

ACHILLES IN FIRE

The *Argonautica* of Apollonius Rhodius deals with a band of heroes one generation before the great warriors at Troy, and the narrative does not really concern itself directly with the later generation. Some of the familiar heroes of Homer may never seem very far from Apollonius' narrative, but they tend not to appear in the poem themselves. One who does is Achilles, twice in fact: once in the first book and once in the last. Both of these passages deal with his early life: the first when he is in the care of Chiron and his wife (1.553ff.), the second when he is in the family home with Peleus and Thetis (4.869ff.). In the former the gods of heaven and nymphs of Pelion are described as watching the departure of the Argo from Thessaly bound for Colchis. Chiron then comes down from Pelion and waves the heroes goodbye. His wife meanwhile holds Achilles on her arm and shows the child to his father Peleus as he departs with the Argonauts. The later passage describes the failed attempt of Thetis to make her son immortal. In this account Thetis addresses Peleus for the first time since their separation (4.856ff.), and then vanishes into the depths of ocean. Their separation occurred some time earlier when she disappeared in anger after her failure to make the young Achilles immortal. She tried to do this by placing him in the fire during the night, and anointing him with ambrosia during the day (4.869–72):

ἡ μὲν γὰρ βροτέας αἰεὶ περὶ σάρκας ἔδαιεν
 νύκτα διὰ μέσσην φλογμῷ πυρός, ἥματα δ' αὖτε
 ἄμβροσιν χρίσκε τέρεν δέμας, ὅφρα πέλοιτο
 ἀθάνατος καὶ οἱ στυγερὸν χροῖ γῆρας ἀλάλκοι.

The attempt fails when Peleus happens to see his son's immersion in the flames, and gives out a terrible cry, whereupon Thetis throws the boy down, goes away herself, and does not return (873ff.).¹

Despite coming at opposite ends of the epic these two episodes are closely connected because the separation of the parents leads to the rearing of Achilles by Chiron. Thus, as far as the story of Achilles is concerned, the second episode precedes the first, and leads directly to it. Like many heroes in the Greek tradition Achilles spends formative years in training outside of the home base. The immersion of Achilles in fire therefore is a very significant moment in his life in that it signals the end of a 'normal' childhood (i.e. living in a house with his parents), and the beginning of a more remote and unusual existence (in a cave on a mountain with a centaur and his wife). Lycophron in the *Alexandra* (175ff.) refers to the tale of his immersion in fire including the version (not cited in Apollonius) that Thetis killed the first six children of the marriage in this way.² It seems too that the second book of the *Aegimius*

¹ References within the *Argonautica* have the heroic careers of Jason and Achilles intersecting in various ways: both have Chiron as teacher (Jason, 1.32–4; Achilles, 1.553ff.; 4.810ff.; cf. Aristaëus, 2.509ff.); and both have an intimate relationship with Medea, although that of Achilles is after his death (4.810ff.). Jason means 'healer', presumably a skill he acquires from Chiron (see Hesiod, *Cat.* 40.2; Pindar, *Nem.* 3.53ff.; *Pyth.* 4.102ff.; cf. Achilles, *Il.* 11.832, and below, pp. 333f.); but this aspect seems to play no part in Apollonius' story of his adventures.

² Cf. Apollodorus (*Bibl.* 3.13.6) who basically follows the account of Apollonius, including the fact that the child gasps (*σπαίροντα*, cf. *Arg.* 4. 874) from the experience; see Frazer (Loeb Text), p. 69, n. 4.

described a similar fate for the earlier born children, except in this poem they are placed in a cauldron of (hot) water (ὁ τὸν Αἰγίμιον ποιήσας ἐν β' φησὶν ὅτι ἡ Θέτις εἰς λέβητα ὕδατος ἐβαλλεν τοὺς ἐκ Πηλέως γεννωμένους); but Peleus rescues Achilles from such a fate.³ Another account of the attempt to make him immortal has Achilles dipped in the river Styx by Thetis, a process that proves to be equally unsuccessful.⁴ The notion of Achilles' immersion in fire or water is therefore an important aspect of the various ancient accounts of his life.⁵ This idea really goes right back to the *Iliad* where he is the only Achaean prince to be immersed in the river Scamander, which almost takes his life (21.233ff.). One aspect of the resulting conflict between Scamander and Hephaestus (on which see below) is that the river becomes like a boiling cauldron (ὥς δὲ λέβης ζεῖ . . . 21.362ff.). Hephaestus' fire totally transforms the nature of the river. References to the river (as a cauldron) in the *Iliad*, and the cauldron referred to in the *Aegimius*, would seem to suggest a clear thematic connection between the two texts. The notion of Achilles' immersion in boiling water is fundamental to both accounts.⁶

But the concern in this paper, in light of the Apollonius passage, is more specifically with Achilles' immersion in fire, and with earlier accounts that deal with the same theme, all of which probably have some bearing on Apollonius' story. As far as earlier 'sources' for the *Argonautica* passage are concerned, most attention focuses on Demeter's attempt to make Demophon immortal in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (236ff., on which see below), but in this paper the principal concern is with the epics of Homer, together with the Epic Cycle. The basic argument to follow is that Achilles' immersion in fire is a kind of Greek epic tradition which is seen clearly in the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *Aethiopis*. The likely influence of the Demeter hymn notwithstanding, the Apollonius passage has much in common with our earliest epic sources.

Demeter's attempt to make the young Demophon immortal at Eleusis involves a number of different acts. Over an unstated period of time she gives him ambrosia by day and breathes on him with her divine breath, while holding him in her lap (χρίεσκ' ἀμβροσίῃ ὥς εἰ θεοῦ ἐκγεγαῶτα, / ἥδ' ὃν καταπνέουσα καὶ ἐν κόλποισιν ἔχουσα, 237–8). At night she would hide him in the fire like a brand without the knowledge of

³ Schol. Ap. Rhod., 4.816 (C. Wendel, *Scholia in Apollonium Rhodium Vetera* [1974], p.293). It seems from the scholia that Achilles in the *Aegimius* is not actually immersed *per se* in the cauldron. Despite this one wonders whether the original account of the poem has him rescued from the actual water, rather like his rescue from the flames in Apollonius' account. On the *Aegimius*, see G. L. Huxley, *Greek Epic Poetry* (London, 1969), pp. 107–10.

⁴ Note Stat. *Achilleid*, 1.268–70, in which Thetis utters a lament to Achilles both on the subject of her marriage to a mortal man, and her failure to immortalize her son, 'si terras humilemque experta maritum/ te propter, si progenitum Stygos amne seuero/ armaui—totumque utinam!'; cf. Serv., *ad Aen.* 6.57. For full references to the various immersions that Achilles undergoes, Escher, *RE I* s.v. 'Achilleus', cols. 225–6.

⁵ On this subject, see W. R. Halliday, 'Note on *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* 239ff.', *CR* 25 (1911), 8ff.

⁶ On this logic the story of the dipping of Achilles in the Styx might have its origin in the *Iliad* passage too (Scamander/Styx). An important article on this subject (J. Burgess, 'The Death of Achilles in Ancient Myth', *CA* 14 [1995], 217–43) deals with the failed quest of Thetis to make Achilles immortal, his 'imperfect invulnerability'. This theme, together with the manner of his death, shot in the heel by an arrow, are taken up in some detail in the article, including discussion of early images of his death on vases (on the latter, 226ff.). The conclusion offered is that the dipping of Achilles in the Styx originated in the Hellenistic period, even if the general theme of his immersion in fire or boiling water goes much further back. Burgess does not consider Achilles' immersion in Scamander in this context, although it seems to me appropriate to do so, especially in light of the 'hellish' nature of the river in *Iliad* 21.

his parents, Celeus and Metaneira (νύκτας δὲ κρύπτεσκε πυρὸς μένει ἢ ὅτε δαλὸν / λάθρα φίλων γονέων, 239–40). The process has a wondrous effect on Demophon and he begins to appear like a god (241). As with the attempt of Thetis in the *Argonautica*, the immersion of the youngster in fire is one important part of the transition from the mortal to the immortal condition. The notion seems to be that if given sufficient time the fire would ‘burn off’ his mortality, and make him ‘immortal and ageless forever’ (ἀθάνατόν κέν τοι καὶ ἀγήραον ἥματα πάντα / παῖδα φίλον ποίησα καὶ ἄφθιτον ὥπασα τιμὴν, 260–1).⁷ But the attempt fails when Demeter is interrupted by Metaneira, the boy’s mother, who, in response to what she sees, cries out in anguish and strikes both her thighs (242ff.). In her anger at the interruption, Demeter casts the boy aside, and he remains a mortal (250ff.).

Despite significant differences in the emotional states of the two goddesses as they embark upon their work (Demeter’s *menis* at the snatching of Persephone, and Thetis’ ambition for her son to be immortal), the parallels in the two passages are very striking, both in terms of narrative patterns and in various aspects of the language. In both cases a goddess fails in her attempt to immortalize a child (by means of ambrosia/immersion in fire). When the process is interrupted by the mortal parent, who is understandably concerned at the goings on, the child is cast aside roughly, and the attempt is ended. In a state of frustration and anger the goddess then departs the scene and does not return. Mortal ignorance or interference frustrates the transition from one condition of existence to another. In addition to these thematic similarities, there are numerous verbal echoes of the Demeter hymn in the Apollonius passage. Richardson’s analysis shows that this is not isolated to the two episodes in question, but occurs at different points in the story.⁸ These similarities in the language suggest at the very least that Apollonius was quite familiar with the hymn. But there are also questions as to whether both accounts draw on an earlier epic source, which may have described the attempt of Thetis to immortalize Achilles in fire. One possibility is that the *Cypria* described such an attempt, but in the absence of any firm evidence to support it, this must remain speculation.⁹ The paucity of evidence for an early epic account of the mother’s placement of the boy Achilles in fire means that scholars often follow a more established course, an analysis of the intertextual relationship between the Apollonius passage and the Demeter hymn. Such an approach at least avoids speculation on the possible subject-matter of the Epic Cycle. In this context one recent article argues that Apollonius’ use of Δηώ (= Demeter, 4.896, 986, 988; cf. the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, 47) confirms the hymn as his ‘source’, and distinguishes him from Callimachus and Theocritus.¹⁰ The various analyses of the relationship between the two texts lead one to the conclusion that there are few grounds for denying the Demeter hymn an influential role in Apollonius’ construction of his account.¹¹

⁷ See J. S. Clay, ‘Immortal and ageless forever’, *CJ* 77 (1981–2), 112–17.

⁸ N. J. Richardson, *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (Oxford, 1979), ad 237ff.; for a comprehensive list of verbal parallels in the two works, see p. 70, n. 1.

⁹ See Knaak, *RE* 5, s.v. ‘Demophon’, col. 148; Preller-Robert, *Griechische Mythologie* (Berlin, 1894–1926), II, p. 67. On the separation of Peleus and Thetis and ‘οἱ νεώτεροι ποιηταί’, see Sch. A ad II. 16.222, 18.57, 60 (H. Erbse, *Scholia Graeca in Homeri Iliadem*, vol. 4 [Berlin, 1969–88]).

¹⁰ S. Jackson, ‘Apollonius of Rhodes and the corn-goddess: a note on *Argonautica* 4.869–76’, *LCM* 15 (1990), 53–6.

¹¹ On this subject, see E. Livrea, *Apollonii Rhodii Argonauticon Liber 4* (Florence, 1973), p. 253; Richardson, *Homeric Hymn*, pp. 231ff.; M. Campbell, *Echoes and Imitations of Early Epic in Apollonius Rhodius* (Leiden, 1981), pp. 77–8; F. Vian, *Apollonios de Rhodes, Argonautiques*, vol. 3 (Paris, 1981), p. 178.

But on occasions obvious similarities between two texts can discourage a wider line of enquiry in which other relevant texts may not be given due consideration. Achilles' immersion in fire may be one such case. When we read the Apollonius passage we turn instantly to the Demeter hymn because of the parallels evident in the two episodes (thematic and linguistic). The scholarly task is then to try to reinforce or reinterpret the connections between the two (as with Apollonius' use of *Δηώ* above). One consequence of this is that Homer tends to be left out of the account, even though Achilles is the Homeric hero *par excellence*, and despite the fact that he is immersed in fire in both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (and in the *Aethiopis*). Indeed it may be said that Achilles has a special association with fire in early epic, one that helps distinguish him from the other Achaean warriors at Troy. In this context there is some benefit to be gained from examining the Homeric background to Apollonius' description of Achilles' placement in the fire.

In the last book of the *Odyssey* (24.58ff.) the shade of Agamemnon describes the mourning, burial and funeral games for Achilles. The body of the hero, wrapped in immortal garments, is placed on the funeral pyre after seventeen days of mourning by gods (Thetis and the Nereids, the nine Muses), and mortals.¹² After the flame of Hephaestus has made an end of him, the Greeks place his bones in a golden amphora together with those of Patroclus (24.76ff.). They build a burial mound around the bones on a promontory by the Hellespont. The great funeral games, to which even the gods contribute prizes, testify to the greatness of Achilles in death as in life. Agamemnon can only compare his own miserable fate, killed on return from Troy by his own wife and Aegisthus (24.96–7).

Much critical attention focuses on the authenticity of the *deuteronekuia* (24.1–204), and the question of the relationship between the description of Achilles' funeral in the *Odyssey* and other funeral descriptions in early epic.¹³ These include the mourning and funeral for Patroclus in the *Iliad* (Books 18–23), the funeral for Achilles in the *Aethiopis* (see below), as well as possible pre-Homeric versions of the same theme. The relationship between these texts is relevant to this article only in so far as they all involve Achilles' immersion in fire. Achilles' close association with fire seems to link the epic treatments of his life and death, even though the manifestation of it within the various narratives differs from text to text. In the *Odyssey* the focus of attention is on cremation and his subsequent entry to Hades. Such a fate has much in common with that of Patroclus in the *Iliad* (cf. *Il.* 23.69ff., 136–7). The text of the *Odyssey* makes it abundantly clear that Achilles' fate after death is to go to Hades in the usual fashion (*Od.* 11.471ff., 24.1ff.; cf. 5.310).¹⁴ The pyre of Achilles in *Odyssey* 24 is thus a transition to his new existence in Hades.

This is not his fate, however, in the *Aethiopis*. In Proclus' account of the poem, Achilles dies at Troy at the hands of Paris and Apollo, after which he is taken from the pyre by his mother Thetis and translated to the White Island (*καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα* [sc. his

¹² Cf. the brief references in Pindar, *Isth.* 8.56ff.; *Pyth.* 3.100ff.

¹³ For a recent discussion of the final book, C. Sourvinou-Inwood, 'Reading' *Greek Death* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 94–107, who is against authenticity. On the part of *φλόξ* (*Od.* 24.71) in the description of Achilles' funeral (used only here in the *Odyssey*), and a discussion of the vocabulary of fire in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, see J. B. Hainsworth, 'No flames in the *Odyssey*', *JHS* 78 (1958), 49–56.

¹⁴ Of the warriors who fight at Troy, only Menelaus, who is destined to go to Elysium (*Od.* 4.561ff.), avoids such a fate. Cf. in the *Odyssey*, Tithonus, 5.1–2; Ino/Leucothea, 5.333ff.; Heracles, 11.601ff.; Dioscuri, 11.298ff.; Cleitus, 15.249ff.; and in the *Iliad*, Tithonus, 11.1–2; Ganymede, 20.232ff.

funeral] ἐκ τῆς πυρᾶς ἣ Θέτις ἀναρπάσσα τὸν παῖδα εἰς τὴν Λευκὴν νῆσον διακομίζει, *Chrest.* 2). After this the Achaeans make a mound for him and conduct funeral games in his honour. Achilles' translation to the White Island after his death is thus in direct contrast to the *Odyssey* where he ends up leading a rather glum existence in Hades.¹⁵ Wherever we imagine the White Island to be, it certainly sounds better than the Odyssean Hades, and Achilles is described variously in later sources as marrying Helen, Medea, or Iphigeneia.¹⁶ In the *Aethiopis*, as in the *Odyssey*, the flames of his funeral pyre are an important symbolic part of his transition into a new location (White Island/Hades). He is taken from the flames by Thetis, this time as a willing act on her part, not an act of frustration following Peleus' interference (*Arg.* 4.873ff.). Thus in the *Aethiopis* she seems to have her desire fulfilled that her son should live forever (cf. *Arg.* 4.801ff.).

It is noteworthy in this context that Asclepius too, like Achilles, is plucked from a funeral pyre by a god. In his account of the birth of Asclepius, Pindar in *Pythian* 3 describes the snatching of the baby Asclepius from the blazing pyre of his mother Coronis, who has been killed by Artemis.¹⁷ Apollo cannot bear to see his son die in his mother's womb, and therefore he snatches him from her funeral pyre (βάματι δ' ἐν πρώτῳ κιχὼν παῖδ' ἐκ νεκροῦ ἄρπασε· καιομένα δ' αὐτῷ διέφαινε πυρά, 43–4). Asclepius is then handed over to Chiron to bring up. Thus Asclepius in *Pythian* 3 undergoes something similar to the young Achilles in the *Argonautica* although with some important differences: he too endures the separation of the parents (this time through the mother's death), and immersion and snatching from fire, and then a medical training by Chiron. The special connection between Achilles and Asclepius (which is implicit in the *Iliad*, 4.219, 11.832), is bound up in their roles as healers trained by Chiron. The connection between them in our earliest source is retained in *Pythian* 3 where the stories of Asclepius and Achilles intersect (Asclepius as healer, Achilles as mortal hero and only son of Peleus). Despite his desire in the poem to witness the presence of Chiron again, specifically for his healing powers, Pindar insists upon the mortal character of human life. Thus Asclepius is strongly rejected for raising the dead (54ff.), and Achilles, as in Homer, has a mortal end (100ff.).

But it is more specifically the theme of immersion in fire that concerns us here, and the fact that they are both ripped from the funeral pyre into very different existences. Asclepius is given life from death, taken from the burning body of Coronis. His birth reveals an essential aspect of his character in myth, the fact that he has a remarkable skill in turning death into life. But the price for this skill is to have life taken from him by divine fire (Zeus' thunderbolt). Like his mother before him, Asclepius pays the price for transcending human limitations.¹⁸ He emerges into life from fire, and is then destroyed by it. Achilles, by contrast, in the *Aethiopis* is ripped from his own pyre, and

¹⁵ On this kind of contrast between Homer and the Epic Cycle, J. Griffin, 'The Epic Cycle and the uniqueness of Homer', *JHS* 97 (1977), 39–53.

¹⁶ Cf. Pindar, *Olymp.* 2.68ff. (Achilles in the Isles of the Blessed), *Nem.* 4.49–50 (Achilles on the White Island). For Achilles and the White Island in a Black Sea location (Achilles Pontarches), see H. Hommel, *Der Gott Achilleus* (Heidelberg, 1980); J. T. Hooker, 'The cults of Achilles', *RhM* 131 (1981), 1–7; G. F. Pinney, 'Achilles Lord of Scythia' in W. G. Moon (ed.), *Ancient Greek Art and Iconography* (Madison, 1983), pp. 127–46; G. Hedreen, 'The cult of Achilles in the Euxine', *Hesperia* 60 (1991), 313–30. For Achilles' relationships with Helen and Iphigeneia in later sources, see Hedreen, p. 320, n. 49; for Achilles and Medea in Elysium, see *Arg.* 4.810ff.

¹⁷ For Asclepius in Hesiod, where there appears to be a similar version of his crime and punishment, see Merkelbach and West, *Fragmenta Hesiodica* (Oxford, 1967), frs. 50, 51, 53, 58, 60.

¹⁸ Coronis' crime is to be unfaithful to Apollo by sleeping with Ischys, an Arcadian.

is then translated to a new existence in a new location. The pyre, it may be said, is his transition to a life within death. Asclepius and Achilles are very different individuals, the one principally a famous healer, the other a great hero. But they also have much in common from our earliest accounts, where they share Chiron's medical expertise in Thessaly (*Il.* 4.217–19, 11.828–32).¹⁹ But the essence of the link between them in the ancient accounts is not limited to an ability to heal the physical form (as in Homer). The stories about them tend to reveal a consistent focus on the very nature and vicissitudes of existence, the potential on the one hand to suffer death and enter into Hades, but on the other to cheat death and live again. It is in this context that fire is so significant in the various accounts of them, the fact that it symbolizes the transition between the different states of existence which they endure. Pindar's apparent consciousness of this is borne out by the fact that within *Pythian* 3 itself both Asclepius and Achilles are placed on the pyre (38ff., 100ff.).

Achilles' immersion in fire, therefore, is seen as a transition to immortality (*Aethiopis/Argonautica*) and a transition to Hades (*Odyssey*). The notion of fire, especially the funeral pyre, as a transition to a new existence has, of course, many parallels elsewhere.²⁰ The apotheosis of Heracles on the pyre on Mount Oeta is one important story. Heracles' mortal part is burnt away by the fire, but his divine part triumphs over the flames, and he enters Olympus.²¹ The fire therefore reveals the essence of his existence as child of Zeus and Alcmena. It separates the mortal from the immortal, and thereby highlights his true greatness as a hero.²² It reveals vividly the fact that he has a fundamentally different nature from ordinary mortals. Similar ideas are at work in the description of the fire in *Iliad* 21, although of course this is no funeral pyre (not for Achilles anyway). In *Iliad* 21 the fighting at Troy centres on the river Scamander into which half of the Trojan forces have been driven by the rampant Achilles. The river quickly turns from having a silvery flow to being a terrible place, red with blood and full of groaning (1–33). In a short time it becomes clogged with the bodies of Achilles' victims. Scamander would prefer his flow to be unimpeded by corpses, and so he tells Achilles (214ff.) to do his killing on the plain. Achilles seems to agree at first (223ff.), but after Scamander appeals to Apollo he leaps into the river again (233ff.). Scamander then goes on the attack and tries to drown him (235ff.). The fury of the river abates only after the intervention of Hephaestus, who hurls fire at him at the request of Hera (328ff.). The fire burns the dead bodies on the plain, the trees and the shrubs by the river, the eels and the fish, and the water itself (342ff.). The triumph of Hephaestus is total and immediate, and the river, with all its streams burning, quickly submits to the Olympian's superior force (357ff.).²³

The picture is starkly conveyed in this narrative of a blazing inferno that engulfs everything in its path. Achilles, however, is not burnt by the fire like everything else in

¹⁹ On this subject, C. J. Mackie, 'Achilles' teachers: Chiron and Phoenix in the *Iliad*', *G&R* 44 (1997), 1–10.

²⁰ For a wide-ranging discussion of fire in a cross-cultural context, with extensive bibliography, see *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (ed. Eliade), vol. 5 (New York, 1987), s.v. 'Fire', pp. 340–6 (Edsman).

²¹ On this, see Richardson, *Homeric Hymn*, pp. 234, 240, 315.

²² For the notion of mastery over fire as a great heroic achievement in the *Iliad*, cf. Diomedes' suggestion to the princes that if he had Odysseus with him, for whom Athena has a great love, the two of them 'could come back from blazing fire' (ἐκ πυρὸς αἰθομένοιο ἀμφὺ νοστήσασιν, *Il.* 10.246–7).

²³ Fire thus saves Achilles from a terrible death. For such attitudes to drowning, cf. *Il.* 21.273ff.; *Od.* 5.299ff.; and Hesiod, *Works and Days* 687, δεινὸν δ' ἐστὶ θανεῖν μετὰ κύμασιν.

the vicinity, something which is puzzled over in the scholia.²⁴ The question of his failure to be burnt is not an unreasonable one, even if it introduces notions of realism that do little justice to the highly symbolic nature of this particular narrative.²⁵ One reply might be that Hephaestus' fire is 'friendly fire', directed specifically at the river and its surrounds. It has no effect therefore on Achilles, whom, after all, it is meant to assist.²⁶ In this sense the fire might be seen as an externalization of the fury that characterizes Achilles' return to the field of battle. Moreover, it is obviously one more divine weapon that supports Achilles in the fighting.²⁷ Hephaestus' fire, called upon at the beckoning of his mother Hera, indicates emphatically the extent of the divine support that Achilles receives.²⁸

But quite apart from all this, Achilles' immersion in the fire, without undergoing the normal process of burning, distinguishes him from the world around him. It is one further indicator among many of his isolation and separation from the other warriors at Troy. Everything else is physically subject to the power of the flames, but not Achilles. Such a contrast between the hero and everything around him indicates his transcendence of the ordinary conditions of a human existence. The ferocity, power, and beauty of the flames help to inform the image of the hero in the full ecstatic frenzy of his violence in the combat. He has, as it were, however briefly, entered into a supernatural state in which the usual laws of nature are temporarily suspended.

Such a notion, that Achilles transcends the ordinary conditions of human existence, is seen elsewhere too following the news of Patroclus' death. The principal theme running through Book 19 is Achilles' rejection of food and drink as a conscious response to the grim news that he receives. One aspect of this is that he wants the army to go into battle without taking a meal beforehand (19.146–53). As it turns out, Achilles reluctantly accepts Odysseus' advice that the army should take a meal before battle (19.216–37); but he himself will eat nothing, despite the pleas of the Achaean nobles for him to do so (19.303–8, 319–21). In response to Achilles' refusal to eat or drink, Zeus and Athena decide to place nectar and ambrosia inside his breast so that hunger and thirst do not come upon him (19.342ff.). Such treatment of course again reflects the honour with which he is held among the gods.²⁹ Underlying the whole

²⁴ Erbse, *Scholia Graeca*, vol. 5, ad 21.343 and 365. It is worth comparing the fire that burns around the Titans during their clash with Zeus (*Theog.* 687ff.). Because they are divine, however, they are able to keep on fighting (711–12).

²⁵ Likewise one may ponder on the question of why the child Achilles is not burnt by the fire in which Thetis places him (as opposed simply to his gasping, *Arg.* 4.869ff.; cf. Apollod. *Bibl.*, 3.13.6). But that would introduce notions of realism that miss the point of the description.

²⁶ The scholia compare the way Scamander keeps the Trojans in his flow (at 21.238–9). On the subject of fire in Homer, L. Graz, *Le feu dans l'Iliade et l'Odyssée* (Paris, 1965); on the critical connection between Achilles and fire in the later books of the *Iliad*, see the detailed textual references in N. Richardson, *The Iliad: A Commentary*, vol. 6: *Books 21–24* (Cambridge, 1993), ad 22.317–21. See too W. Schadewaldt, *Von Homers Welt und Werk* (Stuttgart, 1959), p. 320; C. Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (Cambridge, MA, 1967), pp.128ff and esp. pp.136ff.; C. Moulton, *Similes in the Homeric Poems* (Göttingen, 1977), pp.100ff.

²⁷ Others of note are his spear (from Chiron, 16.141–4 = 19.388–91) and his armour (from Hephaestus, 18.369–617); note too his horses (from the gods or from Poseidon; 16.381, 867; 17.443ff.; 23.277ff., etc.). On this subject, W. R. Paton, 'The armour of Achilles', *CR* 26 (1912), 1–4.

²⁸ Cf. Hera's point to Poseidon that Troy itself will be burnt by the Greeks (*Il.* 20.315–7 = 21.374–6). The life of a city, like that of a warrior, ends in consuming fire. Rome's emergence from the ashes of Troy is, of course, an important underlying notion in Vergil's *Aeneid* (note esp. 2.298–804 *passim*).

²⁹ M. W. Edwards, *The Iliad: A Commentary*, vol. 5: *Books 17–20* (Cambridge, 1991), adopts

episode is the fact that nectar and ambrosia are usually inappropriate to a living human being.³⁰ They are most usually the food and drink of the gods, but they are also especially important in the later books of the *Iliad* as instruments for protecting damage or decay to a corpse, a kind of divine process of embalming some of the human victims of the war. This is the case with the bodies of Sarpedon, Patroclus, and Hector.

After Sarpedon's death Zeus tells Apollo to take his son's body away and cleanse it (16.667ff.). Thereafter he should wash it in the river, anoint it with ambrosia, and clothe it in immortal cloth before having Sleep and Death place it in Lycia. After this Sarpedon's people in Lycia will give him a proper funeral. In Patroclus' case Achilles expresses his fears to Thetis (19.23ff.) that flies and worms might attack his friend's body, causing it to rot. Thetis' response to this is to pour ambrosia and red nectar into his body through his nose (19.37ff.). She tells Achilles that Patroclus could lie there for a year and his flesh would still be fresh, perhaps even better than now. Later in the poem Aphrodite and Apollo protect the corpse of Hector from the defiling to which Achilles is subjecting it (23.184–91, 24.18–21, 24.411–23). Aphrodite keeps the dogs off and anoints the body with rosy ambrosial oil so that Achilles does not cause lacerations as he drags him around behind his chariot (23.184–7). Apollo brings down a mist so that the sun does not shrivel up the body (23.188–91). Later in the final book (411ff.) Hermes tells Priam that although this is the twelfth day that Hector has lain there, there is no decay, nor have the worms, dogs, or birds eaten him. Likewise Achilles drags the body around, but it is undamaged and remains clear and fresh. Hermes' revelation precipitates an exchange with Priam on the virtues of providing gifts to the gods (24.422ff.).

It is important to see the treatment given to Achilles' body (19.342ff.) in the context of the divine protection offered to these three corpses. Thus the chain of death that links much of the action in the final books, Sarpedon–Patroclus–Hector–Achilles, is also characterized by the divine concern for the welfare of their physical forms. The significant difference, of course, is that in Achilles' case he is still alive, and thus the gods' action in protecting his physical well-being has a different symbolic force. The divine protection of his body (19.342ff.) and his immersion in the fire of Hephaestus (21.342ff.) are really different aspects of much the same thing. Both help to reveal his transcendence of the ordinary mortal condition, the fact that he has superhuman powers of endurance, and is not subject to the normal human needs or dangers. His ability to withstand fire, and the fact that divine substances support his physical person, underline his distance from all the living forms that surround him.

These linked ideas, Achilles' subjection to fire, and the divine concern for his body (ambrosia/nectar), point us back to our original focus of attention, the *Argonautica* and *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. It is important to remember that the attempted process of immortalization in both these works (Thetis and Achilles/Demeter and Demophon) involves *both* immersion in fire and the application of ambrosia. It is of course significant in this context that Achilles in the *Iliad* undergoes a similar process in the full fury of his grief and anger on the field of battle. For he too receives

the minimalist position (*ad* 19.340–54) that the divine intervention 'is the equivalent of Athene's invigoration of Diomedes before his *aristeia* (5.1–3)'. My own view is that it does much more work than this.

³⁰ Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* III 4 12 1000 a 9ff., '(those in the school of Hesiod, and all the theologians, say that) whatever did not eat of nectar and ambrosia became mortal' (τὰ μὴ γευσάμενα τοῦ νέκταρος καὶ τῆς ἀμβροσίας θνήτὰ γενέσθαι).

ambrosia (and nectar, by unconscious ingestion), and he too is immersed in fire.³¹ The same notions of transcendence of the mortal condition are there in all three texts, although they manifest themselves in different ways in each case. The Achilles of the *Iliad* never comes close to immortality *per se* (as Demophon in the *Hymn* and Achilles in the *Argonautica* come close). Indeed it is fundamental to the *Iliad* that humans must confront and accept their mortality, and take some satisfaction in it. But Achilles in the *Iliad*, in the full power of his passion and frenzy after Patroclus' death, touches the divine prior to his final acceptance of death.³² As with the pyre of Heracles, the fire that surrounds Achilles at the river helps to reveal his true nature as the son of a god, the fact that he has a spiritual power unique among the princes.

There seems little doubt, therefore, that Achilles has a special association with fire which extends throughout the ancient sources. This is borne out by the fact that he is immersed in fire in four epics from Greek antiquity (*Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Aethiopis*, *Argonautica*), twice in life (*Iliad*/*Argonautica*), and twice in death (*Odyssey*/*Aethiopis*). This occurs when he is a very young child (*Argonautica*) and as a man fast approaching death (cf. *Il.* 24.131–2), and upon his death on the funeral pyre (*Odyssey*/*Aethiopis*). Thus his immersion in flames comes at crucial moments in his passage through life and death. Awareness of this broader association of Achilles with fire, as revealed in Homer and in the Epic Cycle, no doubt affects a reading of the passage in *Argonautica* 4. That is to say one is conscious that his immersion as a child in the flames by Thetis in the *Argonautica* is the forerunner of other episodes dealing with the same theme. Thus Thetis' action seems to be the first important episode in his life, and one which will help define the very nature of his existence as a hero in life and death. Achilles' special association with fire clearly helps to distinguish him from the other Greek warriors at Troy. It is significant that the likes of Agamemnon, Odysseus, or Ajax have no such fire association.³³ Achilles is characterized in the *Iliad* by his separation and isolation from those around him, and fire is one aspect of this. In this context it seems fitting that the figure whose destiny is the focus of so much of the poem's attention is immersed in fire prior to the final workings of his fate. Like Patroclus (Book 23) and Hector (Book 24), Achilles is subjected to fire within the course of the poem; but this happens to him in life, not in death.

To conclude, it has been argued above that there are cases where the close connection between two texts can tend to discourage a wider line of enquiry. This is probably the case with the immersion of Achilles in fire in the *Argonautica* (4.869ff.), and the parallel passage in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (236ff.). The closeness of this parallel has led us away from other texts which should have a greater part to play in relevant discussions of the passages. The case put forward in this paper is that Achilles' subjection to fire (and ambrosia) in the *Argonautica* is fundamental to his whole persona in myth, something which goes back to the earliest times. It is one important aspect of his uniqueness as a mythical figure, not just the product of an isolated literary borrowing. In this context it is impossible to say whether the *Cypria*

³¹ It is worth noting in this context that on his funeral pyre in the *Odyssey* Achilles has immortal clothing (*ἀμβροτα εἴματα* *Od.* 24.59) and burns in divine clothing, ointment, and honey (*καίεο δ' ἐν τ' ἐσθῆτι θεῶν καὶ ἀλείφατι πολλῷ καὶ μέλιτι γλυκερῷ*, *Od.* 24.67–8).

³² Note Frazer's discussion, *Adonis Attis Osiris* (London, 1907), pp. 146ff., including Iamblichus' contention (*De mysteriis* v.12) that 'fire destroys the material part of sacrifices, it purifies all things that are brought near it releasing them from the bonds of matter and, in virtue of the purity of its nature, making them meet for communion with the gods'.

³³ Although it is worth comparing Diomedes (esp. *Il.* 5.1ff.), on which see above, n. 29. But Diomedes' fire associations are nothing like as emphatic as those of Achilles (see too above, n. 26).

contained a narrative in which Achilles was placed in fire by Thetis. But we can certainly say that, if it did, it would have had much in common with the treatment of him in other epics from the earliest extant period.³⁴

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