#### **Book 9: Achilles and the Heroic Code**

Below you will find an essay considering the theme of heroism in Iliad 9.

#### Essay

The embassy to Achilles in Book 9 represents one of the main turning points of the *Iliad*. Before this point, it looks as though the poem will follow the traditional pattern of absence-devastation-return, in which a hero withdraws from battle, is offered and accepts reparations, and returns to save the day. Indeed, in Book 1, Athena predicts that exactly this will happen: 'There will be a day when three times these splendid gifts will be laid before you because of this insult' (1.212-14). In Book 9, too, Phoenix refers to the way heroes are *supposed* to behave: 'This is what we have heard in the tales of past heroes too, when furious anger came on one of them – they could be won by gifts and words' persuasion' (9.524-6). But Achilles is not like the heroes of the past, and the *Iliad* does not present the traditional story. Instead of taking the gifts and returning to the fighting, Achilles rejects the offer and decides to sail home. His decision transforms the structure of the poem from the broadly comedic pattern of absence-devastation-return to something much darker and much more tragic.

Before we look at Achilles' decision not to return to battle in more detail, it is worth thinking about the presentation of heroes and heroism in the poem more generally. Heroism is one of the central concerns of the *Iliad*, and several characters reflect explicitly on what being a hero means, not least Achilles himself.

For some, heroism is a kind of social contract: the hero fights for his community, and his community honours him accordingly. In Book 12, for example, Sarpedon explains to Glaucus how his exploits on the battlefield mean he is 'held in the highest honour ... with pride of place, the best of the meat, the wine-cup always full, and all look on us like gods, and we have for our own use a great cut of the finest land by the banks of the Xanthus, rich in vineyard and wheat-bearing ploughland' (12.310-12).

In some cases, the link between heroism and material rewards is more direct. Several of the heroes in the poem strip the armour from those they have killed, an item which has both symbolic and commercial value. In Book 6, the poet comments explicitly on the monetary value of armour when he describes Glaucus swapping his gold armour for Diomedes' bronze, 'a hundred oxen's worth for nine' (6.236). In Book 23, too, Asteropaius' armour is presented as prize to the hero Eumelus, at which point Achilles emphasises its great value: 'It is bronze, ringed round with an overlay of bright tin – it will be something of great value to him' (23.561-3).



There were other material goods, too. In Book 9, Achilles' silver lyre is described as having been 'won from the spoils when he destroyed Eëtion's city' (9.188), while both Briseïs and Chryseïs have been acquired during raids on nearby cities. Earlier in the same book, Agamemnon has described the kind of material wealth that Achilles can expect to gain if and when the Greeks eventually sack the city of Troy: 'He may ... pile his ship high ... with gold and bronze: and he may choose for himself twenty beautiful Trojan women' (9.136-40).

In addition to all this, the hero could expect a range of immaterial rewards for his exploits on the battlefield. In Book 12, Sarpedon mentions being 'held in the highest honour' ( $\tau \epsilon \tau \iota \mu \dot{\eta} \mu \epsilon \sigma \theta \alpha$   $\mu \dot{\alpha} \lambda \iota \sigma \tau \alpha$ , 12.310) by his community, using a word derived from the term  $\tau \iota \mu \dot{\eta}$  ('honour'). Several other heroes in the poem refer to the importance of being shown 'honour' in the same terms.

More fundamental, however, was the idea of 'glory' ( $\kappa\lambda$ έος or  $\kappa$ ῦδος), which seems to have referred specifically to one's reputation after death. The fact that the phrase 'immortal glory' ( $\kappa\lambda$ έος ἄφθιτον, 9.413) has an exact equivalent in Sanskrit (*srávas áksitam*) suggests that the desire for glory was one of the most ancient and fundamental in the Indo-European heroic tradition. In Book 6, Hector explains to his wife that he must return to battle in order to win 'great glory (μέγα κλέος)' (6.446), while in Book 17, the Trojan Euphorbus demands that Menelaus back away from the body of Patroclus in order that he may 'win glory ( $\kappa\lambda$ έος) among the Trojans' (17.16).

Moreover, the poem provides several indications of how  $\kappa\lambda$ έος might manifest itself after it has been won. In Book 9, Achilles is described as singing a song to Patroclus about 'glorious deeds of men' ( $\kappa\lambda$ έα ἀνδρῶν), showing that a hero's  $\kappa\lambda$ έος might been shown by his or her inclusion in epic song. We might think of the stories that characters tell each other of the heroes of the past as a kind of  $\kappa\lambda$ έος, too. The exploits of Diomedes' famous father, Tydeus, are referred to several times throughout the poem, for example, while Achilles himself tells the story of Niobe in Book 24. The word  $\kappa\lambda$ έος ('glory') derives from the word  $\kappa\lambda$ ύω ('to hear'): it is clear that one aspect of glory in the *Iliad* is being heard about, either in speech or song.

But κλέος could be visual, too. In Book 7, Hector speaks of the burial mound that will be granted to his opponent if he is killed in single combat: 'And people will say, even men of generations not yet born ... "This is the mound of a man who died long ago. He was the greatest of men, and glorious Hector killed him." That is what they will say, and my glory will never die' (7.87-91). In this case,  $\kappa\lambda$ έος manifests itself in the physical reminder of the hero's death, the burial mound, which is commented on by passers-by many years in the future. In Book 3, too, Helen is described as weaving a tapestry which depicts the war going on outside her bedroom. Helen is the only (human) character apart for Achilles to engage in artistic activity in the poem. Her tapestry is the visual equivalent of Achilles' song about the  $\kappa\lambda$ έα ἀνδρῶν. Both are manifestations of the  $\kappa\lambda$ έος sought after by the Homeric hero.

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In addition to thoughts of material wealth, status in the community and immortal glory, however, the *Iliad* depicts its heroes as responding to a range of emotional stimuli, too, and these form a vitally important aspect of the hero's behaviour. In Book 22, Hector stands up to Achilles not because of the glory he would earn if he killed him, but because he would feel ashamed ( $\alpha i \delta \epsilon \omega \alpha i$ ) if he ran away. One of the most common exhortations in the poem is for a hero to remind those around him of the shame ( $\alpha i \delta \epsilon \omega \alpha$ ) they should feel if they do not fight bravely. The following short speech by Ajax is typical:

Be men, my friends, and put pride  $(\alpha i \delta \tilde{\omega})$  in your hearts. In the battle's fury think proudly of your honour  $(\alpha i \delta \epsilon i \sigma \theta \epsilon)$  in each other's eyes. When men have pride  $(\alpha i \delta \omega \delta \rho \tilde{\omega} v)$ , more are saved than killed; but when they turn to flight, there can be no glory there or courage to resist.

15.561-4

As well as 'shame', a hero might also respond to 'pity' ( $\check{\epsilon}\lambda\epsilon\sigma\varsigma$  or  $o\check{i}\kappa\tau\sigma\varsigma$ ). There are more than twenty occasions in the poem where heroes will 'pity' comrades who are killed in battle, which leads to them to join the fighting with renewed vigour. The effect was even stronger if a hero's relative was present in the fighting: 'Are we going to hold back like this, then, Melanippus?', says Hector in Book 15, 'Is it no concern to your heart that your cousin is killed?' (15.553-4)

Finally in terms of emotional stimuli, a hero might respond to 'anger' ( $\mu\eta\nu\iota\varsigma$ ). When Achilles finally decides to return to battle in Book 18, he does so not because he wants something in return, nor because he feels shame or pity for the Greeks, but because he wants to avenge the death of Patroclus: 'My heart has no wish for me to live ... unless first Hector pays me the price for taking Patroclus, son of Menoetius' (18.94). As we see with Achilles, however, anger could provide just as strong an incentive *not* to fight as to fight.

In addition to all this, a hero might be advised how to act by those around him. Here, the hero's father was a particularly important figure. In Book 11, for example, Nestor reminds Patroclus of the advice that Achilles' father, Peleus, had given to his son ('Peleus instructed his son Achilles always to be bravest and best and excel over others', 11.783-4) as well as the advice that Patroclus' father, Menoetius, had given to him ('Your proper task is to give [Achilles] words of wisdom and advise him and guide him – and he will listen to you for the best', 11.786-7). In Book 23, Nestor gives his own son, Antilochus, instructions for the chariot race ('You must cut in very close as you drive your chariot and pair round the post, and let your own body ... lean a little to the left of the horses', 23.306-48). Advice might come in the form of censure, too. In Book 24, Priam rails at his surviving sons for being a bunch of dandies and fops ('You sorry children, you shameful blots! [...] I am left with all these disgraces, braggarts and dandies, heroes of the dance-floor, thievers of sheep and goats from their own people', 24.253-62). Fathers told their sons both how to act and how *not* to act, and it is was expected that heroes would follow their father's advice.

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Finally, a hero could be persuaded how to act based on the behaviour of other heroes. This was usually presented to them by way of a  $\pi\alpha\rho\dot{\alpha}\delta\epsilon\iota\gamma\mu\alpha$  ('precedent, example'). We have already said how being featured as part of a story about the behaviour of past heroes might be seen as a kind of  $\kappa\lambda\dot{\epsilon}o\varsigma$  for those featured in the story, but the  $\pi\alpha\rho\dot{\alpha}\delta\epsilon\iota\gamma\mu\alpha$  was also a way of showing those to whom the story was being addressed how they should act. In Book 4, Diomedes is told the emulate the example of Tydeus (4.370-400), while in Book 7, when the Greek leaders are hesitating to accept Hector's challenge of single combat, Nestor offers the  $\pi\alpha\rho\dot{\alpha}\delta\epsilon\iota\gamma\mu\alpha$  of the hero Lycurgus, who defeated Areïthous in a similar duel (7.124-60). Heroes were expected to follow the examples of their illustrious forebears.

When it came to the behaviour of heroes, then, we can see that there was a whole range of incentives to encourage him to act in the right way. The hero could fight for material wealth, status or standing in the community, immortal glory after his death. He could fight because of shame, pity, or anger, or he could fight because his father had instructed him to do so, or because that is what other heroes had done in the past. It was of course entirely possible or heroes to be motivated by several of these at the same time. In Book 6, for example, Hector explains to his wife why he must fight by talking about the 'shame' ( $\alpha$ iðéoµ $\alpha$ i, 6.442) of not doing so, but also his desire to win 'great glory' (6.446).

With this in mind, we can better appreciate the efforts made by the delegates to persuade Achilles to return to battle in Book 9. The first speaker is Odysseus, who touches on no fewer than five of the most common incentives for heroes to fight: first, he talks about the potential for Achilles to regret his decision ('You will feel pain yourself in the future', 9.249); second, he reminds Achilles of the advice his father had given him before he left for Troy ('If a quarrel begins its mischief, you should abandon it – this way the Argives ... will show you greater honour', 9.255-8); third, he lists the extensive material reparations that are on offer from Agamemnon (9.259-99); fourth, he asks Achilles to 'have pity on' ( $\dot{\epsilon}\lambda\dot{\epsilon}\alpha\mu\rho\epsilon$ , 9.302) his fellow Greeks; and fifth, he tells Achilles of the 'great glory' ( $\mu\dot{\epsilon}\gamma\alpha$   $\kappa\tilde{\upsilon}\delta\sigma\varsigma$ ) he would win if he killed Hector.

While Odysseus' speech covers a lot of bases, however, we note that he spends far longer on the promise of gifts than any of than the other incentives. His appeal to pity, for example, is made in just over three lines (9.300-303), while his the promise of glory is made in just one (9.303). The gifts, on the other hands, take up forty (9.260-99). Despite the fact that the gifts are presented as the third of five reasons to return to the fighting, the sheer amount of time that Odysseus spends on them implies that they should be Achilles' primary consideration – which is exactly how Achilles reads the situation.

Achilles' reacts furiously to Odysseus' speech, rejecting his offer out of hand – and he gives several reasons for doing so. First, Agamemnon has turned the entire system of gift-giving on its head: it ought to be the case, Achilles says, that the more you fight, the more you can expect in return, but Agamemnon gives the same amount to everyone, regardless of how much work they have done – so what's the point of fighting at all? ('Stay at home or fight your hardest –

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your share will be the same. Coward and hero are honoured alike', 9.318-19). Second, even if the awarding of gifts were still a reflection of one's exploits on the battlefield, Achilles simply does not trust Agamemnon not to take the gifts away again at some later date, just as he took Briseïs away in Book 1: 'But my prize of honour - he gave it, and he ... has taken it back to my insult. [...] He has cheated and wronged me. he will not work his cheating tongue on me again', 9.367-76. Third, and this is something that is often ignored in his speech, Achilles is rich anyway. He doesn't actually need the gifts: 'I have much wealth [in Phthia] ... and I shall take with me more gold from her, and red bronze, and fine-girdled women and grey iron, all that I have won' (9.364-67). Fourth, Achilles knows that if he stays as Troy, his life will be short rendering almost all of what Agamemnon offers useless. What he needs is not material wealth, especially that which is contingent on the Greeks sacking Troy and him returning to Argos, both of which Achilles knows he will never see/do, but glory: 'If I stay here and fight on round the Trojans' city, then gone is my homecoming, but my glory will never die' (9.412-13). Throughout his speech, Achilles concentrates on just one of the five incentives mentioned by Odysseus, Agamemnon's gifts. Halfway through his speech, he announces to plans to leave Troy in the morning.

Odysseus and the others recoil in stunned silence, 'shocked by his words and the great force of his refusal' (9.431-2) – but does Achilles have a point? Earlier in Book 9, Agamemnon had listed the gifts that he would offer to Achilles, and had ended with the following demand:

Let him yield – Hades is the one who never pities or yields, and for that he is of all the gods most hated by men – and let him submit to me, in that I am the greater king and can claim to be his senior in age

9.158-61

Odysseus, like all good messengers in the *Iliad*, repeats Agamemnon's offer almost verbatim – but he omits these last lines. Why? Because they show the gifts in their true light: they are not the 'unlimited reparations' ( $\dot{\alpha}\pi\epsilon\rho\epsilon(\sigma\iota)$ '  $\dot{\alpha}\pi\sigma\iota\nu\alpha$ , 9.120) that Agamemnon promises at the beginning of his speech, but a bribe, and they come with a condition that is almost as insulting as his initial offence – Achilles' complete and utter debasement and submission.

Odysseus does not repeat these lines for obvious reasons, though Achilles acts as if he had. At times, Achilles seems to be echoing Agamemnon's demand, drawing on the same ideas and even using the same words. At the beginning of his speech, for example, he refers to the man who 'hides one thing in his mind and speaks another' as being 'as hateful as the gates of Hades'  $(\dot{\epsilon}\chi\theta\rho\dot{\epsilon}\chi\theta)$ ,  $\dot{\epsilon}\chi\theta$ ,  $\dot{\epsilon$ 

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The speech of Achilles is followed by that of Phoenix. At 172 lines, it is the longest speech in the *Iliad* (9.434-605), and it represents a change of approach from that of Odysseus. Instead of concentrating on the gifts as Odysseus had done, Phoenix makes an appeal based on his paternal relationship with Achilles, the importance of honouring the gods of supplication, and a warning from the mythological past in the figure of Meleager.

While Phoenix's appeal is on the whole is more emotional, however, it is worth noting how the promise of gifts underlies two of his main appeals. The reason that Achilles should honour the gods of supplication, he says, is because Agamemnon is showing contrition by offering gifts: 'If the son of Agamemnon was not bringing gifts ... I would not ask you to put away your anger and defend the Argives' (9.515-18). Later, he says how Meleager regretted his decision not to return to battle before he did on the grounds that he lost the gifts that were originally promised to him: 'But they did not go on to pay him those many lovely gifts' (9.598-9). He ends his speech by saying that Achilles should avoid doing what Meleager did: 'Come while the gifts ( $\delta \omega \rho \omega v$ ) are yours. [...] If you enter the fighting ... without the gifts ( $\delta \omega \rho \omega v$ ), then your honour ( $\tau \mu \eta \zeta$ ) will be less' (9.602-5). As we have already seen, however, Achilles does not want  $\delta \omega \rho \alpha$  ('gifts') or  $\tau \mu \eta$  ('honour') – especially not from Agamemnon. What he wants is  $\kappa \lambda \epsilon \omega \zeta \omega \phi \theta \tau \omega v$  ('immortal glory').

Despite all this, Phoenix's emotional appeal seems to do the trick, and Achilles shifts his position. Instead of leaving directly in the morning, as he had said to Odysseus, he will now wait until the morning to decide what to do next. Achilles begins to make up a bed for Phoenix, who will stay the night in his tent. Before the delegation leave, however, there is one more speech – that of Ajax, who makes broadly the same points as Odysseus and Phoenix, noting the generosity of the gifts on offer and appealing to his pity. What might be of interest, however, is the word Ajax uses to refer to the gifts: not  $\check{\alpha}\pi\sigma\iotav\alpha$  ('reparations, compensation') as Agamemnon had done, but  $\pi\sigma\iotav\eta$  ('blood-money'). If Achilles rejected Agamemnon's gifts based on what they represented, the difference between the words may have been important. Does  $\pi\sigma\iotav\eta$  perhaps represent a level of contrition that either  $\delta\tilde{\omega}\rho\alpha$  or  $\check{\alpha}\pi\sigma\iotav\alpha$  do not?

In any case, Ajax's brusque speech elicits a couple of interesting replies from Achilles: first, he admits that while he agrees with much of what Ajax has said 'seems much after my own feeling', his heart 'swells with anger whenever I think of that time, how the son of Atreus treated me with contempt in front of the Argives' (9.645-48); second, he revises his position again, stating that he will return to the fighting after all, but only when Hector 'has killed his way through the Argives right up to the Myrmidons' huts and ships' (9.650-53).

The theme of Achilles' anger is obviously central to the whole poem, but it was also mentioned earlier by Odysseus, who reminded Achilles of his father's advice to 'hold down your heart's high passion in your breast' (9.255-6). Achilles' comment to Ajax that he agrees with much of what has been said, but simply too angry to return to the fighting provides an important context for analysing Achilles' behaviour at this point in the poem: the delegation may have made the

perfect set of arguments to convince Achilles to return to the fighting and yet still have failed. Achilles is simply too angry to act rationally.

Finally, it is worth saying that Achilles' offer to return to battle when Hector reaches his ships might seem like a generous one at first glance, it's worth remembering that Achilles' ships are located at the very end of the Greek camp, i.e. if Hector reaches Achilles' ships, he must have already destroyed the rest of the Greek army. Not such a generous offer after all, then.

The embassy to Achilles fails in its primary objective: Achilles does not return to battle, and come the morning the Greeks will find themselves fighting a desperate rear-guard action to protect their camp from complete destruction. It is at this point that the *lliad* departs from the traditional withdrawal-return narrative to become something much darker and more tragic. Achilles initially reacts furiously to Agamemnon's offer, announcing that he will return to Phthia in the morning. With Phoenix's appeal, Achilles relents – but only slightly. As he says to Ajax, he is simply too angry to return to the fighting, even though everything that is being said 'seems much after my own feeling'. Anger dominates Achilles' behaviour throughout the poem: when he eventually decides to return to battle in Book 18, he does so not because his anger towards Agamemnon has subsided, but because it has been eclipsed by a much more intense anger towards Hector. Everything else – material wealth, status in his community, pity for his fellow Greeks – pales into insignificance.