

From War Heroes to Sporting Heroes: A Brief Study of the Transformation of the War Hero into a Sporting Hero in Iliad 22 and 23.

James Duncan Stratford

Book 23 of Homer's *Iliad*, written in the 8th century BCE, is the first literary account of ancient sporting practices.¹ The focus of book 23 is the funeral games sponsored by Achilles to honour his dead companion Patroklos. Until Book 23 each of these activities has been connected solely with battle. The participants also are all, without exception, warriors. There is one obvious difference, however, between this honorary competition and the conflicts that precede it. The object of the competition for the victor is not to kill the opponent but rather to outperform him in a particular skill.²

In this paper I suggest that the funeral games and Achilles' hunting of Hector which directly proceed them, signal a shift in emphasis away from the deadly field of battle toward the somewhat less deadly but just as value-laden arena of sport. In doing so it is my purpose to look at the movement from war to ritualised combat in early sport as a reaction to war itself and to stimulate speculation on the turning away from the military establishment in favour of organised sport in modern Australian culture.

For the best part of the first 22 books of the *Iliad* the audience witnesses vast swathes of narrative devoted to vivid descriptions of mortal combat involving both the princes and the faceless masses they lead. During the siege of Troy a range of weapons and techniques are employed by the warriors with varying degrees of success. In warfare as in sport a warrior is more likely to succeed if he has mastered a number of weapons or fighting skills. The *aristeia* (duel) between Achilles and Hector is a prime example of 'multi-skilled' warriors as we watch them progressively move from one form of combat to the next and is told by Homer over 159 lines from 22.136 to 22.327. The first 114 of those (22.136-250) are dedicated to the chase (or race) three times around the walls of Troy, followed by a spear attack (22.270-293). Over the final 22 lines (22.305-327) Hector unsuccessfully charges Achilles with his sword. It is significant that each change in the action is precipitated by the intervention of the gods. It is Athene, in the guise of Deiphobos who materialises to convince Hector to stop running and face Achilles in combat (22.225-47) and it is the same Deiphobos who conveniently disappears when Hector needs his spear (22.293-295), forcing Hector to rely on his sword – a poor match for Achilles' famous ash spear.³

A brief analysis of some of the main features of the Hector versus Achilles showdown indicates that there are some important structural similarities between it and the funeral games, which come shortly after them. In the light of such similarities it is possible to view the *aristeia* of book 22 as a deliberate build up to the funeral games of book 23. Homer in fact explicitly compares the events to one another:

it was a great man who fled, but far better he who pursued him rapidly, since here was no festal beast, no ox-hide they strove for, for these are the prizes that are given men for their running. No they ran for the life of Hector, breaker of horses. As when about the turnposts racing single-foot horses run at full speed, when a great prize is laid up for the winning, a tripod or a woman, in games for a man's funeral (*Il.* 22.158-65).⁴

The essentially competitive nature of combat is referred to on a second instance during the chase: 'But brilliant Achilles kept shaking his head at his own people and would not let them throw their bitter projectiles at Hector for fear the thrower might win the glory, and himself come second' (*Il.* 22.205-8). Of course it would be absurd in such a contest for the honours to fall to any random participant, especially one of the *hoi poloi* (the masses). The honour of Hector's death must and will fall to one man and one man alone, Achilles. Interference in such a contest would be completely inappropriate, except if it comes from Olympians, which of course it does.

It is also important to remember that these warriors are meant to be the best of the Achaian and Trojan forces and yet now with the focus on them we are made aware of their own limitations; each is as capable of missing their target as the other. After all Achilles and Hector are more or less equally matched warriors. The deciding factor is not, therefore, a matter of who is the better one but who receives the heavier allotment of the weights of Death on the golden scales of Zeus (22.208-13).

Funeral games in Ancient Greece appear in both the literary and archaeological record to be held exclusively for particular warriors who had died in combat. The games were designed to celebrate the various acts of warfare in general and to recall the final combat of the dead warrior in particular.⁵ In the funeral games for Patroklos sponsored by Achilles in book 23 of Homer's epic poem the *Illiad* there were eight events. They included a horse race, boxing and wrestling matches, a foot race, spear competition, a throwing competition and an archery contest. It would be pointing out the obvious to explain how each of these activities was derived from warfare.

On the battlefield skills must be learnt by necessity. In funeral games participants are able to choose which, if any, of the events they will compete in, competitors are able to specialise. On the battlefield no such specialisation is possible. Of course which event is chosen will be determined by which skill the warrior feels most confident in and we can safely assume that the warriors that contest in each of the events would normally be exemplars in that form of combat on the battlefield. One such man is the boxer Epeios. Whilst being supremely confident of victory in the match it is interesting to note that he does not regard himself as a great warrior: 'I say no other of the Achaians will beat me at boxing and lead off the jenny. I claim that I am the champion. Is it not enough that I fall short in battle? Since it could not be ever, that a man could be a master in every endeavour' (*Il.* 23. 668-671). For Epeios and the rest of Patroklos' comrades, the funeral games are an attempt to recall the

final combat of the warrior, in which his loss resulted from being outperformed in a particular skill.

Homer's funeral games clearly present an opportunity for warriors who excel in particular skills to gain honours they would not be able to win in combat. Likewise, where on the battlefield a victory normally results in the death of the loser, in Patroklos' games all the losers are honoured with a prize of their own. In fact, the number of contestants is limited to the number of prizes on offer.⁶ Those who elect themselves to compete do so because they know that they are among the best.

The funeral games of *Iliad* 23 are both derived from war and celebrate exclusively the death of some participants in war, namely the *promachoi* (those who fight at the forefront). However, the skilful and egalitarian nature of competition celebrates the virtuosity of the specialist who might be disadvantaged in the chaos of battle. At the same time the redistribution of honours deprives, at least temporarily, the act of war of its ability to 'make or break the reputations of its victors and victims.

The way in which honours are distributed to the living contestants in the funeral games has direct repercussions on the way the dead warrior can be perceived by their community. Patroklos, in his own combat, was clearly the loser, but this is not to say that as a warrior he was an inferior warrior on all counts and unworthy of honours, when in fact the opposite is true. Nonetheless, Patroklos' defeat and death in battle presents a problem for those celebrating his life and his status as a great warrior. Redfield asserts that the games are an opportunity to restore and even reaffirm the status of the fallen warrior whilst simultaneously purifying the dead hero's sullied reputation. In funeral games, therefore, the hero's community celebrate the death of the victim of combat by enacting conflicts in which the loser is not a victim. Thus they 'purify the impurity latent in the status of the victim, not by reforming the situation (which is beyond their power)', but by denying the signifying power of the hero's final combat.⁷

Thus Patroklos is honoured as a fine warrior, even if not a victorious one in his final combat. It is important that this act of reclaiming a warrior's honour takes place not as a revenge killing, although Achilles has already done this, rather it takes place within the confines of the community. In doing so, the power of the battlefield is substituted and even denied in favour of that of the *polis*. Ultimately it is the *polis* and its inhabitants (the warrior's community) that have the power to confirm or deny one's place within it.

The critical difference between the contests in the games and on the battlefield is the presence or absence of death. The games replicate combat in most ways. The activities and the participants are the same (except for the enemy of course). The honoured contestants win horses, women, armour, cups and tripods, just as they would in battle. There are disputes over the calling of the various events and the distribution of the prizes. In the discourse of the funeral games even the gods play a part, to ensure the events transpire to their satisfaction. Indeed the games are also violent and accidents do occur in which contestants are hurt, some participants like Epeios even

threaten others with death should they loose. It is the absence of death, or at least intentional death, and the practice of distributing prizes to all contestants which transforms an elaborate contest into a ritual which celebrates the warriors' participation in battle, without glorifying death itself. Nevertheless the funeral games take place as part of the celebration of death in combat.

Although relatively harmless, these 'sports' were not removed from the idea or even the presence of death altogether. By contrast, their enactment is held in the 'shadow' of the funeral pyre as the crowning glory of the funeral rituals, for the very purpose of celebrating the glorious life (and death) of the hero. Taking place just after the burning of the pyre we can almost smell the ash lingering in the air which the competitors inhale, yet Homer implies that the sports have significance over the older markers of death.

Within the narrative of Patroklos' games Homer, via the wise old Nestor, subtly questions the ability of physical memorials to honour the dead over time. Just before the great chariot race the old Nestor takes the younger Antilochos aside to impart some of the wisdom of his years, Most of his monologue is concerned with practical advice such as when to hold the horses back and when to let them go. There is one very interesting remark concerning the corner marker which is worthy of consideration.

I will give you a clear mark and you will not fail to notice it. There is a dry stump standing up from the ground about six feet, oak, it may be, or pine, and not rotted away by rain-water, and two white stones are leaned against it, one on either side, at the joining place of the ways, and there is smooth driving around it. Either it is the grave-mark of someone who died long ago, or it was set as a racing goal by men living before our time (// 23: 326-332).

What is striking about this is Nestor's uncertainty concerning the origins of the marker. Nestor is certain that Antilochos won't miss the marker, but its significance is not clear even for a stationary and learned bystander. If it was just an old weathered tree stump, no meaning has been lost. However, if it was a grave-marker, the sign, which the marker definitely is, it has lost all connection with its intended referent. So, if there was anyone buried under the marker, their death and any importance connected to it have been almost completely lost. Now their death is ultimately and utterly meaningless. In the light of the present argument, there would appear to be little point to death when there is no certainty that the symbols created to honour the dead cannot be mistaken for mere anomalies of nature. Ultimately it is much more fruitful, or at least lest wasteful, to participate in non-lethal competition.

Over the last one hundred years it is possible to see two divergent but connected movements in Australian culture. On the one hand, arguably ever since the First World War, the cost of war in terms of human life has been a major issue, climaxing during the Vietnam War. There are many indicators of this shift in modern society, just as there were in Classical Greece. Literary

sources and the visual arts, public and private patronage of the respective establishments and the infrastructure that supports them all indicate a change in Australian society's attitude toward war.

In Australia at least, the sporting arena has become the new breeding ground of popular heroes. However, modern sport has borrowed, just as ancient sport did, much of the internal and even external mechanisms from the military. Whilst sporting acts no longer resemble modern combat to the same degree (your average soldier would find limited use for a 'drop-kick or a 'torpedo'),⁸ the emphases on training and strategy, the distribution of honours like the Brownlow medal, clearly have their origins in warfare. It is also interesting to look at the language and code-specific terminology used in sport. Words like 'captain,' 'elimination match' and the more recent 'blood rule' adopted by the AFL.' Intense competition draws upon the most intense competition of all – that in which two warriors set to kill one another. However, just as we saw with Patroklos' funeral games, the parallel to combat is there, but crucially, death is not. Just as Nestor questions the significance of the marker in the *Iliad*, we also question the value of deadly combat and, like Epeios, prefer to carry off our honours in life rather than in death.

One contemporary Australian film (relative to Homer at least) in which sport appears in apposition to warfare is Peter Weir's film *Gallipoli* (1981).⁹ The story follows the lives of two promising young sprinters, Archy Hamilton (Mark Lee) and Frank Dunne (Mel Gibson) from Western Australia who enlist to fight in the Australian army in 1915. Weir's narrative follows the classic heroic journey paradigm: the hero is called to face a little known and normally dangerous force in a far away land.

Unlike Homer's treatment of Patroklos' funeral games, Weir does not attempt to connect running as a skill to war, although its applicability (and futility) is clear in the mass infantry charges. What is significant about this film, for the purposes of this paper, is the way in which the challenge of warfare is likened to the challenge of sporting competition and that the warrior is remembered as an athlete. In the final scene, a charge on the Turkish machine guns, Archy invokes the training mantra of his running coach, as a means of overcoming his own fear as he prepares to charge the Turkish trenches. 'What are your legs?' 'Springs, Steel springs'. 'What are you going to do with them?' 'Hurl me down the track'. 'How fast can you run?' 'As fast as a leopard'. 'How fast *are* you going to run?' 'As fast as a leopard'. 'Then let's see you do it'. The charge is treated by Weir as Archy's final race and the film ends when he is shot by an enemy machine gun. At that same moment the runner appears as the classic sprinter lunging for the finishing line. In this image the two heroic models of the warrior and the athlete are seamlessly superimposed upon one another. Unlike his last race in Western Australia, aptly titled 'The Gift', Archy gains no special honours at Gallipoli, instead he dies as one of the many, distinguished and possibly only remembered by his sporting honours. In this way Weir rewrites the funeral games of the *Iliad*.

NOTES:

1. Stephen G Miller, *Arete: Greek Sports from the Ancient Sources*, University of California Press, Los Angeles, Berkeley and Oxford, 1991, pp. 1-16. All quotes from the *Iliad* are taken from Richmond Lattimore (trans.), *The Iliad of Homer*, Chicago University Press, Chicago and London, 1961.
2. Of course on the battlefield, to outperform your enemy would usually result in victory and the enemy's death. The designation of the participants in this event as exclusively male is simply because there are no women participating in battle and consequently in the funeral games either. That is not to say that immortal women didn't have their share of influence, just as they do in the main battle narrative of the *Iliad*. Athene, for one, intervenes in the chariot race to assist Diomedes by giving him his whip which had been dashed from his hands by the god Apollo. Directly after this she smashes the yoke of Eumelos' chariot and causes a gruesome and potentially fatal crash. (23.382. ff.).
3. The name Deiphobos seems to be a clear pun here as it can be translated from the Greek as fear (*phobos*) of the gods (*dei*). Definitely in this instance Hector should be afraid of the goddess Athene.
4. All quotations from the *Iliad*, unless otherwise cited, are from Richmond Lattimore, *The Iliad of Homer*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1951.
5. James M Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad: the Tragedy of Hector*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1994, p. 204.
6. Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad*, p. 206.
7. Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad*, p. 210.
8. Two types of kicks in Australian Rules football.
9. *Gallipoli*, 1981, (Peter Weir, Director).