

## Death from Behind: Achilles and the Orientation of the Future

Relations of front and back have long been controversial in discussions of the orientation of the past and the future in early Greek poetry, as noted already in the ancient commentary on Homer's adverbial phrase *πρόσσω καὶ ὀπίσσω* (Σ bT at *Iliad* XVIII.250b1 Erbse). In a seminal work of comparative philology, Dunkel (1982-1983) disproved Treu's (1955) formulation that Homer conceives of the future as behind the viewer and the past before his eyes: "Events are seen in linear order, with the present one in the middle. The 'behindness' of the future refers not to us, but to the fact that the future follows the present. Correspondingly, the past stands 'in front of' the present" (Dunkel 1982-1983: 80). The future is "behind" the present, which is in turn "behind" the past: all of time lies before the viewer, some nearer and some in the distant horizon. In spite of Dunkel's ingenious analysis, however, we are left with the curious case of death—the ultimate future event—that comes upon a character from behind: several times in Homeric epic the verb *κιχάνω* is used to describe the act of death "catching up with" or "overtaking" someone (*Iliad* IX.416, XI.441, 451, XVII.478 = XVII 672 = XXII.436, XIX.165, XXII.303; *Odyssey* ix.477, xvii.476; cf. Ruijgh and van Krimpen 1969, Purves 2011).

I propose to examine Homer's "death from behind" and the question of the epic conception of the future in light of Achilles' attitude toward his own death. Twice in the *Iliad* Achilles appears as the object of *κιχάνω*: once when Achilles describes the death that will come upon him, though not quickly, should he return home (οὐδέ κέ μ' ὄκα τέλος θανάτοιο κιχέη, IX.416), and once as the river god Scamander catches up with Achilles as he attempts to flee (φθάνει [sc. ὕδωρ] δέ τε καὶ τὸν ἄγοντα· | ὧς αἰεὶ Ἀχιλῆα κιχῆσατο κῦμα ῥόοιο | καὶ λαιμηρὸν ἔόντα, XXI.262-264). Ruijgh and van Krimpen (1969) have argued that *κιχάνω* developed its specific semantic sense of "catch up with, overtake" from a context of athletic competition and

racing. What I wish to emphasize is that Achilles is pursued by death only at specific moments when his actions are directed toward extending his life—that is to say, at moments, real or hypothetical, when he flees an immanent death. The rest of the time, however, Achilles does not flee from death, but rather runs toward it. This model, I argue, is consistent with Achilles' acceptance of his own heroism and the mortality it entails. In short, then, the epic conception of the future, as represented in its final form of death and decay, is as Dunkel argues: on each and every mortal's horizon. The acceptance of the facticity and immanence of one's own death on the battlefield, as opposed to attempting to flee from it, is, I argue, the defining feature of the epic conception of heroism and mortal temporality.

#### Works Cited

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