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Poetic Imagery of Leaves and the Solemn Oath of Achilles

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I have lived long enough. My way of life
Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf,
And that which should accompany old age…[2]

These words, uttered by Macbeth when he is informed of the approach of the English army, invoke a potent mental image, one which connects a withered leaf which has fallen from a tree to the idea of the inevitability of death. It is no accident that Shakespeare chose this simile and placed it in the mouth of Macbeth, a man who would soon meet his destruction. However, this connection between leaves and the inevitability of death was no invention of Shakespeare. Rather, the playwright inherited this image from the most ancient poet in the canon of western literature, Homer.

The simile is, of course, a very distinctive feature of Homeric poetry. It is the tool by which the poet is able to express that which is inexpressible. It is the tool by which the poet allows the audience to paint a beautiful scene within their mind's eye, taking them away, even if only for a moment, from the terrible viciousness and violence of the epic poems. Many have tried to explain the function of these similes within the poems, resulting in the conclusion that similes in Homer are intended to break the monotony of the lengthy poems and act, as Pope believes, as a beacon of light amidst the 'dry desert of a thousand lines.'[3] The matter of the interpretation of these similes is somewhat more complex. David Porter, for example, attempts to interpret similes containing scenes from nature within the Iliad and tentatively postulates that the comparison of the violent with the serene is intended to create a contrast in the mind of the reader and therefore expose the aimless violence of war.[4]

While Porter's argument is tentative and restricted to only a few similes, it is the aim of this paper to provide an interpretation for a recurring simile found

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[2] Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act 5, Scene 3, lines 25 – 27.

[3] Pope, *Epistle to Augustus*, 112.

[4] Porter (1972).

within the Homeric corpus, the simile of leaves. I argue that Homeric similes containing leaves are also connected to the idea of the inevitability of death. Such an interpretation will allow us to fully understand a prominent passage within the *Iliad*, the oath of Achilles in Book 1, an oath which would instigate the events of the entire epic and result in the death and suffering of many:

> ναὶ μὰ τόδε σκῆπτρον, τὸ μὲν οὔ ποτε φύλλα καὶ ὄζους
> φύσει, ἐπεὶ δὴ πρῶτα τομὴν ἐν ὄρεσσι λέλοιπεν,
> οὐδ᾽ ἀναθηλήσει: περὶ γάρ ῥά ἑ χαλκὸς ἔλεψε
> φύλλά τε καὶ φλοιόν: νῦν αὖτέ μιν υἷες Ἀχαιῶν
> ἐν παλάμῃς φορέουσι δικασπόλοι, οἵ τε θέμιστας
> πρὸς Διὸς εἰρύαται: ὃ δέ τοι μέγας ἔσσεται ὅρκος:
>
> Verily by this sceptre, which will never again put forth leaves or shoots,
> since indeed it first left its bough in the mountains,
> it will not sprout afresh, for the bronze axe stripped it
> of leaves and bark, and now the sons of the Achaeans
> bear it in their hands as they pass judgement, those who
> have guarded the laws of Zeus: and this shall be a great oath to you:[5]

It is with this oath that the ἄριστος Ἀχαιῶν, the greatest of the Achaeans, Achilles, withdraws himself from battle, his pride having been wounded by Agamemnon's demand, swearing that the Achaeans would rue the day that they allowed Agamemnon to steal his slave-girl, Briseis. As an audience, we tend to focus on the oath itself, the most impressive and crucial part of Achilles' speech. As a result, the simile preceding the fateful oath seems to have been ignored or rather overlooked.[6] G.S Kirk, in his commentary on Books 1 to 4 of the *Iliad*, suggests that the simile adds the idea of inevitability to the fulfilment of the oath, making it all the more powerful and effective: 'just as [this sceptre] will never sprout leaves again, so will this oath be fulfilled'.[7] The thesis of this paper follows on from Kirk's remark. I argue that this simile does not simply imply the inevitable fulfilment of Achilles' oath, but also forecasts the death and destruction which is made inevitable by this oath. In order to support such an argument, an analysis of the similes containing leaves within the epic poetry of Homer is necessary.

Before embarking upon such an analysis, it is necessary to make a few distinctions. First of all, of the eighteen references to the word φύλλα (leaves) in the Homeric corpus, only eight are found within similes and only two of these are

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5 Hom. Il. 1. 234ff. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

6 Combellack (1948) 211; Friedrich and Redfield (1978) 271.

7 Kirk (2001) 77f.

found within the *Odyssey*. As noted by Samuel E. Bassett, the fact that the Iliad is primarily focused around a battlefield, creates the necessity for more similes.[8] In fact, two hundred similes are to be found in the *Iliad* as opposed to forty within the *Odyssey*. One should also draw a distinction between Homeric similes and similes found in Homer. The Homeric simile is an extended comparison, as opposed to the simple simile, usually spanning around four lines, which creates a poetic image within the mind of the audience, focusing on a specific idea or action and it is with this type of simile that we shall be primarily concerned with.[9] Of the eight similes that are to be discussed, only four are to be considered Homeric similes, and it is these similes which carry the connection between leaves and the inevitability of death.

Turning, briefly, to the ten references to leaves outside of a simile, all coming from the *Odyssey*, we note that the word φύλλα appears most commonly in connection to sleep, carrying no connection to the inevitability of death:

> πάντῃ οἱ κατὰ γουνὸν ἀλωῆς οἰνοπέδοιο
> φύλλων κεκλιμένων χθαμαλαὶ βεβλήαται εὐναί.
>
> He makes a humble bed of leaves anywhere
> on the high ground of his vineyard.[10]

The other mentions of the word φύλλα are, again, not connected to this idea of the inevitability of death. In Book 12 of the *Odyssey*, the word is used when describing the fig-tree that grows above Charybdis and, later in that same book, leaves are used as a replacement for barley in the sacrifices carried out by Odysseus' men on Thrinacia.[11] In Book 19 of the Odyssey, the word is used as part of the scenery of Odysseus' boar hunting on Parnassus.[12] In short, none of these ten references have any sort of connection to the inevitability of death.

The first of the Homeric similes referring to leaves comes from the first lines of Glaucus' famous speech in Book 6 of the *Iliad*. Here, the Lycian responds boldly to the menacing threats of Diomedes. Naturally, our understanding of the context of this simile is paramount in the interpretation.[13] Mid-way through Book 6, the two warriors, Diomedes and Glaucus, meet upon the battlefield of Troy and approach each other to fight. It is Diomedes who, being undoubtedly the superior of the

8 Bassett (1921) 132.

9 See Bassett (1921); Coffey (1951); Snyder (1981).

10 Hom. *Od*. 11.193f. Cff. Hom. *Od*. 5.483, 487, 491; 6.127-129; 7.285, 287.

11 Hom. *Od.* 12.103, 357.

12 Hom. *Od*. 19.442f.

13 For more detailed assessments of this episode see Scodel (1992); Traill (1989); Harries (1993); Donlan (1989).

two, is first to speak and extend the challenge. Glaucus, having been asked for his lineage since the Achaean feared that he might be a god in disguise, provides the following response:

> ‘Τυδεΐδη μεγάθυμε τί ἢ γενεὴν ἐρεείνεις;
> οἵη περ φύλλων γενεὴ τοίη δὲ καὶ ἀνδρῶν.
> φύλλα τὰ μέν τ᾽ ἄνεμος χαμάδις χέει, ἄλλα δέ θ᾽ ὕλη
> τηλεθόωσα φύει, ἔαρος δ᾽ ἐπιγίγνεται ὥρη:
> ὣς ἀνδρῶν γενεὴ ἣ μὲν φύει ἣ δ᾽ ἀπολήγει’
>
> ‘O great-hearted son of Tydeus, why do you ask about my lineage?
> The generation of men is such as that of leaves.
> The wind scatters the leaves to the ground, yet the forest,
> flourishing, blooms others, when spring comes:
> just as the race of men, one generation blooms, another fades.’[14]

These lines seem to be an odd response to the blatant threats of the superior Diomedes. We might ask why the Lycian hero is so filled with emotion at a time such as this? J. D Craig, in his article focusing on the subsequent exchange of armour between Glaucus and Diomedes, suggests that Glaucus’ reply reveals the hero as a coward, who was aware of his inferiority in the face of the great Diomedes and this response is his attempt to flinch away from destiny.[15] This reading[16] misses the point of the simile. As Richard Jebb notes, a ‘simile, in its Homeric use, is never merely ornamental, but always introduces a moment, or a thing, which the poet wishes to render impressive. He prepares us for it by first describing something like it, only more familiar.’[17] The ‘thing’ that Homer wishes to emphasize is the nature of humans in relation to their birth and death. Here Glaucus is not implying that he is soon to be like a leaf which has fallen from the tree. The main focus of Glaucus’ response is his lineage. Kirk paraphrases Glaucus’ opening lines perfectly: ‘Why bother about who, precisely, I am? Men come and go like the leaves of the forest; but if you insist on learning my genealogy, which is in fact quite widely known, then here it is’.[18]

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14 Hom. *Il*. 6.146ff.

15 See Craig (1967). The idea that Glaucus was a coward is at least as old as Horace. See Hor. *Serm*. 1.7.15-18.

16 We note, also, that Glaucus is a descendant of the famous Bellerophon and, as the hero tells us, before setting out from Troy he swore to always be brave and to never shame his ancestors. What is more, he is the cousin and close companion of the great hero Sarpedon, and it is to Glaucus that Sarpedon aims his famous speech on the duty of heroes in Book 12.

17 Ashely (1932) 22.

18 Kirk (1990) 176.

Having dealt with the immediate context of the episode, we may now begin to interpret the meaning of the simile and what Homer means to imply by it. Within these four lines, Glaucus highlights the fleetingness and frailty of human life, using the fallen leaf, an image with which we are all familiar with, to emphasise this point. To man, death is as inevitable as the changing of the seasons, which brings about decay in autumn, yet a rebirth in the spring. For a moment we, as an audience, are taken away from the battle and, by means of Homer's words, we start to see the leaves falling from the tree and we are able to relate to this fleetingness and the inevitability of death in our own lives.

In fact, such a reading of these lines is corroborated by later authors who quote these same lines from Homer. Sider, in his analysis of this quote as found in Simonides, Mimnermos, Horace and Stobaios, argues that all these authors share a similar interpretation of the simile as Homer himself.[19] Mimnermos, for example, choses to focus specifically on the aspect of the inevitability of death and even infers, as Sider notes, that nothing really lasts:[20]

> ἡμεῖς δ᾽ οἷά τε φύλλα φύει πολυανθέος ὥρῃ
> ἔαρος, ὅτ᾽ αἶψ᾽ αὐγῇς αὔξεται ἠελίου,
> τοῖς ἴκελοι πήχυιον ἐπὶ χρόνον ἄνθεσιν ἥβης
> τερπόμεθα πρὸς θεῶν εἰδότες οὔτε κακὸν
> οὔτ᾽ ἀγαθόν:
>
> We are just as leaves, which, born in the season of
> plentiful spring, quickly grow in the radiance of the sun,
> the span of youth resembling the flowers in bloom,
> we delight, knowing neither bad nor good
> to the gods:[21]

This poet choses to focus solely on the first part of Homer's simile, that is, the leaves falling to the ground, and altogether ignores the idea of the leaves regrowing. This reflects his interpretation of Homer's words, even ending the section with 'οὐδέ τίς ἐστιν ἀνθρώπων ᾧ Ζεὺς μὴ κακὰ πολλὰ διδῷ'.[22] Likewise, Simonides choses to focus on the brevity of human life and yet he takes a rather positive outlook on the simile:

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19 Sider (1996) *passim*.

20 Sider (1996) 274.

21 Stob. *Fl*. 98.13.

22 'there is no man to whom Zeus has not given much evil'.

θητῶν δ᾽ ὅφρα τις ἄνθος ἔχει πολυήρατον ἥβης,
κοῦφον ἔχων θυμὸν πόλλ᾽ ἀτέλεστα νοεῖ;
οὔ τε γαρ ἐλμιδ᾽ ἔχει γηρασέμεν οὔτε θανεῖσθαι,
οὐδ᾽ ὑγιής ὅταν ᾖ φροντίδ᾽ ἔχει καμάτου.
νήπιοι οἷς ταύτῃ κεῖται νόος οὐδὲ ἴσασιν
ὡς χρόνος ἔσθ᾽ ἥβης καὶ βιότοι᾽ ὀλίγος
θνητοῖς.

As long as a mortal has the desirable bloom of youth
with a light spirit he thinks many unaccomplished deeds.
For he has no expectation that he will grow old or die,
nor when healthy does he think about illness.
Fools are they whose thoughts are thus! Nor do they know
that the time of youth and life is short for mortals.[23]

Yet, perhaps the most interesting reference to Homer's lines comes from Horace's *Ars Poetica*, in which the poet reutilises Homer's simile to express the point that even words die:

ut silvae foliis pronos mutantur in annos,
prima cadunt; ita verborum vetus interit aetas,
et iuvenum situ florent modo nata vigentque.
debemur morti nos nostraque:

As leaves in the woods are changed with the fleeting years;
the earliest fall off first: in this manner words perish with old age,
and those lately invented flourish and thrive,
like men in the time of youth.[24]

Even though Horace changes the exact words of Homer, altering them in order to convey his own meaning, the conclusion that we must draw is clear. In the minds of all these poets the imagery of leaves was closely related to inevitability of death, therefore indicating that even to Homer the simile of leaves was related to this idea.

This leads us to the next Homeric simile that we shall be analysing. In Book 21 of the *Iliad*, Apollo and Poseidon, the former supporting the Trojans and the latter the Achaeans, meet each other on the battlefield. The elder god, Poseidon,

[23] POxy 3965, fr. 26, translated in Sider (1996) 264.

[24] Hor., *Ars*. 60ff.

challenges Apollo to a fight, reminding him of the insult that they suffered at the hands of the Trojans. Apollo replies with the following words:

> ‘ἐννοσίγαι᾽ οὐκ ἄν με σαόφρονα μυθήσαιο
> ἔμμεναι, εἰ δὴ σοί γε βροτῶν ἕνεκα πτολεμίξω
> δειλῶν, οἳ φύλλοισιν ἐοικότες ἄλλοτε μέν τε
> ζαφλεγέες τελέθουσιν ἀρούρης καρπὸν ἔδοντες,
> ἄλλοτε δὲ φθινύθουσιν ἀκήριοι.’
>
> ‘Earth-shaker, would you say that I am prudent,
> if I do indeed fight against you for the sake of cowardly
> mortal men, who, just as leaves, flourish in fiery brilliance
> for a while, eating the fruit of the earth and then lifelessly
> waste away.’[25]

The connection between Glaucus’ words and those of Apollo is an interesting one. As Nicholas Richardson notes in his commentary of books 21 to 24 of the *Iliad*, Homer almost appears to be referencing the earlier line.[26] The meaning behind this simile is clear to us; the life of man is short, and the death of man is inevitable. Yet a greater contrast is struck by the words of Apollo, a contrast which emphasises the fleetingness of man’s life. For, in this instance, it is not a mortal man, Glaucus, who is uttering these words, but rather an immortal god who lives on Olympus, far removed from the concern of death. The phrase ἀρούρης καρπὸν ἔδοντες, is yet another indication of the connection between the two passages.[27] As Richardson points out, this phrase is only used twice in the *Iliad*; once in this passage and again in Diomedes’ initial speech to Glaucus in Book 6. Moreover, it is clear from the chosen language that this comparison places greater emphasis upon the death of man. Unlike Glaucus’ simile, which focuses primarily upon the cycle of death and rebirth, the words ‘ζαφλεγέες’ and ‘φθινύθουσιν’,[28] both very emphatic words, clearly show the poet’s focus upon the inevitability of death.

Homer’s description of the death of Imbrius in Book 13 serves as the final example of this connection between leaves and the inevitability of death within the Iliad:

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25 Hom. *Il*.21.462ff.

26 Richardson (2000) 93; Plutarch, Mor. 104E-F; Sider (1996) 265.

27 Richardson (2000) 93.

28 The Liddle-Scott-Jones Greek Lexicon glosses ζαφλεγέες as ‘full of fire, of men at their prime’ and φθινύθουσιν as ‘to waste away or pine away, decay, of men’.

ὃ δ᾽ αὖτ᾽ ἔπεσεν μελίη ὣς
ἥ τ᾽ ὄρεος κορυφῇ ἔκαθεν περιφαινομένοιο
χαλκῷ ταμνομένη τέρενα χθονὶ φύλλα πελάσσῃ:

And he fell just as
an ash-tree which, on top of a mountain seen all round from afar,
is cut down by a bronze axe and the soft leaves fall to the ground:[29]

As Teucer cut down Imbrius, a prominent man among the Trojans, Homer launches into this extended simile, comparing the fallen warrior to a tree standing high atop a mountain which is cut down by a bronze axe, again taking the audience away from the battlefield of Troy and using beautiful imagery to enforce a certain idea. It must be noted that the main focus of this simile is the ash-tree itself, notable since it is from this tree that spears are crafted, thus awarding Imbrius his entitled status as a warrior. Moreover, the location of the tree, upon a high mountain, is no coincidence, nor was the location, chosen specifically to create a more evocative image. The location of the ash-tree denotes Imbrius' position of prominence among the Trojan people. Yet, it is the phrase τέρενα χθονὶ φύλλα πελάσσῃ that concerns us here. Homer choses to linger upon this image of the leaves falling to the ground, echoing the words of Glaucus in Book 6, imparting the idea that death comes to even the most prominent of men. However, the contrast between the two passages must also be noted. The leaves of Glaucus' simile are cast to the ground by the wind, a natural phenomenon. Yet, Imbrius' ash-tree is cut down by a device of man, a χαλκός, bronze axe, illustrating the fact that Imbrius' life was cut short and he was not allowed to reach his natural end.

Prior to returning to the oath of Achilles and to the simile of the leaves found therein, I would a like to mention the other four similes relating to leaves which are not considered to be Homeric similes. The first two of these similes come from Book 2 of the Iliad and shall be discussed together as their meaning is identical. Their location within this book is interesting. The first simile is found a few lines before the catalogue of ships, while the second is found a few lines before the catalogue of the Trojans. Both of the similes are used to describe the sheer numbers of the warriors:

ἔσταν δ᾽ ἐν λειμῶνι Σκαμανδρίῳ ἀνθεμόεντι
μυρίοι, ὅσσά τε φύλλα καὶ ἄνθεα γίγνεται ὥρῃ.

[29] Hom. *Il*. 13.178ff.

> And they stood in the flowery meadow of the Scamander,
> numberless as the leaves and flowers in season.[30]

> λίην γὰρ φύλλοισιν ἐοικότες ἠ ψαμάθοισιν
> ἔρχονται πεδίοιο μαχησόμενοι προτὶ ἄστυ.

> For they were exceedingly similar to leaves or sand
> as they come over the plain to attack the city.[31]

Another example of such a simile comes from book 9 of the Odyssey, when Odysseus is recounting his encounter with the Ciciones:

> ἦλθον ἔπειθ' ὅσα φύλλα καὶ ἄνθεα γίγνεται ὥρῃ,
> ἠέριοι:

> Then, at Dawn, they came just as leaves and flowers
> in spring:[32]

Here we may note that identical language is used both here and in *Iliad*.2.468. As already mentioned, the meaning that Homer wishes to convey by means of these similes is similar, namely the idea of large numbers. It is clear that they do not share a meaning with the more complex Homeric similes found in Books 6, 13 and 21 of the *Iliad*.

We may, finally, also also necessary to mention the last simile of leaves in Homer, coming from Book 7 of the *Odyssey*:

> οἷά τε φύλλα μακεδνῆς αἰγείροιο:

> Just like the leaves of a tall poplar:[33]

Here, Homer is referring to the agile hands of the Phaeacian maids working at their loom, a meaning which is completely incongruent with all other similes found above. It is clear that the simple similes found in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* lack the meaning which the Homeric similes of the *Iliad* carry. I would offer a tentative explanation for this incongruence. It has been argued that the longer

30 Hom. *Il*. 2.467f.

31 Hom., *Il*. 2.800f.

32 Hom., *Od.* 9.51f.

33 Hom., *Od*. 7.106.

Homeric similes belong to a later stratum of poetry than the more traditional simple simile, which forms an intrinsic part of the recital of oral poetry, acting as a mnemonic device.[34] Therefore, if these two types of similes do indeed belong to different stages in the development of these epics, it is natural that the meanings behind the similes are also different.

With this in mind, we may now return to the words of Achilles and the oath that would cause perpetual grief and suffering to all that surround the hero. As previously stated, I believe Kirk to be correct in connecting the simile with the inevitability of the oath.[35] However, in light of the extracts mentioned above, I believe that we may build upon Kirk's interpretation and connect Achilles' words not only to the inevitable fulfilment of the oath but also to the inevitable death that this oath shall bring. According to this reading, Achilles' words foreshadow the events that are to come; the death of Patroclus, the death of Hector, and the deaths of all those that perished as a result of Achilles' wounded pride.

Achilles chooses to focus on the fact that the sceptre, a symbol of authority, would never again sprout leaves. The process of death and decay set out by Glaucus' simile has ended. It has come an end, not by nature as in the cases of Glaucus' and Apollo's similes, but rather by χαλκός, a bronze axe. Here, it would be impossible to miss the connection to Imbrius' death at the hands of Teucer. Imbrius was cut down, the tree fell, the leaves touched the ground. Just as the sceptre held by Achilles would never put forth leaves again, Imbrius' ash-tree will never put forth leaves, the process of decay and rebirth was ended. Just as the leaves of this sceptre, this sceptre which is a symbol of the Achaeans, will never put forth leaves again, so will the generations of Achaeans never sprout afresh, so will the men who will die upon the battlefield never bear children. The leaves of the sceptre represent the inevitability of the death that is to come.

To support this reading, we may turn to one final reference to the simile of leaves in epic poetry, this time coming from Book 12 of Vergil's *Aeneid*:

> ut sceptrum hoc' (dextra sceptrum nam forte gerebat
> 'numquam fronde levi fundet virgulta nec umbras,
> cum semel in silvis imo de stirpe recisum
> matre caret posuitque comas et bracchia ferro,
> olim arbos, nunc artificis manus aere decoro
> inclusit patribusque dedit gesture Latinis.'
>
> Just as this sceptre (for he happened to be carrying a sceptre in his right hand)

[34] Shipp (1972) 3; Moulton (1974) 384.

[35] Kirk (2000) 77f.

> will never bear leaves or shade from its light branch,
> when once in the forest it was cut away
> from its mother bough and it is freed from foliage and branches by iron,
> once leafy, now the hands of the craftsman wreaths it in elaborate bronze
> and gave it to the Latin elders to bear.[36]

This oath, found in the final book of Vergil's epic poem, would seal the treaty that would cause the deaths of thousands of men in addition to Turnus. Vergil chooses to echo Homer and the oath of Achilles precisely. This could have been no accident. A poet does not borrow a line from Homer easily, nor does he borrow it without the intention of preserving the same meaning.[37] The inevitability of death is bound to the words of Aeneas in this oath and, therefore, we can conclude that there is, in fact, a link between leaves and the inevitability of death in the Homeric similes of the Iliad, a link which was preserved in the minds of later authors till the present day.

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[36] Verg. *A.* 12. 206ff.

[37] Vergil, when certain accusations of plagiarism were set against him, is said to have replied 'It is as easy to steal the club from Hercules as a line from Homer.'

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