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Anne-Catherine Schaaf

College of the Holy Cross, asscha22@g.holycross.edu

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Nature, Glory, Lineage in *Iliad* 6.145-151

“Great-hearted son of Tydeus, why do you ask my lineage?

As a generation of leaves, so is the generation of men.

The wind scatters some leaves to the ground, but the forest grows others

that flourish and in the time of spring come to succeed them;

so a generation of men either grows, or it dies.

But if you indeed wish to learn these things, so as to know well

my family’s lineage, many men know of it.”

Many similes in the *Iliad* serve to amplify, to quicken. A man is stronger when he is like a lion, faster when he is like the raging wind, and more brutal when he is like the cornered boar. This epic simile in book 6, lines 145 to 151, does just the opposite: it slows, it silences. It drags down the tension of the battle scene like a loom weight pulling a thread out of place. This epic simile is particularly interesting to me in how it subverts *aristeia* and the traditional battlefield narrative to reflect on the deeper themes of memory and devotion in the *Iliad*.

When Glaukos and Diomedes meet here, the battle is well underway. They are both ready to advance, but interestingly, they stop and greet each other with courtesy. Diomedes proudly describes his lineage, then asks Glaukos for his. Before Glaukos lists his heritage, however, he offers this unusual reflection. The theme of succession and the child versus the father is present throughout the *Iliad*, from Achilles being destined to be better than his father, to the acknowledgement among other warriors that they do not measure up to the great heroes of the past. Still, it is an unusual thing to meditate upon when meeting an enemy on the battlefield. Men, when they are compared to plants, are often mighty oaks or poplars, but here they are fragile and forgettable, one leaf out of many doomed to fall and be reabsorbed by the earth. Not

exactly a self-aggrandizing simile for a hero. Glaukos is not claiming any special strength or skill; rather, he is putting himself and Diomedes in the position of the thousands of nameless warriors who will be forgotten as the season's pass.

The statement seems to express that Glaukos feels acutely the ten long years of the war. After his respectful address, "Great-hearted son of Tydeus," it would be natural for him to counter Diomedes with his god-like heritage, as a natural lead up to their physical sparring (before they realize they are ancestral guest-friends), but instead, through this simile, he reaches out to Diomedes (145). It acknowledges that they are both in a situation beyond their control, they both seek *kleos*, and that their entire generation is in with them. Since the simile does not mark out distinctions between the Trojans or Achaeans and refers to a universal "generation of men," Glaukos is empathizing with Diomedes (146). Their battle might not be important or meaningful to either of them, and the glory of victory is fleeting, for their fighting is as neutral and forgettable as the growth cycle of leaves. Still, while the *Iliad* has many moments where soldiers of the opposing sides address one another, this is unique as a simile that casts them all as equal and indistinguishable. We are not given Diomedes' emotional reaction to this statement, yet I cannot help but be reminded of the famous incident in WWI where soldiers from opposing sides played soccer together on Christmas before resuming fighting the next day. Instead of glorifying the individual warrior, this simile finds common ground among them all as the foundation for empathy across the battle lines.

I believe this simile can also be read through the lens of gender. I first noticed a gendered aspect to this with Alexander's choice of the gendered word "men," for the leaves, which brought to mind an interesting tidbit of plant biology. Robin Wall Kimmerer in her book *Gathering Moss* briefly touches on the incredibly complex world of moss reproduction. Mosses

are generally monoecious, with both female and male reproductive organs. The “females” concentrate on producing one large stable gamete with a good chance of surviving the harsh conditions the mosses live in. The “males” instead bet on numbers and produce many small gametes, of which many will die, but some will eventually find a female gamete. While it is a long stretch from mosses to trees and modern biology (recounted by someone who is most definitely not a biology expert) to epic poetry, there appears to be common ground here. Women in the *Iliad*, and in this simile, are essentially a homogenous mass, spinning, feeding, nurturing, and sexually serving the men around them, whether Trojan or Achaean. They do not gain glory for themselves, but they are responsible for the propagation of the next generation and pass on the memory, not just the genes, of the past generation of heroes. Those heroes might be beautiful for a little while, like brilliant leaves in autumn or purple jacaranda blossoms, but they will quickly decay and be replaced. Ultimately, no one will remember any particular hero, just as people do not remember any particular leaf or blossom.

The line “so a generation of men either grows, or it dies” made me pause (149). Isn’t Glaukos’ point here that a generation will die and be forgotten anyway? Perhaps this, taken in conjunction with the preceding two lines, can be understood slightly differently as growth being equivalent to the pursuit of glory. In Achilles’ case, that would mean by staying at Troy and dying young he is, conversely, flourishing, while to go home and live in anonymity would be equivalent to death. “The wind scatters some leaves to the ground” could be understood here as a fall from glory as equal to death (147). While this simile clearly seems to find commonality between the warriors, which can lead to empathy among them, it also acknowledges their fundamental conflict. They cannot help but try and seek glory; it is in their psychological nature as much as it is in leaves’ biological nature to seek the energy of sunlight. The entire simile is

very concise and definite. There is no room for deliberation, detail, or exception. Glaukos' ancestors sought *kleos*, so he must do the same, and more so than any strong feelings over Helen or knowledge of the gods' designs.

Glaukos acknowledges what drives them all forward, yet his own act of reflection is, counterintuitively, against that said driving force. He defies the spirits of dark death that want to drag him into battle. Instead, he pauses and reflects on the futility of their whole enterprise. It will not change his fate, or Diomedes', but its poignancy gives the reader the chance to step back, just like the characters do, from the battlefield frenzy. This simile, not just their common connection, allows them to trust one another, and try to be decent in the midst of an impossible situation. We may be drawn into the battle as readers, but Glaukos' epic simile serves to remind us that the battle is not what makes the *Iliad* timeless, but the humanity and vulnerability of its countless characters, all striving against dark death to reach the golden, glorious sunlight.

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