

## HOMER - From The Iliad: Achilles's Anger ca. 800-700 B.C.E.

Homer is the traditional name of the blind, possibly illiterate, author of the two most significant epics in Greek literature, The Iliad and the Odyssey. The Iliad, a monumental work, takes place in the final year of the Trojan War (ca. 1250 B.C.E.), a Greek assault against the Trojans waged to avenge Paris of Troy's kidnapping of Helen from her husband, Menelaos, the king of the Greek city-state of Sparta. In this passage, Achilles (Achilleus in the translation below) becomes angry when the Achaian (Greek) king Agamemnon moves to take away a female slave whom Achilles had won in a previous battle. The passage begins with Achilles arguing with Agamemnon.

Then, looking darkly at him, Achilleus of the swift feet spoke:

"O wrapped in shamelessness, with your mind forever on profit, how shall any one of the Achaians readily obey you either to go on a journey or to fight men strongly in battle?"

I, for my part, did not come here for the sake of the Trojan spearmen to fight against them, since to me they have done nothing. Never yet have they driven away my cattle or my horses, never in Phthia where the soil is rich and men grow great did they spoil my harvest, since indeed there is much that lies between us, the shadowy mountains and the echoing sea; but for your sake, O great shamelessness, we followed, to do you favor, you with the dog's eyes, to win your honor and Menelaos' from the Trojans. You forget all this, or you care nothing.

And now, my prize, you threaten in person to strip from me, for whom I labored much, the gift of the sons of the Achaians. Never, when the Achaians sack some well-founded citadel of the Trojans, do I have a prize that is equal to your prize. Always, the greater part of the painful fighting is the work of my hands, but when the time comes to distribute the booty, yours is far the greater reward, and I, with some small thing yet dear to me, go back to my ships when I am weary with fighting. Now I am returning to Phthia since it is much better to go home again with my curved ships, and I am minded no longer to stay here dishonored and pile up your wealth and your luxury."

Then, in turn, the lord of men, Agamemnon, answered: "Run away by all means if your heart drives you. I will not entreat you to stay here for my sake. There are others with me who will do me honor, and above all, Zeus of the counsels. To me, you are the most hateful of all the kings whom the gods love."

Meanwhile, Patroklos came to the shepherd of the people, Achilleus, and stood by him and wept warm tears, like a spring dark-running that down the face of a rock impassable drips its dim water; and swift-footed brilliant Achilleus looked on him in pity, and spoke to him aloud and addressed him in winged words: "Why then are you crying like some poor little girl, Patroklos, who runs after her mother and begs to be picked up and carried, and clings to her dress, and holds her back when she tries to hurry, and gazes tearfully into her face, until she is picked up? You are like such a one, Patroklos, dropping these soft tears. Could you have some news to tell, for me or the Myrmidons?"

Then groaning heavily, Patroklos the rider, you answered: "Son of Peleus, far greatest of the Achaians, Achilleus, do not be angry; such grief has fallen upon the Achaians. For all those who were before the bravest in battle are lying up among the ships with arrow or spear wounds...."

"Give me your armor to wear on my shoulders into the fighting, so perhaps the Trojans might think I am you and give way from their attack, and the fighting sons of the Achaians get wind again after hard

work. There is little breathing space in the fighting. We unwearied might with a mere cry pile men wearied back upon their city, and away from the ships and the shelters."

So, he spoke supplicating in his great innocence; this was his own death and evil destruction he was entreating. But now, deeply troubled, swift-footed Achilles answered him: "Ah, Patroklos, illustrious, what is this you are saying? I have not any prophecy in mind that I know of; there is no word from Zeus my honored mother has told me, but this thought comes as a bitter sorrow to my heart and my spirit when a man tries to foul one who is his equal, to take back a prize of honor because he goes in greater authority.

This is a bitter thought to me; my desire has been dealt with roughly. The girl, the sons of the Achaians, chose out for my honor; and I won her with my own spear and stormed a strong-fenced city, is taken back out of my hands by powerful Agamemnon, the son of Atreus as if I were some dishonored vagabond.

Still, we will let all this be a thing of the past; and it was not in my heart to be angry forever; and yet I have said I would not give over my anger until that time came when the fighting with all its clamor came up to my own ships.

So, do you draw my glorious armor about your shoulders; lead the Myrmidons, whose delight is battle into the fighting, if truly the black cloud of the Trojans has taken position strongly about our ships, and the others, the Argives, are bent back against the beach of the sea, holding only a narrow division of land, and the whole city of the Trojans has descended upon them boldly, because they do not see the face of my helmet glaring close, or else they would run and cram full of dead men into the water courses if powerful Agamemnon treated me kindly..

But even so, Patroklos beat the bane aside from our ship; fall upon them with all your strength; let them not with fire's blazing inflame our ships and take away our desired homecoming. But obey to the end this word I put upon your attention so that you can win, for me, great honor and glory in the sight of all the Danaans,<sup>4</sup> so they will bring back to me the lovely girl and give me shining gifts in addition.

When you have driven them from the ships, come back; although later the thunderous lord of Hera might grant you the winning of glory, you must not set your mind on fighting the Trojans, whose delight is in battle, without me. So, you will diminish my honor:"...

He spoke, and Patroklos was helming himself in bronze that glittered. First, he placed along his legs the beautiful greaves, linked with silver fastenings to hold the greaves at the ankles. Afterward, he girts on about his chest the corselet starry and elaborate of swift-footed Aiakides. Across his shoulders, he slung the sword with the nails of silver, a bronze sword, and above it, the great shield, huge and heavy...

Patroklos was charged with evil intentions against the Trojans. Three times he charged in with the force of the running war god, screaming a terrible cry, and three times he cut down nine men; but as for the fourth time he swept in, like something greater than human, there, Patroklos, the end of your life was shown forth, since Phoibos [Apollo] came against you there in the strong encounter dangerously, nor did Patroklos see him as he moved through the battle, and shrouded in a deep mist came in against him and stood behind him, and struck his back and his broad shoulders with a flat stroke of the hand so that his eyes spun.

Phoibos Apollo now struck away from his head, the helmet four-horned and hollow-eyed, and under the feet of the horses, it rolled clattering, and the plumes above it were defiled by blood and dust. Before this time, it had not been permitted to defile in the dust this great helmet crested in horse-hair;

rather it guarded the head and the gracious brow of a godlike man, Achilles; but now Zeus gave it over to Hector to wear on his head, Hector whose own death was close to him.

And in his hands was splintered all the huge, great, heavy, iron-shod, far-shadowing spear, and away from his shoulders dropped to the ground the shield with its shield sling and its tassels. The lord Apollo, son of Zeus, broke the corselet upon him. Disaster caught his wits, and his shining body went nerveless. He stood stupidly, and from close behind his back, a Dardanian man hit him between the shoulders with a sharp javelin: Euphorbos, son of Panthoos, who surpassed all men of his own age with the throwing spear, and in horsemanship and the speed of his feet. He had already brought down twenty men from their horses since first coming with his chariot and his learning in warfare.

He first hit you with a thrown spear, o rider Patroklos, nor broke you, but ran away again, snatching out the ash spear from your body, and lost himself in the crowd, not enduring to face Patroklos, naked as he was, in close combat. Now Patroklos, broken by the spear and the god's blow, tried to shun death and shrink back into the swarm of his own companions. But Hector, when he saw high-hearted Patroklos trying to get away, saw how he was wounded with the sharp javelin, came close against him across the ranks, and with the spear stabbed him in the depth of the belly and drove the bronze clean through. He fell thunderously to the horror of all the Achaian people...

Meanwhile, the son of stately Nestor was drawing near him and wept warm tears and gave Achilles his sorrowful message: "Ah me, son of valiant Peleus; you must hear from me the ghastly message of a thing I wish never had happened. Patroklos has fallen, and now they are fighting over his body which is naked. Hector of the shining helm has taken his armor."

He spoke, and the black cloud of sorrow closed on Achilles. In both hands, he caught up the grimy dust and poured it over his head and face, and fouled his handsome countenance, and the black ashes were scattered over his immortal tunic...

[Angered by his friend's death, Achilles decides once again to fight on the Greek side, confronting the Trojan champion, Hector.]

Pulling out the sharp sword that was slung at the hollow of his side, huge and heavy, and gathering himself together, he made his swoop, like a high-flown eagle who launches himself out of the murk of the clouds on the flat land to catch away a tender lamb or a shivering hare; so, Hector made his swoop, swinging his sharp sword, and Achilles charged, the heart within him loaded with savage fury.

In front of his chest, the beautiful, elaborate great shield covered him, and with the glittering helm with four horns, he nodded; the lovely golden fringes were shaken about it, which Hephaistos<sup>6</sup> had driven close along the horn of the helmet. And as a star moves among stars in the night's darkening,

Hesper, who is the fairest star who stands in the sky, such was the shining from the pointed spear Achilles was shaking in his right hand with evil intention toward brilliant Hector. He was eyeing Hector's splendid body to see where it might best give way, but all the rest of the skin was held in the armor, brazen and splendid, he stripped when he cut down the strength of Patroklos; yet showed where the collar-bones hold the neck from the shoulders, the throat, where death of the soul comes most swiftly; in this place brilliant Achilles drove the spear as he came on in fury, and clean through the soft part of the neck the spearpoint was driven. Yet the ash spear heavy with bronze did not sever the windpipe, so that Hector could still make exchange of words spoken. But he dropped in the dust, and brilliant Achilles vaunted above him: "Hector, surely you thought as you killed Patroklos you would be safe, and since I was far away, you thought nothing of me, O fool, for

an avenger was left, far greater than he was, behind him and away by the hollow ships. And it was I, and I have broken your strength; on you, the dogs and the vultures shall feed and foully rip you; the Achaians will bury Patroklos."...

"We have won ourselves enormous fame; we have killed the great Hector whom the Trojans glorified as if he were a god in their city." He spoke and now thought of shameful treatment for glorious Hector. In both of his feet at the back, he made holes by the tendons in the space between ankle and heel and drew thongs of ox-hide through them, and fastened them to the chariot so as to let the head drag, and mounted the chariot, and lifted the glorious armor inside it, then whipped the horses to a run, and they winged their way unreluctantly.

A cloud of dust rose where Hector was dragged; his dark hair was falling about him, and all that head that was once so handsome was tumbled in the dust; since, by this time, Zeus had given him over to his enemies, to be defiled in the land of his fathers.

So, all his head was dragged in the dust; and now his mother tore out her hair, and threw the shining veil far from her and raised a great wail as she looked upon her son, and his father beloved groaned pitifully, and all his people about him were taken with wailing and lamentation all through the city.

### **Study Questions:**

1. Why is Achilles enraged that Agamemnon wants to take away his female slave? What does he threaten to do if she is taken from him?
2. What do the Greek warriors care most about? Why are they fighting?
3. How does Achilles feel when he hears Patroklos has been killed?
4. What does Achilles do to Hector after defeating him in combat? Why would Achilles have treated Hector's body in this way?

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Richmond Lattimore, trans., *The Iliad of Homer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 63, 330-333, 351-352, 375, 443-446.

