

Decisions in Alice Oswald's *Memorial*

Scholarship on decisions in the *Iliad* has centered primarily on whether real decisions can be said to be represented in the poem. *Memorial*, Alice Oswald's translation and reinterpretation of the death scenes of the *Iliad*, demonstrates the enormous importance of the decision-making processes represented in the *Iliad* through the effect of their complete absence in the modern work.

Scholarship on decisions in the *Iliad* has concentrated, first, on discussion of whether decisions are represented at all. Representation of decision-making in a literary work should convince the reader both that the character has the ability to make decisions (Fludernik 2012) and that the consequences are real (de Carvalho 2003), and arguably neither condition is fulfilled in the *Iliad*. Snell (1934) argued that the lack of unified characters with a concept of "self" in the *Iliad* made decision-making impossible, since there are no characters with the ability to make them. Others question whether the decisions represented are "real", because there are no real consequences, as the outcome of the *Iliad* is predetermined.

Recent scholarship however tends to accept that decision-making, whether or not it is illusory, does seem to be represented in the *Iliad* (e.g. Gaskin 1990, Jones 1996, Morrison 1997, Rosenmeyer 1990, Sharples 1983,). Morrison (1997) and Wilson (2007) for example argue that the world of the *Iliad* is represented as "both predetermined and open to choice". The importance of decision-making in the *Iliad* is highlighted by the frequency with which the poem suggests an alternative ending (Morrison 1997; cf. Griffin 1982) which apparently depends on a character's decision in the moment.

Few scholars however have discussed the function of the narrative representations of decision-making processes, whether "real" or illusory, in the *Iliad*. Gods, kings and aristocrats are shown as making important decisions which govern the entire epic, and the process by which

they arrive at these decisions is given prominence, and shown in detail. What function do these narratives of decision-making serve? Most recently Morrison (1997) and Wilson (2007) have argued that the *Iliad* preserves a tension between predestination and the appearance of free will through (among other mechanisms) the representation of decision-making processes throughout the poem, which imply the possibility of free will.

The presence of frequent deliberate decision-making scenes in the *Iliad* is highlighted by their absence in Alice Oswald's *Memorial*. *Memorial* omits the *Iliad*'s main narrative and all the points of decision associated with it. Through their elimination, *Memorial* demonstrates the importance and function of the decision-making narratives represented in the original epic.

Memorial begins with eight pages of the names, one per line, of all those who died in the *Iliad*, a list visually reminiscent of a war memorial, which reminds the reader that all these deaths are already in the past. The poem continues with a free translation of each of the death scenes of the *Iliad*'s soldiers, great and small alike, moving not through narrative, but through paratactic construction of free paraphrases of these scenes, piled one on another. By removing the overarching narrative and its decisions, *Memorial* makes each individual death seem inevitable, and the decision-making processes of the narrative illusory. The many decision-making narratives in the *Iliad* give the reader the impression that the end is not predetermined. By stripping those narratives away, *Memorial* shows us a text whose every death was predetermined. In the end, in "Memorial's" representation, the decisions described in the *Iliad* were an illusion; only the deaths were real.

Bibliography

- De Carvalho, Fernando J Cardim (2003). 'Decision-making under uncertainty as drama: Keynesian and Shackleian themes in three of Shakespeare's tragedies', *Journal of Post Keynesian Economics*, 25 (2), 189-218.
- Fludernik, Monica (2012). *An introduction to narratology*. Routledge.
- Gaskin, Richard (1990). 'Do Homeric heroes make real decisions?', *Classical Quarterly*, 1-15.
- Jones, PV (1996). 'The independent heroes of the Iliad', *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 116: 108-18.
- Griffin, J. (1980). *Homer on Life and Death*. Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Morrison, James V. (1997). 'Kerostasia, The Dictates of Fate, and the Will of Zeus in the Iliad', *Arethusa*, 30 (2), 276-96.
- Oswald, Alice (2011). *Memorial*. Faber & Faber.
- Rosenmeyer, TG (1990). 'Decision-Making', *Apeiron*, 23 (4), 187-218.
- Sharples, RW (1983). 'But Why Has My Spirit Spoken with Me Thus?': Homeric Decision-Making', *Greece & Rome*, 1-7.
- Wilson, Joseph P (2007). 'Homer and the Will of Zeus', *College Literature*, 34 (2), 150-73.