

## Honor & Glory in the *Iliad*: Life After Death

Honor and glory are central to the Greek character. Since heroes are the essence of the society from which they come, Greek heroes live their lives according to honor and glory, in all their varied forms. Honor and glory trigger an epic war that takes the lives of numerous men, and shape its development at every stage. The fall of Troy is “a thing... whose glory shall perish never (Homer, *Iliad* 2.324)”. The goal of the Greeks is the fame that resounds even after death, and they let nothing bar their way. The honor of the individual, family, and community guide every action and response. Honor and glory define the hero, and therefore are the foundations for everything that comes to pass in Homer’s *Iliad*.

The concepts of honor and glory are critical to understanding the motivation of the heroes in Homer’s *Iliad*<sup>1</sup>. Glory was gained by great, heroic actions and deeds and was conferred upon an individual by others who witnessed and acclaimed the glorious actions. Major battles provided an opportunity for many to find glory at once. Honor was similar to glory, but while the public had to view actions and deem them glorious, each individual maintained their own sense of personal honor which did not always coincide with honor as defined or perceived by the masses. Honor was gained through heroism in battle, but also through compelling speechmaking, loyalty and other noble qualities that a person might demonstrate. Having honor and glory allowed a Greek to gain influence in their society; as Osborne writes, “Individuals exert political influence according to their social standing, their rhetorical abilities, and their personal charisma, but not according to their holding the office of ruler (Osborne, 150)<sup>2</sup>”. An example that demonstrates this point occurs in the *Iliad* amidst an argument over a possible retreat. Odysseus, a respected fighter, makes the claim that it is “disgraceful to wait long and at the end go home empty-handed (Homer, *Iliad* 2.297)”. His message is well received. Meanwhile, Thersites, a man- and commoner- despised by all, advises the army to return home and is struck down by Odysseus to the pleasure of the gathered crowd. Here the

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<sup>1</sup> Homer. *The Iliad*. Trans. Richmond Lattimore. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951.

<sup>2</sup> Osborne, Robin. *Greece in the Making 1200-479BC*. London: Routledge, 1996.

respect and honor that Odysseus has achieved lends sufficient weight to his argument that his opponent, without equivalent status, is barely allowed to retort. The honor and glory an individual has gained increase the respect and influence he commands as well.

Honor and glory were important to the ancient Greeks because social status was not fixed. Indeed, in the eyes of the Greeks “social status correlates closely with access to power, but does not fully determine it (Osborne, 155).” Positions of power were not simply inherited, and through honorable and respected actions a person could elevate their social position significantly. This mobility in Greek culture inspires a cooperative attitude between the local leaders and the people following them. The leaders require the voluntary cooperation of the people under them, and only achieve that with respect and honor. This quality allows Achilles to disobey Agamemnon and refuse to fight when Agamemnon dishonors him by taking his prize. Many of the strategic decisions for the army that are made throughout the *Iliad* are reviewed by a group of respected fighters and elders, even though Agamemnon is considered the main leader. In book nine, facing a rout at the hands of the Trojans, Agamemnon calls a counsel of leaders to persuade them that the army should “run away with our ships (Homer, *Iliad* 9.27)” before losing more men. However, Agamemnon’s suggestion shocks his audience, and his idea is emphatically rejected. Diomedes states, “if in truth your own heart is so set upon going, go... yet the rest of the flowing-heart Achaians will stay here until we have sacked the city of Troy (Homer, *Iliad* 9.42)”. Agamemnon’s leadership position can easily be transferred to another, if he begins to falter. Status could always be gained and lost, and therefore it was necessary to continually protect your honor and resulting status while striving for more.

Gaining honor and glory is not always simple, as there are different and often conflicting ways of achieving status and respect. One of the more obvious methods depicted in the *Iliad* is success in battle, as well as courage. Achilles and Hektor are noted as great fighters, and both of them greatly affect a battle with their presence. Achilles’ decision to abstain from the fighting because he was slighted by Agamemnon carried enough weight to force consideration of defeat. “Glorious” Hektor, “who was ever the bravest fighter of the Trojans (Homer, *Iliad* 6.460)”, also demonstrates extreme courage and battle prowess by continually expressing a desire to return to battle while his

duties force him on errands into the city (Homer, *Iliad* Book 6). His brother Paris, on the other hand, the instigator of the war, must be dragged out of the city to fight, causing other Trojans to say “shameful things (Homer, *Iliad* 6.524)” about his character. Similarly, success in athletic competitions also leads to honor and glory.

The possession of material goods as well as pretty women can be indicators of status. However the giving of possessions is an even stronger sign of status. For example, it was considered in the funeral games held for Patroclus (Homer, *Iliad*, Book 23), that the event not only honors the victors, and Patroclus, but above all Achilles, who spared no expense in choosing the prizes.

Possession of women was important to a man’s standing and honor. Paris’ theft of Helen struck a huge blow to the honor of Menelaus and became the initial cause of the war between the Greeks and the Trojans. The Spartan ruler called upon his brother Agamemnon to gather the Greek forces to forcefully persuade Paris to return Helen and reinstate respect for the king. In this case, others sympathize with the blow to Menelaus’ honor, and Achilles and other famous Greek leaders agree to join the fight to recapture Helen and the honor of Menelaus. The theft of Menelaus’ woman justifies the initiation of the war, and the later theft of Achilles’ woman intensifies the war with his absence.

The Greeks had more subtle distinctions of status in addition to these physical, and personal, demonstrations of honor. Homeric society was very community-based, as can be seen with the collective nature of the ruling class. This communal sentiment often conflicts with individual desires. Many times throughout the *Iliad* what is best for the group is rejected for individual honor. Menelaus and his brother Agamemnon wage war to regain honor, despite the cost of the lives that will be lost in the process. There are multiple instances throughout the *Iliad* where the question of standing down to prevent others from being killed is rejected as cowardly or weak, and the fight continues.

With the massive struggle between two of the Greeks’ greatest men, Agamemnon and Achilles, to retain their honor in the public view, it becomes clear that there are different views on honor within the society. Agamemnon felt his personal honor was greater than that of the army, but Achilles calls him out as “wrapped in shamelessness, with your mind forever on profit (Homer, *Iliad* 1.149)”. Both of the heroes see their women as a sign of status and honor, but relinquishing the symbol of honor for the sake

of the army, as in Agamemnon's case, does not necessarily diminish his personal honor. Many other respected men, such as Odysseus, try to convince Agamemnon to calmly return his prize, but Agamemnon is overwhelmed with the idea that he is being slighted. In this situation, the communal sentiment outweighs that of the individual. To save lives, Agamemnon must give up a possession, which is not viewed by the community as dishonorable. However, Agamemnon's perceived slight does not compare with the insult to Achilles' honor with Agamemnon's appropriation of his woman. Achilles feels his honor as acutely as Agamemnon, and declares, "I am minded no longer to stay here dishonoured and pile up your wealth and luxury (Homer, *Iliad* 1.170)," as he removes himself from the main camp. Achilles gives up the prospect of gaining certain glory on the battlefield, and having "the Achaians [honour] you as they would an immortal (Homer, *Iliad* 9.603)", to preserve his honor off the field.

The idea of family honor adds a new level of intricacy in maintaining a balance between individual and community honor. For the Greeks, family honor is similar to community honor. Menelaus calls upon his brother when his honor is wounded with the theft of Helen. Agamemnon responds to the familial need, and the community does as well, providing more support for Menelaus' difficult situation.

Individuals of a family, like those of a community, do not always have the same ideas on what constitutes the proper actions to take in a given situation. Patroclus is like family to Achilles, as they grew up together, practically brothers. Patroclus respects Achilles' decision to remain out of the fighting, but also desires to achieve his own honor by inspiring fear into the Trojans by wearing Achilles' armor, since Achilles himself will not. His honor is shown in the elaborate ceremonies that Achilles holds for his passing, and the extent of the mourning shown.

Hektor and Paris provide a good example of family honor by the contrast in their characters. Hektor is undoubtedly honorable, brave, and respected, as he "learned to be valiant and to fight always among the foremost ranks of the Trojans, winning for [his] own self great glory, and for [his] father (Homer, *Iliad* 6.444)". Like with Patroclus, Homer describes his funeral, and the depth of mourning over his loss at length. Hektor is mourned by the entire city, including the gods who even go so far as to protect his body from the mutilation that the grieving Achilles tried to put it through. Unlike his brother,

Paris is liable to hang back from the fighting, and to perform underhanded dishonorable actions. The stealing of Helen was itself a dishonorable act, but Paris also defied the host-guest relationship which is of serious import to the Greeks. The cause of the war, Paris “wished to give [himself] over to sorrow (Homer, *Iliad* 6.336),” rather than join the ranks outside the walls. The honorable Hektor has to scold him to get him to enter the battle. Helen, who herself demonstrates regret for leaving Sparta with Paris and instigating a long, bloody war, is disapproving of Paris, and enamored of Hektor. Despite his extensive personal honor, Hektor is ashamed of his brothers’ weakness for the dishonor that it brings on their family.

The emphasis placed on the retrieval of the body and the burial, for both Hektor and Patroclus, illustrates the Greek perception that respect and renown continue after death, and therefore validate the struggle in life to achieve honor and glory. Achilles and Priam both go to extreme lengths and physical difficulty to have the body of their loved ones returned to them. Achilles had to weigh a death in battle, where his “glory shall be everlasting (Homer, *Iliad* 9.412),” against a long life without glory. Initially, Achilles abstains from the fighting, believing the insult to his honor by Agamemnon to prevail over the glory of the fight, but he later returns to the battle and a sure death to avenge Patroclus. He also swears to not only kill Hektor, but to exact his revenge by mutilating the Trojan hero’s body, while Hektor himself offers gifts for the return of his own body (Homer, *Iliad* 22.338). Achilles refuses, and attempts all kinds of “shameful treatment for glorious Hektor (Homer, *Iliad* 22.395)”. The mutilation of the body is an attempt to dishonor the deceased.

Just as Achilles fought for Patroclus’s body, Priam comes for that of Hektor. Priam begs Achilles for his son’s body, saying “I have gone through what no other mortal on earth has gone through; I put my lips to the hands of the man who has killed my children (Homer, *Iliad* 24.505)”. In doing so, Priam demonstrates how death is no barrier to the honor and glory gained in life. Priam is not dishonored in his begging, either, as he does so in the name of his family honor. Such a sacrifice of individual glory is honorable in the eyes of the community.

Honor and glory were at the core of Greek civilization in Homer’s time, as the Greeks recognized that honor and glory last far longer than any physical remnants of a

person's life. The pursuit and protection of these qualities in all their various forms were the driving force behind everything the Greeks did. Honor and glory made it reasonable to go to war, to fight with friends, to lose countless comrades and to be away from home and family for decades. In the *Iliad*, honor and glory were life.