

Hector and achilles as a powerful and energetic iliad character

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



Across cultures, fire has been considered both a life-sustaining and destructive force – it has the ability to warm and the potential to burn. The duality of fire parallels that of a Homeric hero's pursuit of honor. On one hand, the pursuit is an enticing quest for meaning and worth. The Homeric hero bows to bravery, prowess, strength and brutality – which all converge into the single element of force. Force accomplishes glorious deeds and impresses upon other men the hero's significance. Closely tied to an impressive display of force is a desire for immortality; for the Homeric hero, his essential objective is to have his deeds – his name – transcend death. The flames of glory, appealing to force and a desire for immortality, fuel the heroes Hector and Achilles of Homer's *The Iliad*. At the same time, the flames also consume them. Even the strongest and most valiant soldiers are human; they attempt to prevail over mortality but must ultimately come to terms with their defenselessness in the face of death. With fires kindling inside them, the Trojan Hector and the Achaean Achilles embrace force on the battlefield, seek immortality, and confront their fates. The two warriors, fused into one persona, epitomize the "Homeric hero" at the center of the epic *The Iliad*.

Foremost a fighter, the Homeric hero embodies the beauty of force, which, according to Rachel Bepaloff's "On the *Iliad*," "reveals itself in a kind of supreme leap, a murderous lightning stroke" (Bepaloff 47). He abides by the heroic code with his raging ferocity, unwavering courage, and unrivaled skill. Force completely absorbs him; He is a "wild beast," who lights on the "handsome carcass" that is honor (*The Iliad* 3: 527, 26). To reap honor is to affirm one's value, to affirm life. To fight for oneself is of primary importance.

As M. I. Finley argues in *The World of Odysseus*, the Homeric hero Hector has “no obligation to anyone or anything but [his] own prowess and [his] drive to victory and power” (Finley 21). He responds to the call of honor with force, cutting down hordes of Achaeans and establishing his supremacy. In the course of the changes in tide of battle, his “brave spirit never flinches” (*The Iliad* 12: 49). “Hector blaze[s] on in bronze...terrible fire [breaking] from the gear that wrap[s] his body” (*The Iliad* 12: 538-539). He “stands alone” above other fighters (Bespaloff 43).

Like Hector, Achilles outshines the rest of the field of warriors. When Achilles unleashes his force, he is as “fierce as fire” (*The Iliad* 19: 20). He is the first to burst through the gates of fallen cities and pilfer their treasures. The “hard, ruthless” hero is legendary for his “fighting power” (*The Iliad* 9: 771, 279). In fact, as the goddess Hera observes, “As long as brilliant Achilles stalked the front / no Trojan would ever venture beyond the Dardan Gates” (*The Iliad* 5: 907-908). Off the battlefield, Achilles is still drawn to the massacre and does not leave Troy for his native soil of Phthia. As a warrior, he craves “slaughter and blood and the choking groans of men” (*The Iliad* 19: 255). Pent-up inside him is mounting force; it struggles to break free as the splendor of saving the Achaean forces and winning honor pulls at him. Achilles even changes his position on entering the war, vowing to fight if Hector “batters all the way to the Myrmidon ships” (*The Iliad* 9: 797). When his beloved friend Patroclus is killed, defending and reaping greater honor become one of the same for Achilles. Force finally devours him; he “blaze[s] forth in searing points of fire,” ready to raze the Trojan ranks (*The Iliad* 19:

432). In both Hector and Achilles, the raging force that defines the Homeric hero as he pursues honor has the capacity to swallow everyone around him and imprison the hero himself within its folds.

If the beauty of force can crush two armies, the Homeric hero's desire for immortality can overpower twenty armies. The desire for glory glows like the flames in a hearth; it is a beacon of light, guiding him through battle.

Captivated by the prospect of immortality, Achilles steadfastly defends his claim to honor. When King Agamemnon takes away his honor, his prize Briseis, Achilles abandons his Achaean comrades and even prays that the Trojans will slaughter them to heal the wound that Agamemnon has inflicted upon him. Achilles' action is justified:

Though one way point[s] to victory in a great war and the other to a trifle, one captive woman out of thousands, the tremendous conflict lay precisely in the fact that honor [is] not measured like goods in a market, that the insult [to honor is] worth as much as the war (Finley 119).

Even a thousand honorable deeds cannot compensate for the one blow to his name. By no means does Achilles' refusal to fight for Agamemnon "repudiat[e] the heroic ideal" (Knox 50). Achilles waits for a reprisal of the honor lost - not in the form of material goods but of Agamemnon's acknowledgment of Achilles' superiority. The scorching flames of glory command Achilles to see to the restoration of his reputation.

As Achilles yields to its great power, Hector also succumbs to the desire for glory. Embedded inside Hector is the dream of glory for his son " when he

comes home from battle bearing the bloody gear / of the mortal enemy he has killed" (The Iliad 6: 572-573). Yet, the honor his son gains in battle will inevitably be compared to his own. In truth, Hector hopes, most of all, his own feats will be forever etched in history and will immortalize both father and son. He hopes that honor acquired in the carnage of war will culminate into glory. Hector appears to be different from Achilles in that his quest for glory coincides with his defense of his home and family - his defense of Troy. Hector can veil his irrepressible desire for immortality, but Achilles cannot. In the end, the only difference between Hector and Achilles is that they fight on opposite sides of the battlefield. They have the same desire. Both want to surmount the transience of life; both seek to gain and defend honor on the road to glory - on the road to immortality. Each warrior fights for himself: "[T]he honor of the hero [is] purely individual, something he lived and fought for only its sake and his own sake" (Finley 119). Each wins glory for his father, his family, but most importantly, glory for himself.

Driven by the desire for immortality, the Homeric hero eventually must face his fate. For Hector, his fate weighs down on him. He knows that the road to glory will end in his death; he knows that the day will come when his wife will be "widowed, robbed of the one man strong enough / to fight off [her] day of slavery" (The Iliad 6: 552-553). He cannot change his destiny or the destiny of his family and Troy. Though Hector may choose the path of his life, all paths converge in the end. The juxtaposition of Hector's parting with his son and the bloody war heightens the tension in the lever balancing life and death. The joys of life flash before him as he goes off to fight, as he

abandons innocence. Similarly, Achilles is also aware of the other road that he, as a warrior, rejects: "If I voyage back to the fatherland I love, / my pride, my glory dies.../ true, but the life that's left me will be long" (The Iliad 9: 502-504). Both Hector and Achilles recognize that death is inevitable both for the hero and coward: "Death in its rampage outrace[s]" everyone (The Iliad 11: 531). A long life is incomplete if it lacks the pursuit of honor and fulfillment. The hero cannot shrink away from battle or renounce force and the desire for immortality; "flight [...] is a denial of the thing that transcends him, [that] 'glory'" (Bespaloff 44). Instead, the hero, who is powerless against death, tries valiantly to defy it nonetheless. He charges ahead, "...bristling in all his force / like a hound that harries a wild boar or lion," (The Iliad 8: 384-385). He submits to the "fighting-fury" within him, burning and growing in strength - "a blind drive that is always pushing it on to the very end of its course, on to its own abolition" (The Iliad 8: 104, Bespaloff 47). The hero surrenders to the engulfing fire of force and desire that feed him in an attempt to gain eternal glory, to live forever.

When it comes to fire, men both love and fear it. A fire cannot be deemed "safe" or "dangerous", and it does not make distinctions among men. It "devours differences and disparities. [Analogously,] the appetite for glory takes hold of [all] individuals...and transforms itself into a love of immortality" (Bespaloff 46). The appetite of glory is what defines the archetypal Homeric hero in Achilles and in Hector. The warriors of The Iliad cannot be distinguished from each other. Both are conquerors - both are conquered. Both are attracted to the inviting flames that enclose men when

they die and resurrect them in the dark depths of eternity. The promise of immortality seizes everyone who comes into contact with it:

...there is a fire

And motion of the soul which will not dwell

In its own narrow being, but aspire

Beyond the fitting medium of desire;

And, but once kindled, quenchless evermore,

Preys upon high adventure, nor can tire

Of aught but rest; a fever at the core,

Fatal to him who bears, to all who ever bore.

(Lord Byron Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, Canto III, stanza 42)

The pursuit of honor is indisputably tied to a short life. Death cannot be avoided. But, for the Homeric hero, glory triumphs over life – and ultimately, death.

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