

NOTES AND DISCUSSIONS

ACHILLES IN HADES

In the course of the Nekyia Odysseus meets the souls of Elpenor, Tiresias, and his mother, and later of three Trojan War comrades. From Elpenor, and from Anticlea even more, Odysseus learns the meaning of death. Agamemnon seeks at least some positive word of his son, but Odysseus, sadly, has no knowledge of Orestes. Odysseus tries to comfort Achilles and Ajax. Ajax rebuffs him with cruel silence; Achilles' reply is one of many problems, real or imaginary, in the Nekyia (*Od.* 11. 488–91):

μη δὴ μοι θάνατόν γε παραύδα, φαίδιμ' Ὀδυσσεῦ.
βουλοίμην κ' ἐπάρουρος ἔων θητευέμεν ἄλλω,
ἀνδρὶ παρ' ἀκλήρῳ, ὃ μὴ βίωτος πολὺς εἴη,
ἢ πᾶσιν νεκρέσσι καταφθιμένοισιν ἀνάσσειν.

Jasper Griffin and John Finley among recent writers find no change from the heroic Achilles in the *Iliad*, but they seem to represent a minority view.¹ On the other side comments range from H. Fränkel's observation that Achilles is bitter,² and C. R. Beye's comment that Achilles seems to contradict himself,³ to D. J. Stewart's assertion that "Achilles, the quintessential hero . . . of the whole epic tradition, . . . turns the whole heroic image and premise over into the dust."⁴ R. Merkelbach could not believe that this was the hero of the *Iliad* at all; he therefore concluded that the poet of the passage could not be the poet of the *Iliad*.⁵ At stake, then, is not only the interpretation of one small passage from the *Odyssey*, or even our understanding of Achilles, but the relationship between the two epics.

Comments on the passage are generally mere expressions of opinion supported by little argument and no evidence. But Homer has provided the means of correctly understanding Achilles' words. First, his reaction to news about Neoptolemus and his response to Odysseus' attempt at consolation show that Achilles has not renounced his κλέος. If Achilles repented of his heroism, he could not stride off happily over the asphodel meadow upon learning that Neoptolemus has become a great warrior (539–40). Moreover, if he regretted his choice of

1. J. Griffin, *Homer on Life and Death* (Oxford, 1980), p. 100; J. Finley, *Homer's "Odyssey"* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), p. 123.

2. *Dichtung und Philosophie des frühen Griechentums* (Munich, 1962), p. 93.

3. *The "Iliad," the "Odyssey," and the Epic Tradition* (New York, 1966), pp. 190–91.

4. *The Disguised Guest* (Cranbury, N.J., 1976), p. 60. Stewart rightly describes Odysseus' words as "remarkably ill-chosen." See also J. S. Clay, *The Wrath of Athena* (Princeton, 1983), p. 109; D. Wender, *The Last Scenes of the "Odyssey"* (Leiden, 1978), p. 43; and G. Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans* (Baltimore, 1979), p. 35.

5. *Untersuchungen zur "Odyssee,"* *Zetemata* 2 (Munich, 1969), p. 236.

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honor at the cost of a short life, he could not express the wish that he might return to Phthia for a little while and “make my might and invincible hands hateful to anyone . . . who do[es] [Peleus] violence and exclude[s] him from his due honour” (502–3).⁶

In fact only three lines of Achilles’ reply to Odysseus even seem out of character and present a problem (489–91). Odysseus was evidently trying to strike a positive note when he recalled how the Argives had honored Achilles and observed that Achilles now had power among the dead (482–85). Line 488 (μη δὴ μοι θάνατόν γε παραύδα) shows that Achilles understands Odysseus’ words as an attempt to console: LSJ take the verb to mean “speak lightly of” in this passage, but its basic meaning is “console,” and W. W. Merry so understands it here.⁷ As to his being honored, Achilles says nothing. He could, presumably, rely on what his mother had told him (*Il.* 9. 412–16). As to his lordship over the dead, Achilles could either accept or reject Odysseus’ comment. It would hardly be tolerable, let alone an improvement, to have Achilles contentedly conceding, “Yes, Odysseus, it is rather agreeable lording it over the lifeless heads of the dead,” or the like. No, Achilles cannot accept Odysseus’ well-meaning attempt at consolation.

Furthermore, apart from Odysseus’ consolation, there is no reason to suppose that Achilles does in fact exercise lordship over the dead. After Anticlea’s bleak description of death (219–22) such a notion is hardly welcome. Do we want to take Achilles away from his Trojan War comrades and make him a tenured colleague of Minos (568–71)?

Not to overlook the obvious, Achilles never says that he is sorry to have chosen heroic honor over a long life. But his words seem, at first glance, to invite that interpretation: “I would rather follow the plow as thrall to another man . . . than be a king over all the perished dead” (488–91, in Lattimore’s translation). The formulation βουλοίμην κε/ἄν + infinitive + ἢ + infinitive occurs four times in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (see also *Il.* 3. 40–42 and *Od.* 20. 316–19). Each instance involves a theoretical possibility, indeed a contrary-to-fact condition, not reality:

Iliad 23. 592–95. Antilochus says that if there were something greater to give Menelaus than the mare he has won, he would be willing to give it rather than fall from Menelaus’ favor:

εἰ καὶ νῦν κεν οἴκοθεν ἄλλο
μεῖζον ἐπαιτήσεας, ἄφαρ κέ τοι αὐτίκα δοῦναι
βουλοίμην ἢ σοί γε, διωτρεφές, ἥματα πάντα
ἐκ θυμοῦ πεσέειν καὶ δαίμοσιν εἶναι ἀλιτρός.

Odyssey 3. 232–35. Athena says that she would rather have suffered many hardships and come home than be killed like Agamemnon:

βουλοίμην δ’ ἄν ἐγώ γε καὶ ἄλγεα πολλὰ μογήσας
οἴκαδ’ εἴ ἐλθέμεναι καὶ νόστιμον ἦμαρ ἰδέσθαι,
ἢ ἐλθὼν ἀπολέσθαι ἐφέστιος, ὥς Ἀγαμέμνων
ᾤλεθ’ ὑπ’ Αἰγισθοῖο δόλῳ καὶ ἥς ἀλόχοιο.

6. W. B. Stanford, ed., *The “Odyssey” of Homer*², vol. 1 (London, 1964), ad loc.

7. *Homer: “Odyssey,” Books I–XII* (Oxford, 1887), p. 129.

Odyssey 16. 106–7. Odysseus says that he would rather die than have to go on watching the shameful activities of the suitors:

βουλοίμην κ' ἐν ἑμοῖσι κατακτάμενος μεγάροισι
τεθνάμεν ἢ τάδε γ' αἰὲν ἀεικέα ἔργ' ὁράσθαι.

The passage under discussion, *Odyssey* 11. 489–91:

βουλοίμην κ' ἐπάρουρος ἐὼν θητευέμεν ἄλλω,
ἀνδρὶ παρ' ἀκλήρῳ, ὃ μὴ βίωτος πολὺς εἴη,
ἢ πᾶσιν νεκύεσσι καταφθιμένοισιν ἀνάσσειν.

Antilochus gives no other gift and does not fall from favor; Athena does not suffer hardships like Odysseus, and she is not murdered like Agamemnon; Odysseus does not die (in Book 16) but does put an end to the shameful activities of the suitors. The pattern supports the previous conclusion: Achilles is not the lord of the dead. Moreover, since Odysseus has to be told everything else about the Underworld and its inhabitants, it would be inconsistent for him to have information about Achilles' status.

If Homer had made Achilles lord of the dead, the greatness of Achilles' decision to die young but with glory would be diminished. If Achilles could have anticipated, not some Achaean Valhalla, but any kind of special status in the Underworld, the price of glory would have become at least that much more reasonable. Odysseus' well-intended but inept attempt to console has the effect of reducing the fearful cost, and therefore the terrible splendor, of Achilles' decision. And that Achilles—Homer—will not allow. “Do not speak consolingly of death to me, glorious Odysseus. I could wish [if such a choice were open] to live in service to another, [even] a man without possessions, rather than rule over all the wasted dead.” That is, the lowest position on earth would be preferable to the highest position in the Underworld, two theoretical possibilities, neither experienced by Achilles. It is not a question of life without honor as against death with honor. Achilles sets Odysseus right in no uncertain terms. He does not dwell on his condition, much less indulge in maudlin sentiment or bitterness, but he goes on to show his concern for his father and son, and can even find a measure of satisfaction in his son's heroic accomplishments. He does not say or suggest that he has made a foolish mistake. He does not say or suggest that Odysseus has chosen the better part.⁸ He does insist that the poorest man on earth is better off than even a lord of the dead (all other considerations excluded), but he does not say that his κλέος is not worth the price he is paying. He does insist that the price is high. By rejecting Odysseus' well-intended attempt to console, Achilles implicitly reaffirms the heroic premise. This is the Achilles we know from the *Iliad*. The scene could not be improved.

ROBERT SCHMIEL
The University of Calgary

8. Pace K. Rüter, *Odysseeinterpretation: Untersuchungen zum ersten Buch und zur Phaiakis*, Hypomnemata 19 (Göttingen, 1969), p. 252.