

Bloodthirsty Scholarship: Responses to Death in the Scholia to the *Iliad*

Readers of the *Iliad* in the past century or so have often seen the fate of the poem's minor warriors as deeply significant. These otherwise unknown figures are sometimes described by the poet in great detail, so that the reader learns of their youth and beauty, their lives and families, at the very moment of their death. These scenes have been discussed extensively by Jasper Griffin, who argues that they are "vitally important" to the poet in developing his "tragic and consistent view of human life" (1976, 186), and many scholars have likewise noted their poetic, emotional, or philosophical importance (see e.g. Mueller 2011). Modern poets, too, have found in the death scenes fertile ground for exploring the meaning of mortality and war. Alice Oswald's book-length poem *Memorial* (2011) is a striking example. In her "version of the *Iliad*," the epic becomes a lament; the gods are stripped away, along with the speeches and quarrels. Only what is most essential, in the poet's eyes, remains: the death scenes.

For ancient readers, however, the many deaths of minor warriors in the poem could mean something quite different. In this paper, I explore the responses of one particular community of readers, namely the late antique scholars whose comments are preserved in the exegetical scholia to the *Iliad*. Recent studies have highlighted the scholiasts' particular interest in the emotional component of the reading experience (Schmidt 2011; Nünlist 2009, ch. 5). This emphasis on the reader's emotions, I argue, is especially apparent in their reading of the deaths of minor warriors, which are often commented upon with more than erudite interest.

Surprisingly, the scholiasts seem to have taken some degree of emotional satisfaction, bordering at times on delight, in these deaths. For one, they show little interest in the minor warriors as individuals in their own right. They saw the scenes of these men's deaths, not primarily as reflections on mortality, but as tributes to the valor of the poem's more important

warriors. Even in cases where they acknowledge that a death scene is pitiable or pathetic, they still regard it as reflecting favorably on the killer. Often, the pleasure that the scholiasts derive from a death is of a more particular character. In many cases, they observe the fairness of a given death, suggesting that the warrior in question actually *deserved* to die, for one reason or another. This is in keeping with a general ancient interest in poetic justice (Bouchard 2012), but the scholiasts seem to go further, manufacturing explanations for the warriors' guilt, often at the expense of narrative logic. On another level, they seem also to have taken pleasure from many of the deaths (which are overwhelmingly Trojan) because of their bias in favor of the "Greeks" (Van der Valk, 1953). This prejudice made the death of any Trojan into a triumph of Hellenism over barbarism, and thus a cause for rejoicing.

This investigation of the scholiasts' responses to the death of minor warriors highlights the distance that can exist between ancient and modern readings of the *Iliad*. For the scholiasts, these deaths are not particularly poignant or lamentable. Rather, they are emotionally affirming, since they seem to establish the valor of the hero, the power of justice, and the superiority of the Greeks.

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