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Reading The Gunfighter as Homeric Epic

Kostas Myrsiades

In 1967 Jorge Luis Borges wrote in *The Paris Review*, “I think nowadays, while literary men seem to have neglected their epic duties, the epic has been saved for us, strangely enough, by the Westerns . . . has been saved for the world by of all places, Hollywood” (1967). Andre Bazin, one of the most important and influential film critics, places the western in the epic category “because of the superhuman level of its heroes and the legendary magnitude of their feats of valor,” which has even turned the Civil war “into the Trojan war of the most modern of epics” (1971, 148). Communications scholar Doug Williams concurs that the Western has become the American epic, for just as John Wayne stands as an icon of the American identity so once stood Odysseus for the Greeks (1998, 93). The historian Richard Slotkin finds compatibility between Homer and the Western because the Western like the Homeric epic deals with a nation’s culture.
and its past and thus acts as a paean to the greatness of that nation (1992). Film historian Philip French argues that there is no theme or situation that cannot be examined in terms of the Western, as "the Trojan War turned into a Texas range conflict" (1974, 23). Dealing with Clint Eastwood's Unforgiven, Mary Whitlock Blundell and Kirk Ormand assert that Eastwood's film "lies squarely within a tradition that questions, but ultimately reaffirms, an ethic of violence . . . the tradition of the Western European epic, beginning with the Iliad" (1997, 543). Dealing with the heroic nature of the title hero, Robert Warshaw in his 1954 classic essay "The Westerner" calls the Westerner "a more classical figure" (154), while Jim Kitses speaks of the Western hero "as a latter-day knight, a contemporary Achilles (1970, 1) and Andre Bazin sees Billy the Kid "as invulnerable as Achilles" (1971, 147). Martin M. Winkler, who has done more than anyone else in pointing out Homeric parallels in the American Western, deals with Homer's influence in several films (1985, 1996, 2001) and especially at some length with John Ford's The Searchers, where he notices that "Ford's understanding of heroism places especially the figure of Ethan Edwards and the film's ending in the cultural tradition of Homeric epic" (2004).

This paper hopes to add to this body of literature by examining the progress of the warrior's glory and his homecoming through a comparison of Henry King's The Gunfighter (1950)1 and Homer's eighth century B.C.E. Iliad and Odyssey. It explores the themes of the hero's cunning, the destination, homecoming, and reunion in the Odyssey and his being condemned to glory, his self-recognition, and the roles of irony and fate in the Iliad. This is a tale about the gunfighter as warrior, the hero who desires honor, receives it through gifts, and ends in achieving glory through those gifts. It is a tale of discovery through self-recognition that ends in the repudiation of that glory so dearly won. It is a tale of the hero's realization as he turns homeward from the wars and inward, away from the externals that glory represents, to discover that his humanity lies in the importance to him of family. The discovery is qualified, however, by a stipulation. He cannot possess what he now knows to be his true desire; he cannot be other than what he has become: a warrior whose glory comes at a cost that is part of the larger gift. The cost, as he has always known, cannot be escaped. It is his fate to be so indelibly stamped with the glory he sought that others find in him the road to their own glory. The gunfighter's homecoming is not a reunion with family but losing a title and gaining a tomb.

Three terms best define the values men live and die for in the Homeric epics, although to a higher degree in the Iliad than in the Odyssey: timé, kleos, and geras.2 Homeric warriors fight for timé (honor), which is expressed through the geras (gifts) they receive for their prowess and excellence on the
battlefield. The quality and the number of gifts received in turn assures them of *kleos* (glory)—to be remembered after death as great warriors and thus to achieve the only type of immortality available to mortals. In the Homeric epics these values are achieved through the warrior’s performance (*aristeia*) in battle where he strives to be, and demonstrates that he is, *aristos Achaion* (the best of the Achaians). A warrior’s material wealth, the booty won at war, becomes the manifestation of his *timē*, which will outlive him as *kleos aphthiton* (unperishing glory).

*The Gunfighter as Warrior*

*The Gunfighter* preserves the tightness of plot that endeared Homer’s epics to Aristotle, as the Aristotelian unities of time, place, and action remain intact. Like a Greek tragedy, the plot is resolved in less than 24 hours (in film plot time from about 8 a.m. to 10:30 a.m.). The driving action is the gunfighter’s efforts to reunite with his wife and son. Focusing on the title character Jimmy Ringo’s final two and a half hours of life, *The Gunfighter* storyline unfolds largely on a single set—the Palace Bar Saloon in the gunfighter’s destination town, Cayenne. The gunfighter is an Achilles-like warrior searching for the true meaning of “the fastest gun alive” by first embracing the values of his gunfighter society—*timē, kleos, and geras*—and finally rejecting them as he comes to terms with the constraints of mortality, the value of *oikos*, and the determinism of fate. But he is also an Odysseus, surviving his years as a gunfighter in a nineteenth-century world by using the same cunning and wits by means of which he will work to reclaim his wife and son. The incompatibility of Ringo’s roles—the gunfighter, the character in search of himself, and the cunning warrior—and the transformations through which Ringo must pass constitute a nuanced view of the Homeric hero coming to terms with the great myth of the American West.

On the face of things, and in the tradition of a Homeric hero, Ringo is a larger-than-life figure whose hubris—his desire to be the best, “the fastest gun alive”—instigates his downfall. It comes at a moment of the hero’s greatest disconnect from his previous life, when he comes to realize that what he desires is different from who he is, that he cannot profit from his change of heart because his character has, after all, been determined by his life as a gunfighter. When he finally realizes the kind of life the gunfighter's title entails, and in spite of his great desire to change, fate—psychologically, the necessary working out of his own character—has written his end. And in the tradition of Greek tragic irony, at the point where he finally recognizes the kind of life he wants to lead and is capable of understanding the moral distinctions that would make such a life possible, at the moment he is able, and even willing, to accept his mortality, he is struck down.
Ringo's crowning realization comes when, determined to change his life, he leaves the Palace Bar, mounts his horse, and vows to return in a year's time to retrieve his family and begin a new life. Precisely at that moment he is shot in the back. The fate the audience has been tracking—in the guise of three brothers pursuing him throughout the film—appears to have been averted, for they have been apprehended. But as in Homer, who constantly misdirects and retards the main story line and leads us towards unexpected tangents only to return to pick up a plot line he had discarded, the unexpected occurs. At that moment, a minor figure in the film, Hunt Bromley, shoots him in the back. Fate catches up with Ringo, not face to face in the classic gunfighter mode, but unexpectedly in a back-shooting, an inverse symmetry that delivers a left-handed reflection of Ringo's deserved end.

I. The Gunfighter as a Reading of the Odyssey

The Hero's Cunning

Each delay Ringo encounters on his odyssey to Cayenne and the resistance he meets while in Cayenne become adventures which his cunning must help him overcome. Ringo averts danger whenever he can but does not shrink from it. At the Santa Fe Bar outside Cayenne he deflects the goading insults of a young usurper, a character named Eddie, until his harasser draws and he shoots him dead. On his way out of town, his cunning surprises Eddie's three brothers, who pursue him to avenge Eddie's death. He disarms them and scatters their horses so they have to chase him on foot. Whereas his reputation as a gunfighter always precedes him, he tries throughout the journey, like Odysseus, to conceal his identity and remain anonymous. For the greater part of the film, he stays out of sight in Cayenne until he can decide how to proceed. He must still undergo a number of tests, which again require Odyssean cunning. He must disarm a father, Jerry Marlowe, intent on gunning him down to reprise, mistakenly, the murder of his son some years earlier. Ringo tucks him into a jail cell for safe keeping. In the process, a deputy, assigned by the town marshal to keep Ringo from those who would challenge him, is himself pushed out of harm's way. Ringo's searching glance had caught the reflection of Marlowe's rifle from across the street. Hiding his identity, Ringo patiently hears the complaints and appeases the anxieties of Mrs. Pennyweather and the townswomen who are seeking the marshal to demand he keep the town free of gunfighters. In the bar waiting for a prearranged visit from his wife, who resides surreptitiously in the town, he is confronted by another upstart, Hunt Bromley. Sitting passively at a table, his hands hidden under it, Ringo warns Bromley that a gun is pointed at his belly. As Bromley, uncertain, turns and leaves the bar defeated and humiliat-
ed, Ringo withdraws his hands to reveal a small pocket knife he has been using to clean his nails. Years as a gunfighter anticipating others’ moves, suspicious of the intentions of those he meets, have made this “man of twists and turns” (1.1) cautious and sharpened his wits. He weighs each situation and “learns men’s minds” (1.4) before deciding on a plan of action, using intelligence before force as a first line of defense.

The Destination

As a Western Odyssey, The Gunfighter’s destination is always toward oikos (home). From the film’s opening, a horse and rider race across the dunes which change into plains and then mountains as day becomes night and day again. The rider races toward a home he abandoned years before and is now attempting to regain. As Homer expresses the sentiment,

And may the good gods give you all your heart desires:
husband, and house, and lasting harmony too.
No finer, greater gift in the world than that . . . (Odyssey 6.198-200)

Oikos is the goal of the ex-gunfighter and now town marshal Mark Stepp. He renounced his lawless life to attain a home and a town he could be part of, that he can call his own. Oikos is what Molly, the saloon-girl, hoped to have with her husband, Bucky Harris, before he was shot in the back in Abilene. Oikos is what Mrs. Pennyweather and her entourage are trying to preserve in Cayenne by insisting on protection from gunfighters like Ringo. Oikos is what most impresses Ringo when he listens to a simple farmer, Tommy, describe his idyllic life. It is constituted by the very life of Cayenne with its school and church, its truant children, the neighbors who recognize them and reprimand their behavior, the marshal looking after his “family,” and the closeness and familiarity of its inhabitants as they go about their daily chores. All this activity creates a unity, a family, a community, in contrast to Ringo’s sterile and lonely existence. The longer he remains in Cayenne waiting to meet his wife Peg and his son Jimmy, Jr., the more Ringo wants to become part of the town’s life. At the same time, he recognizes the difficulty of transitioning from his life as a gunfighter. The most he can hope for is a home with his family in some isolated spot far away from anyone who might recognize him as Jimmy Ringo. Trading the hard-won glory associated with his life as a gunfighter for the anonymity of family life, Ringo’s choice can be considered in light of Odysseus when he renounces Calypso’s gift of immortality for a chance to see his home once again. “Preside in our house with me / and be immortal” (5.230-31), Calypso begs Odysseus, but he replies,
Nevertheless I long—I pine, all my days—
to travel home and see the dawn of my return.
And if a god will wreck me yet again on the wine-dark sea,
I can bear that too, with a spirit tempered to endure. (Odyssey 5.242-45)

Like Ringo in his early years, Odysseus reflects his belief in both time and kleos by rejecting Calypso, for remaining with her would secrete him from the real world and the glory it brings. But like Ringo in his later years, Odysseus has also had time to reevaluate the relation of the life of the warrior to the domestic life, having left the warrior life 10 years ago (the Calypso episode is his penultimate adventure). Both Odysseus in the Odyssey and Hector in the Iliad understand the counterbalance of the two ways of life, like Hector in the Iliad, as Foley points out (2007). Hector's response to Andromache's plea that he remain at home rather than return to the battlefield forces him to consider her desire for oikos against his own for kleos,

Yes, soon they will kill you off,

all the Achaean forces massed for assault, and then,
bereft of you, better for me to sink beneath the earth.

What other warmth, what comfort's left for me,

once you have met your doom? Nothing but torment! (Iliad VI. 486-90)

Hector's choice for kleos means the death of his son Astyanax, who will be flung from the walls of Troy to his death by Odysseus, and the destruction of his oikos. Ringo's original break with his home (oikos) results as well from his pursuit of timê, geras, and kleos. When he decides to seek his fame, he gives up his oikos and can only regain it after he has abandoned his need for kleos. Young and full of hubris, unable to command both of the opposed values, he opts for glory. Older and disappointed with his gunfighter life, seeing the possibilities of another kind of life in those of his close friends Buck Harris and Matt Stepp, his turn to domesticity can only be achieved by repudiating who he has become as a warrior.

The Homecoming

The Gunfighter belongs to the genre of the nostos, the homecoming of a warrior returning from an absence of many years to reclaim family and rejoin community. Ringo's wife Peg, a Western Penelope, stands for the world he longs to enter but to which he no longer belongs. Once he joins the warrior society, open only to men, the world of the gunfighter, he must relinquish the domestic world of women, a choice with which Hector himself struggles when implored by his wife to remain with her and their son in Troy,
All this weighs on my mind too, dear woman.
But I would die of shame to face the men of Troy
and the Trojan women trailing their long robes
if I would shrink from battle now, a coward. (Iliad VI.522-25)

Ringo’s reunion with his wife presents a comparable dilemma. As his son storms unannounced into the room where Ringo is waiting, the father is taken aback by the boy’s brashness, which both impresses and concerns him. His warrior self admires the boy’s fearlessness; seeing himself in his son, he smiles. Hector’s parting words to his infant son echo Ringo’s smile of recognition:

Zeus, all you immortals! Grant this boy, my son,
may he be like me, first in glory among the Trojans,
strong and brave like me, and rule all Troy in power
and one day let them say, “He is a better man than his father!” (Iliad VI.568-71)

But Ringo recognizes how futile his past life has become. He has heard the confession of his fellow gunfighter Strepp. A stray bullet in one of his robberies had killed a young girl, leading him to turn his back on his old life. Another child, his own son, leads Ringo to consider the value he gives life when the boy asks him about Wyatt Earp, whom the boy idolizes:

Jimmy Jr.: “Did you ever meet Wyatt Earp?”
Ringo: “Yeah. I’ve seen him once or twice.”
Jimmy Jr.: “Who is the toughest one you ever saw?”
Ringo: “You mean the real toughest?”
Jimmy Jr.: “Yes sir, besides you.”
Ringo: “Well, I guess I haven’t seen anybody any tougher than a fellow you have right here in your own town. A fellow by the name of Mark Strepp.”
Jimmy Jr.: “You mean marshal Mark Strepp?
Ringo: “He’s the toughest man I ever met.”
Jimmy Jr.: “But he don’t even carry a gun.”
Ringo: “Well he don’t have to, son. He can handle them bare-handed.”

The picture Ringo paints for his son is not that of a gunfighter, but of the man who needs no gun, a man strong enough to step out of the spotlight of the Western gunfighter. The dilemma for Ringo, as he tries to rehabilitate himself in Jimmy Jr’s eyes, is that Ringo must give up the only legacy he has to give his son—his reputation as a gunfighter—in order to rejoin him as part of a family. His son can not be allowed to continue Ringo’s way of life by
taking over for him where he left off, a prospect that the boy seems to have instinctively been drawn to in his hero-worship of Wyatt Earp. This break in the continuity of the father-son relationship does not auger well for Ringo, for it prefigures a disconnect between the two that is prescient. Ringo might not, unlike Odysseus, be going home again as what he has to leave behind—a legacy—what he needs to have to make a meaningful connection with his son.

Still, Ringo’s stay in Cayenne has slowly begun to reintegrate him into society, awakening him to the world he forsook for *timē* and *kleos* and making him conscious of the disjunction between the two worlds. He has become one with those warriors in the *Odyssey* who reach home only after great suffering, a suffering that earns them the right to return, to gradually reintegrate into society. Odysseus is allowed to return to Ithaca only after a decade of wandering, rising slowly out of a world of monsters to the more human world of the Phaeacians and finally to the social world of Ithaca. By the same argument, Ringo integrates incrementally into the world of the home he has left, having experienced his own monsters—the usurpers Eddie and Bromley, the death of his friend Harris, and Strepp’s confession and reform.

The Reunion

As a warrior returning home following a long absence, Ringo’s goal is to carry out his reunion as unobtrusively as possible. While his presence becomes known as soon as he arrives in town, only Strepp and Molly know the connection between Ringo and Peg. Now the town schoolteacher, Peg has assumed a new identity, leaving her past and the stigma of the gunfighter behind to raise her son within a community. Before he tries to meet her, Ringo, like Odysseus, cunningly questions others, the marshal and Molly, about her life and her feelings toward him. The marshal is recruited to intercede with Peg. Molly is interrogated about possible suitors:

“Is it somebody else?” asks Ringo.

“You ought to know better than that,” Molly responds.

“No, I don’t; it’s been a long time.”

“There will never be anybody else for Peg.”

“Anybody else tried?”

“Of course. Pretty girl like that. Young squirt named Hunt Bromley got after her; thought she couldn’t take care of herself. Boy you should have heard her tell him off.”

“What did he do to her?”

“Nothing really. Just one of those loud mouth barroom loafers who try to move in on a woman without a husband.”
Presented by Molly with the dilemma of meeting Ringo, the Penelope-like Peg is unsure of her own feelings and reluctant to face this stranger who claims to be her husband. Not knowing how the intervening years and the life he has led as a gunfighter have changed him, she admits, “He scares me Molly, he really does.” To Molly’s query about any suitors, Peg is clear, there have never been any. “Then it’s still Jim,” Molly says. “I guess it always will be,” responds Peg, faithful to her charge as a warrior’s wife and mother of his son. Throughout Ringo’s absence, she has shunned the company of men, remained faithful to the gunfighter, and protected their son. Suddenly she is confronted with Penelope’s dilemma—she must face the man for whom she has waited for years, reluctant to accept him before making certain he is truly the man she once knew. Molly might have persuaded her to meet with Ringo, but she will not yield to him before she questions his intentions.

Ringo, for his part, has passed the time with the young farmer Tommy as he awaits word from Molly. A man of action, he seizes upon the idea of a farm of his own, something palpable he can envision resolving the puzzle of his life. His proposal becomes a beacon, a place where the three of them can live out their lives in solitude. But not until he can prove himself by one more test, a test that will ensure his clarity of vision and his sincerity of purpose. A return to the social from the world of the monsters is not an automatic move. Ringo must pass a test before Peg will finally accept him, a test like that of Penelope’s axes:

I mean to announce a contest with those axes,
the ones he would often line up here inside the hall,
twelve in a straight unbroken row like blocks to shore a keel,
then stand well back and whip an arrow through the lot.
Now I will bring them on as a trial for suitors.
The hand that can string the bow with greatest ease,
that shoots an arrow clean through all twelve axes—
he’s the man I follow, yes, forsaking the house
where I was once a bride. . . . (Odyssey 19.644–52)

Peg’s test gives Ringo a year to forsake his gunfighter life. If he can stay free of trouble, he can return to claim her and the boy. Only then will she follow. Ringo’s return to society must be sanctified by the experience of returning to the wilderness, surviving there as a new man, leaving his monsters behind, and then rejoining society. It is a challenge that Ringo gratefully accepts.
II. The Gunfighter as a Reading of the Iliad

Condemned to Glory

The film opens with a note to the audience: “In the Southwest of the 1880s the difference between death and glory was often but a fraction of a second; this was the speed that made champions of Wyatt Earp, Billy the Kid, and Wild Bill Hickok. But the fastest man with a gun who ever lived, by many contemporary accounts, was a long, lean Texan named Ringo.” This is the story of a warrior in the mythic West, Jimmy Ringo. An exemplar of a time when one’s reputation was made by the way one handled a gun, he was simply “the fastest man with a gun who ever lived.”

As the film opens, Jimmy Ringo, after an absence of twelve years, is returning home to reclaim his wife and the eight and half year-old son he hasn’t seen for eight years. The gunfighter interrupts his journey to stop in Santa Fe for a drink at a bar where, his fame already legendary, everyone recognizes him by name—the old man outside the bar, the bartender, the men playing poker. A young upstart at the card table named Eddie goads him. “How fast can he be?”, he asks, “he’s just a man like everyone else. Have a drink Mr. Frazzelbottom, isn’t that your name Mr. Frazzelbottom? You don’t want to drink with me Mr. Frazzelbottom?” Ringo does his best to ignore the insults, “Why is it that everywhere I go I have to meet up with a squirt like you?” Eddie draws but immediately crumbles to the ground dead. Everyone in the saloon agrees Eddie drew first, but a bystander warns Ringo that the young man has three brothers who will not ask questions how he died. Ringo leaves the bar and continues his journey towards Cayenne and the Palace Bar.

Ringo thus establishes himself in this first appearance in the film as a famous gunfighter, justly feared and begrudgingly respected. This early scene with Eddie has a binary aspect to it, for just as he reminds us that he has a reputation that is the envy of every young man in the West who wants to make a name for himself, it becomes clear that Ringo himself is weary of his title and dissatisfied with the honor and fame it has accorded him. Tired of the predictable challenges that provoke shoot-outs that kill ambitious boys like Eddie, Ringo has been mellowed by time, and he has begun to question the values for which he has forsaken his wife and son. He senses there should be more to life than a reputation as the fastest gun alive, and for some time now, he has been trying to run from his past. In this light, Ringo puts on the aspect of a Western Achilles, a man whose choices have been few—either to win glory by being the fastest gun alive or to live an uneventful life. It was fear of the latter that drove Ringo to seek the gunfighter’s reputation that he is beginning to reconsider, as the Cayenne marshal will later remind him.

This change of heart is cemented through three crucial scenes occurring midway through the film. First, when he meets the Palace Bar saloon...
singer Molly, wife of his friend, the gunfighter Bucky Harris. Second, when
he comes in contact with Tommy, the young farmer. Finally, when he speaks
to Marshal Strepp. Ringo has not been a thoughtful man. He has never con-
sidered a life other than the one he led and his trip to Cayenne has little
purpose other than to meet face to face with his wife and son, without any
idea of what might happen as a result. In the short time that passes during
his conversations with Molly, Tommy, and Mark Strepp, however, he comes
to realize the falseness of the values he has pursued up to this point, he dis-
covers what he wants, and he arrives at a plan for making the changes that
will alter his life.

Self-Recognition (anagnorisis)

The first of these three crucial scenes occurs when the marshal delivers
the disappointing news that Ringo's wife does not want to meet with him. As
he prepares to leave the saloon, he meets Molly, who is surprised to see him.
The saloon-singer wife of Ringo's friend and fellow gunslinger seems sur-
prised that Ringo has not heard that Harris, foreshadowing Ringo's own fate,
was killed six months ago in Abiline, shot in the back of the head in an alley.
When Ringo inquires why Molly has to work in a saloon, she says, "I have to
eat don't I?" When asked whether Buck has provided for her, she lists her
inheritance as a horse, a saddle, two guns, and $15. Having led the same kind
of life as his friend, Ringo realizes he is bound to end up the same way. The
memory of Buck's sudden end and his insignificant legacy are all that are left
to show he ever existed. His 

(geras (a horse, a saddle, a gun, and $15) at the end
of his life does not amount to the kleos and timé that Ringo felt his friend's
warrior past should have provided. It is as if Buck never lived, wiped out from
the world's memory. While he was alive, he had an identity, a reputation
because he posed a problem for the law and those he came in contact with.
Dead he is forgotten because he no longer poses a threat to anyone. Whatever
feats of excellence he performed while alive, hold no meaning in death. What
his reputation finally comes down to is that he left nothing of significance to
be remembered by, he died an unheroic death, and more devastating than both
of these, he was not even able to provide security for his wife. His friend's fate
drives the point home that Ringo's own life as "the fastest gun alive" has not
produced the timé and the kleos that he expected.

The second crucial scene that leads Ringo to reevaluate his life occurs
while he awaits Molly's return as an emissary to his wife. During his anxious
wait in the saloon, the young farmer Tommy enters the Palace Bar for a
drink. Tommy represents the first contact Ringo has had with someone who
neither knows the gunfighter nor has any idea of his reputation. For him,
Ringo is a mere stranger to whom the bartender Max has introduced him
and with whom he strikes up a friendly conversation. The bartender shares Tommy’s story with Ringo. Recently married to a girl who seems to have a strong hold on him, he is under strict orders from his wife to have only one drink while he is in town for farm supplies. Ringo’s offer of a second is refused as Tommy cites his wife’s admonition. Ringo, drawn to Tommy’s simple and unassuming nature, listens attentively to his companion's idyllic tale of the life he and his wife lead on their farm and his catalogue of the cattle and horses their hard work has added to their stock. Held against the scene describing the legacy of a gunfighter’s death and his wife’s solitary struggle, this scene pictures a like-minded husband and wife, close and with a single purpose, oblivious to the world outside their farm. Ringo is touched by the harmony he senses in this couple whose devotion provides all the fame and honor they need. Separated, Molly and Buck have nothing to show for their life. Together, Tommy and his wife, even at the beginning of their life, have already amassed a great deal. Domestic harmony like theirs expresses for Homer the complementarity of man and woman, the greatest gift one can bestow on another human being:

And may the good gods give you all your heart desires:

husband, and house, and lasting harmony too.

No finer, greater gift in the world than that. . . . (Odyssey 6.198-200)

The third scene occurs between Ringo and Marshal Strepp, a scene in which Ringo is already showing signs of the effect of his first two meetings. The death of the gunfighter and the life of the farmer prompt him to think about his own prospects. Instead of responding to Strepp’s concern that it’s time for him to leave town, he shares his thoughts about Buck:

Ringo: “She told me about Buck; never heard it before.”
Strepp: “I guess he never knew what hit’em.”
Ringo: “That’s a fine life, ain’t it? Just trying to stay alive not being able to live on and enjoy anything, not getting anywhere. Just trying to keep from getting killed. Just waiting to get knocked off by some tough kid like the kind of kid I was.”
Strepp: “And the truth of the matter is it don’t pay much either.”
Ringo: “Here I am 35 years old and I ain’t even got a little watch. How did you get out of it Mark?”
Strepp: “I just quit.”

When Ringo first arrived in town, he was surprised his old friend Strepp was marshal of Cayenne. Too preoccupied with getting in touch with his wife to pursue the matter, and having had the opportunity of his meetings with Molly and Tommy, Ringo is now intrigued to know how Strepp was
able to leave behind his gunfighter past and end up on the side of the law. Here, Strepp's confession of his participation in a bank robbery and gunfight in which a child was killed reveals that he felt responsible for the death, although it could have been his bullet as well as anyone else's that killed the girl. He left the life of a gunfighter to wander through the West until he ended in Cayenne. There, he determined to build a new life, out of the same anonymity from which Peg constructed her new life, in an effort to prevent such innocent deaths from occurring again. In a signature statement that marks his new identity, Strepp has refused to wear a gun. No longer impressed with feats of valor, Strepp presents himself as a simple, quiet, unassuming man doing his duty. He has found contentment by leaving his reputation behind and by making sure that no one else tries to create one in his jurisdiction. His insistence that Ringo leave the town as soon as possible, and the care he takes in assuring that he is kept out of sight of the crowds anxious to catch a glimpse of him, change the terms of the game from one where an individual's glory matters more than collective security, to one where the good of the many trumps the one.

Strepp's confession reveals that a gunfighter can change his life, but the change has to come from within. In Strepp's case, it occurs when he discovers his humanity, when he realizes that his actions could have caused the death of an innocent child. It is at that moment that he is willing to trade fame for anonymity. He acts in terms of what he believes to be right—an intrinsic human value—rather than what he might gain from the act—an assertion of utility value—relinquishing any kind of external fame. No one will know what he did or why he did it except himself, an act for which Achilles provides the model when he reenters the battlefield to avenge his fallen friend Patroclus. No longer concerned about his fame or the many gifts offered by Agamemnon, he acts out of devotion and love for a friend. Similarly when he returns the body of Hector to Priam that he previously dragged around Troy, he does so out of pity for an old man who reminds him of his own father, a father who, he realizes, will never again see his son. Achilles and Strepp have looked inward and discovered their humanity, the very obverse of the warrior/gunfighter who acts out of a need to be known, to be recognized, and to be remembered.

It takes all three experiences—the unexpected news of Buck's death, the conversation with Tommy, the confession of Mark Strepp—to jolt Ringo into a recognition of what it means to be "the fastest gun alive." The fame that accompanies this honor relates to the skill of the fast draw and not to the nature of the man who performs the act. Buck is expendable just as Ringo will be when someone faster at the draw comes along. In the world of the Western film the performance (the drawing of the gun) takes precedence over
the man who performs it. While Buck was alive, he was admired for his act; dead and no longer able to act, he becomes inconsequential. Buck's death, and the way he died, enables Ringo to assess the two possibilities available to "the fastest gun alive," the Homeric equivalent of the *aristos Achaion*: remain the best and be admired as long as the act can be performed, but die young since others are waiting to acquire that act; or remain unnoticed and live a long life. Achilles avails himself of the same thought in *Iliad* 9 when Odysseus, Phoenix, and Ajax approach to persuade him to return to their aid,

> two fates bear me on to the day of death.
> If I hold out here and I lay siege to Troy,
> my journey home is gone, but my glory never dies.
> If I voyage back to the fatherland I love,
> my pride, my glory dies . . .
> true, but the life that's left me will be long,
> the stroke of death will not come on me quickly. (*Iliad* IX.499-505)

Buck's death is as shocking to Ringo as the death of Patroclus is to Achilles. But Achilles abandons his pride and focuses his anger on Hector in order to avenge his friend's death, while Ringo does not seek revenge. Rather, his friend's death seals for him the realization that *kleos*, the title of the best in the West, does not bestow undying fame on the warrior. Buck's fame lasted only during his short life. Once dead, his fame died with him; what remains is a corpse lying unattended in some back alley.

The emptiness of a gunfighter's fame is further reinforced by Tommy's honesty and forthrightness, which leads Ringo to consider what kind of life he himself would like to lead with his own wife and son. After his conversation with the farmer, Ringo knows what he wants to do with the rest of his life and is eager to meet with his wife to propose to her his idea of a small farm far away from the present territory where no one will have heard of him. There the three of them can begin the simple life he so admires in Tommy. The burden of the title he has been carrying with him all these years no longer seems to matter. It is better to be a farmer than have the notoriety as a gunfighter; "I'd rather slave on earth for another man— / than rule down here over all the breathless dead," Achilles tells Odysseus when they meet in the underworld. (11.556). When Peg is persuaded by Molly to meet with him, Ringo proposes to her the idea of a small farm he would like to buy in California, an idea that he admits just came to him:

> "I wanna get away from here Peggy"
> "When did you get this idea Jim?"
"Well I didn't get it. It kinda just came over me. . . . I changed you know. I'm different now."

By the conclusion of these three scenes, Ringo's character takes on new meaning. He has come to the conclusion that the greatest priority for a mortal is to stay alive and enjoy life as long as possible, since eventually all mortals must face death. He moves from uncertainty to certainty, from aimlessness to purpose. His weariness seems to disappear, and he is excited and once again interested in life. After all his years of running from place to place, he can now stop. He has discovered the solution he was seeking—a piece of ground for his wife and son far away from the world he presently inhabits. His fame has been nothing more than a form of entertainment for the public, a sport that they participate in as onlookers. Once dead, he will no longer be of any interest, for he will no longer provide the public with the thrill of a gunfight, the rush that they experience through him. Yet the life he chose gave him only two false alternatives: to fight and win glory for oneself or fight and die and give glory to one's opponent as Sarpedon remarks to Glaucus in the _Iliad_, "so in we go for attack!/ Give our enemy glory or win it for ourselves!" (XII.380-82). The western gunfighter is a Homeric warrior transposed from 13th century BCE Troy to the 19th century American West. The life of the Western gunfighter, so long as he remains within the margins set by the Homeric warrior, takes place in a world from which there is no escape as Sarpedon tells Glaucus in the _Iliad_,

> Ah my friend, if you and I could escape this fray <br> > and live forever, never a trace of age, immortal. <br> > I would never fight on the front lines again <br> > or command you to the field where men win fame. <br> > But now, as it is, the fates of death await us  <br> (Iliad XII. 374-78)

In a final twist on the _Iliad_, it is possible in some respects to consider Hector as a model for Ringo. Hector, unlike Achilles, is not aware of his fate. He clings to the hope that it might be possible to defeat Achilles, although he knows him to be a much greater warrior than himself. Ringo too realizes his end can not be much different than Buck's, but after his conversation with Strepp, he has hope for a way out of his dilemma. Considering Strepp's renunciation of his past and his acceptance of anonymity, Ringo too envisions a future with Peg and his son Jimmy as an unknown somewhere far from the territory where he might be recognized. When Hector is about to face Achilles and debates between running away and being labeled a coward or standing up to an opponent stronger than himself and losing his life, he
decides, "Better to clash in battle, now, at once— / see which fighter Zeus awards the glory! (XXII.155-56). Even though in his heart he knows he is no match for Achilles, he still entertains the possibility of victory. After all, only Zeus knows for certain the final outcome, and it is just possible that the match might go his way. As mortals, both Ringo and Hector are able to face hopeless situations because they can not predict their future.

Irony and Fate

These three scenes account for Ringo's ultimate act at the end of the film. Having reconciled with his wife and having reunited with his eight and one-half year-old son, he has been assured by Peg that in one year's time, she and their son will accompany him to the new life he has proposed. His mission accomplished beyond his wildest dreams, he is now ecstatic and ready to begin his one-year trial. But as in Greek tragedy fate awaits him just outside the door he has to exit to mount his horse—the door that separates life from death. In the alley behind the Palace Bar, the marshal has made all the preparations for Ringo's departure and is ready and waiting. A deputy is busy canvassing the area for the three brothers who have pursued him throughout the film and who are now hiding in a barn directly across the door from which Ringo is to exit. Ringo leaves the bar, having discovered the value of family (a private, unsung life with the few people who love him as opposed to a public life in the spotlight as the fastest gun alive). As he mounts his horse, the audience expects that the three brothers will finally end his life. But fate is again averted, for the deputy spots the brothers and disarms them before they can act. Ringo is free. Although he has been guilty of hubris, the gods have forgiven him. He mounts and begins to ride out of town, when suddenly Hunt Bromley, the young town boaster eager to make a reputation for himself, emerges from behind a tree his guns poised. He calls out Ringo's name and before Ringo can turn his head, Bromley shoots him from behind, back-shot just like Buck Harris.

As the marshal arrests Bromley who gloats over the kill that will bestow on him the reputation of having killed the fastest gun alive, the dying Ringo pleads with Strepp for Bromley's freedom insisting that Bromley was faster on the draw and thus deserves his new earned title. With his dying breath Ringo explains to the puzzled Strepp, who witnessed Bromley's cowardly act, that allowing Bromley to get away with the title is a greater punishment than a jail sentence or even a hanging could bestow on him. Bromley will have to learn the way Ringo has learned what it means to carry the burden of the "fastest gun alive." He will have to experience himself the short-lived fame that such a title carries. On the brink of death, the burden of the title he has been carrying has become for Ringo a deadly legacy, perhaps the only
one he has to give. Setting Bromley free condemns him to wander as a lone-
ly and hunted man as Ringo did before him. In death, Ringo understands
that as a Western Achilles he had chosen unwisely, that a long uneventful life
is preferable to a short glorious one.

Ringo at the end of the film dies as the result of a cowardly act, which
emphasizes the falseness of a title indicating that the new bearer is “the best.”
Bestowing this title on Bromley is comparable to Paris’s taking on the title
in the *Iliad*, as both, throughout the film and the epic, respectively, are shown
to be inferior to the original holders. They belittle the whole idea of being
“the best.” *The Gunfighter* makes it clear that Bromley is not as fast as he
believes himself to be and will discover this the hard way when some “squirt”
guns him down for the title he has stolen. It is for this reason that Ringo
pleads for his release. Like Bromley, Paris is not considered a major warrior
and he runs away from the fighting in the *Iliad* whenever he can. It takes his
brother Hector’s taunts and insults to get him back into the battle,
your people dying around the city, the steep walls,
dying in arms—and all for you, the battle cries
and the fighting flaring up around the citadel.
You’d be the first to lash out at another—anywhere—
you saw hanging back from this, this hateful war.

Up with you—

before all Troy is torched to a cinder here and now! (*Iliad* VI.386-92)

In having Bromley/Paris be the ones who finally defeat Ringo/Achilles, the
texts demean the idea of the struggle for a fame that ultimately amounts to
nothing other than ignominious death. The true fame for which Achilles and
Ringo will be remembered by the future is not that they were the best of
the Achaians or the fastest gun alive but that the first died for a friend asking
nothing in return and the other sought a simple life for his wife and son.

By exploring the themes of the hero’s cunning, homecoming, and
reunion *The Gunfighter* can be read as a western *Odyssey*. However, *The
Gunfighter* can also be seen as a western *Iliad* by placing the emphasis on the
hero as a warrior striving to become “the fastest gun alive,” a title he equates
with the honor and glory that will give meaning to his life. But as in the
Homeric epics, through self discovery and self-recognition the hero ends by
repudiating *timê, kleos* and *geras*, the values through which the Homeric hero
strives to become *aristos Achaiôn* (the best of the Achaians).

Notes

With Gregory Peck, Helen Westcott, Millard Mitchell, Jean Parker.
2 Timē (honor), kleos (fame), and geras (gifts) have been dealt with by numerous
scholars. See especially Katz (1991), Rabel (1997), Zanker (1994), and McAulan and

3 For a discussion of aristos Achaion (the best of the Achaians) see Nagy (1979).

4 All translations from Homer's Iliad and Odyssey are taken from Robert Fagles's

5 All quotations from The Gunfighter are taken by the author directly from the
film.

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