

Homer – The Iliad

Context:

We know very little about Homer, who was regarded by the Greeks as their first and greatest poet. Evidence of how little we know about him is that no fewer than seven cities claim to have been his birthplace. Homer is thought to have lived between 850 and 750 BC. The Trojan War, which is the subject of his poem, took place c. 1250 BC, some 400 years before. A bard, who according to tradition was blind, Homer received the history of the war as part of an oral tradition handed down from one generation to the next. The Iliad is an epic poem, meant to be recited or rather sung aloud. One of the greatest war stories ever told, it is filled with scenes of battle and carnage. From this broad perspective, it is the story of a war between two peoples, the Greeks from the West and the Trojans from the East. But Homer's stated purpose is to sing of one man, Achilles, and the results of his choices. Insofar as the poem is about both, Achilles and the war between the two peoples, it gives us a hint of what all epics are about, a founding or a refounding. Epics are always about a people in the midst of some battle struggling to overcome something they don't understand or see very well. They typically bring into focus two worlds, a cosmic order of the gods and the temporal, largely political order of a people. At the center of some battle is an individual who either because of some divinely appointed task or divine burden is the instrument of issuing in a change which makes possible a greater attunement between the human and divine orders. The epic is always heroic precisely because of the magnitude of the burden the hero has to bear. The hero of this epic is Achilles.

As part of a living oral tradition, the epic made use of conventions that all of its listeners would have known. One of the more obvious was that the story began *en medias res*, that is, in the midst of things. Homer was counting on his audience already knowing all that preceded and all that came after his story, or he could not have begun where he did. It is important for our understanding of the poem to have some sense of the events leading up to the point where he begins, 9 ½ years into the war. On a human scale, the story began with the abduction of Helen, the wife of Menelaus. Paris, the son of Priam, king of Troy, fell in love with Helen while he was a guest of Menelaus and taking her with him, he returned to Troy. In retribution for the violation of both the marriage and the rules of hospitality, Agamemnon, Menelaus' brother, gathered an army of the Greek city-states and traveled over the Aegean Sea to lay siege to the city of Troy. On a divine scale, the roots of the conflict grew out of a contest in which Paris was asked to choose Hera, Athena, or Aphrodite as the most beautiful goddess. He chose Aphrodite, and as a result both Hera and Athena bore a grudge against him. The gods are actively involved in this war, taking sides with either the Trojans or the Achaeans. Hera and

Athena, along with Poseidon, support the Achaeans; Apollo, Ares, Artemis and Aphrodite support the Trojans. Zeus intervenes on both sides at various times as it suits his own high purposes.

Book Summaries:

Book I: begins 9 ½ years into the war. Before the story opens, in one of their many raids, the Greeks captured the small town of Chryse, and Agamemnon was given Chryseis, the daughter of Chryses, a priest of Apollo, as booty. When the story opens, the priest comes to the Achaeans to ransom his daughter. Agamemnon refuses, and Apollo sends a plague on the Achaeans for dishonoring his priest. Troubled by this turn of events, Achilles calls an assembly. During that assembly, Kalcas, the bird reader, reveals that the plague is due to Agamemnon's refusal and that Apollo will not lift it until the king returns Chryseis without ransom. Agamemnon becomes angry, and when Achilles confronts him, the king takes Briseis, Achilles' concubine, to replace the one he is forced to give up. Feeling dishonored, Achilles responds by withdrawing himself and all his men from the war. He appeals to his mother, the goddess Thetis, to restore his honor, and she in turn persuades Zeus to punish Agamemnon by helping the Trojans. Zeus consents. A whole divine order is put in motion in support of Achilles.

Book II: Zeus sets in motion his plan to restore Achilles' honor by sending Agamemnon a false dream that he will take Troy that day. Agamemnon tests his soldiers by telling them that Zeus is sending them back to Greece in shame. But his plan backfires, and they rush to put to sea for home. Odysseus restores order. The Greeks once again assemble. Thersites, "a man of many words but disorderly," attempts to persuade the Achaeans to abandon the war and return home. Odysseus defeats him. Nestor offers sound advice. This chapter ends with a well recognized epic convention, a catalogue of the Trojan and Achaean forces.

Book III: The two armies face off, but rather than engage, they arrange a truce so that Paris and Menelaus, the two principles of the conflict, can engage in single combat with the winner to take Helen. While the two prepare, Helen ascends the Skian gate atop the walls of Troy where she points out the leaders of the Greeks to Priam. Just at that moment when Paris is in danger of being defeated, Aphrodite spirits him back behind the walls of Troy and to his bedroom, where he makes love to Helen.

By the terms of the truce, Helen should go to Menelaus, but Hera wants Troy defeated and so in **Book IV**, Athena persuades one of the Trojans to

kill Menelaus to reignite the fighting. Pandaros, a Trojan archer, wounds Menelaus and the battle recommences.

Book V: describes the aristeia of Diomedes. Diomedes is unstoppable and he leads the Greeks in a day of battle that swings first to one side and then the other. The Book begins with Athena healing Diomedes' wound and lifting the „mist“ from his eyes so that he can see the gods on the field of battle. The gods actively join in the fighting, killing some and saving others. Diomedes attacks both Aphrodite and Ares as they help the Trojans. Ares complains to Zeus that the war and his wound are the fault of his „accursed“ daughter, Athena, but Zeus will hear none of his whining and rebuffs him.

Book VI. Diomedes encounters a guest-friend and for the sake of that friendship, they refuse to kill each other, exchanging shields as a sign. Hector leaves the field of battle to make an offering to Athena in hopes of gaining her aid. While he is within the walls of Troy, he rebukes Paris for remaining safe in the palace while Trojans die for his cause. He seeks out his wife, Andromache and his infant son, assuring her that she will never be taken as a slave as long as he lives.

Book VII: opens with Hector's return to the battle followed by Paris. He challenges the Achaeans to choose someone for single combat. Aias is chosen but nightfall halts the duel before a winner is decided. The Trojans offer to return everything taken from Menelaus except Helen; the Achaeans refuse the goods and Helen. Another truce is agreed upon so that each side may collect and bury their dead. On the advice of Nestor, the Achaeans fortify their camp with a wall and a ditch during the truce. The Trojans meet in assembly.

Book VIII: reveals the further unfolding of Zeus' plan to make the Greeks suffer for Agamemnon's dishonor of Achilles when he forbids any of the other gods to interfere in the fighting while he himself encourages the Trojans. At the end of the day, the Achaeans retreat behind their fortifications and the Trojans make camp on the plain.

In **Book IX**, Realizing that shaming Achilles was a mistake that is costing the Greeks dearly, Agamemnon sends Aias, Odysseus, and Phoenix to appease him. They offer him generous gifts as well as the return of Briseis but Achilles refuses their offers. Faced with the choice the gods have given him of dying there with great honor or returning to his home for a long comfortable life without honor, he would choose a long life rather than help Agamemnon. He plans to sail for home, and declares he will

never enter the battle until Hector breaks the Achaean wall and reaches the ships.

Both sides decide to send spies out in the night in

Book X. Diomedes and Odysseus capture Dolon, the Trojan scout, using what they learn from him to kill some of the Trojans allies and to steal booty.

Fighting resumes the next day in

Book XI. Hector beats the Achaeans back to their camp. Some of the greatest Greek warriors, Diomedes, Odysseus, and Agamemnon, are injured while Achilles, watching the fighting from his ship, nurses his wounded pride. Patroklos goes out to learn of the casualties and seeing him, Nestor pleads with him to join the battle without Achilles. He tells him if he puts on Achilles' armor, the Trojans will fall back in fear. Hector's aristeia takes place in

Book XII. The Trojans storm the Greek camp, and Hector breaks through the wall allowing them through to the beach.

In **Book XIII**, the battle continues on the beach as the Achaeans strive to fight back the advance of the Trojans toward the ships, their only means of survival and passage home. Knowing Zeus is away, Poseidon takes advantage of his absence to encourage the Achaeans. Aias stops Hector from pushing through the fortifications.

Alarmed at the turn of the battle and wanting to get her husband behind doors which only she can unlock, Hera seduces Zeus with the aid of Sleep and a love potion from Aphrodite. They make love here during the height of the battle. While Zeus sleeps, Poseidon works with the Greeks and the battle turns again in **Book XIV**.

Book XV opens with Zeus awakening. He reveals his plan to Hera and Poseidon is forced to withdraw. Following Zeus' command, Apollo restores the stunned Hector, who leads the Trojans through the Greek barricade where he plans to set fire to the ships.

The Trojans are clearly in the ascendancy. Achilles is moved by Patroklos' pity, and in

Book XVI he gives Patroklos the use of his armor and men, but he warns him not to take the battle to the walls of Troy. Before Patroklos arrives, Hector finally gets past Aias and sets fire to the first ship, but once the Trojans see the armor of Achilles, they fall back. In battle fury and forgetting Achilles' warning, Patroklos pushes the Trojans back to the

walls of their city. Apollo confronts and disarms him there and Hector kills him.

Book XVII describes the battle over the body of Patroklos and Achilles' armor. The Achaeans manage to retrieve the body of Patroklos and get it back to the Achaean camp, but Hector keeps Achilles' armor. In Book XVIII, Achilles grieves the death of Patroklos and, angry with himself for remaining outside the fighting too long, sets his quarrel with Agamemnon aside to avenge his friend. Thetis, his goddess mother, reminds him that if he rejoins the fighting, he himself will follow Hector's death. Hephaestus, the god of craft, makes Achilles new armor with a shield on which is depicted the two cities of men: the city of war and the city of peace and justice. Thetis and Odysseus both urge Achilles to make a formal reconciliation with Agamemnon at the opening of Book XIX. Achilles speaks to Agamemnon, telling him of his regrets in letting his anger rule him. Agamemnon places the blame for his own behavior on the gods for having deluded him and then offers Achilles gifts. Achilles says the gifts are of no consequence. He desires to take up the fight immediately. He performs a ritual dressing in his new armor, and just before taking the field, his horse Xanthus speaks a prophecy, telling Achilles his horses will keep him safe for a while, but he is soon to meet his death at the hands of "a great god and powerful Destiny."

When Achilles returns to the battle in **Book XX**, Zeus gives all the gods permission to rejoin the fighting and a psychopatheia ensues. The battle is a holocaust that sweeps up all of nature: the god of the dead awakens, the underworld gapes open, all the gods fight. Achilles kills everyone who faces him with the exception of Aeneas, who is saved by Poseidon, and Hector, who is saved by Apollo.

The Trojans' retreat in **Book XXI** is hampered by the river, Xanthos. As Achilles fills it with bodies, the river rises against him in protest but is finally stopped by the fire of Hephaestus. Now the gods begin to turn openly against one another, with Athena defeating both Ares and Aphrodite and Hera boxing the ears of Artemis. Apollo deceives Achilles into pursuing him long enough for the Trojans to reach the city safely.

Reaching the city gates in **Book XXII**, Achilles finds Hector waiting for him. As Achilles approaches, Hector takes flight, aided by Apollo. Apollo finally leaves him, and when he does, Athena persuades Hector to turn and fight Achilles. Achilles kills Hector, and fastening his body to the chariot, he drags it back to the Achaean camp while Hector's family watches from the walls.

The ghost of Patroklos appears to Achilles in **Book XXIII**, asking why he has not been given a proper burial. The next day he is given an elaborate funeral followed by a day of funeral games.

Book XXIV opens eleven days after Hector's death, his body still left unburied. Apollo has kept it safe from desecration or corruption and the gods tell Priam to go to Achilles to ransom his dead son. With the help of Hermes, the god of stealth who leads souls to the underworld, Priam goes under cover of night to seek out Achilles and ask for the return of Hector's body. Achilles greets him courteously, and they grieve their losses together. Achilles has Hector's body bathed and anointed and returns it to Priam, warning him to stay clear of Agamemnon and promising that there will be no fighting until the days of the funeral are completed. The poem ends on an elegiac note with the Trojans gathering their dead for Hector's funeral.

Things to Think About When Reading the Poem

1. The war has been going on for 9 ½ years with neither side winning. Each side fights for a different set of values. Be aware of what is most honored by the Achaeans and what by the Trojans.
2. Epics are about foundings. What are the values being fought for at the beginning of the epic? Watch to see if they are changed and if the changes taking place become the occasion for a new order, either in the men or the readers. Be aware of the value given to honor by both men and gods and how the concept of honor changes over the course of the book.
3. The epic struggle of a people doesn't take place in a vacuum; it occurs against the backdrop or rather in the midst of a cosmic order. And this cosmic order, the order of the gods, isn't just a setting; there is something going on within this order itself that's a part of the struggle the humans are facing. It brings into focus some aspect of the problem that isn't obvious at first. The importance of this cosmic order and the epic world it unfolds to us isn't small, then; it's enormous because to be aware of a cosmos is to be aware of ancient beginnings. When we enter a cosmos in which the gods play a part, we move into a world that takes us back to beginnings, to "the deeps of time" where boundaries or barriers as we know them fall away. We hear of an Olympus where the gods dwell; an underworld where spirits go or are taken; a place called Tartarus. In book one, Zeus is described as taking a twelve day's journey to the ends of the ocean, that place where Okeanos, one of the fathers of the gods has been banished--it is at the ends of the world as we know it. And after Zeus agrees to Thetis's request to help recover the lost honor of her son, Achilles, Thetis "leapt down...down from

shining Olympus into the sea's depth." Over and over again, we are reminded of a mythic world interpenetrating our own and yet fully real to itself just beyond our borders. Let this world have its full place as you read (cf. especially, XIV, 200ff; and XV, 185ff).

4. In an epic largely devoted to „deeds, “ Homer gives attention to several episodes in which words are shown to have an extraordinary power. As you read, think about the power of words vs. the power of deeds and which is greater.

Names and Terms

1. Epic: from the Greek epos, a word or story.

2. The poet or bard: The bard is a poet, a singer who moved from town to town telling his stories or remained at court in the service of his king. Many of the stories were drawn from history and myth that had been handed down from one generation to the next and so would have been familiar to their audiences. This passing on of stories from generation to generation is called the oral tradition. Homer, like the bards before him, would have received the stories of the Trojan War as part of that spoken heritage. Tradition tells us that Homer was blind. It may have been his inability to see with his eyes that gave him the vision to see beyond the battles to invisible things, things greater and more permanent

3. Invocation: a calling on the gods. When Homer begins by invoking the help of the Muse, Calliope (I, ll.1-7), he is drawing on mythic powers of the cosmos without which he cannot tell his tale. His subject involves something too great for him to tell by himself. What is so great about the war that it is deserving of divine help? Notice the several parts that make up the themes announced in the invocation: 1) Achilles' "anger" and its devastation; 2) the "will of Zeus" or Zeus's plan to recover Achilles' honor; and 3) the anger of Apollo who caused the conflict between Agamemnon and Achilles.

4. Muse: Calliope, one of the 9 daughters of Mnemosyne and Zeus (memory impregnated with divine power). Homer invokes her as the muse of epic poetry; she contains knowledge of all things past, particularly those associated with battle. The epic world is a world of the past, existing in memory and apparently closed off from the present.

5. In medias res: in the midst of things: this doesn't mean in the middle arithmetically; its meaning is rather in the midst of a crisis, some problem that is so great, so con-fusing, so painful, no one quite understands how to get out of it: in the midst of things. The fact that the story begins 9 ½ years into the war is not small. Neither side has been able to bring the conflict to a close, suggesting some underlying disorder

is in the way. The story is about some change taking place in the interval between Achilles' withdrawal from the war and his return. 9 ½, remember, is almost 10, a number representing completion: as *The Iliad* begins, something is about to happen.

6. Aristae: a special show of valor by an individual; he is perfect, unfailing and invincible in this state.

7. Hubris: pride; an over-reaching showing a failure to grasp human, natural limits.

8. There are two peoples fighting this war: the people of the West are the Achaeans, Danaans, and Argives. The people of the East are the Trojans and the Dardanians. Be aware of the differences between them. Notice, for example, the way they enter the battles in Book III and their respective assemblies, Books I and VII. It will be helpful to keep the cast of major characters clear: