

The treatment of material gifts and wealth in books vii and ix of homer's iliad



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Book VII and Book IX of Homer's Iliad present opposing views on the significance of material wealth in relation to the heroic code, contrasting Hector and Achilles consecutively, who have already been established by the poet as polar in character. On one hand, in the passage from Book VII, material wealth acts with moral significance to end the battle between Aias and Hector and promote a friendship for the benefit of both the Trojan and Greek armies; whereas Achilles breaks down this heroic ideal, as if the giving of the gifts as an act has lost its meaning as a means to mend the relationship between Achilles and Agamemnon, and is completely undermined by Achilles' arguable self-preservation due to his lack of emotional control. Since material wealth in Homer's era was representative of social status, the exchanging of gifts would have withheld a certain honour that could be easily linked with the heroic code. The acceptance of gifts, which appears to act as a form of forgiveness and relative peace between two people, which is reflected in the passage from Book VII, follows the dignity expected of the hero in order to protect the needs of the greater population. Yet, the opposing dismissal of gift giving because of the desire for personal preservation is reflected in Book IX. Therefore, both the acceptance and rejection of gifts adds to and takes away from the heroic image of Homer's characters Hector and Achilles.

The basis of exchanging gifts in both the passage from Book VII and Book IX is for the changing of relations between two central characters of the epic, and therefore the outcome of gift-giving is of great importance and has poignant significance towards the development of the poem. In the passage from Book VII, the focus appears to be on developing the original 'hostility'

between the heroic males to 'close friendship' – and thus a development in their relationship. Hector's prediction of the Achaean and Trojan responses which reads: 'these two fought each other in heart-consuming hate, then joined with each other in close friendship' illuminates Hector's desire for peace in battle at nightfall, having already explained that it is best to 'give in', instead of persevere for the personal glory of one or the other of the warriors, having an understanding that ultimately the decision is up to the 'divinity' – Hector does not attempt to challenge this, and nor does Aias refuse his offer, despite it having a rather demanding and underlying impersonal sense from 'come then'. The exchange appears to be of personal items, which also adapts the relationship between the two heroes, since the gifts of the 'sword with nails of silver' and the 'war belt coloured shining with purple' are not only rich material goods in terms of worth but personal possessions, giving the exchange moral significance in their metaphorical exchange of parts of each other. In contrast, in Book IX, the exchanging of gifts acts only to further the hatred and 'anger' between Achilles and his king. Gifts are treated with a contrasting lack of moral value and instead are spoken of in more personal terms, as if they are not to be shared. Achilles' repetitive use of 'I' and the possessive 'mine' in response to his material wealth suggests a greed and lack of personal value that deems gifts as having 'no action' and arguably no meaning – failing to see the attempt of Agamemnon to reconcile with Achilles by under the heroic code, and only looking at the 'gifts' as just items such as 'gold', 'bronze' or 'women' which have an economic value, 'allotted' to him as his other winnings are, not as representative of an apology.

By ignoring the underlying reasoning behind gift giving, Achilles places himself and his own personal needs above that of Agamemnon, his elder and so-called better, as well as the entire army. In relation to the heroic code, which expresses the need for the placement the needs of one's men above the personal needs of oneself, the joining of Hector and Aias in 'friendship' at the closing of the battle is for the sake of the 'Greeks' and the 'Trojans'. Homer's near repetitive use of non-violent language, 'kindred', 'thanksgiving' and 'happiness', invokes images of peace and friendship such and emphasises the benefits that both armies receive from the acceptance of these rich, personal gifts. The friendly exchange gives insight to the reader concerning the priorities in the minds of the heroes – that their internal emotions towards each other, which in the moment of battle is 'hostility' and 'heart-consuming hate', are put away due to their understanding of their greater 'divine' purpose for the eventual 'victory' of one or the other army. The recognition by the heroes of the collective rather than personal purpose is stressed in Hector's piety and understanding of 'divinity' which means that he must ultimately give way to the powers above him and accept his fate, rather than attempting to control it. Achilles' lack of understanding in the passage from Book IX contrast this. Instead of behaving in the expected manner of a great warrior-hero and accepting the offers of the embassy, Achilles' refusal displays an absence of collective responsibility in his character by placing his own emotional needs, consumed entirely by 'hate' and 'anger' that the other heroes are able to set aside, above anything else. Achilles appears to promote a sense of inactivity in his question for 'no action' at all costs, even if he were to be given 'ten times... twenty times' more as recompense; there is no distinction made by Achilles to separate the

<https://assignbuster.com/the-treatment-of-material-gifts-and-wealth-in-books-vii-and-ix-of-homers-ililad/>

personal and public demands of heroism. In fact, it could be argued that his response is entirely anti-heroic, actually calling on suggested rebellion: 'so that other Achaeans may turn against him in anger', and therefore preventing any advancements that would lead to success for the Greeks, attempting to make his own lack of 'action' universal. As an attempt of ubiquitous immovability, Achilles goes against the heroic code which dictates that he should accept and promote forgiveness just as Hector and Aias are able to do in Book VII.

Unusually, despite being most fitting within the heroic code, the friendly and accepting interchange between Hector and Aias differs most potently within the Iliad's plot. It is possible to argue that personal grudge, the 'hate' and 'anger' of one person, is what drives the entirety of the Iliad's plot. Although momentary peace is often established throughout the entirety of the poem, peace in its entirety is never fully found as, even at the end of the poem, we are left in media res. Achilles' treatment of the personal, obviously seen in his repetitive use of 'my', is not dissimilar from the hostility between Menelaus and Paris over Helen, refusing to come to an agreement, even when lavish gifts with a large material worth are offered to the Greek army. The exchange between Hector and Aias therefore could be described in this case as unusual, since they are able to find 'friendship' and part in equal 'victory' even in the surrounding environment of 'hostility'. Interestingly when comparing the two passages from Book VII and Book IX, Achilles' response is undoubtedly more human and genuine, and therefore relatable, rather than the puppet-like responses of Hector and Aias, following their code as a dictated law. Hector's speech, in contrast to Achilles' in Book IX,

comes across as formulaic and forced, lacking a certain sense of emotion as if it is expected of him. Despite his obvious commanding, 'come then', Hector leaves the outcome of the war entirely to the 'divinity' instead of taking direct emotional control of the situation. The passage from Book IX emphasises the emotional and personal nature of the underlying plot of the epic, since it is often lost in the narrative by breaking away from the formulaic construction of heroic characters in a quest of self-preservation and improvement. Moral wealth is rendered more important, in this case, than material wealth both in Achilles and the Greek army's denial of gifts to make up for the loss of a stolen woman. Although material wealth was definitive into the rich appearance of heroic characters, it appears that its moral weight and personal meaning drives the plot more significantly; Achilles' lack of emotional control leads to Greek success, whereas Hector's instrumental following of the heroic code is his downfall.

Homer contrasts the heroic attitude towards material wealth and gift giving therefore in order to illuminate the importance within the Iliad of personal preservation, particularly to Achilles, and its position in the ultimate defeat of the Trojans. The expected heroic code is not always followed by Homer's characters, particularly noted in the passage from Book IX and its prominent 'inactivity', and acts as a means to drive the plot of the epic as well as comment on the nature of the heroes – developing them as characters through the inclusion of emotional responses and a juxtaposing lack.