

THE ILIAD, BOOK 22: ACHILLES VERSUS HECTOR

Western Canon 1 | Brendan Shea, PhD (Brendan.Shea@rtc.edu)

Then Hector said, as the life ebbed out of him, "I pray you by your life and knees, and by your parents, let not dogs devour me at the ships of the Achaeans, but accept the rich treasure of gold and bronze which my father and mother will offer you, and send my body home, that the Trojans and their wives may give me my dues of fire when I am dead."

Achilles glared at him and answered, "Dog, talk not to me neither of knees nor parents; would that I could be as sure of being able to cut your flesh into pieces and eat it raw, for the ill have done me, as I am that nothing shall save you from the dogs—it shall not be, though they bring ten or twenty-fold ransom and weigh it out for me on the spot, with promise of yet more hereafter. Though Priam son of Dardanus should bid them offer me your weight in gold, even so your mother shall never lay you out and make lament over the son she bore, but dogs and vultures shall eat you utterly up."

Hector with his dying breath then said, "I know you what you are, and was sure that I should not move you, for your heart is hard as iron; look to it that I bring not heaven's anger upon you on the day when Paris and Phoebus Apollo, valiant though you be, shall slay you at the Scaean gates." (Iliad, bk. 22).

The *Iliad* is a work of ancient Greek literature traditionally ascribed the poet **Homer**, though modern scholars agree it (like the Hebrew Scriptures and the Epic of Gilgamesh) likely originated as an oral poem that was eventually written down. The original events that inspired the poem that have been lost to history. It describes the siege of Troy (in modern Turkey) by Greek forces (called the **Achaeans**). When the poem begins, the siege has been going on for nine years. The focus of the poem is largely on the exploits and motivations of two great warriors: the Trojan Hector and the Greek Achilles. Hector kills Achilles' close friend Patroclus, who is unwisely dressed in Achilles' armor, in attempt to scare the Trojans. Achilles later pursues and kills Hector, and dishonors his dead body. The poem ends with the return of Hector's body to his family in Troy, and with a temporary truce between the Greeks and Trojans. Along the way, the various Greek gods interfere and make problems for basically everyone.

In this lecture, we'll be taking a look at one of the most famous and influential scenes in the *Iliad*: the combat between Achilles and Hector, and Achilles's subsequent defiling of Hector's body. Hector's defeat will, in the long run, lead to the fall and sack of Troy (not portrayed in the poem), and Achilles' mistreatment of his body will eventually cause the gods to let Paris kill him (again, something that doesn't happen in this poem).

CHARACTERS AND PLOT

There are many, many websites and videos (and movies and books) that provide overviews of the plot of the *Iliad*, so we're not going to spend a ton of time doing it here (a good place to start is Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iliad>). However, in order to set up our more detailed discussion of chapter 22, it will help to at least review some of the characters and events that lead up to Achilles' and Hector's historic battle.

- **Helen of Troy** is the most beautiful woman in the world, who Greek mythology held was born when the sky god **Zeus** (or **Jove**) raped her mother Leda. She is married to the Greek leader **Menelaus**. Helen's kidnapping (or seduction?) by the Trojan **Paris** and the goddess Aphrodite is what triggers the war, which has been going for NINE years when the poem begins.
- Along with Menelaus, other Greek leaders include **Agamemnon** (the overall Greek leader and a bit of a jerk to basically everyone; he also sacrificed his own daughter to the gods), **Ajax**, and **Odysseus** (the main character of the *Odyssey*). In the first few chapters, these characters fight against the various Trojans.
- **Achilles** is the Greek hero of the *Iliad*. He's initially motivated mainly by the desire for glory, and later by the need to avenge his friend (and perhaps lover) **Patroclus**. He spends the first half of the book in a fight with Agamemnon, who stole one of his concubines, but rejoins the battle after Patroclus is killed. His pride and anger help drive events forward: in his absence, the Trojans almost win; when he returns, the Greeks push toward victory.
- **Hector** is the Trojan's strongest warrior, and many readers (both ancient and modern) have seen him as the "real" hero of the *Iliad*. As opposed to Achilles, he seems to be at least partially motivated by love and loyalty to his family and city. His parents are King **Priam** and Queen **Hecuba**, his wife **Andromache**, and his sister is the prophet **Cassandra**. Hector is portrayed as having a fair amount of self-knowledge: he seems to know that he can't beat Achilles in battle, and that Troy will ultimately be doomed.
- Along with Zeus, the Greek gods include his wife **Hera** (or **Juno**) and daughter **Athena** (or **Minerva**), both of whom hate the Trojans (maybe because they are jealous of Helen? Or angry at Paris?), and who are instrumental in its destruction. The Trojans are often aided by Zeus's twin children **Artemis** and **Apollo**, as well as by **Aphrodite** (the goddess of love who *likes* the romance of Paris and Helen, even if she doesn't have their best interests at heart).

Nearly all of the characters of the *Iliad* appear in *lots* other literature and art: Greek and Roman plays, philosophy, novels, paintings, films, etc.

BOOK 22: THE FINAL BATTLE

Astyanax [Hector's son], who erewhile would sit upon his father's knees, and have none but the daintiest and choicest morsels set before him. When he had played till he was tired and went to sleep, he would lie in a bed, in the arms of his nurse, on a soft couch, knowing neither want nor care, whereas now that he has lost his father his lot will be full of hardship—he, whom the Trojans name Astyanax, because you, O Hector, were the only defense of their gates and battlements. The wriggling writhing worms will now eat you at the ships, far from your parents, when the dogs have glutted themselves upon you." (Andromache's speech on hearing of Hector's death).

In book 22 of the *Iliad*, Achilles and Hector have their final battle, which Achilles wins. Here's a brief overview of the plot:

1. In book 16, Patrocholos puts on Achilles' armor and leads a (largely successful) counterattack against the Trojans, who retreat. However, he pursues them (which Achilles told him not to do!), and encounters Hector, who kills him. This leads Achilles to finally reenter combat on the side of the Greeks, as he is consumed with rage and grief. In books 18 through 21, Achilles leads the battle against the Trojans, and even the gods join in the fray (with Zeus's permission, of course). The Trojans are now in full retreat, and have fled behind the city walls.
2. Apollo (the sun god, who favors the Trojans) has tricked Achilles into chasing him, which has so far prevented him from pursuing the retreating Trojans. At the beginning of the book, Achilles discovers the ruse, and begins to charge at Troy (apparently all by himself?). Priam and Hecuba see him, and beg Hector to come inside. The Trojans seem to know they will lose (and losing in a Greek war is no joke—they expect horrible things to happen to themselves and their children, which they are pretty explicit about). Priam and Hecuba don't want to see their son die right now, especially when they won't be able to give him a proper funeral.
3. Hector (notably unlike Achilles!) is unsure what to do: stay and fight (for personal glory and to save his people) or to try to negotiate for a peaceful surrender. He decides to stay and fight, but his nerve doesn't hold up, and he flees when Achilles gets near. There is a long chase around the city walls, with everyone watching them.
4. Athena interferes on Achilles' behalf, and tricks Hector into standing and fighting. She appears as Hector's brother Deiphobus, and begs him to stand and fight. Achilles quickly wins the battle by stabbing Hector in the throat. As he lays dying, Hector begs to have his body returned to his family, but Achilles refuses.
5. Achilles tears off Hector's armor, and drags his body around the walls of Troy, in full view of his father and mother. Hector's wife, Andromache, hears of his death, and foresees the worst for her infant son (correctly, it turns out—according to Greek myth, he will be thrown from the city walls by Achilles' son, who will then enslave her as a concubine).
6. The *Iliad* as a whole finishes with Achilles finally returning Hector's body to his father Priam, as the two of them both (finally) accept the death of their respective loved ones, as well as the inevitability of their own deaths. A truce is declared, but Greek readers would know that both Achilles and Priam will die in the coming conflict.

The final battle then, is a brutal one, with relatively little drama as to the outcome: Achilles wins, as he was always destined to. However, in the end, nobody but the gods are going to be really "winners": the Trojan men will all die in battle, as will Achilles, and the Trojan women will be enslaved. According to Greek myth, most of the Greek men will die in various horrible ways as they try to return home (with the notable exception of Odysseus, who is too tricky to be defeated by anyone). The only compensation for the heroes of the *Iliad* is that they will be *remembered* for their valiant deeds.

THEMES

"Unhappy man, you have indeed been greatly daring: how could you venture to come alone to the ships of the Achaeans, and enter the presence of him who has slain so many of your brave sons? You must have iron courage: sit now upon this seat, and for all our grief we will hide our sorrows in our hearts, for weeping will not avail us. The immortals know no care, yet the lot they spin for man is full of sorrow...Bear up against it, and let there be some intervals in your sorrow. Mourn as you may for your brave son, you will take nothing by it. You cannot raise him from the dead, ere you do so yet another sorrow shall befall you." (Achilles to Priam, on the return of Hector's body).

The battle between Achilles and Hector is perhaps the most famous battle in all of Western literature, and it has been *hugely* influential in later literature and art. Some important themes:

1. **It's not "good" versus of "evil."** There isn't a clear sense of "good" versus "evil" in the way that later readers (including Roman and Christian ones, but even many Greeks) would like there to be. Achilles *certainly* doesn't win the battle because he's a better human, or even because Zeus wants him to (Zeus seems relatively indifferent, and lets Athena do whatever she wants). Later literature will sometimes portray Achilles as a villain, but this doesn't seem to be Homer's attitude. Achilles is under the control of emotions—notably sadness at a friend's death and a desire for recognition—that seem all too human. That being said, many readers have found that Hector's attachments to his family and city makes him easier to root for. However, in the end, these emotions let Hector down as well, first leading him to flee in fear for his life and then (unwisely) turning to fight.

2. **Humans have almost no control over their lives.** The lives and deaths of the *Iliad*'s heroes are inevitably portrayed as being due to the whims of the gods, who repeatedly interfere with both the outcomes of battles and with the psychology of individual humans (e.g., by making them believe/feel things that lead them to disaster). This covers everything from Paris's feelings toward Helen to Achilles' rage to Hector's attitudes toward his family and city. If there is a "villain" of the *Iliad*, it might well be Aphrodite (the goddess of love), whose meddling with Helen and Paris set off the conflict in the first place, and who torpedoed the only chance of an early resolution to the war when she refuses to allow Menelaus to kill Paris in a duel. Of course, getting rid of Aphrodite (of love itself!) isn't really an option for humans.
3. **There is meaning in struggle (and only in struggle).** The heroes of the *Iliad* believe in an afterlife of some type, but they view it as (at best) a pale reflection of life on Earth, where everything is boring and bland (without love, battle, art, or anything else). The meaning of their lives thus depends entirely on what they do when alive and (crucially) how others view them. For Homeric Greeks, this mainly means success in battle, and having others recognize this success in battle. Achilles and Hector thus represent models of what it *means* to lead a successful human life, combining courage, loyalty and love to one's friends/family, and skill on the battlefield. The fact that their actions and lives are commemorated in verse is thus all they could hope to ask for. This model of a successful life—as an endless striving for victory, even in the face of inevitable defeat—will be something against which the very different philosophies of later eras (Epicureanism, Stoicism, Christianity, Islam, etc.) will have to react. In the 19th century, philosophers such as **Frederich Nietzsche** will look back to the Homeric Greeks as alternatives to more modern conceptions of human life and morality.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. In what ways is Achilles similar to other heroes of books/films (especially action heroes!)? In what ways is he different?
2. If you were going to make a piece of art (painting, short story, etc.) based on a character in the *Iliad* besides Achilles, who would it be? Why? (Note: This has been something A LOT of artists have done over the years).
3. How does the "Homeric worldview" presented in the *Iliad* (everything from the role of the gods to ethics to the meaning of life) differ from "modern" worldviews? Can you think of any benefits to adopting the Homeric worldview? Any drawbacks?