

### 3.1. Homer / Agamemnon's Insult

Agamemnon has taken the daughter of Chryses, a priest of Apollo, hostage and refused to accept a ransom, causing the priest to pray to Apollo for vengeance.

Hom. *Il.* 1. Source: Homer. *The Iliad*. Trans. A. T. Murray. London: Heinemann, 1924.)

The wrath sing, goddess, of Peleus's son Achilles, the accursed wrath which brought countless sorrows upon the Achaeans, and sent down to Hades many valiant souls of warriors, and made the men themselves to be the spoil for dogs and birds of every kind; and thus the will of Zeus was brought to fulfillment. Of this sing from the time when first there parted in strife Atreus's son, lord of men,<sup>1</sup> and noble Achilles....

*[The priest's prayer of vengeance for Agamemnon taking his daughter causes Apollo to rain down pestilence among the Greeks.]*

For nine days the missiles of the god ranged through the army, but on the tenth Achilles called the army to the place of assembly, for the goddess, white-armed Hera, had put it in his heart; for she pitied the Danaans<sup>2</sup> because she saw them dying. So, when they were assembled and met together, among them rose and spoke Achilles, swift of foot:

"Son of Atreus, now I think we shall be driven back and return home, our plans thwarted—if we should escape death, that is—if indeed war and pestilence alike are to subdue the Achaeans. But come, let us ask some seer or priest, or some reader of dreams—for a dream too is from Zeus—who might tell us why Phoebus Apollo has conceived such anger, whether it is because of a vow that he blames us, or a hecatomb;<sup>3</sup> in the hope that perhaps he may accept the savor of lambs and unblemished goats, and be minded to ward off destruction from us."

When he had thus spoken he sat down, and among them rose up Calchas, son of Thestor, far the best of diviners, who had knowledge of all things that were, and that were to be, and that had been before, and who had guided the ships of the Achaeans to Ilios by the gift of prophecy that Phoebus Apollo had granted him. He with good intent addressed their assembly and spoke among them:

"Achilles, dear to Zeus, you ask me to declare the wrath of Apollo, who smites from afar.... It is not because of a vow that he blames us, nor a hecatomb, but because of the priest whom Agamemnon dishonored, and did not release his daughter nor accept the ransom. For this reason the god who strikes from afar has given woes, and will continue to give them, nor will he drive off from the Danaans loathsome destruction until we give back to her father the bright-eyed maiden, unbought, unransomed, and take a holy hecatomb to Chryse; then perhaps we might appease his wrath and persuade him."

When he had thus spoken, he sat down, and among them rose the warrior, son of Atreus, wide-ruling Agamemnon, deeply vexed; and with rage was his black heart wholly filled, and his

eyes were like blazing fire. To Calchas first of all he spoke, and his look threatened trouble:

"Prophet of evil, never yet have you given me a favorable prophecy; always it is dear to your heart to prophesy evil, and no word of good have you ever yet spoken or brought to fulfillment. And among the Danaans in assembly you utter your prophecies, and declare that it is for this reason that the god who strikes from afar is bringing woes on them, because I would not accept the glorious ransom for the girl, the daughter of Chryses, since I would far rather keep her at home. For in fact I prefer her to Clytemnestra, my wedded wife, since she is in no way inferior to her, either in form or in stature, or in mind, or in handiwork. But even so I am minded to give her back if that is better; I would rather have the army safe than perishing. But for me make ready a prize at once, so that I may not be the only one of the Argives without a prize, since that is not right; for you all see this, that my prize goes from me elsewhere."

Then in answer to him spoke noble Achilles, swift of foot:

"Most glorious son of Atreus, most covetous of all men, how shall the great-hearted Achaeans give you a prize? We know nothing of any wealth laid up in common store, but whatever we took by pillage from the cities has been distributed, and it is not right to take this back from the men. Do you give her up at the god's command, and we Achaeans will recompense you threefold and fourfold, if ever Zeus grants us to sack the well-walled city of Troy."

Then in answer to him lord Agamemnon spoke:

"Do not in this way, valiant though you are, godlike Achilles, try to deceive me by your cleverness, for you will not outstrip me nor persuade me. Do you really intend, so long as you yourself keep your prize, that I sit here like this lacking one, since you ask me to give her back? Let the great-hearted Achaeans give me a prize, suiting it to my heart so that the recompense is equal! But if they do not give it, then I will come myself and take your prize, or that of Aias, or that of Odysseus I will seize and carry off. Angry will he be, to whomever I come. But of these things we will take thought later on; now let us launch a black ship into the bright sea, and man it with a due number of rowers, and place on board a hecatomb, and embark on it the fair-cheeked daughter of Chryses herself. And let one that is a counselor take command, Aias, or Idomeneus, or noble Odysseus, or you, son of Peleus, of all men most daunting, that you may offer sacrifice and appease him who works from afar."

Then with an angry glance Achilles swift of foot spoke to him:

"What, you clothed in shamelessness, you crafty of mind, how can any Achaean eagerly obey your words either to go on a journey or to do battle? I did not come here to fight because of the spearmen of Troy, since they are in no way at fault toward me. Never did they drive off my cattle or my horses, nor ever in deep-soiled Phthia, nourisher of men, did they lay waste the grain, for many things lie between us—shadowy mountains and sounding sea. But you, shameless one, we followed here in order to please you, seeking to win recompense for Menelaus and for

<sup>1</sup> Agamemnon, the overlord of the Greek armies.

<sup>2</sup> Another word for the Greeks collectively.

<sup>3</sup> A sacrifice of 100 cattle; was Apollo demanding one?

you, dog-face, from the Trojans. This you do not regard or take thought of; and you even threaten that you will yourself take from me the prize for which I toiled much, and the sons of the Achaeans gave it to me. Never do I have a prize like yours, when the Achaeans sack a well-peopled city of the Trojans; my hands bear the brunt of tumultuous battle, but when the distribution comes, your prize is far greater, while I go to my ships with some small thing, yet my own, when I have grown weary with fighting. Now I will go to Phthia, since it is far better to return home with my beaked ships, nor do I intend, while without honor here, to pile up goods and wealth for you.”

Then answered him Agamemnon, the lord of men: “Flee then, if your heart is set on it; I am not begging you to stay for my sake. With me are others that will do me honor, and above all Zeus, the lord of counsel. Most hateful to me are you of the kings, nurtured by Zeus, for always is strife dear to you, and wars and battles. If you are most powerful, a god, I think, gave you this. Go home with your ships and your men, and lord it over your Myrmidons;<sup>1</sup> for you I care not, nor am I concerned about your anger. And this will be my threat to you: since Phoebus Apollo takes from me the daughter of Chryses, her with a ship of mine and men of mine I will send back, but I will myself come to your hut and take the fair-cheeked Briseis, that prize of yours, so that you may well know how much mightier I am than you, and another too may shrink from declaring himself my equal and likening himself to me to my face.”

So he spoke, and grief came upon the son of Peleus, and within his shaggy breast his heart was divided in counsel, whether he should draw his sharp sword from his side and break up the assembly, and kill the son of Atreus, or whether he should check his wrath and curb his spirit. While he pondered this in his mind and heart, and was drawing his great sword from its sheath, Athene came from heaven, sent by the goddess, white-armed Hera, for in her heart she loved them both alike

and cared for them. She stood behind him, and caught the son of Peleus by his tawny hair, allowing herself to be seen by him alone, and of the rest no one saw her....

“I have come from heaven to put a stop to your anger, if you will listen, and the goddess, white-armed Hera, sent me, for in her heart she loves you both alike, and cares for you. Come now, cease from strife, and let not your hand draw your sword. With words indeed taunt him with what will happen; for thus I will speak, and surely this thing will come to pass: one day three times as many glorious gifts will be yours on account of this insult. Restrain yourself, therefore, and obey us.”...

*[Athena departs, and Achilles taunts Agamemnon:]*

“You heavy with wine, with the face of a dog but the heart of a deer, never have you dared to arm yourself for battle with your troops, or to go into an ambush with the chief men of the Achaeans. That seems to you to be death. It is surely far better to take back the gifts of whoever through the wide camp of the Achaeans speaks in opposition to you. People-devouring king, since you rule over nobodies! Otherwise, son of Atreus, you would now be committing your final outrage.

“But I will speak frankly to you, and will swear a mighty oath on it: by this staff here—that will never again put out leaves or shoots since it first left its stump in the mountains, nor will it again grow green, for the bronze has stripped it of leaves and bark, and now the sons of the Achaeans that give judgment bear it in their hands, those who guard the laws that come from Zeus; and this shall be for you a mighty oath—surely some day longing for Achilles will come on the sons of the Achaeans one and all, and on that day you will in no way be able to help them for all your grief, when many will be laid low at the hands of man-slaying Hector. But you will gnaw your heart within you in wrath that you did not at all honor the best of the Achaeans.”

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<sup>1</sup> Achilles's own people, whose warriors he led to Troy.