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All Shall Fade: Homer's Foreshadowing of the End of the Heroic Age in The Iliad

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Heroes: the mighty men of valor were those who took the burdens of the world upon their own shoulders. During the time of the Trojan War as detailed by Homer, heroes were the paragons of strength and glory. These men, sometimes the sons or grandsons of the immortal gods and goddesses, stood head and shoulders above the inhabitants of the world around them, sought prowess and great victories on the battlefield, and revered personal glory and honor above all else. Achilleus, Agamemnon, Hector, Diomedes, Aias, and the others of their kind strode through the mythology and literature of Ancient Greece, their stories forever immortalized even as they themselves died. The time of heroes, however, was not fated to last forever. In Homer's *The Iliad,* the end of the golden age of traditional god-like battlefield heroes is foreshadowed through the shield of Achilleus, the aged hero Nestor, the weakness of the Trojan prince Paris, and the crafty Ithacan king Odysseus.

All of the main male characters in *The Iliad* exemplify to some degree the Ancient Greek hero of war. They are tall and strong, able to accomplish extreme feats that no man, "such as men are now," could possibly manage (V. 304). Many are descended from gods: Achilleus is the son of the water goddess/nymph Thetis, the Trojan hero Sarpedon is a son of Zeus, Aeneas' mother is the love goddess Aphrodite, and so on and so forth. Even those without immortal parentage are shown special favor by one god or another – Odysseus is very obviously beloved of Athena, Aphrodite protects Paris, and Hector is smiled upon by the sun god Apollo. These men seek honor and glory on the battlefield above all else, some (such as Patroklus and

Diomedes) even daring to even fight a god on occasion, attacking "three times… / … [and] a fourth, like something more than man" (V. 436, 437). Their stature is awe-inspiring, their prowess on the battlefield is unmatched, their strength is incredible, and their divinely-inspired rage is terrifying. For nine years these god-like men have fought outside the walls of Troy, oblivious to the fact that the time of their world is ending, that the fall of the city will mark a decline in the age of heroes, and that the age that is dawning will be devoid of their kind, that it will instead be a time of mere mortals.

One important clue that signifies that the age of heroes is fading away is the shield that the god Hephaestus makes for Achilleus in book eighteen. It is a beautiful shield, made of bronze, tin, gold, and silver, with many exquisitely detailed decorations on it (XVIII. 470-89). The two prominent features of the shield are the depictions of two earthly cities. One shows prosperity and craftsmanship and the joyous celebration of a wedding, a city at peace, while the other portrays a town full of death and destruction, a city in the throes of a brutal war. The embellishments of the shield show mere mortal men going about their lives and business (along with some interaction from the gods), but heroes are curiously absent from the entire decoration. Homer seems to be signifying to his audience that once the war has ended and the survivors have returned home, the time of the heroes will be over and they will not be needed any more. It will be time for the regular men to take control and run the world.

The heroes, however, especially Achilleus, fail to recognize the importance of the omission from the design. When Thetis brings the god-created weaponry and armor to her son, Achilleus is "glad… / …satisfied [in] his heart" by the wonderfully wrought shield, while everyone else is too terrified to even look at it (XIX. 18-19, 14-15). The Myrmidons and other Achaians are perhaps too wrapped up in the glorious grotesqueness to notice that something is

missing, and Achilleus is too full of anger and a burning desire for revenge to take note of it. None of the other Achaian heroes appear to notice the omission, either. Perhaps they did not even see that heroes were missing from the tableau on the shield of Achilleus, or perhaps they were just unable to recognize the importance of it (Homer does not give conclusive evidence for either option); either way, the significance is lost on the heroes and their cohort as they run into battle once more.

Nestor, the oldest of all the Achaians, also represents the fading of the age of heroes. Homer says that "In his [Nestor's] time two generations of mortal men had perished / …and he was king in the third age," far older than any of the heroes present at the siege of Troy, and far older than many of those same heroes will live to be (I. 250-52). He constantly refers to his fellow generals and kings as young men, and when he gives them advice, reminds them that they are much younger than he is (I. 259). Nestor is the only hero of that age still alive, and he will be one of the few of this age to survive the sack of Troy and the subsequent journey home. He alone of the Achaian and Trojan heroes lives to see several centuries, and no mortal man in the years to come will even come close to reaching his age. The longevity of the heroes has begun to diminish and is yet another sign that their time is now coming to an end.

With Nestor's old age comes a great respect that none of the other heroes can even come close to having. Agamemnon honors him "beyond all elders beside [him]," Idomeneus calls him "the great glory of the Achaians," Patroklos is sent to him for advice, and Nestor himself says that after a great battle in his younger days, "…all glorified Zeus among the gods, but among men Nestor," and "there is none who can dishonor / the thing that [he] say[s], not even powerful Agamemnon" (II. 21., XI. 511, 760. IX 61-62). He is revered by all the Achaians for his age and heroism. In contrast, the other heroes are the recipients of far less honor and respect from those

around them. Agamemnon shows disrespect to Achilleus, the best of the Achaian fighters, by taking away the woman he had captured for a concubine. Agamemnon himself will later be disrespected even more when he is brutally murdered by his wife Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus. Odysseus is mocked by the Trojans (and in *The Odyssey*, a later Homeric work, by the men who seek to woo his wife), Diomedes and Aias are taunted by their opponents, Hektor is refused the honor and common decency of a proper burial by Achilleus, and Menelaus experiences great disgrace when Paris and Helen eloped. Nestor, on the other hand, is well respected and everyone looks up to him. Even when his advice is not followed, his fellow heroes listen to what he has to say and answer deferentially.

Nestor also has greater battlefield prowess and strength than his fellow heroes. He says that he "fought single-handed, yet against such men no one / of the mortals now alive upon earth could do battle" (I. 271-72). When he attempts to appease the wrath of Achilleus and convince Agamemnon to not take the handmaiden Briseis, he also reminds his two fellow Achaians that he fought alongside (and maybe even against) many "god-like" heroes of a bygone age, great and powerful men and demi-gods such as Dryas, Polyphemos, Exadios, and Theseus "in the likeness of the immortals," something that none of his current companions can boast of, and who were all "better men than you are" (I. 263-65). Even though the strength of Aias, Agamemnon, Menelaus, and the others is greater than that of normal mortal men, their power is still greatly diminished from that of eras gone by. Nestor even says that "…Never yet have I seen nor shall see again such men as these were" (I. 266-67). His statement makes it clear that as the generations of heroes change, their prowess and importance is lessened, and they will never ever be as strong, as renowned, or as great as the heroes of generations gone by. Nestor is perhaps the last of the truly great heroes, a slowly fading relic of an age quickly fading away into obscurity.

The Trojan "hero" Paris, one of the youngest of those involved with the siege, also foreshadows an end to the great ages of heroism. Paris is very unlike most of the other heroes, on both sides of the battlefield. Unlike the other great men involved in the conflict, Paris is described as "…beautiful, woman-crazy… / [his] looks are handsome…" and his looks are heavily emphasized whenever people talk to or about him (III. 39, 45). A reasonable assumption can be made that his features are talked about so frequently because he is not truly heroic like his brother and the men his people are fighting against. When he fights Menelaos in book three, he is quickly beaten down and almost killed by the jilted husband of Helen – it takes divine intervention to save him from the brutal bronze spear of the Spartan king. (III. 340-382). The young Trojan prince has no real courage or fortitude, either: when Menelaos comes to fight him, "…the heart was shaken within him; / to avoid death he shrank into the host of his own companions / …[his] cheeks seized with a green pallor" as he runs away for fear of the vengeful Menelaos (III. 31-32, 35-37). His cowardice is so despicable that Helen even refuses to go to bed with him. "…Oh how I wish you had died there / beaten down by the stronger man… / …fight no longer with Menelaos…You might very well go down before his spear," she says almost derisively (III. 428-29, 434-36). He is not renowned for heroic deeds, strength, and prowess on the battlefield; rather, people know him as a lover and a man of surpassing fair looks.

Paris' priorities are also out of line with those of traditional heroes. The other kings and famous men seek honor and glory in the eyes of the gods and men (Achilleus even refuses to fight for the Achaians after he is dishonored by Agamemnon), but Paris seems to care mainly about love and women. Hektor rebukes him several times for being a "lover not a fighter," so to speak, and Paris does not even bother to deny it. When Aphrodite rescues Paris, she deposits him "…in his own perfumed bedchamber" and then forces Helen to go sleep with him (III. 378-445).

He later refuses to send Helen back to Menelaos in order to stop the war because he is so in love/lust with her and so enamored with her beauty that he cannot bear to return her to her husband. He can be seen as a signal that the priorities of men are shifting away from glory and honor, and instead reside in "love" and physical relationships. When such things become the priority, heroes are no longer needed.

The final, and perhaps most clear, foreshadowing of the end of the golden age of heroes surrounds the Ithacan king Odysseus. In book two, the "Catalogue of Ships," Odysseus holds the middle position, bridging the gap between Agamemnon (who is first in the catalogue) and Achilleus (who is last). He stands between two of the greatest heroes on the side of the Achaians, both of whom are widely renowned for their prowess and who are two of the main fighters in the *Iliad*. The one is the leader of the expedition and is indirectly responsible for Hector's Trojans being able to hold off the invading army for so long, while the other is so well-renowned that the Achaians take heart at the mere sight of his armor and the Trojans retreat in fear when he shouts (XIX). Odysseus stands in stark contrast to them, a full head shorter than Agamemnon himself, who is one of the shortest of the assembled kings and leaders. He is not the typical hero, physically overwhelming and awe-inspiring by his mere presence. He is not a strong, brash, authoritative leader like Agamemnon, nor is he handsome, the swiftest and most skilled in battle, like Achilleus. He is somewhere in the middle: a good leader, not much to look at it, a decent fighter, but his physical prowess is not very remarkable, all things considered. Odysseus is a hero, yes, he is blessed by the gods (particularly Zeus and Pallas Athena), and he is quite frequently referred to as "Odysseus the godlike" (X. 243), but he does not conform to the traditional notions of what a hero should be like. He cannot be a true "hero" in Ancient Greek sense of the word.

There is also a marked contrast between Odysseus and the other Achaian heroes when it comes to capabilities. The Ithacan king is by no means a weak coward like Paris is (he is referred to several times as "… Odysseus the spear-famed," and brutally slaughters Sokos and gloats over his corpse), but in regard to prowess on the battlefield, his skills are most certainly different from those of the men he fights with and against (XI. 396, 446-55). He fights and fights well, but he is not imbued with godlike strength and bloodlust. Whereas Patroklus, Diomedes, and several of the other heroes can charge at a god or other opponent "…three times… / … [and] a fourth, like something more than man," Odysseus' rule of three is something a little different (V. 436, 437). When he is cornered by the Trojans and fighting all on his own while gravely wounded in book eleven, he has to call out in a loud voice three times to his companions so that Menelaos and Aias can come and rescue him from his predicament (XI. 459-71). Unlike his compatriots, he cannot just bull-rush the enemy and fight his way through their ranks - he has to ask for and receive help from the other Achaians.

Much of Odysseus' talents do in fact lie in other places than those of the rest of the heroes: instead of being able to conquer entire legions on his own or throw boulders that are ten times the size of a normal man, his mind is readily apparent as his best weapon. Homer refers to him as being crafty and "…insatiable of guile and endeavor… / …wise much-devising Odysseus" (XI. 430, 482). In book nine, because of his wiles and skill at oratory, he is sent with Nestor and the rest of the envoy to speak to Achilleus and try to persuade him to return to battle. Later on, in book ten, Diomedes chooses Odysseus to accompany him on a scouting mission deep into enemy territory, saying that "[w]ere he to go with me, both of us could come back from the blazing / fire itself, since his mind is best at devices" (X. 246-47). The other Achains (and Homer, for that matter) praise him as a great hero, but they do so mainly for his mind and great

skill at speaking rather than for his strength in battle or his prowess with deadly weapons. Odysseus provides a heroic balance between body and mind, but because so much emphasis is placed on the latter trait, it signals a shift from the focus on the battlefield to the strength of the mind. Once the great power and glory of the battlefield has disappeared, the classical hero ceases to exist, for even mere mortals are capable of great achievements of the mind.

The Trojan War was a colossal battle of heroes versus heroes, the giants of men at war amongst themselves. These legendary mortals, beloved of the immortal gods, fought and died outside the walls of the city of Troy, unaware of the changes about to occur, blind to the portents signaling that with their deaths comes the end of the time of heroes. The hero's shield of Achilleus, with the bronze cities worked upon it, foretells a time without heroes, when regular men will rule the world while the gods watch. Aged Nestor, last of the generation of the greatest of men, represents the waning strength of each passing heroic generation. Beautiful, cowardly Paris exemplifies the change of priorities from glory to physical pleasure. Brilliant Odysseus, devious and cunning, shows the shift from strength and prowess in war to the craft and imagination of the human mind. As each hero meets his destiny, the time that these paragons represent, the golden age of heroes, begins to die away with them. The time of men awaits as the time of nearly-supernatural heroes fades.

Work Cited

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