

The Death of Achilles: A Paradox of Value in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* XII.612-28

The Iliadic Achilles offers a dichotomy for his interpreters between the tragedy of the suffering and untimely death of an individual, and the heroic fame that is achieved even at the cost of one's life. In this paper I will discuss the death of Achilles as represented in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* XII.612-28 and its exposition of this relationship between death and glory.

For Simone Weil, heroic death in the *Iliad* is essentially tragic, irredeemable, and represents the ultimate objectification of the human soul. In her essay *The Iliad or The Poem of Force*, that centerpiece of epic for Weil is defined as the "x that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a *thing*" (Weil 2003: 3). For Weil, the conditions of war imply a special sort of human existence, one in which "the relation between death and the future is different than for other men... for the soldier death is the future" (Weil 2003: 22).

In her review of a recent edition of Weil's essay, Sheila Murnaghan provides an alternate view: "the Homeric world encompasses both a less austere concept of poetry as transmuting suffering into something satisfying and pleasurable and an unavoidable gap between the experiences of audiences and the events retold in poetry" (Murnaghan 2004). Death is not the future, but in death there is a continuation of life that is granted in poetry. Value is inherent in the destruction of war in that it results in something worth enduring "death that ends all": that is to say, a glory that will be "undying forever" (Homer *Iliad* IX. 426-429, tr. Lombardo).

I argue that Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in representing Achilles' death at the end of Book XII as a metamorphosis, offers a sort of synthesis of the implications of the epic hero's death. In Ovid, we find a close connection between Achilles as a human being and as an idealized portrait of *kleos apthiton* (everlasting glory). I will argue that Achilles' transformation in the *Metamorphoses* is not a death, but rather an exchange that occurs where Achilles becomes the

entity he was destined to be: “This measure makes answer for the man himself, and by this measure Peleus’ son is equal to himself and does not feel empty Tartarus” (*Haec illi mensura viro respondet et hac est / par sibi Pelides nec inania Tartara sentit*) (Ovid *Met.* XII.618-19). His change breaks the more typically unnerving metamorphic paradigm in Ovid’s poem mainly in that Achilles’ transformation is not into another animal or object, but into himself (Murray 1998). Through his achievement of great deeds and death, he becomes what he was always meant to be: he literally becomes his own *kleos*. Achilles trades the death of a part of himself for the realization of what is perhaps *parte... meliore* “a better part” (Ovid *Met.* XV.875), as the poet claims for himself in his *envoi* at the end of the work.

Bibliography

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