

From
The Iliad
Part One

HOMER

Retold by Jane Werner Watson

The Quarrel

This is the story of one man's anger, of all the troubles it brought to the Greeks, and of all the warriors it sent down to Hades in death.

Achilles was the man, and his anger rose when he quarreled with the great King Agamemnon. It happened that the Greeks took as prisoner Chryseis, the daughter of a priest of Apollo, and she was given to King Agamemnon. Her father offered rich ransom for her, but Agamemnon rudely sent him away.

The old man went, but when he reached the shore of the sea, he lifted his hands in prayer to Apollo and asked a curse on the Greeks.

Down from Olympus charged Apollo, bow in hand, quiver of arrows on his back. Into the Greek camp he sent arrows of sickness, until day and night fires burned for the dead.

"Apollo is angry," said the Greeks' seer, "because the daughter of his priest was not returned home. He will not stop shooting his arrows of sickness until she is returned and proper offerings are made."

Now Agamemnon leaped up in anger. "Let the girl be returned, for the safety of the army.

Both human heroes and the gods
are drawn into the Trojan War.
How do their jealousy and pride
affect the progress of the war?

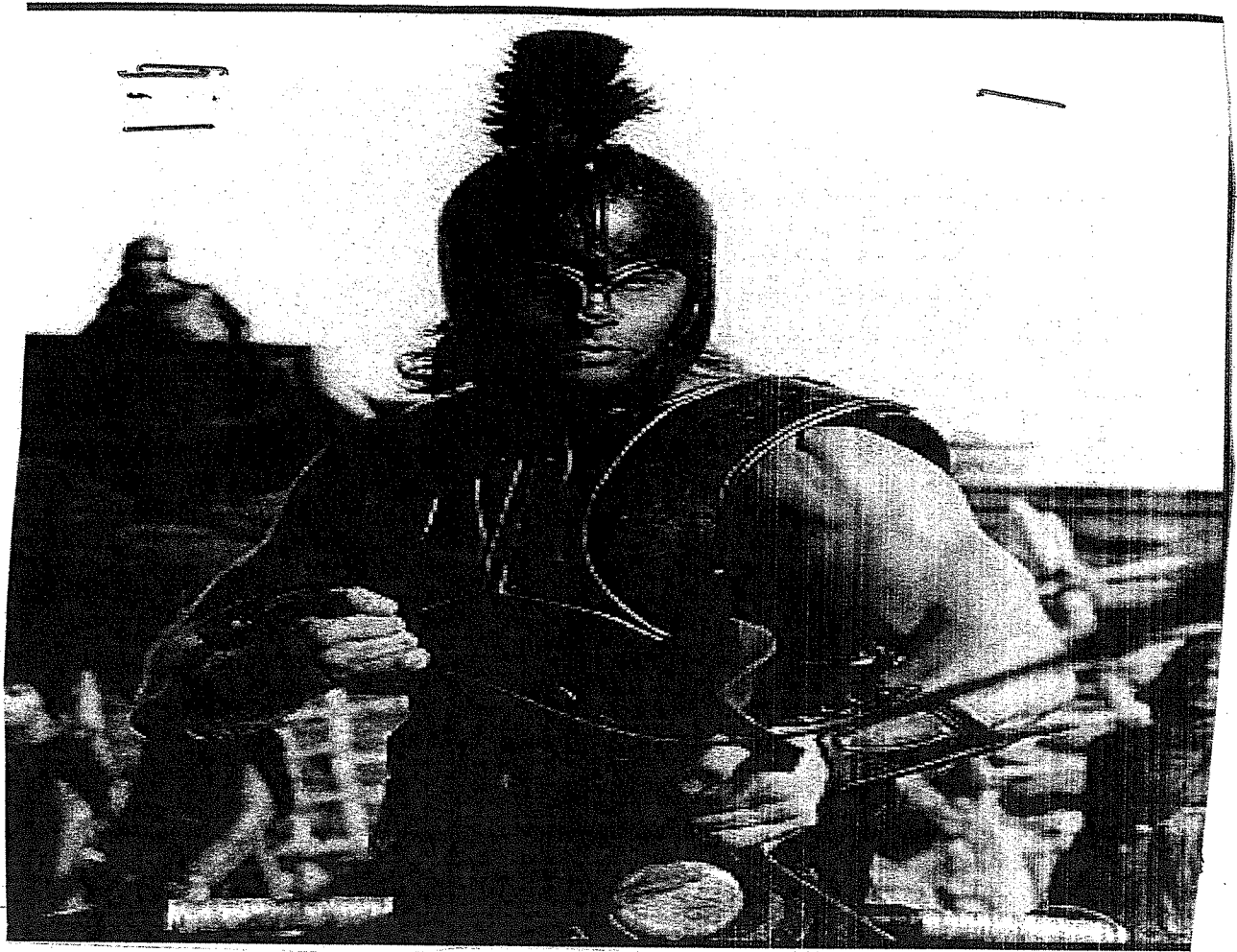
But I will not be done out of my prize. Let something of equal value be found for me, or I shall send men to Odysseus' tent, or to Ajax's or Achilles', and take one of their prizes for my own."

"You greedy schemer," Achilles sneered "I will take my ships and sail back home rather than stay here to be insulted and pile up riches for you."

"Go home with your ships and men," replied Agamemnon. "I will not beg you to stay. But now, to show you who is the stronger, I shall send to your tents and take the girl Briseis, who is your prize. Then others will know enough not to cross me this way."

This stabbed proud Achilles to the heart. He turned on Agamemnon with searing words.

"You good-for-nothing, with the eyes of a dog and the heart of a frightened deer! Listen now, while I take a solemn oath. As surely as this staff I hold will never grow again, never again put forth twigs and leaves—just as surely the day will come when all you Greeks will miss Achilles. And as your men fall by hundreds before Hector of Troy, you will beat your breasts in sorrow for having trampled on the best man of all."



With these words Achilles flung down his gold-studded staff and sat down in his place, while Agamemnon glared at him.

After this the assembly was dismissed, and Achilles, followed by his men, went off to his ships and huts.

Agamemnon promptly sent Chryseis home by a ship under Odysseus' command. But he did not forget his quarrel with Achilles. He sent two unwilling heralds to the hut of Achilles, to bring Briseis to him.

When the men had led the weeping Briseis away, Achilles, sad at heart, walked down

beside the sea. And he cried out to his mother, the sea-nymph Thetis, as she sat beside her father, the god of the sea. Up she came, rising like a gray mist from the water. Sitting down beside her son, she gently stroked his hand.

"My son," she said, "tell me why you weep, so that I may sorrow with you."

So, although as a goddess she knew everything, Achilles told her all that had happened that day.

"Go to Zeus," he begged when he had finished his story. "Clasp his knees and persuade him, if you can, to help the Trojans—to

fling back the Greeks to their ships with heavy slaughter. That would show Agamemnon how foolish he was to insult his best warrior."

Theris went at once to the sky. There, finding the father of the gods seated by himself on the highest peak of Olympus, she sank down at his feet and clasped his knees.

"Father Zeus," she begged, "if ever I have done anything for you, grant me this boon: honor my son, who is fated to die so young, and who now has been insulted by Agamemnon. Favor the Trojans until the Greeks pay Achilles the honor which is due him."

Zeus sighed unhappily. "This is a troublesome thing," he said. "It is sure to get me into a quarrel with my wife, Hera, who already fusses because she says I favor the Trojans too much. Do go away before Hera sees you. But first, to show that I grant your plea, I will nod my head."

As Zeus swung his great head in a lordly nod, all of cloud-crowned Olympus shook.

Agamemnon's False Dream

In keeping with his plan to destroy many Greeks on the battlefield for the glory of Achilles, it seemed best to Zeus to send a false dream to King Agamemnon. So he called to him from the house of Sleep one of the Evil Dreams, and sent it to tell King Agamemnon that victory was at hand.

Away went the dream with all speed to the camp. It sought out Agamemnon, asleep in his tent.

"Asleep?" it said to him. "This is no time to sleep, when the immortals have at last decided to let you capture Troy with its broad streets."

Then the dream slipped away, and Agamemnon awoke. He sat up quickly. He put on a fine new tunic, flung his cloak over his shoulders, laced up his sandals, and slung his sword over his shoulder. With his royal sceptre in his hand, he set out among the ships.

First he called a meeting of his leaders, torn from sleep, to give them the false good news. They in turn called the soldiers to assembly. Like a vast swarm of bees the men rushed out from their huts on the sands. So great was the roar that it took nine heralds, shouting loud, to quiet them enough to listen to their leaders' words.

When at last they were all seated, Agamemnon arose, leaning on his royal sceptre.

"My friends, heroes of Greece, warriors all!" he greeted them. "Soon the city of King Priam will bow her head, captured and sacked by the hands of the Greeks. There will not be another day's delay. But first, men, dismiss, have a good meal and make ready for battle.

"Sharpen your spears, adjust your shields, feed your horses well, and see that your chariots are ready for action.

"For this will be a long day. We shall fight without pause, until your shield straps are stuck to your breasts with sweat and your hands are heavy on the spears. As for any shirker who lingers by the ships, he shall be food for the vultures and the dogs!"

The Greeks welcomed this speech with loud cheers, like the roar of the sea breaking on a rocky coast. Then the assembly broke up, and the men scattered among the ships, to build their fires and prepare their meal. Each man made an offering to his favorite god, and prayed that he might be alive when the battle ended that night.

Agamemnon, too, made his sacrifice, a fine five-year-old bull, to Zeus. And he prayed that Troy might fall in flames that day, and its hero Hector and his friends roll in the dust.

Zeus accepted the sacrifice. But he did not grant the prayer, for he planned death and suffering that day for the Greeks.

When the meal was finished, Agamemnon sent out his clear-voiced heralds to sound the battle cry. At once the men poured out from the ships and huts, clan after clan in battle array. Captains brought their companies into battle order, there on the river Scamander's plain. And Zeus made Agamemnon stand out from the rest as one great bull in a herd of cattle.

Out marched the men, with a dazzle of bronze that shone like a forest fire on the mountains. And the earth shook beneath their tramping feet.

Meanwhile, Zeus had sent swift Iris, goddess of the rainbow, to Troy in the form of a Trojan scout. She found the leaders gathered at the city gates, and there she addressed King Priam and his son, Prince Hector.

"Sir, you still go on talking here," she said to Priam, "as if we were back in the days of peace. But a death struggle is upon us, for a force is at this moment rolling over the plain, in numbers like the leaves of the forest or the sands of the sea. Hector, I beg you, have your allies draw up their men in companies and go forth to battle!"

Hector recognized the goddess's voice in this warning. He dismissed the meeting swiftly and sounded the call to arms. Soon with a great din the Trojan army and its allies were pouring through the city gates to a mound in the plain.

Developing Comprehension Skills

1. What caused the Greeks and Trojans to go to war?
2. Why does Apollo punish the Greeks? What must the Greeks do to end the punishment?
3. Why do Achilles and Agamemnon quarrel?
4. Achilles asks his mother to persuade Zeus to help the Trojans. Why does Achilles make this request? What does this request reveal about Achilles?
5. What is the false dream that Zeus sends to Agamemnon? How does Agamemnon react?

Think about the reaction of Agamemnon and his warriors. What can you conclude about the importance of dreams in their society?

6. How does Zeus get information to the Trojan army? What is his message?
7. Do you agree with Zeus's decision to help the Trojans? Did Agamemnon's actions justify this kind of punishment?

Reading Literature

1. Understanding External Conflict. Conflict is the struggle between different forces in a