

Leonine Behavior and Prolepsis in *Iliad* III. 23-28

Homer, through the use of a remarkable simile, set the stage early in *Iliad* III for a duel between Paris and Menelaus: "...Atrides thrilled like a lion lighting on some handsome carcass, lucky to find an antlered stag or wild goat just as hunger strikes—he rips it, bolts it down, even with running dogs and lusty hunters rushing him. So Menelaus thrilled at heart—princely Paris there, right before his eyes." (Fagles) Scholiast A comments that by *sw,mati* (carcass in Fagles' translation) Homer must mean a living creature because a lion never touches the corpse of an animal. While many critics and translators (Leaf, Monro, Kirk, Rouse, and Willcock) have agreed with Aristarchus (and against the scholiast) that Homer uses *sw/ma* always to designate a corpse, they nonetheless have attempted to rationalize Homer's supposed inaccuracy over a lion's feeding habits because they (e.g. Kirk) have embraced the widely-held view that "lions generally do not eat corpses."

Field biologists (Schaller, Bartlett, and Kruuk to name at least three), in a variety of studies, have shown that lions frequently scavenge food from other predators, hyenas in particular. From *National Geographic* comes evidence that of all predatory cats, only cheetahs will not eat animals that they themselves did not kill. In light of all of the evidence from those who study leonine behavior, Homer has used the lion (Menelaos) and the carcass (Paris) correctly in constructing this simile. Homer, in fact, describes lions stealing the prey of other animals, e.g. *Iliad* XIII. 198, and *Iliad* XI. 479ff.

This remarkable simile, often discredited or rationalized, deserves reconsideration, if not admiration, for what it accomplishes. Most similes in the *Iliad* make a single comparison, but here Homer makes two: Menelaos resembles a powerful, hungry lion and Paris resembles dead meat. Because Paris has not died, the second comparison, by prolepsis, anticipates his end. Both

sides seal a truce and determine to hold a duel matching Menelaos and Paris. With the teichoscopia Homer then delays the action. When the duel finally takes place, Aphrodite intervenes, rescues Paris from certain death, and spirits him back to his bedroom in Troy. Paris, already dead in the simile and nearly dead in the duel, returns to life and earthly pleasures by the end of III. The proleptic simile predicts dramatically (yet misleadingly) the outcome of the duel and thus magnifies the unexpectedness of Paris's rescue from certain death to life.

Bibliography:

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