

The anger of achilleus

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



“ Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus’ son Achilleus and its devastation, which put pains thousandfold upon the Achaians ...and the will of Zeus was accomplished since that time when first there stood in division of conflict Atreus’ son the lord of men and brilliant Achilleus.” – (1. 1-7) Thus begins Homer’s Iliad, a narrative, on certain levels, of the anger of Peleus’ son Achilleus. This anger, divine wrath, of Achilleus is at the center of the epic, an element that drives the action forward. With the opening lines of the poem, one can already distinguish that the focus Homer intended was upon human emotions, the consequences of Achilleus’ anger, caused by the conflict between himself and Atreus’ son, Agamemnon. Only near the very end of the Iliad does the anger finally dissolve, and a necessary transformation takes place to ensue a comfortable (though not completely comfortable) closure to an otherwise uneasy story. To examine more closely this transformation, we will focus upon the first and last books of the Iliad, Book One and Book Twenty-Four, in hopes that the similarities and, more importantly, the differences will reveal much about the transformation of the hero Achilleus. Firstly, the similarities are striking, even on the most basic level. In both books, a desperate supplication takes place to implore the return of the supplicant’s child. In Book One, Chryses, bearing gifts and friendly wishes (“ to you may the gods grant...Priam’s city to be plundered and a fair homecoming thereafter” (1. 18-19)) to entreat Agamemnon to return his daughter: “...may you give me back my own daughter and take the ransom, giving honour to Zeus’ son who strikes from afar, Apollo.” (1. 20-21) In the last book, a grieving Priam, again bearing gifts, falls to the feet of Achilles, begging for the return of his son Hektor’s body: “ one was left me

who guarded my city and people, that one you killed a few days since as he fought in defence of his country, Hektor; for whose sake I come now to the ships of the Achaians to win him back from you, and I bring you gifts beyond number." (24. 499-502) Another similarity is the recurring motif of feasting, usually to celebrate reconciliation. In Book One, after returning Chryseis back to her father, the Achaians make a sacrifice to Apollo and Apollo stops the plague he had brought upon them. Afterwards, the men feast upon the meat from the sacrifice. In Book Twenty-Four, Achilles invites Priam to feast after they reached an understanding, after Achilles agrees to return Hektor's body to Troy. The role of gods in the two books is also comparable. Divine intervention is necessary in both books to restrain the effects of Achilles great anger. In Book One, Athene descended to dissuade Achilles from killing Agamemnon: " I have come down to stay your anger - but will you obey me" (1. 207) In Book Twenty-Four, Achilles abuses the body of Hektor and drags it around the tomb of Patroklus, and only the intervention of Apollo prevents the corpse from damage: "...guarded the body from all ugliness, and hid all of it under the golden aegis, so that it might not be torn when Achilles drags it." (24. 19-21) In Book One, the goddess Thetis begs Zeus to help her ill-fated son, while in Book Twenty-Four Zeus asks Thetis to speak to her son " see that Achilles is given gifts by Priam and gives back the body of Hektor." (24. 75-76) An argument or grudge among the gods is common in both books. In Book One, Hera is furious with Zeus for deciding to help the Trojans to punish Agamemnon. Book Twenty-Four recounts the cause of the Trojan War, the story of how Paris offered the golden apple to Aphrodite, instead of Hera or Athene, infuriating the latter two goddesses.

Helen was then abducted from Menelaos as a prize for Paris. The last similarity mentioned puts forth a question regarding the glory/pettiness of war. Throughout the book, the noble characters are the ones valiant in battle, while the cowardly ones (like Paris) are given no respect. While Homer does seem to glorify war, both books One and Twenty-Four hint at the pettiness of it all. Book One, the wrath of Achilles entails unspeakable suffering for the Achaians, and in Book Twenty-Four, Homer mentions the seemingly small conflict (the abduction of Helen) that incites the Trojan War, that caused bloodshed and the eventual fall of Troy. In Book One, we learn of the origin of Achilles anger. Agamemnon, when contemplating whether he should return Chryseis to her father, demands compensation for his loss: "What do you want? To keep your own prize and have me sit here lacking one?" (1. 133-134) Agamemnon takes Briseis, Achilles' prize, thus robbing Achilles of honor, and setting in motion their bitter conflict. Both sides stubbornly defend their pride. Achilles withdraws from battle to his ships and promises suffering upon the Achaians: "...some day longing for Achilles will come to the sons of the Achaians, all of them. Then stricken at heart though you be, you will be able to do nothing, when in their numbers before man-slaughtering Hektor they drop and die. And then you will eat out the heart within you in sorrow, that you did no honour to the best of the Achaians." (1. 240-244) Achilles' decision essentially detaches him from humanity, as his unshakable pride and rage make him capable of standing by, doing nothing, while his friends die in agony. The Trojans nearly defeat the Achaians in Book Eight, and Agamemnon tries to persuade Achilles to return to battle, offering riches in return for Achilles' loyalty, but is still too

proud to offer an apology. Achilles, despite all the appeals from his friends, refuses to return, remembering the injustice he has suffered: "...still the heart in me swells up in anger, when I remember the disgrace that he wrought upon me before the Argives, the son of Atreus, as if I were some dishonoured vagabond." (9. 645-648), insulted further by the fact that Agamemnon sent delegates to make the plea, instead of appearing himself: "...he would not, bold as a dog though he be, dare look in my face any longer. I will join with him in no counsel, and in no action." (9. 372-374) Only after Patroklos' death does Achilles return to battle, his rage multiplied by grief. Achilles' attack on the Trojans is inhumanly and unnecessarily brutal, as is his treatment of Hektor's corpse after Hektor's defeat. Achilles finally transcends his anger in Book Twenty-Four. King Priam kneels before Achilles, and begs him to think of his own father Peleus and how glad he will be when he hears that his son is alive. But Achilles remembers that he is fated to never return to Phthia, and realizes that Peleus will suffer the same anguish Priam is suffering for the loss of a son, and is moved to tears: "There was not any generation of strong sons born to him in his great house but a single all-untimely child he had, and I give him no care as he grows old, since far from the land of my fathers I sit here in Troy, and bring nothing but sorrow to you and your children." (24. 537-542) Achilles understands the suffering he has caused, and is overwhelmed with sorrow and compassion. The sorrow of Achilles in this final chapter is not selfish as it was in Book One, when he wept at the loss of Briseis: "sorrowing in his heart for the sake of the fair-girdled woman whom they were taking by force against his will." (1. 429) and the loss of his honor: "Since, my mother, you bore me to be a

man with a short life, therefore Zeus of the loud thunder on Olympos should grant me honour at least. But now he has given me not even a little. Now the son Atreus, powerful Agamemnon, has dishonoured me, since he has take away my prize and keeps it." (1. 352-356) His sorrow is at the end is more profound, as now he understands the true scope of what has been lost. The rage that pervaded the story, ever since Book One and the provocation by Agamemnon, is finally overcome. Achilles agrees to return the body of Hektor, and even allows a twelve-day mourning period, a respite from battle, for the fallen Trojan hero. Homer, by ending the Iliad much like it began, strives to call attention to the great implications resulting from the differences between the two books. Achilles has changed. Book One finds him selfish, impulsive, and irrationally stubborn at the cost of his friends. Now, at the end, Achilles is more mature, capable of empathy, and granting the mercy he previously denied. Achilles and King Priam forge a temporary but sacred peace amidst the turmoil of war. But the Iliad ends, leaving both sides of the war mourning, and we are reminded of the doomed city of Troy and its people, fated to be destroyed after the defeat of their cherished hero. The final tone is of overwhelming loss and sorrow. Only the transformation within Achilles, and the end of his wrath that began the story brings some sense of closure.