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# Softened death: the language of fainting in the *Iliad*

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## Iliad XXII.462-7: Andromache's fainting spell

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αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ πύργον τε καὶ ἀνδρῶν ἶξεν ὄμιλον  
ἔστη παπτήνας' ἐπὶ τείχεϊ, τὸν δὲ νόησεν  
ἐλκόμενον πρόσθεν πόλιος: ταχέες δέ μιν ἵπποι  
ἔλκον ἀκηδέστως κοίλας ἐπὶ νῆας Ἀχαιῶν.  
τὴν δὲ κατ' ὀφθαλμῶν ἐρεβεννὴ νύξ ἐκάλυψεν,  
ἥριπτε δ' ἐξοπίσω, ἀπὸ δὲ ψυχὴν ἐκάπυσσε.

But when she came to the wall and the throng of men, then on the wall she stopped and looked, and caught sight of him as he was dragged before the city; and swift horses were dragging him ruthlessly toward the hollow ships of the Achaeans. **Then down over her eyes came the darkness of night and enfolded her**, and she fell backward and gasped out her spirit.

- At first sight, this is the same formula as the one frequently used to depict death
- Are there any differences in this formula when used for fainting vs. death?

# The other fainting episodes

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5.310 (Aeneas)

γαίης: ἀμφὶ δὲ ὅσσε κελαινὴ νύξ ἐκάλυψε

[...]; and dark night covered both (his) eyes

11.356 (Hector)

γαίης; ἀμφὶ δὲ ὅσσε κελαινὴ νύξ ἐκάλυπεν

[...]: and dark night covered both (his) eyes

14.438-9 (Hector)

αὖτις δ' ἐξοπίσω πλῆτο χθονί, τῷ δέ οἱ ὅσσε

[...], while both of his eyes

νύξ ἐκάλυψε μέλαινα; βέλος δ' ἔτι θυμὸν ἐδάμνα

black night covered; [...]

5.696 (Sarpedon)

τὸν δ' ἔλιπε ψυχὴ, κατὰ δ' ὀφθαλμῶν κέχυτ' ἀχλὺς

[...], and mist shed over (his) eyes

# Death as darkness: the formula

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- Most often takes the form:

τὸν δὲ σκότος ὅσσε κάλυψε

‘and darkness covered both (their) eyes’

4.526 (Diores)

χύντο χαμαὶ χολάδες, **τὸν δὲ σκότος ὅσσ' ἐκάλυπεν**

[...], and darkness covered both (his) eyes

13.575 (Adamas)

ἥρωσ Μηριόνης; **τὸν δὲ σκότος ὅσσε κάλυψε**

[...], and darkness covered both (his) eyes

20.471 (Tros)

κόλπον ἐνέπλησεν; **τὸν δὲ σκότος ὅσσε κάλυψε**

[...], and darkness covered both (his) eyes

- In this exact noun-verb pair, it's attested 15 times
- However, there are variants (more soon!)

# Night and mist vs. darkness

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- Tentative generalization:
  - when a fainting episode is described, **νύξ** is preferred over **σκότος**
  - **νύξ** can metaphorically refer to darkness (as in the lines above)
  - but the darkness described by **νύξ** is of a temporary kind (just as the darkness brought about by the night)
  - **σκότος** is only ever used to refer to the (permanent) darkness of death
- The term used for Sarpedon's fainting episode also seems less forceful than the use of **σκότος**:
  - **ἀχλύς** ('mist') is hardly as definitive...?

# Night and mist vs. darkness

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- Yet, both **νύξ** and **ἀχλύς** are used to portray death, each twice:

5.659 (Tlepolemos)

**τὸν δὲ κατ' ὀφθαλμῶν ἐρεβεννὴ νύξ ἐκάλυψε**

and dark night covered him over (his) eyes

13.580 (Deipytros)

**τὸν δὲ κατ' ὀφθαλμῶν ἐρεβεννὴ νύξ ἐκάλυπεν**

and dark night covered him over (his) eyes

16.344 (Akamas)

**ἤριπτε δ' ἐξ ὀχέων, κατὰ δ' ὀφθαλμῶν κέχυτ' ἀχλύς**

[...], and mist shed over (his) eyes

20.241 (Polydorus)

**κάρ ῥά οἱ ὀφθαλμῶν κέχυτ' ἀχλύς; οὐδ' ἄρ' ἔτ' ἔτλη**

And, lo, mist shed over his eyes; [...]

# Mist foreshadowing death?

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- A not very strong statistical argument:
  - the ratio for the use of ἀχλύς – two deaths : one syncope – is not as significant as it looks
  - ἀχλύς is used in 20% of the fainting episodes (1/5), but in a much smaller percentage of death scenes
- A stronger argument:
  - The fainting episode where ἀχλύς is used is about Sarpedon, who faints as his friend Pelagon pulls a spear out of his thigh
  - Sarpedon, however, (much) later dies killed by Patroclus
  - Can we argue that the choice of word was intentional? Is the use of this version of the formula meant to foreshadow his death?

# Qualifiers for ‘night’

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- Close up on adjectives: which ones are used to qualify **νύξ**?
  - **κελαινή** – fainting episodes: Aeneas, Hector
  - **μέλαινα** – fainting episode: Hector
  - **ἔρεβεννή** – deaths: Tlepolemos, Deipyros + fainting episode: **Andromache**
- **ἔρεβεννή** is a derivative of **ἔρεβος**
  - in Greek mythology, Erebos is the gloomy darkness of the Houses of Hades
  - Erebos is also often used to refer to the realm of the dead itself
- When **νύξ** is qualified as **ἔρεβεννή**, it is more likely associated with the darkness of Erebos, i.e. the non-temporary kind of darkness:
  - this is definitely the case for the deaths of Tlepolemos and Deipyros
- By contrast, neither **κελαινή** nor **μέλαινα** have etymological associations with the realm or the dead



# Back to Andromache

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- Why is ἐρεβεννή used to describe the fainting spell of Andromache in 22.466?
- There is reason to believe that the use of ἐρεβεννή for Andromache's syncope is anything but an oversight:
  - Andromache's fall is temporary, but symbolically it can be argued that it is not
  - Hector's death does not only end her marriage to him, but also her life
  - Hector's death at the hand of Achilles foreshadows her own enslavement and the end of her liberty (see Segal (1971:56) and Schein (1984:176))
- The gloomy night/darkness of Andromache's fainting, while temporary for her body, is then really a symbol of her own death

# Fainting episodes and role of formulae

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- Homeric formulae are no longer viewed as semantically empty chevilles
- While Parry emphasized their utility for the ἀοιδοί, recent scholarship highlights more conscious, context-sensitive usage
- Formulae can be adapted to achieve different narrative effects
- Fainting spells in the Iliad illustrate this adaptability

# Essential bibliography

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# Thank You

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