Fame, Narrative, and the (Im)Permanence of Memory

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> Gilgamesh said to his servant Enkidu, "I have not established my name stamped on bricks as my destiny decreed; therefore I will go to the country where the cedar is felled. I will set up my name in the place where the names of famous men are written, and where no man's name is written yet I will raise a monument to the gods...' (2, p. 20)
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> Utnapishtim said, 'There is no permanence. Do we build a house to stand for ever, do we seal a contract to hold for all time?' (4, p. 106-7)[1]

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* presents its hero as motivated in the first instance by a desire for fame, to have his "name stamped on bricks", to be renowned, to be remembered. As his tale unfolds, of course, he comes to be motivated by a number of other deep human emotions, love and grief, in particular. But this is where he starts, and so he launches himself into the commission of great deeds likely to bring him the fame that he seeks. Utnapishtim's response is not a straightforward repudiation of this quest but rather of Gilgamesh's desire for an immortality that would restore his dead friend, Enkidu, to him. Nevertheless, the rebuke does double service here: the search for immortality, whether in life or in the memories of others after one's death, is doomed to failure. The bricks will crumble and Gilgamesh's name and the record of his deeds with them. Gilgamesh's quest is futile: we all die and all memories fade into oblivion. And yet, this is why the hero seeks the pseudo-immortality of fame; to outlive himself.

Despite how compelling and widespread the desire to be written into the memories of others seems to be, philosophers have had surprisingly little of substance to say about the human quest for fame and, when they have had cause to discuss it, they have largely been censorious, whether this is because of its perceived vanity, its futility, or its harmful social consequences incurred in the forceful contending with others for pre-eminence. Amongst the philosophers, there is little discussion of fame as such, rather than associated causes or effects, *praise* in particular.[2] In fact, it is quite difficult to find anyone, including the famous, saying anything

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[1] *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (1972).

[2] Hume is relatively unusual in being fame-positive, though this can be attributed to his views about pleasure and the circumstance that what he is describing is the pleasure one feels

good about fame, which really does make one wonder why anyone would want it[3]–and yet there does seem to be a considerable thirst for it, at least among those who do not have it.

What is less often considered than the moral question of whether fame or praise is a worthwhile end to pursue is that of *why* anyone would pursue it at all, what makes it the kind of end that humans might have good or bad reason to pursue–in short, what is the *point* of fame? I shall here ask this question with the aim of understanding what human need beyond immediate emotional gratification or short term instrumental utility might underlie the desire for fame: what is the need for which fame is seen as a possible solution? I am not pursuing the ethical questions that attach to fame, except in a very indirect way, but the question of whether the aim is rational or not, "rational" here understood as "likely to achieve the ends at which one aims".

Since this is such an ancient human desire, it makes some sense to start with the epic hero, since this figure has so deeply shaped how we think of fame, at least up until our own time.[4] Doing so will allow us to see how the pursuit of fame has altered in the present day in ways that reflect changes in how we (or some of us) understand our own lives and how they fit into

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in the praise of others and pride in oneself. See *Treatise* 2.1.11 ("Of the love of fame") and Martin (2006). Boyle also argues that Margaret Cavendish seems to have regarded fame as a valuable "form of continued existence", given the uncertainty of any other kind of afterlife. (Boyle 2006, 262). Scarre (2001) ostensibly addresses the present topic and dismisses self-concern for the meaningfulness of one's life and deeds after one's death as irrational. Whether one agrees with this assessment or not, there is clearly more analysis and explanation to be made.

[3]A particularly forthright comment, and fairly representative in its dismissal of fame, would be this from *Iron Maiden* vocalist Bruce Dickinson: "I'm not interested in being famous. Fame is the excrement of creativity, it's the shit that comes out the back end, it's a by-product of it. People think it's the excrement that you should be eating. It's not. It's the creativity and the audience and being there in the moment." https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/jun/19/iron-maiden-bruce-dickinson-frank-turner-interview

[4]I shall be discussing motives attributed to largely or entirely fictional figures *as if* real because it is simpler to do so and because the narrative representation is as much the point as any actual deeds done by historical figures (as I shall explain in due course); I have no philosophical commitments with respect to the ontological status of fictional characters. Nor, should it need saying, do I endorse the values or the actions performed by the epic figures to whom I refer; I am interested in the existential basis of the quest for continued existence in human memory. Moreover, if I were looking for a model of virtuous behaviour, Achilles would be well down my list.

a social narrative of human achievement.

Fame and the Epic Hero

A particularly illuminating suggestion comes from the *Iliad*. We know the story about Achilles and the choice posed to him between long life and happiness versus a short one and everlasting fame,[5] but it is Sarpedon's exchange with Glaucus in Book Twelve that tells us quite a bit more about the motivation for its pursuit. Sarpedon asks Glaucus why they are so honoured at home if not to stand in the first rank of battle, "so that among the close-armoured Lycians men may say:

> 'Certainly those who rule us in Lycia are not without glory,
> these kings of ours, who eat fattened sheep and drink
> choice honey-sweet wine. There is also noble valour in them,
> it seems, because they fight in the first rank of the Lycians.'"[6]

This suggests the first reason for seeking a particular type of fame: a larger share of social goods in exchange for which one gains the honour of preferment in martial status–in effect, a specific type of instrumental value. That this is not the whole story, however, is clear in the following lines:

> "My dear friend, if we two could escape from this war
> and were certain to live forever, ageless and immortal,
> I would not myself fight in the first ranks, nor
> would I send you into the battle where men win glory;
> but now, since, come what may, death's spectres stand over us
> in their thousands, which no mortal can flee from or escape,
> let us go forward, and give the glory to another man, or he to us."[7]

The reason offered here for the presence of Sarpedon, Glaucus, and the other heroes at Troy, and why they have made the instrumental exchange of riches for long life that they have, is precisely because they are, in fact, mortal. If they were immortal, this conflict and the quest for glory would have no value and would be pointless to them. Mortality, then, is an underlying condition of the desire for fame that outlasts one's own short span of life. What perhaps seems odd about this is why an immortal would have no interest in fame, a question to which I shall return later. Before we get there, however, let us try to get a broader

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[5] *Iliad*, 9, 410-416.

[6] *Iliad*, 12, 317-321.

[7] *Iliad*, 12, 322-328.

understanding of the epic hero's bargain.

To do this, I turn to a more recent if still very old epic hero: Beowulf, primarily because it is easier for a modern reader to make sense of Beowulf's actions. Achilles quite explicitly and deliberately chooses fame over a long life but it is not very clear why, as it doesn't seem that he shares Sarpedon's sense of responsibility. Achilles' actions appear entirely motivated by his emotional response to personal slight or loss and an entirely self-concerned desire for his own glory.[8] Beowulf's actions, on the other hand, are such as will bring him fame, but also have an important role in building and maintaining social relationships. Like Achilles, Beowulf acquires wealth by his deeds, though not by stripping Grendel of his armour and weapons (he has neither), but by receiving gifts of gratitude and the reinforcement of bonds of mutual kinship and responsibility.

Beowulf goes to Hrothgar's aid for two reasons: the bonds of kinship and the need to make his reputation. To make his reputation, he also needs to provide the means of living for those who travel with him. In common with any other men of status in this period, he needs to acquire wealth in order to be able to provide gifts of that wealth to those around him, thereby reinforcing their relationship of mutual support. Reputation-building, then, as both an accomplished warrior and as a generous leader, has for Beowulf a practical purpose: security of social position. Of course, Beowulf seeks out exceptionally ostentatious challenges and thereby steps up his reputation beyond that of the average mead-jarl. Beowulf's exchange with Unferth makes this point. Unferth suggests that Beowulf isn't all that great, apparently out of jealousy for his own name, which draws a lengthy boast from Beowulf, including the rebuke that "I have never heard a word about any such contest concerning you,"[9] in effect, an early version of "who are you again?"

The precise particulars of Beowulf's, or Achilles', deeds are not what concern us; they are the actions expected of warriors of their respective times, greatly exaggerated. Both are exemplars of the qualities valued by those who tell their stories. It is this telling that is the other important element for the present discussion. What makes Beowulf's reputation is the narration of his actions, whether by himself or (as it amounts to the same thing) by the skald, scop, or poet.[10] Certainly, for a society that depends on an oral transmission of stories, skaldic verse plays a central role in spreading the hero's fame, and can easily undercut it depending on how it is told. *Beowulf* (like the *Iliad*) tells a great many stories besides that of its main protagonist and, in the case of the former, uses the tales of other heroes and villains in order

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[8]See T.H. Irwin (2015), 223-248.

[9]*Beowulf*, (2013), 581-2. The whole exchange is from lines 499-606.

[10]Cf. Hannah Arendt (2018) 184-194, on the story element of a human life and as this applies to Achilles.

to put the deeds of Beowulf (or whomever "Beowulf" represents) into perspective, but also in relation to a presumed historical background, and to make judgements on the relative value of the actions of figures familiar to the audience. In part, it tells the audience what are the tales worthy of telling and why. The immortality of the hero, then, is due to their story being told and re-told; they are remembered, and so long as they are remembered they continue in a certain sense to exist. One can also be remembered in such stories as a villain, as the exemplar of unworthiness. That is a version of immortality as well, though presumably of less value than being remembered as a hero.

Death and the remembrance of one's deeds remains a question for the epic hero in another sense, however. Achilles dies very soon after his greatest deeds, and thus remains in poetic memory in his youthful heroic perfection. His memory does not suffer the indignity and incongruence of his growing old and slow. The problem for the hero of actual existence is that, if they survive their deeds of heroism, they also outlive themselves as memory crystallizes them. As Hannah Arendt remarks,

> '...whoever consciously aims at being "essential", at leaving behind a story and an identity which will win "immortal fame", must not only risk his life but expressly choose, as Achilles did, a short life and premature death. Only a man who does not survive his one supreme act remains the undisputable master of his identity and possible greatness, because he withdraws into death from the possible consequences and continuation of what he began.'[11]

Unlike Achilles, however, Beowulf does grow old. He dies doing another heroic act, for the completion of which he needs the aid of others (which he acknowledges), and he is celebrated by the story-teller for both this act and for his earlier victories, as well as for his providing for his people, short-lived though that turns out to be. Hence he is praised not just for the great and showy deeds, but what positive effect his behaviour has on others. If one's aim is to be remembered entirely as *that* hero, the one who glittered brightly and slew Hector, or, more prosaically, discovered *that* new drug, or scored *that* goal, Arendt would seem to be right, but that makes the hero *only* that, and continued existence is a prolonged sequence of increasing embarrassment. The achievement then becomes finding a way to live the rest of one's life in society with others and not only, as Arendt suggests,[12] in individualistic self-display.

The question of how to live with one's achievements isn't the concern of the present discussion, however, but what "life" one's deeds might grant one after one has departed. If one were to seek fame for the purpose of being remembered by others as a means of some kind of substitute immortality, what exactly is it that one aims at and what can such

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[11]Arendt (2018) 193.

[12]Ibid. 194.

"immortalisation" gain the hero? In the following, I will explore the question of accuracy in the attribution of deeds versus the object attained, including whether what is desired is recognition rather than fame, the advantage gained from present fame, and the role played by a desire for continued agency. I shall conclude with a short discussion of narrative control and reliability in relation to the contemporary pursuit of fame.

Accuracy and Heroic Exaggeration

The famous person is, supposedly, famous *for* something: something they have *done* (an action/achievement) or some abiding *trait* of theirs, such as beauty, skill, strength, wisdom, or virtue. One might also be famous for simply having been some place at some time, in which case one's fame is only by association, perhaps accidental, or indeed be famous only for being famous; I will leave consideration of these sorts of fame aside since the concern here is fame for one's actions. The question of how fame is grounded is sometimes thought to be important for justifying fame, in the sense of whether it is deserved by the person who acquires it, or whether it is something that it is rational in some sense to desire.

Douglas Lackey distinguishes between two types of fame, which seem to roughly correspond to that of action or trait. For Lackey, the divide is between "personal fame", where it is an *individual* who is famous regardless of their personal traits, which he further distinguishes into accurate/inaccurate, and "generic fame", where the specific individual is largely irrelevant save for their possession of some *trait*.[13] We can think of this in terms of whether we remember and praise Beowulf rather than Unferth for defeating Grendel, on the one hand, or whether we give the renown to *the strong and courageous warrior who defeated Grendel*, who might just as well have been Unferth as Beowulf. Is it *Beowulf* who matters to posterity, or the qualities exhibited by someone, maybe someone named "Beowulf", that led to the defeat of some great foe, possibly named "Grendel"? But surely we remember a hero, Beowulf, because it was Beowulf who not only had those qualities but exercised them both in the way that Beowulf, whoever he was, would and when it was called for? There are several questions rolled up in this one and they could do with teasing out, as questions about accuracy and about the identification of the fame-worthy element are bound up with each other.

One aspect of the accuracy question seems relatively straightforward: if the question is whether one's fame for being the person who did φ is justified, one's having actually done φ seems to be required. If, e.g., Pons and Fleischmann had actually discovered a method of cold fusion, then fame rather than infamy would have been warranted. Or if Collip had managed to both isolate insulin and keep adequate records that would have allowed him to replicate the feat ahead of Banting and Best, thus proving his priority in knowledge of the technique, he

[13]Lackey (1987), 542.

would be rightly remembered as *the* discoverer of insulin instead of the others.[14] So, in general, if ***A*** desires fame and to be remembered for having done ***φ***, then it matters whether ***A*** really is the one who really did manage to do ***φ***. It matters that, in the future, ***A***'s deeds be attributed to ***A*** and not to ***B***, and that ***A*** is known for ***φ*** rather than ***ψ***.[15]

This sort of concern with the exact aetiology of events makes sense to us in an age concerned with copyright and correct scholarly attribution, but our concerns are considerably narrower than those of epic literature. The answers to the questions: "who had this idea first?" and "was so-and-so killed by spear, sword, or by falling off a chariot?" don't matter in the same way. If one thing ought to stand out from the tales of epic heroes, apart from the extraordinary lengths to which they go in order to establish their fame, it is that accuracy in the re-telling is not forensically critical, i.e., not in the way that we require for other evidentiary claims. Moreover, accuracy in reporting is not really the point of these tales and not just because there are no trolls, dragons, minotaurs, gods, or (probably) Achilles, Beowulf, or Cuchuláinn[16]. It isn't that truth and accuracy don't matter, or that story-telling makes truth. Rather, the question is what the story does in terms of preserving the individual's life and significance. Lackey's claim is that if ***A*** desires to be remembered for having done ***φ***, then it matters that ***A*** actually has done ***φ*** (as described). This claim does have a basic plausibility because we, too, want to receive proper credit for our actions. I want to be remembered for the (praiseworthy) things that I really did, not the ones I didn't. Yet, it is also the case that some people desire fame for things they did not do–imposters abound in the fame game. But that is why such imposters are despised once found out: they have cheated us by claiming our praise when it is undeserved.

But now suppose it was Unferth that killed Grendel. It would seem to follow that Beowulf doesn't or shouldn't merit the desired "immortality", i.e., preservation in memory, because it is the wrong person that is remembered. Nevertheless, it is Beowulf's name that we know and, for the sake of argument, let's say that everything else we are told about him is true. How much does accuracy with respect to the defeat of Grendel matter? It depends. The epic hero's project isn't exactitude but fame–for their deeds and perhaps pre-eminently for their qualities. Achievements are indicators of qualities. Thus, Beowulf is praised for his strength and

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[14] "Cold fusion: A case study for scientific behavior", (2012), www.understandingscience.org. Michael Bliss, (1982), 554-568.

[15] Lackey (1987), 543. Suppose that it is your ambition to "make a dent/mark on the world", to "make a difference". This seems to be our primitive sense of how we want to be remembered. But do we want to be remembered *as* the one who made a/that dent, or simply remembered *for* making some kind of dent, whatever it was? See Halberstam (1984).

[16] I mention the latter in particular because of the utterly and relentlessly fantastical character of Cuchuláinn's exploits. See *The Táin* (1969).

endurance, his courage, his generosity, and his loyalty to his word, all of which are demonstrated by his specific deeds. Arguably, the deeds themselves don't matter so much as what they show of Beowulf's character–any heroic deeds would do so long as they are achieved. On the face of it, this is quite a different situation than concerns us today: as a scholar or scientist, one is likely most interested in getting credit for *this* idea or theory, and it is this that perhaps provides evidence for one's brilliance, etc., but the former comes first; being famous for one's brilliance may be gratifying but it is a consequence or side-effect of one's fame for specific achievements. Being brilliant but having achieved nothing of note is not the look we want.

If Lackey is right about the failure of generic fame, i.e., that which is predicated on traits rather than individual achievement, then these heroes, if they existed, should have been most careful to ensure their fame and remembering in the form of a careful recounting of their deeds. But, on the contrary, if justified fame requires accuracy, then Gilgamesh, Achilles, Beowulf, Cuchuláinn, all failed spectacularly to have their ambitions realized despite our present familiarity with the stories of their victories. This is because the stories are of highly implausible events, the details of which are exaggerated and heroically generic. To sing of Beowulf or Achilles by concentrating on their *acts* alone is not to remember any human individual.[17]

A reasonable response here would be to agree that of course, to recite these poems is not to remember the deeds of any definite individuals–these are fictional, perhaps at best composite or representative, characters who never existed. But this is too easy an out, one available because of the exaggerated nature of heroic exploits. Compare, then, the central character of almost any of the Icelandic family sagas or, even more prosaically, of any family history.[18] These are not only much more ordinary humans than Achilles or Beowulf, but either plausibly or definitely historical individuals. Their stories no doubt contain many inaccuracies, but they also tell us much that is true about their lives, characters, and actual events. And, because of their stories we know of them and remember (something of) them. Although, from the heroic point of view, it is the deeds that make the memory, Lackey's description of generic fame as trivial is importantly mistaken. It is the actions that become separated in memory from the *person* who does them. If I want to be remembered as who I am, if I want that sort of *personal* immortality, I need to be remembered for my traits of character, and my actions only as expressions of that character. It is trait-fame that matters, and action-fame is dependent on its connection with traits.

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[17]Arguably, this is a problem with any individual who ends up being reified as a "role model"–role models aren't real humans but exemplars or stand-ins for social values, simplified cartoons of human possibilities.

[18] See *The Sagas of the Icelanders* (2000). I mention ordinary family histories because these are (perhaps only in my own experience) notoriously unreliable.

Recognition, Validation, and Advantage

This essay began with the question of *why* anyone would desire fame. An important group of reasons have to do with validation of an individual's social worth. Halberstam comments that "Fame is an attestation of worth, and it provides the assurance that one's abilities, status, or work is recognized and admired."[19] Relying on Hume, he goes on to point out that it is "the *pleasure* that praise affords that is the attraction of fame and, as such, praise must be included along with those other motivations which look to fame as a source of pleasure and immediate benefit."[20] This isn't entirely convincing as it suggests that the motivation is first pleasure, then praise, and only then fame as a possible source of one, then the other. There is, in fact, very little in Hume's discussion in the *Treatise* that has to do with fame rather than praise and how much we like it, or are inclined to offer it. It doesn't explain the desire for fame as such. Halberstam does, however, point to the immediate benefit that fame offers and this gives us a promising line of inquiry.

One may become famous or deserve fame without seeking it. If one is dedicated to one's work, one may be more interested in getting on with it than with the interruptions that fame brings. One may also simply not care for praise, whether it is the praise that is uninteresting or distracting or because one does not value those doing the praising. For those who do desire fame, however, the pleasure generated by fame seems a plausible motivation, though that would suggest that it is only or primarily the fame or praise that the individual desires, rather than the accomplishment. Certainly, given the choice between being famous and praised for doing something valuable or for no reason at all, the former seems a more likely option, if only because the resulting fame will probably have a longer shelf-life.

Fame does have clear instrumental benefits that make it rational to pursue. Simply put, those who have, get more, i.e., those famous for doing φ are more likely to get asked to do more φ than those unknown for φ-ing. This applies to epic heroes, actors, scholars, athletes, and politicians. Deeds commonly, if not universally, imply skill, which attracts those in need of or prepared to reward skill. Reputation generates opportunities and rewards. Thus, for Beowulf, deeds bring wealth and followers, which bring security and further reputational reward. For the modern scholar, deeds (publications, etc.) bring funding, position, further research opportunities, priority in consideration, and so on. For some of the famous, this also means permission and preference–"when you're famous, they let you get away with it", as someone once said.

But this does raise the question whether what is at issue here is *recognition*. "Recognition" in this respect is the acknowledgement of the other as having a claim to our consideration, at the

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[19]Halberstam (1984), 96.

[20]*Ibid.* See also Martin (2006).

most basic level, as equally human and thus morally considerable, sometimes in speech but more significantly in action. In special cases, recognition is a matter of one's membership in some more restricted qualification class, such as citizenship, legal standing, or a profession. To be recognized is to expect to be treated in an equivalent manner as all others so recognized. Hence its importance to political, moral, and legal interaction.

In a limited sense, of course, the desire for the more particular recognition of one's individual work or one's talents or virtues *is* at issue, but to describe this as equivalent to recognition *as such* would be to stretch the point too far. It is confusing appraisal as heroically excellent with recognition as belonging to the class of those who can be heroic in any degree. That is, recognition *for* something is at stake and insofar as recognition *as* the hero is *for* the specific attributes of the hero, these are the same thing. The specificity of recognition here indicates that this is not the basic recognition of another self-conscious being who must be taken into account, such as in recognising one's personhood or right to be considered. Achilles' attitude to Agamemnon underlines this: his petulance over the sharing of honours with others who belong to his own social class, shows that his concern is not recognition of his place in that class but his pre-eminence above all others. This isn't just recognition, but *rank*. Recognition of one's merits does not necessarily require rank; fame does, insofar as it requires that the famous person stand out from all the other contenders (even if the standing out is illusory).

To desire fame is, then, to desire more than mere recognition for what one has accomplished in the sense of acknowledgement that this person is the one who has done ***φ***; it isn't just about correct attribution but also a desire for a further level of praise and differential treatment. Fame is about ascendancy. If fame is *also* thought of as a limited resource, a positional good that is diminished insofar as it is shared, or shared widely, then what is at stake in fame is not recognition at the minimal level required for sociality, but superiority in rank. And this does seem to be what the hero seeks–not just to be seen, but to be seen as the one, the best, or at the most generous, as one of a small, elite, band–definitely not the *hoi polloi*.

Agency and Memory

> Cattle die, kinsmen die,
> the self must also die;
> but the glory of reputation never dies,
> for the man who can get himself a good one.
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> Cattle die, kinsmen die,
> the self must also die;
> I know one thing which never dies:
> the reputation of each dead man.[21]

[21] *Hávamál*, §76-77 ("Sayings of the High One"), Larrington (1996), 22-23.

There are, then, potential advantages to being famous in one's own lifetime. This doesn't, however, seem to offer any reason to desire fame *after* one's life. Lackey argues that such a desire is irrational and goes on to give an Aristotelian account that holds honour to be valueless because it is bestowed by others.[22] The question whether the desire is rational or not misses the point somewhat. People *do* desire such fame and the question here is *why* they do: what advantage might one (perhaps mistakenly) take as sufficiently compelling for one to pursue a posthumous fame? The clearest answer seems to be a kind of agential immortality, or at least, an extension of one's agency beyond one's own life-time. The hero continues to affect the pattern of events after his or her death. By being remembered and praised as an exemplar of a particular set of virtues, the hero shapes the behaviour and expectations of future people and societies. Being an example to others (whether good or bad) puts one in a position of influence in the lives of others. Not only is one known and remembered but one's agency persists beyond one's own death. One remains or, rather, a narratively preserved memory of one remains, part of a continuing social identity. Given a choice between continuing to be part of this collective narrative and being forgotten altogether as if one never existed, one might well choose this kind of pseudo-immortality. Obviously, the subject of this narrative memory is not actually immortal and so not around to enjoy it, but it might nevertheless motivate one while still alive, whether that motivation is rational or irrational.[23]

We all die from life; being forgotten is a sort of further social death. The first of these is inevitable. So, eventually, is the second, but we can, or think we can, do things to mitigate it. It is a futile exercise–we all slide into oblivion eventually–but, knowing that, many are strongly compelled to make some kind of mark to somehow wrest acknowledgement of our existence from the world around us, even if it is only a grave marker–the unmarked grave is something we regard as an affront to the once-living. This is a non-personal continuity: I will not be aware of nor will I interact with those in the future who know my name, nor will I be able to argue with those who totally misrepresent my character and actions. That circumstance may encourage me to curate my own story while I am still alive and capable, to be my own skald or get my future skalds onside, by writing my memoirs, destroying the incriminating documents, and ensuring that my enemies' monuments are destroyed or effaced, if I happen to be Pharoah or Caesar, or just metaphorically if I am not.

If I am a researcher I may strive to produce a treatment, or make a discovery, that alters the course of future science or medicine; if a business person, politician, or jurist to pursue some great project in industry, law, or statecraft that changes my society the way railroads, constitutions, landmark legal judgements, and international bodies such as the United Nations

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[22]Lackey (1987), 545.

[23]See, for example, Dutmer (2022), who offers a characterisation of this Ciceronian ideal of care for one's "ethical legacy", in particular, in terms of becoming in oneself a moral exemplar for those who follow after.

have. Or, more modestly, to endow a university fellowship or chair so that others can study those subjects I have judged worthy. Or I can simply leave whatever meagre wealth or belongings I have acquired to my descendants for their own benefit, perhaps just photographs and family tales. In all these cases, I am exercising a kind of residual agency in a society in which I am no longer a living participant. Subsequent generations (or just one) continue to be shaped by my causal influence. I am remembered because I continue to affect persons and events. At least for a time.

Given that human lives are fragile and transitory, the desire for permanence of some kind is an understandable existential response to the impending oblivion that we all face. If personal immortality is not available, we reach for social or historical continuation, to have our name stamped on bricks. Of course, Aristotle and Shakespeare are both long dead but we refer to both, metaphorically, as "living on" in the influence that they continue to exert on philosophy, religion, literature, theatre, popular culture, etc. Is it really so irrational to want to have such a presence? And if we think we have something to offer those who live after us, it may be reasonable to wish our stories be told.

A person's great discovery may turn out to have been (to later generations) a risible mistake, or to have had appalling consequences, and given that we do not now know what future lies in wait for our self-presumed greatness, it may, sometimes, have been better to fade into oblivion. But *if* what is desired is simply the continuation of one's name and the memory of one's deeds, however those in the future may assess them, then one might succeed, if only partially, by achieving fame, continuing to be an agent of social interaction despite one's corporeal absence. Scholars today know, or should, that the best they can hope for is to deflect, like a rock in a streambed, the flow of philosophical conversation, at least until the rock is worn away, or the stream diverted or dried. Clearly, this is nothing like immortality, and it is ineluctably transitory, but it is as close as any of us will ever get: a small measure of remote agency of short duration and little control.

Narrative Control and Reliability

Andrea Westlund has observed that grief narratives function for us as a means of bearing witness to the loss of the beloved, attesting to the reality and importance of those we have lost, and as a means of resisting "the further form of loss involved in forgetting or allowing to be forgotten".[24] Westlund argues that such testimonials are not "private exercises in self-understanding", but centrally involve an audience before whom the memorialisation is enacted, and thus hold onto the loved one in a collective act of remembering through the performance of the life narrativized. As she puts it, "that to which the testifier bears witness is publicly recognized, in a normative sense, as intersubjectively *real*, and thus as commanding

[24]Westlund (2017), 21.

attention, respect, and remembrance."[25] This is a fair description of how these testimonials function for us in managing grief and they clearly have a role in *enacting* memorialisation, i.e., fixing or framing versions of memory rather than being strictly accurate reports of events as heretofore remembered. The phrase "intersubjectively real" points to the potential problem here for the reliability of both narrative and the permanence that depends on it, particularly if the validity of permanence requires some sort of link to material accuracy. After all, a community may retain a narrative "memory" of someone who is largely fictional.

It seems that if I want to be remembered as me and not someone quite unlike me, or if I want to be remembered as only my most moral and heroic self, I need to exert some kind of control over my story. Just as Beowulf and Gilgamesh seek to control their respective presents and to forestall the eventual dissipation of their memories into the mists of forgetting, the famous person or celebrity of our own day may engage, at minimum, in an attempt to fix a particular narrative of their present life in contemporary discourse or, at maximum, to shape future events outside themselves. I shall concentrate on the minimal case.

For someone who already is famous, and who values that fame, there is at least some incentive to nurture the narrative that maintains it. What any given individual is prepared to do in this regard will vary, but there are a few strategies that should be familiar. One is simply to make sure that one's story is told; in effect, that there is a skald who sings of one's greatness. For the contemporary celebrity this is a bit more complicated than slaying one's enemies and then boasting about it in the mead-hall. For the ancient hero, it might not have mattered quite so much how the tale was told, just so long as it was, within certain limits, such as that Achilles needs to be praised *more highly* than Agamemnon while Beowulf is compared favourably to other known semi-historical heroic exemplars.

For the more recent celebrity, epic exaggeration may be still useful but it is individual control over the narrative that has become more critical. Whether through the "definitive interview" or authorized biography, the heavily edited memoir, or the active pursuit through libel action of alternate accounts of the celebrity's life and actions, the modern hero might seek to be the one who determines the correct interpretation of their worth. A carefully curated social media profile might be part of this project, in which heroes determine the canonical telling of their own story directly, centering themselves as the authority for what belongs in the story and what it means.

Belonging to a highly individualist and self-concerned culture, we have less interest in what a future society might care about.[26] The case of the hero, however, offers a useful illustration of

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[25] *Ibid.*, 34.

[26] It also seems to be the case that modern celebrity as a culture lacks a conviction regarding the continuation of time outside the present moment, which would also short circuit

the importance of multiple viewpoints versus individual subjective authority for the assessment of any given person's historical significance. We are not reliable narrators of our own lives, for a number of reasons. For one, we often are in the dark about many aspects of ourselves–historical and familial circumstances of which we are unaware, biological or psychological conditions, memory gaps, and so on. Our assessments of events in our own childhoods, in particular, are affected by our relative lack of cognitive and personal development at the time and our unawareness while so young of the significance of actions taking place around us, or an understanding of the motivations of others. Second, vanity and self-deception can easily cloud our self-awareness. Many of our own motivations are not what we think they are, and much of our inner and public life is affected by what we would rather not know. Where we are clear-eyed we may still have reason to bend the story to accentuate some parts of our story at the expense of accuracy, whether out of pride or shame. Third, our social circles are commonly limited and our perspective distorted by our tendency to only listen to some and to discount others prejudicially. And, fourth, we often are simply ignorant about our influence on the world around us. The point to be stressed here is not that our subjective viewpoint is *as such* inherently unreliable, but that self-narration risks unreliability insofar as it issues *only* from a single vantage point. We are not only self-conscious individuals, but also social and material beings. Thus, the testimony of others as to who we are, what we have done, and, in general, our own significance and how or whether we have affected the others around us, are all important to achieving an accurate self-accounting.

Fame and persistence in memory depend on the narrative of one's life and actions. This has both an instrumental value and an existential one that appears to offer reprieve from the inevitable slide into oblivion that is our forgetting of the past. This reprieve is temporary and hedged with difficulties belonging to the mechanisms of memory, including personal and social narrative. These difficulties make the demand for accuracy an ideal that is especially difficult to attain and perhaps practically impossible in many instances. To be clear, this is not to deny the importance of accuracy concerning reality, or of rationality, but in addition to normal obstacles it is also evidently the case that both represent epistemic values not universally revered. The desire for fame and for memorialisation may well outweigh a commitment to truth for many individuals, as a matter of fact, whether it is either rational or moral so to desire or not.

As should also be evident to us in an age of instant celebrity and as rapid take-downs, there is also a strong desire in many of us to dismantle heroes. This isn't new; it's just so much easier now, when a sports star or movie actor can go from hero to anathema in the space of a news cycle. Heroes and celebrities may face attack by the envious or malicious or the bored, because of some disagreement or just for amusement–to fill out a different narrative centred

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any desire for fame to continue far into the future, or to see any need to *do* anything that would justify it.

on the teller.[27] What all of the preceding should indicate is that fame and whether one's name, achievements, or reputation persist in memory has a strong dependence on whether one's story is told, by whom, and whether what is told fits with what others are interested to tell. Among other things, this means that one may not star in the story of one's life as a hero. One could also end up as the villain, or as a joke. What is told may not be accurate and whether it is may depend in part on what is valued in the telling. Narrative is always subject to revision; it is never fixed, and varies with the concerns of the present story tellers and their audiences.[28] A story may indeed last longer than the life it relates, but there is no guarantee that your story will continue to be yours once it is told by others.

Conclusion

Utnapishtim was right–the deliberate search for fame is futile, or at least, that fame that stretches significantly beyond one's own lifetime. And as Achilles finds as well, a bad bargain.[29] And yet, the prospect of oblivion moves mortals to seek both the dubious permanence of memory, and the more transient but immediate rewards of present fame. The latter doesn't need a lot of explanation; it is the former that seems irrational. Given what we know about narrative and memory, and the risks that may attend the pursuit of fame, we are unlikely to get more than a short lived repetition of a garbled version of our story, or even just a name empty of import "stamped on bricks".

Part of the problem is a confusion between a desire to be famous *for* ***φ*** and the desire to simply *be* famous. The former requires that one seek to accomplish something the significance of which is independent of the fame that may or may not ensue to the benefit (or detriment) of the agent. The desire for fame *as such*, especially that extending beyond one's lifetime, seems to rest on a kind of imaginative projection on the part of the one pursuing it, as if one imagines being able to experience one's own fame well after one's own earthly demise, and

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[27]There are too many examples of this to cite, to the extent that by the time you read this you will have forgotten any example I might give here.

[28] Note, for example, recent re-tellings of the Homeric stories by, for example, Madeline Miller (2018) and Natalie Haynes (2021)–which give us a valuable shift in perspective on the mythic events they relate. But this also means that the value of biographical tales and memoirs for presenting models of moral behaviour is less than universal or fixed. Suppose we can understand the motives and actions of historical or epic figures as they would have understood themselves (so this is not simply a hermeneutical problem). This doesn't determine that I will accept them as exemplars, because I now value different things. Likewise, my own attempt to be remembered for my outstanding virtue is as out of my control as any other aspect of my memorialisation by my descendants.

[29]*Odyssey*, Book XI, lines 488-491.

that it is this satisfaction in imagination that renders the prospect attractive. Such a desire is a hollow one and cannot be experienced in actuality, only in imagination. But it should also be distinguished from a satisfaction that humans frequently take in future-oriented actions, ones for which they may well acquire some kind of fame. For example, if I plant a grove of slow maturing beech or walnut trees, I do so knowing that I am not very likely to gain the full enjoyment of them, but that other humans and animals will in the decades that follow after me. Many of the things we do in society have this characteristic, that the full benefit (or detriment) of those actions are gathered in by those much removed from us in time or space. The point is that the object of my action is, in this example, the restoration of the stand of trees rather than becoming famous. And that is even if I think that there should be a record of who planted the trees, which could eventually make me famous in some limited way.[30]

Where this leaves us is with the following conclusions. Some people do, as a simple matter of fact, desire fame in the present and some desire that fame to last beyond their own lifetimes. I have tried to offer some explanations of why such individuals might seek one or the other kind of fame. Whether they *should* in a moral sense is a different question, but whether it makes sense to do so, that is, whether it is a reasonable desire, has been considered. On the basis of what has been said here, I conclude that:

1. Even if there were to be no future distortion of the hero narrative, it would be irrational and indefensible to think that one could "enjoy" eternal fame, for the reason that one cannot have a continuing perspective on it.

2. The desire to not disappear from human social consciousness, to fade into the oblivion of human forgetting, is irrational insofar as it is inevitable and causes no harm to a living being, but also possesses a certain quasi or pseudo-"rationality", in that it is an existentially understandable concern given our tenuous mortality.

3. The desire to affect and benefit future humans and other beings is both rational and laudable. It is an impulse behind our familial and charitable bequests, our attempts to make our societies more just, and to repair damaged environments. To be recorded and known for doing so may lead to an incidental renown, but insofar as that then encourages others to do likewise may mark a further desirable outcome.

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[30]My point, though I cannot pursue it here, is that not doing something for the sake of acquiring fame doesn't mean that I must be self-effacing about my own actions. Rather, proper self-respect requires that I claim my actions as mine and take the credit or the blame.

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