

Fair and Foul Play in the Funeral Games in the *Iliad*

Matthew W. Dickie*

There is a belief deeply entrenched by now in the minds of many professional classical scholars that in Greek athletics all that mattered was winning. Athletes in their zeal for victory would, on this view, have stopped at nothing to win and would have felt no inhibitions about cheating, if that would bring them victory; in the eyes of those around them their victory counted for more than the means they had used to attain it. Reproach, mockery and humiliation were reserved for those who were defeated.¹ It is customary to support assertions of this sort by quoting a passage from Pindar's Eighth Pythian, an ode composed to honor the victory of a boy wrestler in the Pythian Games of 446 B.C. In that passage Pindar speaks of the homecoming of those whom the victor he celebrates had defeated: their return to their mothers does not provoke the pleasure of sweet laughter and they skulk in back-alleys to avoid their enemies; their misfortune has made a deep bite in them (vv.83-87). Tom from their context and treated as a categorical statement of what a Greek athlete would have felt and experienced in defeat, these lines of Pindar afford a certain amount of support to the view that all that counted in the Greek games was victory. But what Pindar is really concerned to evoke here is the joyous and triumphal return of the young victor and the elation that he feels in his brief moment of glory. The misery of those whom he has defeated is introduced largely to highlight by way of contrast the victor's moment of triumph. The Eighth Pythian turns out to be a somewhat unsatisfactory foundation on which to erect a thesis about the spirit of Greek athletics.

The belief that all that mattered in Greek athletics was victory reflects a more general theory about the nature of Greek society. The proponents of that theory maintain that Greek society in the Archaic and Classical periods was a results culture. What is meant by that is a culture in which all that really counts is success; what determines a man's worth or his standing in the eyes of his fellows is his success in furthering his own interests at the expense of the interests of others; if he is successful in doing this, he is admired and

* Matthew Dickie is an Associate Professor of Classics at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois 60680.

1. Cf. M.I. Finley and H.W. Pleket, *The Olympic Games: The First Thousand Years* (New York, 1976), p. 20: "Victory alone brought glory; participation, games-playing for its own sake, was no virtue: defeat brought undying shame." Pindar, *Pythian* 8.81-87 is then quoted in support of these assertions. It is probably correct to say that games-playing was not itself considered a virtue. On the other hand, having the courage to put oneself to the test by entering the games was thought admirable. It may not exactly have brought glory, but mere participation in a game has never brought glory, only victory does that.

praised, even though he may have stooped to the very basest means to attain that end.² There would seem to be little reason to question the assumption that the ethic of Greek athletic competition mirrors the moral outlook of Greek society as a whole. It is logically possible that a culture could exist in which one morality exists for gamesplaying and another for the more serious business of life, but that possibility is not worthy of serious consideration so far as the Greeks go. What is open to question is the assumption that Archaic and Classical Greece was a results culture.³

I shall argue in this paper that what happens in the Funeral Games in the *Iliad* suggests very strongly that winning was not everything in Greek athletics and that the spirit in which a man competed in the games was a matter of some importance. I am fully aware that even if I succeed in making my case for the *Iliad*, there will be those who will rule the evidence of the *Iliad* out of court and will declare that it is illegitimate to extrapolate from the lessons that the Funeral Games have to teach about competitiveness and the pursuit of victory to later Greek attitudes. But the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* do not stand apart from the rest of Greek literature and life. The concerns, attitudes and values that inform post-Homeric literature do not differ materially from those that are to be discerned in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.⁴

The Funeral Games are an athletic contest that Achilles, the finest warrior on the Greek side, holds in honor of his comrade Patroclus, who had been killed in battle by Hector, the Trojans' greatest champion. Patroclus had died defending the Greek camp from a Trojan attack. Achilles himself had refused to fight because his honor had been affronted by the supreme commander of the Greek force, Agamemnon. Although his comrades and friends had begged him to put aside his wrath, he had remained obdurate and continued to brood over the wrong done him. That wrong lay in Agamemnon's depriving him of a prize of war, a girl called Briseis. Agamemnon took Briseis from Achilles because he had been forced to give up his own prize of war, also a girl, to avert the anger of the god Apollo from the Greek army. He cannot see why others should have prizes and he should not (1.118- 120). Achilles cannot see why Agamemnon has to have a prize immediately (1.122-129). nor does he see why he should do the bulk of the fighting, yet when it comes to the distribution of booty, the greater share should go to Agamemnon (1.165-167). The genesis of the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles lies then in the prizes of honor that each feels the other does not deserve to have.

The quarrel is prolonged by Achilles' indulging his outraged pride to the point of letting his comrades-in-arms die at the hands of the enemy. With Patroclus' death Achilles comes to some degree of realization how greatly his

2. The most influential statement of this view of Greek culture is that of A.W.H. Adkins, which he first propounded in *Merit and Responsibility* (Oxford, 1960)

3. Questioned and criticized by H. Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus*, 2nd edn (Berkeley. Los Angeles and London, 1983)

4. Cf. C.W. Macleod. *Homer, Iliad Book XXIV* (Cambridge, 1982), p.vii. "I have also introduced more parallels than might be expected from later authors, in order to show how Homer's language, artistry and thought are comparable to theirs. The greatest poet of ancient Greece is too often treated as if he were not a part of Greek civilization."

wrath has harmed his comrades and how it has kept him from helping them. A reconciliation with Achilles is effected and he sets out to exact vengeance from Hector. The rage that Patroclus' death has inspired in him is terrible and is not satisfied by Hector's death: even after he has killed Hector, he subjects Hector's corpse to horrible insults. Patroclus' burial is followed by the Funeral Games. After they are over and Achilles is left on his own again, he inflicts further insults on Hector's body, but this time his wrath is quickly spent. When Zeus orders him to give Hector's body back to his father Priam, he accedes without protest. Priam comes to his tent and is received kindly. Achilles' full return to the fold of humanity is marked by the pity that Priam's plight inspires in him. The basis of that pity is the realization that his own father's suffering, once he dies, will be no different from that which Priam experiences at the loss of his son.

The Funeral Games are a stage in Achilles' moral and emotional progress from insensate rage to a realization of shared humanity. They are so because Achilles sees mirrored in the competition of the games the same emotions that had engendered the quarrel with Agamemnon and had made him so obdurate in his rage. The competition of the games is a microcosm of the competition over prizes of honor that is the subject of the *Iliad* as a whole. The Funeral Games are an integral part of the *Iliad*: they look backwards to what has happened already and prepare the way for Achilles' final renunciation of the anger that keeps him apart from other men.⁵

The motives and passions that govern and sway the conduct of Achilles and Agamemnon are those that also govern and sway the competitors in the games. In both the wider world of the *Iliad* and in the games men strive to win prizes, which they see as tokens of recognition on the part of others of their worth. They are motivated by a desire for honor, a notion that in Greek is expressed by the term *philotimia*. Closely related to that notion is desire for victory, in Greek, *philonikia*. A man who, prompted by *philotimia* or *philonikia*, competes with others for prizes must necessarily want to win the prizes he competes for. He need not wish to win them at any cost. He may only derive satisfaction from winning, if he knows that he has beaten his opponents fairly and squarely and that the prizes he is accorded reflect his true merits. That same man, if he is fairly and squarely beaten, will acknowledge the victor's merits and recognize that the prize has gone to the man who deserves it. That does not mean that he does not feel distress and chagrin at losing; he does not, however, allow these emotions to affect the fairness of his judgment.

In contrast to this man, there is the man who has such an overwhelming desire for victory that he will go to any lengths to win. What an unfairly gained victory means to a man who is motivated purely by desire for victory remains unclear. It is also unclear what defeat, whether it has been inflicted on him fairly and squarely or whether he has been cheated out of victory will

5. For similar accounts of the significance of the Funeral Games, see F.M. Stawell, *Homer and the Iliad* (London, 1909), pp. 84-90 and C.W. Macleod, *op. cit.* (above n.4), pp. 29-32. I am particularly indebted to the latter scholar's discussion of the place that the Funeral Games has in the development of the *Iliad*.

mean to him. The man whose only motivation for competing in the games is the desire to win is not a very well delineated type. Nor is he a type that Greek authors have anything to say about.

Most Greeks would have assumed that the man who will go to any lengths to win is not motivated solely by the desire to win. They would take it for granted that an unwillingness to see anyone else win plays a large part in the motivation of such a man. The thought that another man will win causes such a man distress and his efforts are directed as much to depriving the other of victory as they are to winning himself. If he wins by unfair means, he has at least the satisfaction of knowing that he has deprived everyone else of victory and that he is free of the anguish that another's victory would have caused him. If he is defeated, he bitterly resents his opponent's victory and cannot acknowledge it for what it is, a mark of his opponent's superiority to himself. He will go to great lengths to render that victory worthless: he may spread stories about his opponent's having used unfair means to win or he lets it be known that he himself was off form that day. This man the Greeks would have said was motivated by *phrthonos*, a term used of that state of mind that grudges another man some good. The man motivated by *phrthonos*, the *phrthoneros*, cannot bear to see another enjoying a good; he feels distress at the sight and wishes to see the other deprived of the good; he may even take steps to secure that end. Excessive *philotimia* and *philonikia* were thought to be due to *phrthonos*. The Greeks, although they recognized that there was a large element of *phthonos* in the character of most men, were nonetheless wholehearted in their condemnation of conduct motivated by *phthonos*.

The Greeks, in short, understood that there was a distinction to be made between those who entered games to put themselves to the test and to win public recognition of their native ability and those who were moved as much by these motives as by a desire to prevent others winning. This was not a purely theoretical distinction: those who were motivated by *phthonos* were condemned. In the Funeral Games the man who allows nothing to stand in the way of victory and who is portrayed with the characteristic traits of the *phthoneros* has to acknowledge that he has done wrong and bows before the moral suasion that is exerted upon him.

After Patroclus' pyre has burned itself out and his bones have been collected for burial, Achilles assembles the Greek force and sets five prizes before it: they are to be the prizes for the chariot-race. He then invites those who wish to compete for them to do so. The first to arise is Eumelus, then the great warrior Diomedes, next Agamemnon's own brother, Menelaus, and after him Antilochus, the son of Nestor, the senior statesman in the Greek camp. Nestor seizes the opportunity to give his son some advice, the gist of which is that since his horses are the slowest in the field, he must exercise his intelligence to win; in particular, he should drive his team with great care, and always keep both the turning-post in view and the team ahead of him. If he can make a tight turn round the turning-post, no one, Nestor assures him, will be able to catch him on the back-straight (23.306-348). Such is Nestor's advice. In the event, Antilochus does not follow it.

The fifth and final competitor to arise is a Cretan, Meriones. Starting-places are assigned by lot. Antilochus draws the inside position, then comes Eumelus. Menelaus, Meriones and on the outside Diomedes. The race begins and the chariots fly across the plain. But it is not until they reach the final part of the home stretch that the race is really on. Eumelus moves into the lead, closely pursued by Diomedes, who looks as though he will draw level or go into the lead himself, until the god Apollo, who has reason to be annoyed with Diomedes,⁶ knocks Diomedes' whip from his hand. The goddess Athena, who has been keeping an eye on things, gives Diomedes back his whip and breaks the yoke that holds Eumelus' horses. Eumelus is thrown from his chariot and skins his nose, lips and elbows. Diomedes moves into the lead.

But it is the race between Menelaus and Antilochus with which our attention is mainly occupied. Menelaus leads in it. This provokes Antilochus to call out to his horses:

Hurry on both of you, press on as hard as you can. I do not bid you make a match of it with the horses of Diomedes, to whom Athena has granted speed and to their driver glory, but catch Menelaus' team and don't let them leave you behind, lest the mare Aithe pour abuse on you, saying, "Why, fine sirs, do you fall behind?" I shall tell you what will come to pass. Nestor will not look after you, but he will immediately slaughter you. if you slack and we carry off an inferior prize. But press your pursuit and hasten on with all the speed you can muster. I shall devise a way of getting past where the road narrows, nor will the opportunity pass me by (23.403-416).

These threats to his horses are our first indication that Antilochus is somewhat too zealous in his pursuit of victory.

The horses do indeed respond to his threats and their pace increases for a while. Antilochus sees a place where the course narrows, a point where the winter rains have hollowed out and broken up its surface. He guides his team slightly to the side with the result that he and Menelaus are now running on parallel courses. Menelaus, seeing danger ahead, calls on Antilochus to desist, lest there be a collision, for the road is not wide enough for both to drive side-by-side. Antilochus presses on even harder and applies his whip furiously. He appears not to hear Menelaus. They run together for a short distance and then Menelaus deliberately slackens his pace and falls back to avert a collision. He nonetheless berates Antilochus as a fool and warns him that he will not carry off the prize without swearing an oath; that is, Antilochus will have to swear on oath that he did not intentionally cheat to win.

The poet leaves the race for the moment to turn to another squabble, one between two of the spectators. Idomeneus enjoys an especially good view of

6. Diomedes had had the effrontery to attack Apollo on the field of battle (*II*. 5.432-442).

the race-course because he sits at the edge of the throng of onlookers. He notices that a team of horses other than those of Eumelus are now in the lead and stands up to say so. The tone of his announcement is cautious and unassertive. But this does not save him from being roundly abused by Ajax, son of Oeleus, who accuses him of being a braggart and of having poor eyesight, since otherwise he would have seen that Eumelus' horses were still in the lead. Idomeneus is not surprisingly infuriated and replies in kind: Ajax is a virtuoso at abuse and at nothing else; he is utterly lacking in finer feelings; a wager on which team of horses is really ahead will teach him a lesson when he has to pay up. They are about to come to blows when Achilles steps in to separate them. He tells them to behave themselves. They would be indignant, he says, if they saw other men hurling abuse at each other as they have done. This is a wiser and more dispassionate Achilles than the Achilles who had engaged in an unedifying mud-slinging match with Agamemnon, of which we are no doubt meant to be reminded by this quarrel between Oelian Ajax and Idomeneus. We are not yet done with Oelian Ajax. His foul-mouthed behaviour will be suitably punished.

We return to the chariot-race to see Diomedes and not Eumelus sweeping in to win. He is followed by Antilochus, who has Menelaus hot on his heels. Next comes Meriones and last of all Eumelus. He drags his chariot behind him and drives his pair of horses in front of him. This pathetic spectacle arouses Achilles' pity. This is the first time that Achilles has been moved to feel pity since the quarrel with Agamemnon. It marks a stage in his moral and emotional rehabilitation. He proposes that the second prize be given to Eumelus, since he really was the best man in the race, a puzzling observation for those who believe that all that counted was winning. Diomedes, he suggests, should keep his first prize. This, of course, means that Antilochus will have to forfeit the second prize he had fought so hard to get. Achilles' proposal is applauded by everyone and he is about to hand the second prize, a mare, over to Eumelus, when Antilochus makes a formal protest. He tells Achilles that he will be very angry, if his prize is taken from him. Eumelus, he says, should have prayed to the gods; he would not then have come in last. But if Achilles pities Eumelus, let him give Eumelus some other prize, since he has plenty of valuables at his disposal. He will not give up his prize and anyone who tries to take it had better be ready to fight. Achilles smiles at this outburst, rejoicing, the poet tells us, because Antilochus was his dear comrade. Antilochus' behaviour on this occasion should remind him of his own earlier self and his own anger at having to give up his prize and the threats that he had made about what would happen, if anyone were to dare to take anything else from him.⁷ He accedes to Antilochus' suggestion and agrees to give Eumelus another prize.

What Antilochus has done so far in pursuit of a prize is the following: he has threatened his horses with death, if they do not beat Menelaus' team; he

⁷ Achilles, like Antilochus, challenges anyone to try to take anything from him (II 1.302-3).

has driven without regard for his own and his opponent's safety; he has engineered a situation in which a collision is inevitable, unless his opponent falls back and lets him go ahead; and finally he is quite unable to bear the thought of letting the prize that he has won by these dubious means go to someone else, even though that other deserves it more than he. There is a certain pattern to all of this: Antilochus sets no bounds to what he is prepared to do to win; he is consumed with an overwhelming desire to win and he cannot stand the thought of anyone other than himself winning. In sum, he seems to be motivated as much by a desire to win as by a desire to see no one else win. His is a grudging and mean-spirited state of mind.

He has now to face the consequences of his actions. An extremely angry Menelaus gets up and speaks:

Antilochus, you used to show much good sense.
What have you done? You have besmirched my worth
and you have impeded my horses by throwing your
own far inferior ones in front (23.570-572).

Menelaus then suggests that Antilochus should swear by Poseidon that he has not deliberately and by guile checked Menelaus' chariot. This Antilochus cannot do. He begs Menelaus to desist and seeks to excuse what he has done as a youthful excess. He will give up the mare, he says, and whatever else besides Menelaus wishes, since he does not want to incur Menelaus' permanent displeasure and to be a sinner against the gods. This display of remorse wins Menelaus' heart. He now declares that he will put aside his wrath, since Antilochus' failings are simply the product of youthful folly, and what is more, he will give Antilochus the mare so that everyone may know that he is neither arrogant nor unfeeling.

The way in which the quarrel between Antilochus and Menelaus is resolved is an object lesson for Agamemnon and Achilles. Neither party clings jealously to his prize, nor does Menelaus indulge his wrath. But for the immediate purposes of this paper what is important is why exactly Menelaus is angry and what his anger means. He is angry because Antilochus has sullied his worth by throwing his horses in front of his own team and impeding its progress; that is, Antilochus' cheating has kept him from realizing his own and his team's innate worth in the chariot-race. The Greeks saw athletics, the hunt and war as fields of endeavor in which men could affirm their innate worth. That is why they entered the games. It was not a question of games-playing for its own sake but of confirming and testing one's physical prowess and courage under difficult and trying circumstances. It is only thus that a man can show his true mettle. Menelaus is furious with Antilochus because Antilochus has deprived him of this opportunity.

Menelaus' anger at Antilochus' cheating shows furthermore that for him the principles governing fair play in the games are not simply external rules to be obeyed without emotion or feeling but rules to which he subscribes with all his being; they are part of him. Since that is so, a victory won by unfair means is not something that a Menelaus would think meaningful.

Because Achilles has given Eumelus a special prize, there is one prize left. Achilles gives it to Nestor, Antilochus' father, as a memento of Patroclus, since Nestor is now too old to take part in the games. This gift prompts Nestor to express the wish that his strength was such as it had been in his youth when he took part in the funeral games of Amaryngceus. No one was his equal then, he says.

In boxing I defeated Clytomedes, son of Enops,
in wrestling Angcaeus from Pleuron. I outran
Iphiclus and in the javelin I outthrew Phyleus
and Polychorus. Only in the chariot-race did
the Actoriones drive past me, throwing their
horses before mine in the crowd, begrudging me
the victory because the greatest prizes were
still left. They were twins. One drove con-
stantly. while the other urged on the team with
the whip. Thus I was then (634-643).

Nestor's sole defeat in the funeral games for Amaryngceus was significantly in the chariot-race at the hands of a mysterious pair of twins, the Actoriones. They had used much the same tactics to defeat him as had Antilochus Menelaus: they had thrown their horses in front of his. The Greek is the same as that used by Menelaus to describe Antilochus' unfair tactics. They had done this prompted by exactly the same motive which seems to have governed Antilochus' behaviour: they begrudged Nestor's winning because the finest prizes awaited the winner of the chariot-race. Is this criticism of Antilochus' conduct, discretely veiled to avoid the embarrassment of an open reprimand, but criticism nonetheless, and at the same time a lesson for Achilles to ponder? It must have some such purpose, since on the other occasions when Nestor reminisces in this way about his youth, the purpose of the reminiscence is to instruct those younger and less wise than himself.⁸ The lesson does not seem to have been lost on either Antilochus or Achilles because both now when put to the test display a generosity of spirit that is the antithesis of the envious and begrudging spirit that the Actoriones had shown in depriving Nestor of victory in the chariot-race.

Antilochus has to wait for another race, the foot-race, to redeem himself. The event immediately after the chariot-race is a boxing-match between Epeius and Euryalus. Epeius wins it with a punch that jolts Euryalus' head back and takes his legs from under him. Epeius raises Euryalus to his feet and his friends help him away. It is worth noticing what Epeius does in his moment of victory: he helps his beaten opponent to his feet. He is, in other words, magnanimous in victory and displays respect for the man whom he has defeated. There is in this gesture none of that contempt for the defeated that the Greeks are supposed to have felt.

The next contest, the wrestling-match, ends inconclusively, since Achilles stops it before a clear victor emerges. It is as though he were concerned to

8. *Il.* 1.259.273;7.132.160;11.664-763.

prevent either Ajax or Odysseus, the contestants, suffering the hurt of defeat. After the wrestling-match comes the foot-race. The contestants are Oelian Ajax, Odysseus and Antilochus. This race, like the chariot-race, is to a turning post and back. Again, as in the chariot race, the excitement does not really begin until the final portion of the home stretch. Ajax moves into the lead with Odysseus on his heels. Odysseus has the crowd's backing. Just as they are about to reach the finish, Odysseus prays to Athena for added speed. His speed is answered, and, what is more, Ajax slips and falls in the dung of the cattle sacrificed by Achilles. It fills his mouth and nostrils. Odysseus passes him and takes first prize. Ajax comes in next to take the second prize. He stands holding its horn and declares to the assembled company that Athena had impeded him and helped Odysseus. While he speaks, he has to spit dung from his mouth. Everyone laughs merrily at this spectacle.

Antilochus comes in last. As he takes his prize, he is smiling. He says:

What I am going to say, you all already know, namely, that the gods honor older men. Ajax is a little older than I. But this fellow is a whole generation older; men call him the vigorous old chap. It is hard for the Achaeans, with the exception of Achilles, to compete with him in the foot-race (787-792).

Thus does Antilochus acknowledge his defeat and his speech does not go unrewarded. Achilles declares that the point of his remark has not escaped him and that he will add half a talent of gold to Antilochus' prize. This Antilochus happily accepts.

In the foot-race and in its aftermath the squabbling and quarreling of the chariot-race is finally resolved. The ghastly Oelian Ajax is properly rewarded for his foul-mouthed attack on Idomeneus with a large mouthful of dung, a punishment whose suitability did not escape the attention of the ancients.⁹ Antilochus shows that he has learned his lesson and accepts his defeat graciously and without rancor: he smiles as he takes his last prize and generously acknowledges the superiority of the man who has beaten him.

Antilochus is not the only person to learn a lesson from the Games about the proper spirit in which to compete. Achilles learns something too. The games end with a javelin-contest in which Agamemnon and Meriones arise to take part. But the contest never takes place because Achilles praises Agamemnon as the best of javelin-throwers, thus suggesting that a contest would be superfluous. He then seeks Agamemnon's consent to his giving what is in fact the first prize to Meriones. This Agamemnon agrees to and Talthylus, his herald, accepts the second prize from Achilles and takes it off to Agamemnon's tent. This situation is a reversal of what had happened at the beginning of the poem, where that self-same Talthylus had come to Achilles' tent to take Briseis away from a very unwilling Achilles (1.321-344). Achilles now

9. An ancient commentator on *Il.* 23.777 points out that after calling Idomeneus a blabber-mouth, it is in his mouth that Ajax is punished.

willingly gives Agamemnon a prize and generously acknowledges his merits, while Agamemnon, for his part, willingly acquiesces in the first prize's going to another.

The lesson that Antilochus' adventures in the Funeral Games teaches affords no comfort or support to those who believe that all that mattered in Greek athletics was victory. Antilochus is portrayed with the characteristics of the *phthoneros*: he cannot bear to see another win and for that reason cheats to get the better of an opponent and complains bitterly when the prize he has cheated to win is about to be awarded to another. There can be little doubt that Antilochus' conduct in the chariot-race is presented in an unfavourable light: the poet intends us to draw the conclusion that such behaviour is reprehensible. We are given an example of what is admirable and to be emulated in Antilochus' gracious concession of defeat in the foot-race and in his generous admission of his opponents' superiority to himself. It does not follow from any of this that the poet of the *Iliad* did not think that winning was important. But he very clearly did not think that winning was of overriding importance. At the same time, he did not think that defeat was a disgrace. In fact, Antilochus gains credit by bearing defeat graciously and disgraces himself when he allows nothing to stand in the way of his defeating Menelaus.