

A Colorful Quandary: an exploration of color terms in Homeric poetry

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The modern student of Homer is undoubtedly familiar with the wine-dark sea and gray-eyed Athena, but one does not always stop and think about what these descriptions mean. What kind of sea is wine-dark? Are Athena's eyes gray or flashing? Homer has become famous for some of these color-related epithets, yet their meaning is not completely understood. Homer's need to fit the meter means that he reaches for stock adjectives, which in turn gives them their own limited definition within Homer. On some occasions, Homer himself does not seem to know exactly what these formulae mean, but follows the tradition faithfully, if somewhat blindly. A study of color in Homer may not only reveal characteristics about ancient Greek color perception, but it can offer an understanding of how color is a social construct.

One of the most problematic color terms in Homer is πορφύρεος. Homer uses the term to describe such a wide variety of things, including death, blood, water, cloth, clouds, various forms of fabric, and finally a ball, so that one cannot simply cling to the tidy definition of "purple." In his *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*, Robert Beekes suggests that there are two distinct meanings of πορφύρεος, each with a different root, making them homonyms, for they even share the same accentuation: "πορφύρεος 'boiling, whirly' of the sea; to be kept apart from πορφύρεος, 'purple.'" ¹ Each of these two separate adjectives has a different root. Beekes identifies the first as the verb πορφύρω, meaning '1) to surge, boil 2) to dye purple, redden.'² The second is the noun πορφύρα, meaning 'purple dye, purple snail, purple clothes.'³ Pierre Chantraine, in his *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque*, reaches a similar conclusion, that the two words

¹ Beekes, s.v. πορφύρω

² Beekes, s.v. πορφύρω

³ Beekes s.v. πορφύρα

are homonyms, and that it is incorrect to reduce these two words to one etymological root.⁴

Chantraine remains adamant that πορφύρεος has two distinct roots, implying that the adjective deserves two distinct dictionary entries. These two words may get mixed together in later Greek, but in Homer, there is still evidence of these two separate definitions.

Liddell and Scott recommend such definitions as ‘dark gleaming’ or ‘glittering,’ implying an essential light component to the word. They go on to say, “Homer seems not to have known the πορφύρα [purple dye, snail, or clothes] so that the word does not imply any definite color.”⁵ Although it seems unlikely that πορφύρεος has any color connotation in relation to water, there is one term that brings perspective to this debate, and that is ἀλιπόρφυρος, ‘sea-purple,’ a compound of ἄλις and πορφύρα.⁶ In all three occurrences of this word, it refers to spun yarn and a woven web, so it is most likely a color, especially because part of the compound, πορφύρα, refers to purple dye. While it is possible that ‘sea-purple’ may have something to do with the color or some quality of the sea, based on its components, it is probably ‘sea-purple’ because the dye comes from a sea creature. ‘Sea-purple’ does not necessarily refer to the color of the sea, but to the color of the murex dye, created by boiling certain snail shells, for πορφύρεος also describes a number of kinds of dyed fabric, including φᾶρος, τάπης, ῥῆγος, πέπλος, and χλαῖνα (cloak, rug, blanket, robe, and cloak). This is strong evidence linking πορφύρεος to the color purple, for these sorts of items are undoubtedly dyed purple.

Though there is an undeniable color association, keeping Beekes’ suggestion of ‘boiling, whirly’ in mind may elucidate some of the seemingly odd usages of the adjective. The connection between the two definitions is not difficult to see. In order to dye a garment, the

⁴ Chantraine s.v. πορφύρω

⁵ Liddell & Scott s.v. πορφύρεος

⁶ Liddell & Scott s.v. ἀλιπόρφυρος

garment must soak in the dye, and then must be boiled as well,⁷ which strengthens the connection between the two offered definitions of πορφύρεος, ‘boiling,’ and ‘purple,’ and perhaps providing an explanation for the confusion surrounding the term. Armed with this information, one can go through examples in Homer and, by examining the usage of πορφύρεος, attempt to find where one definition ends and the other begins, as well as where the two may blend together.

The word θάνατος is described by πορφύρεος three times. Death is often associated with dark colors, including μέλας in Homer, but here the color association may incorporate a crimson hue. The first example occurs in the *Iliad*: αἱματόεσσα δὲ χεὶρ πεδίῳ πέσε: τὸν δὲ κατ' ὄσσε / ἔλλαβε πορφύρεος θάνατος καὶ μοῖρα κραταιή. “And the bloody hand fell on the plain: crimson death and powerful fate took hold over his eyes” (5.82-3). To call any death ‘purple’ seems absurd, but taken in context, it is easy to see how this type of death might be considered crimson, or a darker purple. The phrase πορφύρεος θάνατος follows a description of an explicitly bloody death, and considering that blood is also described in other places as πορφύρεος, it is probable that this bloody quality, whether it is color or some other aspect of blood, is what causes Homer to use πορφύρεος in association with θάνατος. There does not seem to be any strong sense of the ‘surging’ meaning of πορφύρεος in this case, nor in the other two instances of πορφύρεος θάνατος: πᾶν δ' ὑπεθερμάνθη ξίφος αἵματι: τὸν δὲ κατ' ὄσσε/ ἔλλαβε πορφύρεος θάνατος καὶ μοῖρα κραταιή. “The entire sword grew hot with blood: crimson death and powerful fate took hold over his eyes. (*Il.* 16. 333-4; 20. 476-7).” While the formula containing πορφύρεος θάνατος is the same, the preceding phrase has changed. This phrase, although different, still conveys a bloody death. The only three appearances of πορφύρεος θάνατος are associated with deaths that

⁷ Ziderman (1990) 98

involve blood (αἱματόεσσα, αἷματι). But in the latter two occurrences, there is an argument for the ‘boiling’ aspect of πορφύρεος: the sword is hot, presumably from the warm blood, which could poetically be called ‘boiling.’ This is an instance in Homer where the two definitions meet and mingle together, and Homer’s exact meaning is not precisely clear.

In keeping with these examples, πορφύρεος describes blood itself. In another battle scene, the ground is covered with red blood, αἷματι δὲ χθῶν δεύετο πορφυρέῳ. “The ground was wet with crimson blood.” (*Il.* 17. 360-1). Once πορφύρεος has been associated with blood and bloody death, the debate begins about what color this blood would have been. Homer has described αἷμα as μέλας in some places, but it is possible that this refers not to hue but to darkness in the sense of the contrast between light and dark. If blood spilled on the battlefield would take on a reddish-brown color, this color would not correspond with the color most often associated with πορφύρεος, a range of crimson to darker purple. Whatever color this blood may have been, there may be more to its description as πορφύρεος than hue.

Irwin suggests a less color-oriented definition, that πορφύρεος “describes the appearance which purple-dyed material and certain other objects have in common. This may be sheen or iridescence, the apparent mixture of light and dark on a changing surface.”⁸ This vague definition highlights the fact that a completely hue-oriented perception of πορφύρεος is difficult to justify. Irwin has suggested some elusive, yet shared, quality of purple cloth and other things described as πορφύρεος such as blood and water. It does not seem to be hue, but perhaps the play of light on a moving surface, or even a ‘dark gleaming’ quality, as suggested in Liddell and Scott.⁹ However, there seems to be sufficient etymological evidence to recommend the theory that πορφύρεος is actually two different words. These may not have even been recognized as

⁸ Irwin (1974) 18

⁹ Liddell & Scott s.v. πορφύρεος

homonyms by the poet himself, for some of the occurrences of πορφύρεος appear to have ambiguous meanings. This is not to say that Irwin's definition is completely incorrect, for her logic attempts to make sense of the places where there does seem to be overlap in the two definitions of πορφύρεος in Homer. The wet, reflective appearance of blood may be a result of its 'boiling' and 'surging' nature, which could create the kind of contrast on a "changing surface," as suggested in Irwin's definition. Gladstone brings up an interesting point about the verb πορφύρω. He notes the instances where the "sea darkens," ὡς δ' ὅτε πορφύρη πέλαγος μέγα κύματι κωφῶ. "As when the great sea darkens with dull wave..." (*Il.* 14.16)¹⁰, and the "mind broods," ἔστη, πολλὰ δέ οἱ κραδίη πόρφυρε μένοντι. "He stood, and his heart brooded much as he was waiting" (*Il.* 21.551).¹¹ In these cases, Gladstone interprets πορφύρω with a sense of darkening, for brooding can have metaphorical connotations of darkness, if one is troubled. Still, both of these occasions seem to refer to surging, in the sense of turbulence. The verb πορφύρω does not seem to carry the connotation of a purple or crimson hue, but Gladstone's interpretation suggests that it may at least have a relationship with light and dark contrast, as the water changes from light to dark and grows turbulent, or a mood grows dark and emotions rage within the heart. The latter, a darkening mind, is metaphorical, but turbulent feelings are often described in terms of contrast, such as having "dark thoughts," or, conversely, looking on "the bright side." Irwin's definition is not perfect, but it does endeavor to make sense of Homer's inconsistent use of πορφύρεος.

Instead of Irwin's vague definition, the best explanation for the strange use of πορφύρεος is the etymological evidence of homonyms, one meaning 'purple,' the other meaning 'surging.'

¹⁰ It is worth noting that this usage occurs within a simile referring to a troubled mind, torn between two courses of action.

¹¹ Gladstone (1858) 461

This second definition is particularly useful when dealing with water. In the next examples, Homer uses πορφύρεος to describe water, beginning with a wave of the sea, κῦμα. There is one instance where the water in question is bloody, when Achilles has filled the river Xanthos with corpses, the river blasts him with a πορφύρεος wave: ἦ, καὶ ἐπῶρτ' Ἀχιλῆϊ κυκώμενος ὑψόσε θύων / μορμύρων ἀφρῶ τε καὶ αἵματι καὶ νεκύεσσι. / πορφύρεον δ' ἄρα κῦμα διΐπετέος ποταμοῖο / ἴστατ' ἀειρόμενον, κατὰ δ' ἦρεε Πηλεΐωνα. “He [Xanthos] stirred up against Achilles, rousing himself on high, seething and roaring with foam and blood and corpses, and then a surging wave of the divine river stood raised up, and seized the son of Peleus” (*Il.* 21.324-7). In this instance, there is good reason for the wave to be surging, but there is also a case for its being crimson. There are many prior examples of blood that is πορφύρεος, but this passage has a number of words that highlight the motion of the water, such as, ἀφρός, foam, along with violent verbs, such as θύω. This water is turbulent to the point of foaming, perhaps like white rapids, yet it is also full of blood. In this case, both meanings have a strong claim, but surging is the better candidate here for two reasons. The first is that the motion of this water is the strongest component, for the river rises up, foams, and carries Achilles off. The second is that a wave can be πορφύρεος even when there is no trace of blood in the water, and the bulk of these instances of a πορφύρεον κῦμα are the stronger indication of its meaning. Still the purple with blood sense is not lost, and perhaps indicates that Homer himself was not aware that πορφύρεος was a homonym.

As mentioned above, in most passages, the πορφύρεον κῦμα refers to a surging wave with no suggestion of why the wave would be purple. One example occurs just after Odysseus sets sail to leave the Phaeacians: ὧς ἄρα τῆς πρύμνῃ μὲν ἀείρετο, κῦμα δ' ὀπίσθεν / πορφύρεον μέγα θῦε πολυφλοίσβοιο θαλάσσης. “So the stern was raised up, and from behind a great surging

wave of the loud-roaring sea raged” (*Od.* 13.84-5). While it is possible that the sea takes on a reddish purple color at sunset or perhaps sunrise, there is no indication that this is the case in this example. In this context, πορφύρεος probably means ‘surging.’ The surging wave is πολυφλοίσβοιο θαλάσσης, suggesting that the sea is in a turbulent state, because it is ‘loud-roaring.’ As before in the example with the river Xanthos, Homer uses the verb θύω. The description of the motion of the ship on the sea, as if weathering rough waves, is further proof that this wave is surging, and the use of the verb θύω would provide further evidence that even in the previous example, where the water is bloody, πορφύρεος still means surging.

When Poseidon seduces Tyro, he attempts to conceal the act with an obscuring wave that is called πορφύρεος: τῷ δ' ἄρα εἰσάμενος γαιήοχος ἐννοσίγαιος/ἐν προχοῆς ποταμοῦ παρελέξατο δινήεντος:/πορφύρεον δ' ἄρα κῦμα περιστάθη, οὔρει ἴσον,/κυρτωθέν, κρύψεν δὲ θεὸν θνητὴν τε γυναῖκα. “Appearing like him [Enipeus], the earth-moving earth-shaker lay in the outpouring of the eddying river, and then a surging wave rose around, like a mountain, and having formed an arch, it hid the god and the mortal woman” (*Od.* 11. 241-4). The circumstances described are confusing, because the reader is not sure of the nature of this wave. Is it one wave that encompasses the god and the woman, or is it turbulent, surging water that makes the deed impossible to see? It is difficult to imagine that Homer refers to one solitary wave, frozen long enough to cover Poseidon for the duration of the act, though its arch-like form would suggest this. In any case, the wave fits a description of ‘surging’ because it is large enough to hide the lovers.

These two examples both show that these waves may just be turbulent and surging, and do not necessarily have a strong color connotation; however, there is another example where the evidence of turbulence is lacking. When Odysseus goes to Khryse to make sacrifices, Apollo

gives him and his men a favorable wind on their return journey: ἐν δ' ἄνεμος πρῆσεν μέσον ἰστίον, ἀμφὶ δὲ κῶμα / στείρη πορφύρεον μεγάλ' ἴαχε νηὸς ἰούσης. “And a wind blew into the middle of the sail, and a great surging wave resounded around the keel of the ship as it went” (*Il.* 1. 481-2). In this case, the water is by no means calm, but it is not exactly stormy with large waves. One word worth note is ἴαχω, which implies that the sea is roaring, presumably with waves. These waves may be from the wind sent by Apollo, or perhaps they are the wake of the ship. The word κῶμα often refers to a certain state of water, a wave, which conveys a sense of motion, so it is no wonder that a wave would be described as ‘surging.’

There is one example where Homer refers to the sea (ἄλς) as πορφύρεος: τῶν δέ τε πάντες μὲν ποταμοὶ πλήθουσι ῥέοντες, / πολλὰς δὲ κλιτῦς τότ' ἀποτμήγουσι χαράδραι, / ἐς δ' ἄλλα πορφυρέην μέγαρα στενάχουσι ῥέουσαι. “And all the rivers of them [men] are full, flowing, and then the torrents cut off many hill sides, and they roar, gushing into the great surging sea” (*Il.* 16.389-91). The word ἄλς does not have the same relationship to motion as a wave, but the flowing rivers, ποταμοὶ ῥέοντες, that enter the sea are surging, but the sea itself is not turbulent except perhaps for the location where the rivers are rushing into it. Much of the vocabulary in this passage suggests turbulence and motion.

One strange use of πορφύρεος occurs while Odysseus is on Phaeacia, where Alcinous orders two members of his court to dance. They pick up a ball, which is πορφύρεος:

οἱ δ' ἐπεὶ οὔν σφαῖραν καλήν μετὰ χερσὶν ἔλοντο,
πορφυρέην, τὴν σφιν Πόλυβος ποίησε δαΐφρων,
τὴν ἕτερος ῥίπτασκε ποτὶ νέφεα σκιδόεντα
ἰδνωθεὶς ὀπίσω, ὃ δ' ἀπὸ χθονὸς ὑψὸς ἀερθεὶς
ῥηϊδίως μεθέλεσκε, πάρος ποσὶν οὔδας ἰκέσθαι

Then they took in their hands the beautiful purple ball
Which skillful Polybos made for them,
Which one was tossing toward the overshadowing clouds
Having bent backwards, and the other, having been lifted up aloft from the earth
Was catching it in turn, easily, before he reached the ground with his feet.
(*Od.* 8.372-6).

There is no reason that this ball, possibly made of leather, would be purple, except perhaps to reflect the wealth of the Phaeacians. A.F. Garvie has little comment on the word, calling the ball “crimson,” and continuing to say that the ball, “fits in with the luxurious life-style of the Phaeicians.”¹² Despite this rather weak explanation for its color, it seems unlikely that the motion of passing the ball, and tossing it in the air could be considered under the ‘surging’ definition of πορφύρεος, especially since it differs so greatly from other contexts with that meaning. This leaves color as the more plausible association.

Finally Homer uses πορφύρεος to describe clouds and the rainbow. Both are described as πορφύρεος when they appear together in a simile:

ἦὔτε πορφυρέην ἴριν θνητοῖσι τανύσση
Ζεὺς ἐξ οὐρανόθεν τέρας ἔμμεναι ἢ πολέμοιο
ἦ καὶ χειμῶνος δυσθαλπέος, ὅς ῥά τε ἔργων
ἀνθρώπους ἀνέπαυσεν ἐπὶ χθονί, μῆλα δὲ κήδει
ὥς ἢ πορφυρέη νεφέλη πυκάσασα ἔαυτήν
δύσσετ' Ἀχαιῶν ἔθνος, ἔγειρε δὲ φῶτα ἕκαστον.

¹² Garvie (1994) 313

As when Zeus extends a shimmering¹³ rainbow from heaven
To be a sign to mortals either of war
Or of a chilly winter, which stops men on earth
From their work and troubles the sheep,
So she, having wrapped herself in a surging cloud entered into
the company of the Achaeans, and roused each man. (*Il.* 17. 547-52)

The rainbow in this case is a portent of war, or a storm, and the cloud in which Athena is concealed is almost certainly a storm cloud as well, based on the context. The modern association of a rainbow is color, but in Homer, there seems to be a strong association with storms, as this simile suggests. The connection seems to be with stormy weather that precedes a rainbow, and a “surging cloud” would be a storm cloud. Although a storm cloud or a rainbow could be purple, the sense here is that bad weather is associated with rainbows, and a storm cloud is more likely to be surging like a fast approaching storm than a purple color that is strongly associated with dyes and blood.

The variety of uses of πορφύρεος make it word that is difficult to define. At one moment, it clearly must be a shade of purple, and at another it is completely devoid of hue and suggests motion, or even qualities of light. While many cases call for a color definition, it is important to think about the context, and not assign color where context suggests motion. One must also keep in mind the examples where color and motion meet, such as the bloody surging wave that sweeps Achilles away, for Homer may not have fully grasped the distinction of these homonyms.

Although one would like to imagine that Homer had a flawless vision of the world he was describing, perhaps when he sang about the κύμα πορφύρεον, he imagined deep crimson water

¹³ Neither ‘crimson’ nor ‘surging’ are suitable translations here, though the association with a turbulent or surging storm does seem to be present.

instead of a surging wave. Although Homer had incredible creative power when forming his lines from formulaic units, sometimes one must assume he became a slave to these units, repeating units that were passed down in the oral tradition without fully understanding their meaning. In a number of cases of πορφύρεος, one cannot help but wonder whether Homer truly draws a distinction between the two homonyms, one from πορφύρω, the other from πορφύρα, or if in his mind they somehow joined to form one single notion.

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