

## **The Hero and Homeric Culture**

The Iliad is replete with references to personal honour. In Homeric culture, everyone's honour was valued, but the hero's honour was of utmost importance. He felt compelled to defend his reputation, even at the cost of his life, because he could not stand insults. The hero's responsibility was to fight, and since heroic action on the battlefield was the only way he could achieve renown and immortality, he constantly readied himself for the hazards of battle. According to the Homeric hero, men must respect one another, work together in combat, and abstain from extreme cruelty. For the Homeric hero, this final prerequisite was crucial. He detested wilful harshness and unfairness. He felt that he should kill a victim as soon as possible; he was not to dismember him, as Achilles does with Hektor's corpse. By abiding by this rule, a hero established a reputation for honour and dignity that would secure his place in his community's social memory.

Strict social and cultural standards governed the Homeric hero's life, both at home and in combat. Understanding his role in society and acting in a way that met its expectations were essential to his status as a hero. He embraced the hero's pattern, which encompassed both the hero's death and suffering. The hero assumed that either society or a god were the source of his thoughts when he put them into words. There was nothing from within. (The hero addresses "his own great-hearted spirit" in his soliloquies as if it were an outside force guiding him towards the correct course of action.)

The Homeric hero's status depended heavily on communal honour; his relationship with his family and city dominated his entire existence. He believed that life had lost its purpose if he were to lose the honour or glory that his community bestowed upon him. When Agamemnon takes Briseis away from Achilles, for instance, Achilles feels as though he has lost his honour. He experiences rejection, and even Agamemnon's subsequent offer of gifts to entice Achilles to rejoin the battle is ineffective since Achilles understands that accepting Agamemnon's presents will result in him losing even more honour.

Although the hero's social obligation was crucial to preserving his status, his heroic performance on the battlefield was the exclusive means of establishing his status. In addition, he had to respect and adhere to societal norms and situations; he had to be loyal to his friends and show respect for his superiors; and he could not in any manner bring shame to himself, his family, or his society. Withdrawing from an impossible position, however, was not a disgrace because, in certain cases, it was all a warrior could do. However, Patroklos disregards Achilles' caution against forcing the Trojans to return to their city as well as this concept. Patroklos fails because he loses his sense of reason and turns irrational.

The Homeric people relied on their heroes to protect their religious and social rituals as well as every other aspect of communal life. A warrior defined and justified his social standing solely on the battlefield, and being a hero was a societal duty that granted a man social standing.

In Homeric society, the hero understood that his community's rage was justified. For instance, Agamemnon holds Zeus and Destiny accountable for Achilles' deeds when he deprives him of his war prize. He asserts that "Delusion" ensnared him and states, "It is the god who accomplishes all things." In a similar vein, Athena catches Achilles by the hair and cautions him against engaging in combat with Agamemnon as he considers drawing his sword against him. It is obvious that Achilles does not take ownership of his rage or his failure to murder Agamemnon.

In actuality, despite the fact that both Achilles and Agamemnon are on the verge of violence, neither acknowledges personal accountability for their mental and physical reactions. Since an external force drives action and thought in the Homeric hero, personal accountability has no bearing on a hero's choice to submit to external authority.

A hero always had two options: either he made his own decisions or he followed an outside power. The idea that a man became a hero because he had particular attributes is the source of this notion. Heroic balance is one of those attributes, which calls for a hero to maintain appropriate modesty before the gods while insisting on his greatness. He needed to be self-aware and capable of assessing and responding to a situation. Additionally, he had to discern when the gods stopped supporting him, at which point the hero had to leave the battlefield. He would have lost his heroic equilibrium and committed a terrible error if he had not realised how much his action was dictated by the gods.

The hero's reaction to every social circumstance and to other people's opinions was dictated by his fear of shame (*aidos*). He would be derided by society if he did something wrong. However, take note of what Agamemnon and Achilles did during the fight in Book I, despite the possibility of being judged by others. It's both men's fault. By disparaging Achilles and claiming Briseis instead of Chryseis, Agamemnon shatters the link between hero and community. Similarly, Achilles' threat to assassinate Agamemnon is a social act that, if it were to come to pass, would not only be disrespectful to his superiors but also drive his Achaian men out of Troy. The chaos this crisis creates necessitates the return of order.

Heroes were always afraid of shame and of being judged by their community. The hero did not make a distinction between his own values and adherence to the norms of the larger society; he was entirely focused on being accepted by the populace because he ran the risk of offending them in any manner and causing them to feel ashamed.