

ACHILLES THE HONORABLE WARRIOR

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Brilliant Achilles, beloved of Zeus, follows the warrior's code of honor unrelentingly. He knows his place in society, and acts according to what is traditionally expected of a warrior. He has his faults, certainly, a hot temper being foremost among them, but he only loses his rage in defense of his honor. In arguing his rights when Agamemnon tries to deprive him of his justly earned prize of war, refusing to take a bribe when it is offered him, and avenging the death of Patroclus, Achilles proves himself an honorable warrior.

It is honorable and right for Achilles to withdraw from the battle because Agamemnon has disgraced him. After Agamemnon takes away the prize Achilles has rightfully won in battle, Achilles says he has "...no mind to linger here disgraced." (p.108) Achilles' place in the battle was as a hired warrior under Agamemnon, and his reward for fighting under the king was a certain share of the spoils. By taking away his prize, Agamemnon in effect devalued Achilles' service to him. Achilles then tells Agamemnon "my honors will never equal yours," (p. 108) thus acknowledging Agamemnon's superiority to him. Achilles knows his place - it is Agamemnon who forgets his duty. As king, his obligation is to reward the warriors under him, but he acts selfishly and mistreats Achilles. Achilles, as an honorable warrior, cannot continue to serve a king who treats him in this manner. The only defense of his name that Achilles has is to withdraw from the battle, which he does.

Achilles continues to appropriately defend his honor when he refuses to let Agamemnon bribe him into returning to the battle. Not even arguments from the men he is closest to, Phoenix, Odysseus, and Ajax, can sway him from his decision. Odysseus plays on Achilles' inherently human sense of greed by telling Achilles in great detail of all of the gifts Agamemnon

will give him if he returns. However, Achilles values his honor above riches and refuses this offer, saying “no wealth is worth my life” (p 141); he wants honor, not riches, and Agamemnon has already shown that he will not honor Achilles. When Odysseus’ argument does not work, Phoenix appeals to Achilles as a father to his son, telling him “it’s wrong to have such an iron, ruthless heart” (p 144), and that Achilles should forgive Agamemnon. His paternal speech is poignant, but no obligation is greater for Achilles than that of honor, and not even love for the man who raised him can make him betray this. Ajax, in his turn, reiterates Odysseus’ argument and tells Achilles to accept the payment Agamemnon is offering him. Yet none of the three men can argue Achilles into abandoning his honor for the sake of riches; the reason he left originally was not specifically because he wanted the girl, but rather because Agamemnon was disrespecting him by taking her. The focus of the argument is not the war spoils, but rather Achilles’ honor, and a material bribe is not the solution.

Achilles is only able to rejoin the fight honorably after Patroclus is killed, because it is acceptable to the warrior’s code for him to lay aside past grievances in order to avenge a friend. Hector broke the code of honor when he defiled Patroclus’ body and dragged it behind his chariot in the sand. A warrior’s body must be kept sacred, and a warrior shows respect for his enemy by not defiling the body. Achilles’ rage at hearing what Hector does to Patroclus’ body leads him to return to the battle and avenge the dishonor. Iris tells Achilles that “the shame will be yours/ if your comrade’s corpse goes down to the dead defiled” (p 165). She says this because Achilles owes Patroclus a debt of friendship, and friendship demands that Achilles protect his own honor by avenging the slight done to Patroclus’. Once more, Achilles’ actions are driven by a desire for all things to be as they ought to be according to the warrior’s code of

honor.

Achilles lives as the true Greek warrior lives; his every action is centered around protecting his honor and that of his comrades'. His argument with Agamemnon arises because he is dishonored; he refuses to take the bribe offered him because it would be dishonorable; and he returns to the battle because Patroclus, his friend, has been disgraced and must be avenged. Achilles, more than any other warrior in the Iliad, exemplifies how a true warrior is honorable.

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