

“AN UNHEROIC HERO”: CRITIQUING ACHILLES’ PORTRAYAL IN HOMER’S *THE ILIAD*

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ABSTRACT

Although Achilles possesses superhuman strength and has a close relationship with the gods, he may strike modern readers as less than heroic. He has all the marks of a great warrior, and indeed proves the mightiest man in the Achaean army, but his deep-seated character flaws constantly impede his ability to act with nobility and integrity. He cannot control his pride or the rage that surges up when that pride is injured. This attribute so poisons him that he abandons his comrades and even prays that the Trojans will slaughter them, all because he has been slighted at the hands of his commander, Agamemnon. Achilles is driven primarily by a thirst for glory. Part of him yearns to live a long, easy life, but he knows that his personal fate forces him to choose between the two.

In Greek mythology, Achilles was a Greek hero of the Trojan War and the central character and greatest warrior of Homer's *The Iliad*. By the 5th century the Greeks had reinterpreted the epic so as to idealise Achilles and ignore Hector. Their loathing for barbarians contributed this, also their indifference to national patriotism and admiration for pederasty—the attitudes which were foreshadowed in *The Iliad*. As Saul Levin points out, “Homer’s Achilles stands out as a man of intense but narrow devotion, to himself and his comrade Patroclus.”(37)

Although Achilles possesses superhuman strength and has a close relationship with the gods, he may strike modern readers as less than heroic. He has all the marks of a great warrior, and indeed proves the mightiest man in the Achaean army, but his deep-seated character flaws constantly impede his ability to act with nobility and integrity. He cannot control his pride or the rage that surges up when that pride is injured. This attribute so poisons him that he abandons his comrades and even prays that the Trojans will slaughter them, all because he has been slighted at the hands of his commander, Agamemnon. Achilles is driven primarily by a thirst for glory. Part of him yearns to live a long, easy life, but he knows that his personal fate forces him to choose between the two. Ultimately, he is willing to sacrifice everything else so that his name will be remembered.

The need to venerate this human was something Homer understood and exploited to glorious effect in *The Iliad*. Most obviously, and brilliantly, he does this by keeping Achilles off the scene. In the first line of *The Iliad*, Homer may ask the muses to sing about the wrath of Achilles – but the man himself appears in the poem surprisingly rarely. Homer is careful to give him mainly the big moments – the beginning, the climax, and a few crucial turning points. There are books and books in which he is barely mentioned. But, of course, all the time he is off the scene, his presence only grows. Every other feat of arms, every brutal kill,