus has invoked in the hearer or reader. In Book 17, immediately after his death, Menelaus is the first to show his protective love for Patroclus, “braced like a mother cow lowing over her calf, her first-born, first labor-pangs she’d felt.” (17.5-6). The simile with it touching maternal imagery is echoed in a paternal sense with Ajax: “But Ajax, shielding Patroclus round with his broad buckler, stood fast now like a lion cornered round his young when hunters cross him…” (17.151-4). Even Achilles’ immortal horses mourn him, “from the time they first had sensed their driver’s death, brought down in the dust by man-killing Hector.” (17.494-5). Finally there are the tender words of Menelaus quoted in the opening paragraph (17.755-6).

The most revealing speech on Patroclus’ character comes from Briseis. Her lament does not come until Book 19, beautiful and surprisingly personal. If the men’s grief were not convincing, now the grief of a woman, a captive no less, nearly matches in passion Achilles’ own reaction and is comparable, no doubt to a lesser degree, to the pain of Andromache at the death of Hector.

Parry makes the observation that the adjective used here, μέλιχος (assumedly translated as ‘gentle’ by Fagles but as ‘sweet’ by Parry), is only ever ascribed as a human characteristic to Patroclus. Elsewhere it is used to describe words or in an ironic sense, denying the quality to some other soldier. Parry concludes that this further distinguishes Patroclus not only by his actions, but by a unique vocabulary (he finds other evidence to support this further, including the apostrophe). See Parry, P. 11.
And so Briseis returned, like golden Aphrodite,
But when she saw Patroclus lying torn by the bronze
She flung herself on his body, gave a piercing cry
And with both hands clawing deep at her breasts,
Her soft throat and lovely face, she sobbed,
A woman like a goddess in her grief...

18. 333-7

We learn in the following speech that Patroclus’ kindness towards humankind extended beyond his male comrades even to his slave women. She mourns the man who was her only comfort, a woman robbed of her home and family: “But you, Patroclus, you would not let me weep, not when swift Achilles cut my husband down […] So now I mourn your death—I will never stop—you were always kind.” (19.348-56). Much like Achilles, she vows she will not relent in her grief and appears to have loved her master’s friend as much as his comrade’s did. Given that the other slave women seem to be the only others around her, it can be assumed that her grief is genuine. All the preceding evidence is what makes the apostrophe so effective in the case of Patroclus. Once we have been asked to sympathize with the character through his portrayal and later informed of his qualities by other characters, an intimate direct address is what it takes to convince us that we love him.

The way in which the apostrophe is set up and supported through the _Iliad_ and especially the way it is used in Book 16 is what makes its effect so profound. Although the apostrophes are used almost as frequently with Menelaus and once or twice with others, they are in these cases scattered throughout the poem, rather than being compounded one upon the other, which is what happens towards the end of Book 16. The first apostrophe to Patroclus occurs at the very beginning of the Book, setting up his first words: “With a wrenching groan you answered you friend, Patroclus O my rider…” (16.22-23). The poet’s connection with the character is
established from the first lines and we feel ourselves being drawn in along with him, a sense that will be cemented by the end of the book.

The apostrophe does not come up again for several hundred lines, when Patroclus’ aristeia is well under way. During this time, Patroclus has admittedly unleashed a rage that brings him to commit some of the most elaborate killings in the Iliad, including the death of Zeus’ son Sarpedon (16.499ff). But the motivation for Patroclus’ brutality sets him apart from the rest. He does not pursue glory on the battlefield, but rages on deeply aggrieved by the deaths of his comrades. And if we find ourselves forgetting this, the next apostrophe reminds us who Patroclus is fighting for. After witnessing the death of Epigeus, another Myrmidon, Patroclus is addressed directly as he reacts: “Patroclus O my rider, straight at the pressing Trojan ranks you swooped, enraged at your comrade’s death!” (16.682-4). This, the second apostrophe, is followed in swift succession by six more; Block argues tell in outline Patroclus’ final story. Certainly their proximity makes it impossible not to develop a conscious or unconscious personal engagement with Patroclus and become caught up in his final moments.

The third apostrophe invokes Patroclus in the same way that Homer invokes the Muses. The fact that he has chosen to invoke the hero here instead enforces the impression of a close bond between poet and character. “Patroclus—” he asks, “who was the first you slaughtered, who the last when the great gods called you down to death?” (16.809-11). The apostrophe here is combined with the device of foreshadowing, doubling its sympathetic impact and echoing the initial invocation of the Muses in Book 1 where Achilles’ doom is alluded to (1.1-6). Less than a

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8 The death of Thestor is one of the most notable (16. 479-89): “Patroclus, rising before him stabbed his right jawbone, ramming the spearhead square between his teeth so hard he hooked him by the spearhead over the chariot-rail, hoisted, dragged the Trojan out as an angler perched on a jutting rock ledge drags some fish from the sea. So with the spear Patroclus gaffed him off his car, his mouth gaping round the glittering point and flipped him facefirst, dead as he fell, his life breath blown away.”

9 Block, P. 17
hundred lines later (in the Greek) we are invited to join Patroclus as he kills Cebriones: “Cebriones’ life breath left his bones behind and you taunted his corpse, Patroclus O my rider…” (16. 866-7) and following his taunt his confrontation with Hector over the corpse, who will deal him his death blow, is presented in a direct address: “So you sprang at Cebriones, full fury, Patroclus, as Hector sprang down from his chariot just across and the two went tussling over the corpse as lions…” (16. 878-9). Being invited to engage in battle with Patroclus is not comfortable but it is the ultimate way to redeem him. Even Hector is vilified in contrast to the unfailingly sweet Patroclus. Only a few lines later Hector is described as, “ablaze for glory” (16.884) a few lines later, confirming his selfish motives.  

The final three apostrophes move away from Patroclus as a fighter and follow him as he nears death. As Apollo strides up to Patroclus to deal the first blow, there is a quick jump from a third-person description of Patroclus’ magnificence to a direct address as certain death approaches: “Then at the fourth assault Patroclus like something superhuman—then, Patroclus, the end of life came blazing up before you, yes, the lord Apollo met you there in the heart of battle, the god, the terror!” (16.913-16). This may be the most vivid apostrophe yet and it makes Apollo all the more horrific as we are beckoned to share in Patroclus’ terror. Next, Euphorbus’ spear strikes Patroclus in another apostrophe: “He was the first to launch a spear against you, Patroclus O my rider, but did not bring you down. Yanking out his ashen shaft from your body, back he dashed and lost himself in the crowds—the man would not stand up to Patroclus here…” (16.943-5). Here as elsewhere the ‘you’ addressed to Patroclus might stir up a response in the listener or reader. It is difficult not to feel that we are being addressed when we hear that ‘you’ from the narrator, especially when it is so jolting and unfamiliar. But this time you, Patroclus, but also you, the receiver of the words, are actually “yanking out his ashen spear

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10 Later, gloating over Patroclus as he dies, the picture of Hector in this book becomes even more hateful. “And I with my spear,” he says, “Hector, shining among my combat-loving comrades, I fight away from them the fatal day—but you, the vultures will eat your body raw.” (16.973-6). This last line will be echoed by Achilles over the body of Hector, to whom our sympathy might be transferred, but for the moment, it is Hector who plays Achilles’ condemnable role.
from your body”. It is difficult not to cringe at Homer’s third person deaths but when the most sympathetic character’s wounding is presented in a direct address, it would be an especially unreceptive reader or hearer who does not feel his pain. Finally, one last apostrophe is used to introduce Patroclus’ dying words to Hector: “Struggling for breath, you answered, Patroclus O my rider…” (16. 985). And that is the tragic end of sweet Patroclus, who has been snuffed out at the height of our empathy for him.

As shown earlier, there is nothing after Book 16 to diminish our sympathetic understanding of Patroclus’ character. In fact, favourable descriptions of his character, which had not been set out clearly for us before, serve to confirm our notions about him. Block observes that “there has seldom, if ever, been articulated a response to Patroklos that was not sympathetic” which she attributes to the narrator’s concern for him as communicated through the apostrophe and elsewhere.11 Whether or not Homer intended to communicate concern for Patroclus is essentially irrelevant to my argument. The point is that his use of the apostrophe, whether provoked by metrical reasons or employed as a sympathetic device, is received by the reader or hearer in a way that elicits intense sympathy. I will admit that it is impossible to know how Homer was received in his own day,12 but today, especially considering that the vast majority of people read (and do not hear) Homer in translation, the effect of the apostrophe is profound. It jumps off the page as incongruous and it does not immediately cross the mind that it might derive from metre. With no other character is it used as effectively, concentrated as it is in Book 16 and confirmed by all evidence elsewhere in the epic. The effect of the apostrophe is as subtle as its appearance is conspicuous. Although we may notice the strange second person address, we probably do not realize how it has affected us until it too late to reverse our feelings and opinions. I challenge readers to offer a convincingly unsympathetic depiction of Patroclus.

11 Block, P. 17
12 However, there is evidence in the Scholia that the commentators as least believed the apostrophe arose from the author’s sympathy, pity, or affection for a character. How they themselves and their fellow Greeks were affected by it is not clear. See Yamagata P. 91.
Bibliography


