

Strife Versus Stasis: The Paradox of Achilles in Hades

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Abstract

Achilles in the *Odyssey* prefers being a surf in the land of living to be a king in Hades. His attitude to heroism in *The Odyssey* contradicts his valorous character in *The Iliad*. Critics have viewed such contradiction as either a paradoxical rejection of heroism or a pessimistic view of death in general. This paper aims to look at the paradox from a different angle. It is the frozen nature of Hades that Achilles grieves most. In Hades, he is a psyche among other psyches who cannot fulfill any ideal including *aristeia* or to excel others. Hades is a place of stasis and passivity in sharp contrast to the moving world of the living. Achilles who once strove under the shining sun on the battlefield is now an idle shadow doing nothing. Thus, the stasis in Hades contrasts the strife in the living world and is the cause of Achilles' paradoxical attitude to heroism.

Keywords: heroism; Hades; stasis; strife; *aristeia*.

Argument

“O shining Odysseus, never try to console me for dying.

I would rather follow the plow as thrall to another

Man, one with no land allotted him and not much to live on,

Than be a king over all the perished dead.”

The paradoxical words of Achilles, the most revered Greek hero, in Hades resonate through ages. Achilles, the fiercest of the Achaeans, would rather be a slave on the land of living rather than a king in the land of dead. He is not proud of his death despite being the great victor who died heroically in combat. Therefore, he lays a paradox with which he both contradicts himself and the valorous values and heroic principles in *The Iliad*. A few sentences later, he expresses his love for his son's daring actions and skill as a warrior, which further exacerbates the contradiction. The paradox is perplexing for many who sought for a reasonable explanation for the altered attitude of the hero of *The Iliad*. For some critics, “Death in the battle was considered a privileged end by the ancient Greeks” (Dimakis, 2015; Redfield, 1992). For Vernant, in his “A ‘Beautiful Death’ and the Disfigured Corpse in Homeric Epic”, beautiful death actualizes excellence not only at the moment of death but forever (1991). The only way “to immortal fame” for Achilles is glorious death in the battle (Clay, 1983). According to Graves, for Greeks death is a journey and not an end (*telos*). For some other critics there are other reasons. Morris argues it is the awfulness of Hades that makes the hero die in the battle to immortalize himself (1989). For Gazis heroic death is “the end of a whole generation of heroes” and thus the end of heroic era (2018).

The irony of the epic poem of *The Iliad* lies in the fact that Achilles, the main Greek hero for whose wrath Homer sings, is so gloomy about dying heroically that contradicts the strife of the entire book and opposes the values held precious for the Greek audience. There are two views of the paradox, some see it as a rejection of heroic ideal and others argue that Achilles does not reject it at all and it is only a sorrowful view of death in general. Stanford sees the paradox as Greek's pessimistic attitude to death in general (1974). Achilles in Clay's words "regrets his former choice, but can only embrace the other extreme: the lowliest, most obscure existence he can imagine" (1983). H. Frankel thinks that Achilles is bitter (1962), for Beye Achilles contradicts himself (1966). For D. J. Stewart Achilles rebukes heroic act and turns it into dust (1976). Albinus sees Achilles' reproaching his honor not to benefit him in death. For Gazis Achilles, who is the epitome of heroic ideal, renounces "his choice of *kleos* in favour of a long and uneventful life" as a sign of "regret" (2018). But the regret comes from the very nature of Hades and its sharp difference from the world of living and its values, "the dead have no interest at all in mortal honours" (2018). Robert Schmiel argues Achilles does not repent his heroism since he is happy upon learning that his son has become a great warrior (1987).

There can be another aspect to the paradox beyond Greek's pessimistic attitude to death or ideal of heroic act. It is the very nature of Hades as a place of stasis that causes such a grief in Achilles. Achilles as a man of action strove in the Trojan War and died as a hero. But now he is only a psyche who cannot act at all in Hades. Hades is a place of complete stasis and passivity, dead do nothing but play (Garland, 1988) and lead an idle life.

According to *The Iliad*, the aim of all men is to be the first and superior to the others. The principle of *αἰὲν ἀριστεύειν* *aièn aristeúein* (Ever to Excel) is put by Glaucus "Hippolochus begat me. I claim to be his son, and he sent me to Troy with strict instructions: *Ever to excel*, to do better than others, and to bring glory to your forebears" (Homer, 1990). It is called *aristeuein*- or *aristeia*-Ideal. *Aristeia*-ideal is the moment when an epic hero seizes the whole moment for himself and single-handedly fights many of the enemies. Achilles' *aristeia* is in the Books 20-22 of *The Iliad* when he is striving to kill Hector to avenge Patroclus.

With having this in mind, the underworld or Hades is a completely different place where there is no place for *aristeia*. For Gazis, Hades is a realm of invisibility "a place of utter confinement and concealment" and seclusion (2018). So unlike Abrahamic conception of hell as a place of fire and torture, Garland reads Hades in different texts as both neutral (1988) and judgmental. But it rarely appears as a place of punishment and reward. According to Garland the only activities in Hades are "gossip, sententious moralising and self-indulgent regret" (1988). Hades is a place to "pass a quiet hour playing a game of draughts" (1988). What remains unclear for Garland is whether Hades is a place of earthly pleasure or frozenness in life (1988). For Keuls the psyches in the Hades are "frozen in time at the moment of death, in appearance as well as in experience" (1974).

For a man of action like Achilles, Hades is a static place in which he cannot live to the ideal of heroic life. For Greek to act is a crucial aspect of life in general and doing nothing and being idle are real deaths. On the nature of the dead in Hades Lars Albinus believes that the dead are senseless in Hades (2000). The ghosts (psyches) in Hades only repeat what they have already lived and only remember their past lives. From an epic perspective, the dark world of the underworld is "a frozen world of remembered images" (2000). Achilles addresses Odysseus and

describes Hades as a place “where the senseless dead men dwell, mere imitations of perished mortals” (2000). Such a description may refer to the fact that the psyche in Hades cannot choose and cannot strive, there is no rivalry in Hades and it is meaningless to do so.

When Achilles asks about his son and his father he refers to the paradox of passivity and activity. He is concerned about his father’s life and is sorrowful that he is no longer the man he “used to be once” since he is unable to help his father against the possible hardship. The inability that Achilles refers to can be regarded as the inability to act and to strive. Thus, Hades is a place of inability, passivity, and stasis. Achilles feels helpless when he wishes that “If only for a little while I could come like that to the house of my father, my force and my invincible hands would terrify such men” (2009). He is nostalgic about the good old days of action and strife in comparison to a frozen world of stasis and passive life. Stasis for Greek means death, and if you do not strive in real world you are already dead, thus we have the theme of death-in-life as a major theme in western literature. In this regard, one can interpret Sloth as a deadly sin in Christianity representing the dictum of death-in-life too. For the Christian man, sloth means stasis which is contrary to the classical tradition of strife and hard work. Thus, strife is praised.

Achilles is concerned about his son as well and wants to know if he has fought like a champion or not and Odysseus assures him of his son’s heroic valor. In describing the actions of Neoptolemos, Odysseus refers to his ability to move and fight “run far out in front, giving way to no man for fury, and many were those he killed in the terrible fighting” (2009). On the land of living fighting on the battlefield is a Greek ideal and a virtue. Thus, the principle of Ever to Excel means to strive to be the best which cannot be achieved in Hades, although, one is the king of all the dead. This is the reason behind Achilles’ double attitude to heroism. Heroism which is a value on the land of living is meaningless in Hades. Hence, Achilles feels happy when he hears the heroic acts of his son (2009). For archaic Greek Strife versus stasis is a great ideal which can be achieved through fighting. Achilles is grieving his own death since he cannot strive and in Hades, he is in a complete state of stasis.

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