

The consistency of cruelty in combat

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



The Iliad, in that it is more about the Greek hero Achilles than any other particular person, portrays the Achaean in surprisingly shocking light at times throughout the story. In his encounter with Lycaon, who had previously been taken prisoner by Achilles long ago, Achilles demonstrates the extents to which his warlike demeanor can go. Yet it is equally surprising that he is capable of impressive compassion, as is depicted elsewhere in the Iliad.

What seems to be an almost unbelievable fluctuation in attitude and mood is far from unexplained or contradictory, however. In fact, there is a well-defined regularity in Achilles' actions and demeanors, to the point of being capable of systematic classification. Achilles is not a loose cannon or an unpredictable firebrand. The method to his madness can be applied to his encounter with Lycaon as it can with any of his episodes in the Iliad. It is in Scroll XXI, at the height of his vengeful and destructive advance, that Achilles meets Lycaon. He has just captured twelve soldiers for sacrifice, and at the exact moment that he reaches Lycaon he is "thirsting for still further blood" (33). Lycaon entreats Achilles to have mercy on him. He mentions that he has been captured before by Achilles and has had precious little time to enjoy his regained freedom. He also distances himself from Hektor, who he knows has Achilles' enmity because of the death of Patroklos. In near desperation, Lycaon falls to his knees, declaring himself to Achilles as "suppliant" (64). Achilles' reaction at this instance is, along with his defilement of Hektor's body, among the most grim and bellicose moments in the Iliad and in Achilles' development as a character. He kills Lycaon with his sword "plunged...to the very hilt" (114). He then says without a moment's delay: "Lie there among the fishes, who will lick the blood from your wound

and gloat over it; your mother shall not lay you on any bier to mourn you, but the eddies of Skamandros shall bear you into the broad bosom of the sea. There shall the fishes feed on the fat of Lycaon as they dart under the dark ripple of the waters...None the less miserably shall you perish till there is not a man of you but has paid in full for the death of Patroklos and the havok you wrought among the Achaeans whom you have slain while I held aloof from battle" (114-136). The absolute disregard for the respect of Lycaon's body illuminates the depths of cruelty that Achilles finds himself capable of. But in contrast with his kindness in Scroll XXIV, when Priam comes to request the body of Hektor, this might seem inconsistent. When meeting with Priam, Achilles weeps openly and seems even empathetic about the great patriarch's loss. How is this disparity in attitude explainable? The point that must be made about the Lycaon episode is that it must be seen in its context. Achilles is on a rampage, killing as many men as he can on the battlefield. This is the key $\text{\textcircled{X}}$ on the battlefield, Achilles is a warrior in the truest sense. He fights purely in that each encounter on the field can be resolved in only one way $\text{\textcircled{X}}$ combat, usually to the death. When Lycaon attempts to reason and negotiate, Achilles sternly rebukes him: "' Idiot...talk not to me of ransom'" (97). It might be said that Achilles is in " warrior mode." Whereas a more typical soldier might in fact turn to negotiation on the battlefield, Achilles has demonstrated himself throughout the Iliad to be the quintessential warrior $\text{\textcircled{X}}$ his armor is the best, his skill is the best, and his legend is the most fearsome. So it is completely natural and in fact expected that Achilles, of all warriors, would be unwilling to discuss matters on the battlefield. It is either to kill or be killed. This idea is supported by his similar

treatment of Hektor, who asks for a proper burial if he dies. Achilles has no desire to check his own warrior impulses at that moment or this one, with Lycaon. So the range in emotions and compassion that Achilles displays, from being almost barbaric with Lycaon to being empathetic with Priam, is a result of his character adhering to a certain set of rules which Achilles follows consistently. On the battlefield (particularly in light of Patroklos' death and mistreatment), Achilles feels no compulsion for mercy. But outside of the sphere of combat, he is clearly capable of compassion and reason. This is consistently shown as a facet of Achilles' complex character in the Iliad, and it makes it possible for the reader to fathom his utter brutality with Lycaon. This polarity of personality is to be expected of the hero. Part of the appeal of the hero is that he is an exaggeration of the facets of a normal man's personality. Where a normal man can experience anger and sadness, Achilles feels *menis* and *akhos*, truly extreme and searing emotional states that serve to make the hero larger-than-life (yet still human). The emotional states of the hero are admirable in their consistency. Achilles is driven to rage and is unsympathetic to the pathetic, cowardly pleas of Lycaon, but he respects Priam and treats him with respect and mercy. This is why Euripides' Herakles is so tragic. Driven by a blind rage brought on by Hera, Herakles confuses his sons with those of Eurystheus. In a parallel incident, "the boy [Herakles' son] sprang to his father knees" and begs for mercy (987). The reader knows, however, that mercy will not come. This is because of a tragic mixing of the two realms of the hero: his brutality in battle and his reason outside of combat. Herakles is confused into believing that he must spring into warrior mode, and it is clear to all what will result. This is a powerful

episode in its ability to delineate the extreme states that a hero is capable of. When Achilles is in a similar situation of standing before a supplicant enemy (albeit not as a result of mistaken identity in his case), the reader knows that he will in fact kill him with disregard. That is the role of the hero in a situation such as that. While some might argue that there is nothing about such extreme brutality in battle that differentiates a hero like Achilles from other soldiers, it must be remembered that other soldiers are normal humans like the reader. It is decidedly human to have tinges of compassion on the battlefield, just as it is possible to have tinges of disrespect in personal relationships with an honorable person. Achilles the hero, however, makes no such mixture of state. In combat, he is completely and utterly a fighter. At a time of rest, he is completely honorable to a person who deserves such honor. So, in some sense, he is a model to be admired in his treatment of Lycaon. As an example of the supreme warrior, it is the cruelty and anger that he shows to his cowardly enemy that serves to elevate him above other soldiers. And far from being shocking, it is in fact completely consistent with the character of Achilles that we see throughout the Iliad *is* fearsome in combat, respectful of honor and courage otherwise.