

Grain and Glory: Eating Practices in Homer's *Iliad*

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In Homeric epic, eating is critically linked to the paradox implied in the title of Seth Schien's *The Mortal Hero*, for eating embodies a consciousness of mortality necessary for the hero's achievement of glory or *kleos* (68-70). The Homeric hero can win immortal glory only through a fundamental recognition of his mortality, an enthusiastic embrace with death which confirms his humanity. Through mortal combat, the hero achieves the immortal reputation which can be purchased only at the cost of individual human life. In Homer's *Iliad*, eating operates on literal and figurative levels to emphasize this encompassing theme of the hero's mortality. Throughout the poem, we encounter formulas which describe eating rituals and food preparation, interactions among eaters, and eating imagery. Such eating codes point to the significance of what I will call the "paradox of eating," essential for understanding the tension of mortality and immortality at the core of the concept of *kleos* in the *Iliad*.

In the episodes and examples which I will be referring to, I see the Homeric hero eating both to forget and to remember. The emphasis on eating food in the *Iliad* focuses our attention on the body, on the restoration of vigor and the replenishing of ambition for *kleos*. Additionally, through the consumption of food and satisfaction of the appetite, the concomitant appetite for glory is rekindled. The act of taking time, space, and energy to prepare and consume a meal temporarily displaces memory of the past and thoughts of the future during the intake of food, but by the end of the meal, the body is physically nourished and mentally re-charged to continue the act of remembering the past and envisioning the future.

In the proper functioning in the *Iliad*, eating distinguishes the human from both the god-like and the "uncivilized" beast. Right eating reflects "proper" societal relations, maintenance of social order, and traditional attitudes toward the human achievement of immortality grounded in the super-consciousness of mortality. Conversely, "wrong" eating endangers conventional cultural codes. Figurative cannibalism such as Achilles' eating his heart out because of grief, refusal to eat, or tampering with proper eating rituals results in a disruption of the collective memory, the culture's version of its history. Through this loss of memory, indicated by corruption of eating rituals, the Homeric hero is left with a warped sense of his true mortal condition and capabilities. This loss of consciousness of mortality, necessary to the proper achievement of *kleos*, ultimately leads to chaos, to a view of the universe Claude Levi-Strauss might describe as "raw" rather than "cooked."

In discussing this paradox of eating in the *Iliad*, I want specifically to examine the general formulaic descriptions of eating and the more specific ones which deviate in important ways from the general ritual.

I then will evaluate the types of eating performed in the context of these rituals in an effort to illuminate definitions of humanness which the *Iliad* portrays, criticizes, and ultimately transforms.

Eating in the *Iliad* is not simply a meal on the battlefield or a necessity to survive. Rather, eating in a Homeric epic is serious business, and its physical and spiritual ramifications are clear to all the characters, although this heightened awareness of eating does not prevent them from periodic deviations from the “proper” codes of eating. The poetic descriptions of eating ritual establish the patterns of “right” eating and suggest literal and figurative levels of meaning associated with the meal. As the general repeated formula makes clear, the individual eater is also a speaker, a leader, a warrior, or a singer — if not more than one of these. Every eater has a social role and a particular history, and each time the hero comes to a meal, he brings his individual history to the table. In this collective gathering, the individual’s history is temporarily subordinated to the predominance of the group’s values and sanctioned codes of behavior. One such code involves the preparation and consumption of human food since food in the *Iliad* is not simply raw or uncultivated fare. Homeric eating thus humanizes because a meal becomes a feat of cultivation, work, religious duty, and a social undertaking. Addressing the confusion of proper dietary codes in the *Odyssey*, Jean-Pierre Vernant describes the hero’s diet of bread and wine as “*produits cultivés, fruits du travail, ces deux types de nourriture ‘cuite,’ également éloignée des herbages crus, pâture animale, et des aromates desséchés, brûlés pour les dieux, constituent les réserves de vivres dont dispose l’équipage, le biotos proprement humain*” [“Cultivated products, fruits of labor, these two kinds of ‘cooked’ food are equally removed from raw grass or animal pasture and dried herbs, that are burned to the gods, and constitute the reserve provisions for the crew, the properly human means of life”] (242). While I agree with Vernant’s distinction between human and non-human food, I want to argue here that the tension inherent in the eating codes that we find in the *Iliad* suggests a critique of absolute codes of right eating and of individual status within the community.

When looking at the formulaic representation of meal preparation and sharing in the *Iliad*, we need to listen and read beyond the lines’ function in serving the needs of metrical economy. By understanding the social context and functioning of the meal, we can understand how consumption as sustenance and spectacle structures the hero’s social and personal identity. What is eaten? Where? When? By whom and with whom? What happens during the meal besides the consumption of the literal food? Who does not eat and why? When does this refusal to eat occur? How and when is eating subversive activity? What social norms and expectations are fulfilled by proper eating? In the passages that I will be examining, instances of deviation from or perversions of “proper” eating signal critiques of the traditional social system and its

norms of honor and human identity. Right eating, wrong eating, and new eating patterns reflect a changing concept of *kleos*, a redefinition of the glory of the hero and purpose of poetry.

The most frequently repeated type-scene describing the eating ritual offers a good starting place for addressing the questions I have offered above.

So he spoke in prayer, and Phoibos Apollo heard him.
 And when all had made prayers and flung down the scattering
 barley
 first they drew back the victims' heads and slaughtered them and
 skinned them,
 and cut away the meat from the thighs and wrapped them in fat,
 making a double fold and laid shreds of flesh upon them.
 The old man burned these on a cleft stick and poured the
 gleaming
 wine over, while the young men with forks in their hands stood
 about him.
 But when they had burned the thigh pieces and tasted the vitals,
 they cut all the remainder into pieces and spitted them
 and roasted all carefully and took off the pieces.
 Then after they had finished the work and got the feast ready
 they feasted, nor was any man's hunger denied a fair portion.
 But when they had put away their desire for eating and drinking,
 the young men filled the mixing bowls with pure wine, passing
 a portion to all, when they offered drink in the goblets.
 All day long they propitiated the god with singing,
 chanting a splendid hymn to Apollo, these young Achaians,
 singing to the one who works from afar, who listened in
 gladness. (1.457-74)

This general eating scene is repeated in Books 2, and 7, although with each repetition we notice a condensing of the original twenty lines — at first to thirteen lines, and finally to ten lines. This shortening of the scene as we progress in the *Iliad* is important, I think, for it comments upon the deviations from the proper eating ritual which occur as the poem continues. First, though, I want to examine the similarities in the three principal recurrences of the “right” eating formula for what they can reveal to us about the hero's relation to *kleos* in the *Iliad*.

It is interesting to note that such an elaborate description of pre-and post-meal activity nearly ignores the actual moment of consumption, the putting of hand to mouth. We are simply told that the men “feasted.” This reduction of the actual moment of eating is made possible by the simultaneous elaboration of the pre- and post-meal ritual. By emphasizing the actions, attitudes, and interrelations of the characters before and after the meal instead of the actual eating of the meal, Homer purposely draws his audience's attention to cultural

norms which encode right eating. Additionally, I would argue that eating not only parallels the paradox of the hero's relation to *kleos* but also serves as a vehicle for achieving *kleos*.

The opening lines of the meal formula commonly begin with a prayer to a specific god or goddess, thereby delineating the proper context for eating which involves sacrifice to and appeasement of the gods. The context of the meal as part of the larger process of prayer and sacrifice suggest both a literal and a more symbolic distancing of the eater from the food, an estrangement of the eater from the individual act of eating. The distancing created by compulsory introduction of the meal with a prayer to the gods highlights the studied consciousness of man's relation to eating, his place in the cosmic order of gods and mortals, and the cultivated ingredients which confirm man's civilized, domesticated status.

The collective activity of eating is further emphasized by the use of the third person plural pronoun "they" in the formula. The individual does not eat alone merely to feed himself, but "they" make prayer together, fling down barley, and interact in the assorted labors of preparing the meal. Focusing on the prayer and sacrifice before the meal is crucial for establishing the social and cultural context of eating and for defining the hero's identity in terms of community. The details included in representations of the slaughtering, skinning, and intricate wrapping of the meat on roasting skewers are interesting anthropologically, but they also serve the poetic function of deferring the hero's actual gratification of hunger. The eleven lines which describe the preparation of food delay the consumption of the meal in the narrative and remind listeners of the necessity of cultivated restraint of men's natural impulses and cravings.

Another important aspect of the repeated meal formula concerns the relation between elder and younger males. In the hierarchy of gods and men, the elder men pass on the values and cultural codes of right living as they assist in and direct the process of right eating. The old man "burns the meat on a cleft stick" and pours "the gleaming wine" over it while the young men "with forks in their hands" stand around him. In his role as minister of the meal, the elder male demonstrates the connections between cultivated food and civilized human identity as he passes these codes on to the next generation of properly trained men "with forks in their hands."

The momentary recognition of actual consumption is swiftly passed over with the words, "they feasted," as the formula continues with the post-meal ritual that emphasizes satiation of desire, fullness, celebration, and camaraderie. The pre-meal focus on offerings to the gods and preparation of meats is characterized after the meal by further cultural interaction among the eaters as they partake in wine and song, counsel, or strategy sessions. The ending of the meal with singing re-establishes the continuance of memory, which I will discuss in more detail later. In a curious sense, we never really encounter the

heroes in the *Iliad* as eaters. More accurately, according to the formulas, they are either hungry pre-eaters or satiated post-eaters. Thus, the formula's wording conveys the desire for food without ever offering us one bite. In proper eating, the right focus is not on the mouth, but on the mind and heart. The soldier eats to reaffirm his role in society and to revitalize the mental and spiritual as well as the physical capabilities for *kleos*. For, if the hero's eating strays from the social codes of right eating, the dangers inherent in wrong eating and an imbalanced concern for the self portend a flawed pursuit of *kleos*.

In turning now to some examples of such deviations from normal eating, I want to suggest that these flawed relations to food are significant both for what they convey about the hero's warped sense of *kleos*, and for how the concept of *kleos* may be changing in the poem. Usually remembered for Achilles' refusal to accept the plea of his friends on behalf of Agamemnon, Book 9 also contains a meal scene which is important in the ways it differs from the general formula which I have just discussed. Although Achilles observes all of the eating codes inherent in "right" eating, his and Patroklos' meal with Odysseus, Phoinix, and Ajax suggests new directions in which the concept of right eating may be headed. Unlike the traditional formulas defining right eating, the meal episode in Book 9 names individuals and specifically involves them in the preparation and eating of the meal. The pronoun "they" in the general formula is here replaced with Son of Menoitios (who sets up a mixing bowl), Patroklos (who sacrifices a sheep, goat, and pig on a chopping block), and Achilleus (who carves the meat). Additionally, we notice more domesticated accoutrements and behavior during this meal: bread, salt, platters for serving the food, and toasting of the host. Unlike the earlier patterned rituals contained in the highly collectivized and depersonalized descriptions of eating, in Achilles' meal with his friends we see the introduction of individual voices and domestic devices. On the margins of the battlefield, a new type of domestic space, an *oikos*, is created. However, when we interpret this scene in the context of Achilles' stubborn refusal of his friends, this individually characterized, domestic meal appears out of place and in tension within the frame of this warrior epic. I would further add that the differentiation of this meal from the more collective and anonymous meal also reflects the fundamental tensions, within the text, of a society experiencing a transition from a collective to an individual definition of the hero.

Near the end of Book 18, we receive a description of the god-made shield given to Achilles by his mother, Thetis. Cast by Hephaistos, the all-protective shield carries on its front surface an emblematic representation of harvesting food and preparing a meal. Reflecting pastoral bounty and innocence, the perpetuation of the general eating formula contained in the description of the scenes on the shield nevertheless reveals a tension at the core of the narrative between right

and wrong eating, between conservative and challenging action. Following the peaceful, traditional image of the meal cited above, we encounter the depiction of herdsmen, cattle, and lions involved in a frantic and violent fray. As the shepherds tend the cattle in a peaceful pasture, “two formidable lions” violate the peacefulness of the scene by attacking one of the bulls. The herdsmen and dogs enter into this conflict between lions and domesticated animal, but they are unsuccessful in their attempt to beat back the lions who, “breaking open the hide of the great ox, / gulped the black blood and the inward guts” (18.582-83). Here we have a clear inversion of proper eating of cooked food, with the wild beasts attacking and feeding upon the raw flesh of the domesticated animal. The shield’s surface narrative then concludes with a description of sheep meadows and dancing youths.

Why does Homer frame this violent episode, with its implied conflict between the eating of food or between savage and civilized beings, between two scenes of pastoral order and right living? I contend that the lions’ raw eating of the bull works on two levels to continue the emphasis on the function of eating ritual in the pursuit of *kleos*. Also, the shield foreshadows the more individual implications of Achilles’ refusal to eat as he seeks to avenge Patroklos’ death. The shield as defensive instrument of war represents a literary artifact, a text which suggests Achilles’ identification with the flesh-eating lion. Like the lion figured on his shield, Achilles becomes mired in the perverse moment of savage eating as he re-enters the war against the Trojans. Instead of a reduction of the moment of consumption which we perceive in the general eating formulas, here Achilles’ violence against the Trojans characterizes a hero whose perverse prolongation of the moment of eating exposes an imbalance in the mortal pursuit of *kleos*.

As the herdsmen are unable to beat off the lion attacking their oxen, the Trojans, as well as the Achaians, are unable to temper the rage of Achilles’ passion to mercilessly destroy the enemy. Achilles’ overstepping of the bounds of propriety in warfare is reflected in his strange relation to eating in this episode. His denial of supplicants in battle, savage treatment of Hektor’s corpse, and initial refusal of Priam’s ransom do not conform to the standards of right action, even in warfare. One might argue that Achilles’ unleashed desire to “consume” Trojans is acceptable and perhaps even necessary behavior for a victory. However, his egocentric refusal to relinquish his raw prey, to rise and step away from the table once the “feasting” has ended, reminds us of the dangers inherent in wrong eating. Instead of focusing on the collective good, limits of appetite, and restraint of passion, Achilles’ relentless cruelty against the Trojans and his desire to withhold food from himself and his troops betray the dangers caused by an unrestrained hero who gives in to personal desire. Here, I also note the absence of any significant reference to meal sharing or eating in Books 12-19 which contain episodes devoted primarily to the

business of killing. On the battlefield, the tension between wrong and right eating is transfigured into terms of right and wrong codes of warfare. Achilles' refusal to eat signals to us that something is disastrously wrong with the hero's reasoning in the context of the social system portrayed in the general meal formulas. At the same time, we sense the vulnerability and weakness of a society that cannot constrain or feed a hunger that threatens its power and control.

Whereas previously in the *Iliad* right eating entailed a temporary loss of memory on the part of the eaters, who eventually would re-nourish themselves and better see the connections among past, present, and future, Achilles' wrong eating in Books 9-23 betrays his entrapment in the moment of memory loss. He becomes engrossed in the present moment of desire fulfillment through vengeance. Achilles virtually turns his hunger in on himself and his own people as he insatiably devours his "right" sense of the past and future. In this context of right and wrong eating, Achilles' refusal to eat, his efforts to keep his men from eating, his sacrilegious treatment of Hektor's body, and his constant refusals of supplications made to him can be interpreted as evidence of a cannibalistic mindset, which in turn indicates his misdirected seeking of *kleos* outside the established codes of his society. Perhaps, though, Homer intends us to hear the surface narrative of Achilles' wrong eating as a new song which tells us of the inadequacies and necessary transformations of the formulas defining right and wrong eating.

Attempting to persuade Achilles to allow the troops to eat, Odysseus says:

Do not drive the sons of the Achaians on Ilion when they are hungry,
to fight against the Trojans, since not short will be the time of battle, once the massed formations of men have encountered together, with the god inspiring fury in both sides.
Rather tell the men of Achaia here by their swift ships,
to take food and wine, since these make fighting fury and warcraft.

For a man will not have strength to fight his way forward all day long until the sun goes down if he is starved for food. Even though in his heart he be very passionate for the battle, yet without his knowing it his limbs will go heavy, and hunger and thirst will catch up with him and cumber his knees as he moves on.

But when a man has been well filled with wine and with eating and then does battle all day long against the enemy, why, then the heart inside him is full of cheer, nor do his limbs get weary, until all are ready to give over the fighting.

(19.156-70)

In this passage, Odysseus maps out the proper condition for the hero's motivation for *kleos*: hunger for glory must be fueled by the satisfied hunger for food. Achilles, by confusing these conditions in his refusal to allow eating to occur, spoils food as an engine of war because, for him, eating becomes war. Instead of complying with Odysseus' request, Achilles answers:

“No, but I would now
drive forward the sons of the Achaians into the fighting
starving and unfed. . . . For me
at least, neither drink nor food shall
go down my very throat.” (19.205-10)

Inherent in Achilles' response is the breakdown of the complex system of *kleos*. Whereas proper eating previously maintained and propelled the pursuit of *kleos*, Achilles' fasting brings the system grinding to a halt. As he makes clear, “ ‘Food and drink mean nothing to my heart / but blood does, and slaughter, and the groaning of men in the hard work,’ ” Achilles no longer possesses the traits and values of a “ ‘mortal’ hero” (19.213-14). Instead, in these lines we hear the echo of the shield story describing the untamed lion who violently feeds on raw flesh. At this point in the *Iliad*, right eating will not support the war in the face of Achilles' single-minded version of *kleos*. If fighting cannot be continued successfully according to the conventional codes of eating described earlier in the poem, the system must change to accommodate this type of hero and avoid chaotic defeat at his own hands.

Although we often verge on the margins of chaos in the *Iliad*, this crisis is shown to be especially severe since the gods have to intervene secretly to fulfill the human eating codes. To counter Achilles' refusal to eat mortal food, the gods secretly feed him items from the divine menu: nectar and ambrosia. While this divine intervention permits the war and pursuit of *kleos* to continue by ensuring Achilles' compliance with proper eating codes, Achilles is not conscious of having eaten. Our sense that something is wrong and unresolved in this tension between eating and *kleos* does not disappear. The gods may have defused the crisis temporarily, but the very fact that they have to intervene detracts from the soundness of the conventional eating codes.

Odysseus tries to convince Achilles of the efficacy of eating with this plea in Book 19:

and all those
who are left about from the hateful work of war must remember
food and drink, so that afterwards all the more strongly
we may fight on forever relentless against our enemies
with the weariless bronze put on about our bodies. (229-33)

Although it fails to persuade, Odysseus' speech is important for what it reveals to us about the poet's changing depiction of war and the relation of food to memory and *kleos*. War acquires the negative connotation of "hateful work," and though their armor might be "weariless," men's bodies require food and rest. The former idealization of battle culminating in *kleos* loses the lustre it once enjoyed in the poem. Odysseus' words in this passage ring out a final, unheard plea for Achilles to eat and, thus, to preserve the traditional eating codes; his failure to persuade Achilles reiterates the exhaustion and disillusionment associated with war that can no longer be waged and won according to old beliefs of right and wrong as depicted in the text. Even if Achilles had consented to eat, the war still would be "hateful work." We would still recognize the flaws in the hopeful mask that Odysseus tries to impose on Achilles. Refusing to eat, Achilles "would not / be comforted, till he went into the jaws of the bleeding battle" (19.312-13). By ignoring the text's conventional codes of "right" eating and war, Achilles enters the jaws of the fight, figuratively to be devoured.

As Achilles later contemplates "shameful treatment" for "glorious Hektor" in the lull of his victory, we encounter a familiar-sounding meal ritual:

and in speed and haste they got the dinner ready, and each man feasted, nor was any men's hunger denied a fair portion. But when they had put aside their desire for eating and drinking, they went away to sleep, each man to his own shelter. (23.55-58)

While there are similarities in the form of this meal and the right eating formulas described at the beginning of this paper, the differences in content are important to recognize. This meal, unlike the deferred treatment of eating in the previous meal formulas, is characterized by speed and inattention to pre-meal traditions. Our sense of the isolation of these eaters, as opposed to their earlier collective identity, is further enhanced by the line, "they went away to sleep, each man to his own shelter." The meal is rushed, the eaters dislocated. Whereas the anonymity of the eaters who follow proper eating codes in the beginning of the *Iliad* is subsumed by collective identity and motivations, the anonymity we find here is crucially different. In this meal ritual, anonymity is not a function of collective tradition, but the result of the alienating pursuit of *kleos* initiated by Achilles' individually-centered motives.

Instead of joining in counsel, song, or meetings, each man retires, alone, to sleep in his shelter. Whereas proper eating once reinvigorated men to properly situate themselves in the present by reassuming the memory of the past and the task of envisioning the future, "proper" eating has now devolved into the putting to sleep of memory. The Achaians may be victorious, but this near victory is not

perfect. Achilles continues to grieve and to focus his energy inwardly, and it is obvious through such passages as the "rushed meal" cited above that he only appears to comply with proper codes of eating and warfare. Once again, Thetis has to intervene in the poem to re-route her son back to the proper codes of right living. "My child," she says to him, "how long will you go on eating your heart out in sorrow / and lamentation, and remember neither your food nor going to bed" (24.128-30)? Only when the anger of the gods is impressed upon him by his mother does Achilles agree to accept Priam's ransom for Hektor's body.

The return to traditional right codes of eating is tentatively reaffirmed by Achilles' comforting words to Priam when he tells the story of Niobe who "remembered to eat when she was worn out with weeping" (24.613). Achilles then advises Priam, "Come then, we also, aged magnificent sir, must remember / to eat, and afterwards you may take your beloved son back / to Ilion" (24.618-20). With the seeming re-establishment of proper eating and restored memory, Achilles explains how the past and future press on the present moment, for Priam must remember to eat so that he can begin to forget his past grief and look toward the future.

Although eating appears to be proper once again in Book 24, a comparison of the final meal between Achilles and Priam with the earlier Embassy meal at Achilles' self-exiled campsite suggests a more problematic relation of humans to food in the *Iliad*.

So spoke fleet Achilleus and sprang to his feet and slaughtered
a gleaming sheep, and his friends skinned it and butchered it
fairly,
and cut up the meat expertly into small pieces, and spitted them,
and roasted all carefully and took off the pieces.
Automedon took the bread and set it out on the table
in fair baskets, while Achilleus served the meats. And thereon
they put their hands to the good things that lay ready before
them. (24.621-27)

In looking at the similarities and differences between this meal and the Embassy meal, we notice the same apparent observance of proper pre-meal preparation and personal, domestic qualities of the eaters. The principal difference between this meal and the Embassy meal is the fact that Achilles here gives in to Priam's supplication, whereas before he refused Agamemnon's absentee supplication delivered by his friends. I would argue, then, that the general formula for right eating is reinstated at the end of the poem in such a way as to strike a compromise between the oppositions of good and bad eating contained in the *Iliad*.

As Book 24 draws to a close, rank, propriety, and the intact preservation of the culture are emphasized by the re-establishing of

right eating codes. Achilles' previously untrammelled passions have been subdued and controlled by the system. However, the problem of negotiating a return to domestic life after ten years of life at war is also conveyed by the domestic tone of the final meal. During this final year of the war, the Achaian troops confront the changes in values evident in the reconfiguration of the hero's relation to eating in his pursuit of *kleos*. I read Book 24 as a presentation of a society which, having gained some breathing space during its brief truce with Priam, reorders its concepts of individual and collective identities so that neither one is tyrannically oppressive. The compromise between these two extremes, which is represented in the last meal in Book 24, suggests to us that the glory of the individual frees the collective culture and the glory of the culture nourishes the hero. The hero's *kleos* is selectively refined as historical food on which each successive generation feeds. Similarly, the culture's identity is continuously reshaped by the individual histories of its heroes. If the society is to perpetuate its own history and encourage motivation for *kleos*, it must come to terms with the constant balancing of individual and collective priorities.

In this final meal, there is a building on the *kleos* of past times, a focus on the present feasting, and a look ahead to future meals at home. Right and wrong eating are finally described, not as fixed opposites but as vehicles for preserving a culture that seeks to assimilate the individual and collective values associated with each type of eating. This critical moment of compromise, transition, and re-orientation is wisely expressed by Priam to Achilles at the end of the meal: "Now I have tasted food again and have let the gleaming / wine go down my throat. Before, I had tasted nothing" (24.641-42). The tentative acceptance of such a revised return to proper eating is indicated above in the civilizing words *tasted* and *let*. Within the worldview of the poem, this re-orientation of self and culture results in a more heightened awareness of taste and a cultivated way of eating — the proper way to *kleos*.

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