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Paper 1

In book 22 of Homer’s The Iliad, as translated by Robert Fagles, lines 364 through 389 describe a great charge and final battle to the death between Hector, the fiercest warrior of the Trojans, and Achilles, son of Thetis and greatest warrior of the Achaeans. In other translations of the epic poem, such as ones by Richmond Lattimore or Robert Fitzgerald, the plot of these lines remain the same however there is much that differs throughout the selection. All three writers keep with the original, chronological order of the poem. However, the various translations differ in terms of wording, creating different interpretations in terms of imagery, characterization, and metaphors.

In first six lines of the selection (364-370 in the translations by Fagles and Fitzgerald/306-312 in the translation by Lattimore) Hector is drawing his sword to charge Achilles, as his previously thrown spear had been deflected by Achilles’ god-made shield. The first item to be described in this section is Hector’s sword. Both Fagles and Fitzgerald use the term “whetted” to describe the sword (Fagles 22. 364; Fitzgerald 22. 364). This term appears more formal than in Lattimore’s translations where the sword is casually referred to as “sharp” (Lattimore 22. 306). The word “sharp” in lieu of “whetted” gives a more barbaric mental image of the sword. By using the word “whetted,” Lattimore provides the reader with the imagery of a meticulously crafted weapon. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term “whetted” comes from old English where it was used to describe something that was sharpened (“whetted”). Essentially the word is just an outdated version of the word sharpened, but its lack of common day use gives it a more formal feel as other out of use words seem to do.

Furthering the description of Hektor’s sword, Lattimore refers to the sword as “huge and heavy” (22. 307). Fagles instead used the words “tempered” and “massive,” whereas Fitzgerald chose “ponderous” and “long” to describe the sword as it hung from Hector’s hip (Fagles 22. 365; Fitzgerald 22. 365). All three of the translations use various synonyms to illustrate a giant sword, seemingly capable of great damage. The words “tempered” and “ponderous,” as used by Fagles and Fitzgerald respectively, both serve to personify the sword. The two words have almost a synonymous meaning in the context, making the sword seem neutral in the conflict and too large compared to the man wielding it. The vivid imagery of the sword creates an almost comical image of Hector as he prepares to charge the great Achilles, wielding a great sword that is, in all reality, too big for him to handle practically. Almost as a child would look trying to wield a sword of a great adult warrior in a sparring game with friends.

In contrast to the sense of humility created by the sword, all three translations go on to describe Hector as an “eagle” diving through the skies as if to catch an animal of prey (Fagles 22. 365; Fitzgerald 22. 366; Lattimore 22. 308). The phrase is obviously a metaphor in which Achilles is the animal of prey and Hector is the predatory eagle. The difference in the translations comes when describing the animal the eagle is attacking. Fagles refers to it as “a helpless lamb” or a “trembling hare,” Lattimore chooses to call it a “tender lamb” or a “shivering hare,” and Fitzgerald uses the terms “lamb” or “cowering hare” (Fagles 22. 367; Lattimore 22. 310; Fitzgerald 22. 368). All three translators mention both a lamb and a hare to describe Achilles, which provides a sense of irony because Achilles is anything but an animal of prey, being just as dangerous, if not more so, than Hector. The irony continues as each translator adds adjectives to describe the animal of prey in the metaphor. When Fagles chooses to refer to the animal as “helpless” and “trembling” it gives the impression that Hector’s opponent is terrified and doesn’t stand a chance. The terms “tender,” “shivering,” and “cowering” all have the same effect, creating an air of terror around Achilles. The term “tender” brings to mind a baby animal, and the terms “shivering” and “cowering” contributes to that interpretation, causing one to feel fear on behalf of Achilles based on these lines. Beyond adding to the irony of referring to Achilles as an animal of prey, this metaphor also serves to illustrate just how confident Hector is in himself. By referring to him as an “eagle,” all three translators make it clear that Hector is not afraid of Achilles. This is insinuated as an eagle is a predatory bird that is most commonly viewed as a symbol of pride and strength. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, this interpretation of the symbol of an eagle can be attributed to its historic use by many empires, dating back as early as the Holy Roman Empire (“Eagle”). Use of this symbol characterizes Hector as the fierce warrior he is portrayed as previously in the epic.

The previous lines essentially all come together to serve the purpose of creating a sense of suspense leading up to the battle. In line 368 (Fagles and Fitzgerald) /311 (Lattimore), the suspense breaks as both warriors charge and the focus then shifts to Achilles in the following lines. Fagles describes Achilles as “bursting with rage” and “barbaric” (22. 369). Comparably, Fitzgerald describes Achilles’ charge as one with “wild fury,” and Lattimore chooses the term “savage fury.” (Fitzgerald 22. 370; Lattimore 22. 312). All three choices create a sort of intensity surrounding Achilles as all of the anger he possesses over the loss of Patroclus suddenly comes forward in a blind rage. A notable difference in the translations of this line is the difference between “rage” and “fury.” The Oxford English Dictionary defines “fury” as “Fierce passion, disorder or tumult of mind approaching madness” (“fury”). While “rage” seems to be the highest extent of anger, “fury” seems to take the meaning of anger to a new dimension, to a point where it borders on madness. Pairing the term with words such as “savage” and “wild,” as Lattimore and Fitzgerald did, serves the ultimate purpose of illustrating Achilles as beyond enraged. The terms “savage” and “wild” encourage one to think of a wild animal which is what Achilles seems to have become as Achilles focuses solely on Hector.

Achilles’ armor creates a glorious image of the warrior as he charges into battle. Terms used by Fagles such as “well-wrought,” “gleaming,” and “strong” all seem to describe Achilles as well as his armor (22. 370-371). Lattimore does the same thing in his translation, using words such as “beautiful,” “elaborate,” and “glittering” (22. 313-314). Both translators’ word choices cause Achilles to appear glittering and magnificent as opposed to Hector who appears clumsy and dull in contrast. Continuing the description of Achilles’ armor; Fagles, Fitzgerald, and Lattimore all make sure to restate that the armor was handmade for Achilles by Hephaestus. The difference being that Fagles specifies Hephaestus as “the god of fire,” as opposed to using his name (22. 371). This description only adds to the previously mentioned rage of Achilles, the term “fire” bringing the image of flames to mind, which can fuel Achilles’ fury. The term also serves to personify Achilles’ armor, it possesses the fire just as Achilles’ possesses his fury, creating an image of armor that is just as enraged as its wearer.

After thoroughly illustrating the two warriors as they charge one another, the poem analyzes Achilles as he seemingly takes his time deciding just where would be best to stab Hector. In line 378 of Fagles’ translation, the phrase “-where to pierce it best?” adds to the illusion of being in Achilles’ mind and hearing his thoughts (22. 378). The intensity of the charging scene is suddenly slowed down by the sudden plunge into Achilles’ mind where he is carefully plotting his next move. Comparably, Lattimore states that Achilles was watching Hector’s body “to see where it might best give way” (22. 220). Fitzgerald, at the same point in the poem, pronounces that Achilles held his spear towards Hector “at the skin where most it laid exposed” (22. 380-381). The phrase used by Lattimore, “best give way” proves that Achilles is looking for the best entrance point on Hector’s body for which his spear to enter. All three of these translations create a macabre sense of coming death.

The macabre air that gathered about Achilles becomes justifiable in the following line as Achilles finds the point he is looking for in the exposed neck of Hector’s armor. This is significant as the armor Hector is wearing was taken off of Patroclus who had borrowed it from Achilles. Achilles grief is felt by the reader as each translator mentions that Patroclus had worn the armor. Fagles uses the term “strong” to describe Patroclus, Fitzgerald describes him as “slain,” and Lattimore states that Hector “cut down the strength of Patroclus” (Fagles 22. 380; Fitzgerald 22. 383, Lattimore 22. 323). Lattimore’s description, as well as the term “strong” build up the reputation of Patroclus as well as reveals Achilles’ opinion of his deceased friend. The strong term “slain” also contributes to the anguish felt by Achilles over the loss of his friend. Using “slain” as opposed to “killed” adds more intensity as it insinuates a more savage murder. These phrases also help to keep the concept of Achilles’ fury fresh in the reader’s mind, putting him in the light of a hero who is out to seek revenge for his best friend’s death as opposed to a mad man simply out to kill.

The selection ends as Achilles stabs his spear into Hector’s neck, “where the end of life comes quickest” (Fagles 22. 384). In all three translations Hector is Fatally wounded but Achilles’ spear does not pierce his windpipe, which allows him to still speak. In Fagles’ version it seems as though it were an accident that this happened, stating that the “strong bronze weapon failed to slash the windpipe” (22. 386). The choice of the term “slash” creates the image of the rest of Hector’s neck being destroyed save for the one bit. This image is full of gore yet it was expected due to the previous foreshadowing of death in the selected lines. Lattimore’s translation creates the same idea of the uncut windpipe being accidental, Achilles’ spear, “heavy with bronze did not sever the windpipe” (22. 328). On the other hand, in Fitzgerald’s translation, Achilles cut “through the tender neck, but did not cut the windpipe” (22. 386-387). Fitzgerald’s version seems to insinuate that Achilles purposely did not cut Hector’s windpipe, presumably so the Trojan would suffer more. Fitzgerald’s use of the phrase “did not” makes it seem as if Achilles had a choice as to whether or not to sever Hector’s windpipe. Lattimore and Fagles, however, translated the poem in a way that it seems as if Achilles’ spear failed by not fully cutting Hector’s windpipe. Mentioning that the spear was “heavy” adds to the thought that it was supposed to fully pierce. If the poem is interpreted in this way then it can potentially be seen as giving Hector a more dramatic end in which he is able to speak.

Nevertheless, Hector fell to the ground and Achilles stood over him. Fagles uses this opportunity to refer to Achilles as “prince Achilles” (22. 389). This is interesting because previously Achilles is not seen as a prince but it can be inferred that this is said due to his recent killing of Hector. The term “prince” also contributes to a heroic air around Achilles, making him appear god-like to the reader for having killed Hector. In addition, in Lattimore’s translation Achilles gloated “above” Hector (22. 330). This adds to the heroic imagery of Achilles as it illustrates him standing above his opponent, suggesting that he is greater than Hector, even as Hector lay dying.

Throughout the selected lines the three translators all seem to stick to the same basic interpretation of the poem. Differences arise in aspects of imagery, however, all three translations come to the same conclusion.

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