

The Greek Concept of a Hero: A Case Study of Achilles and Hector in Homer's the Iliad

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Abstract

This paper delves into the psyche of the two important Greek heroes: Achilles and Hector in Homer's celebrated epic The Iliad. Both, Achilles and Hector, were endowed with superhuman qualities. They were invincible and at the same time vulnerable. Despite their invincibility, they were mortals, and hence, they were bound to die. The thrust of this paper is to make an in-depth study of the vulnerable and human side of these great and invincible characters. The study investigates the elements which make both these heroes human and bring them down from the high pedestal to the level of the ordinary mortals. The paper also throws light on the Greek concept of a hero and attempts to decode who the real hero is in Homer's The Iliad.

Keywords: invincibility, vulnerable, mortals, pedestals, decode War is Man's business. (Jones, Homer, The Iliad, P.112)

INTRODUCTION

Since its publication in the 8th Century BC (simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iliad) Homer's The Iliad has been considered as the most celebrated epic in the western literary tradition. Homer's magnificent epic The Iliad is about the ten- year long Trojan war fought between the Greeks and Trojans. (Thomson, novaonline.nvcc.edu) The epic was venerated even by the ancient Greeks themselves. Homer's The Iliad is a classic tale of an enormous scope which depicts the miraculous deeds of its heroes. The Homeric heroes were endowed with superhuman qualities. (introductiontohomer.html) The epic dwells on the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles, Achilles' subsequent withdrawal from the battlefield, the fight between Patroclus and Hector, and thereby the death of Patroclus. The death of Patroclus is that of a personal loss for Achilles which resulted in Achilles' decision to return to the battlefield, and to avenge the death of Patroclus. Patroclus's burial, the death of Hector, the return of Hector's dead body and the funeral games played in honour of Hector conclude the epic. In a nutshell, Homer's the Iliad is all about Achilles' uncontrolled anger and its terrible consequences." (Thomson, novaonline.nvcc.edu). However, in the Trojan war, the fight between Achilles and Hector is the climax of the narrative.

The Concept of a Greek Hero

The Greek heroes, in Homer's the Iliad, are considered as greater human beings than the ordinary warriors. Some heroes might have a divine or semi-divine parentage, yet the Homeric heroes are mortal and subject to death. Each hero is distinguished by a virtue, but they have a vice too. For example, Achilles is the greatest warrior, but he is arrogant and stubborn. The Homeric heroes are below the level of gods but above the ordinary warriors. Homer's The Iliad moves around the aristocratic heroes and doesn't give

enough space to the ordinary soldiers. The ordinary warriors tend to be somewhat lesser individuals than the heroes, although much greater than the ordinary men. In ancient Greek myth, heroes were humans, endowed with superhuman abilities and were descendants of the immortal gods themselves. The Trojan heroes were larger-than-life figures, and their exploits proved to be legendary. Not all were equal in valour, skill, courage, or counsel. However, some clearly stood above the rest. (thecollector's.com)

For the Homeric heroes, their performance in the battlefield is the most important feat. Ancient Greek society accepted war as a necessary part of a man's life. For these heroes nothing mattered more than fighting in the battlefield. If a hero doesn't go to fight in the battlefield, his life is not worth living. Moreover, death in the battlefield is the ultimate prize, and nothing else counts. Winning in the battlefield brings glory and honour to the heroes. At the end of the Iliad, it is Achilles who emerges triumphant by killing 'God like Hector', the greatest warrior from the Trojan side. Homer intends to emphasize that Achilles was the finest Greek warrior in the Trojan war. In the world of Homer's Iliad, death is the only reward that a warrior can expect in the battlefield. At the end, all the great warriors die. Patroclus dies, Hector dies, and even Achilles dies (not in the Iliad, but in Odysseus). The fact, however, remains, that nobody wants to die, even heroes don't want to die. Nevertheless, they must die as they are mortals. Mortality, not immortality, is the dominant gene. (Nagy, introductiontohomer.com)

Achilles

The "swift footed Achilles" (Jones, Homer, Revised Edition, 2003, P.05) is the greatest Greek warrior in the Trojan War. Achilles is the son of Peleus, a mortal, and Thetis, an immortal sea goddess with far reaching cosmic powers. Achilles was known for being brave and courageous, but he had a vulnerability called "Achilles' heel". Greatest of all the Achaean heroes, and the central character in Homer's the Iliad, Achilles was trained by Chiron who taught him the art and craft of war. (thecollector.com) Achilles was "a matchless son, a mighty man, and greatest of warriors." (Jones, Homer, Revised Edition, 2003, P.321) There was a prophecy that Achilles would either live long in obscurity or die young and attain glory. In order to secure immortality for Achilles, Thetis, the sea goddess and the mother of Achilles, had dipped him in the river Styx to make him invincible. However, while dipping in the sea, Thetis missed Achilles' heel which ultimately proved to be a cause of his doom.

Homer's Iliad begins with Achilles withdrawing himself from the war after quarrelling with Agamemnon, commander of the Greek expeditionary forces. The feud between Achilles and Agamemnon was for a beautiful young woman named Briseis, a 'war-prize', captured by Achilles. Agamemnon forced Achilles to submit the 'fair cheeked Brises' (Jones, Homer, Revised Edition, 2003, P.09) to him which he did, but reluctantly. Achilles lost his cool, and in retaliation, he refused to fight and stayed back nursing his wound. Achilles' withdrawal from the war brought havoc to the Greek troops. Achilles was not bothered about the death of the Greek soldiers, for, he knew that the Trojans have never any harm to him. "It was no quarrel with Trojan warriors that brought me here to fight." (Jones, Homer, Revised Edition, 2003, P.08)

Patroclus, Achilles' close friend and companion, convinces Achilles to allow him to go to the war taking Achilles' armour, and acting as the head of the Greek troops. Patroclus joins the battle and fights bravely but couldn't save his life. Patroclus was killed by Hector. The death of Patroclus devastated Achilles as it was a personal loss for him. "Patroclus was more to me than any other of my men whom I loved as much as my own life." (Jones, Homer, Revised Edition, 2003, P 321)

In vengeance, Achilles decided to rejoin the war. Achilles went on a spree killing hundreds of Trojans, and eventually, Achilles took revenge by killing Hector. Once Hector dies, Achilles strips him of his armor, and dishonors Hector's body by

lashing it to the back of his chariot. Achilles spends his days mourning the death of Patroclus and dragging Hector's body behind his chariot. Thereafter, an elaborate funeral games was arranged in the honour of Patroclus.

Achilles was the chief warrior in the Greek expedition against Troy. The success and failure of the Greek expedition depended upon Achilles's willingness to fight in the war. The problem of Achilles was that he was haughty and arrogant. He will go to fight only when he wants to. Nobody could force him to join against his own wish. Achilles loves Patroclus more than anything else. Patroclus was more than a friend, a true companion who was always available for him unconditionally. If there was someone who could influence him, it was Patroclus. After the death of Patroclus, Achilles vows to kill Hector to avenge the death of Patroclus. (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iliad)

The most significant flaw in the temperament of Achilles was his limitless rage and his excessive pride that makes him inhuman. Achilles' wrath was so intense that Homer begins his great epic with the word 'anger'. "Anger—Sing Goddess, the anger of Achilles, son of Pelus, that accursed anger, which brought the Greeks endless suffering." (Jones, Homer, Revised Edition, 2003, P.04) Agamemnon, had insulted Achilles' honour and had humiliated his pride. Agamemnon says, "If you are a great warrior, it is because the god made you so. Go home now with your ships..... I have no interest in you whatsoever." (Jones, Homer, Revised Edition, 2003, P.09). Achilles was the finest Greek warrior, but he was violent and fiercely uncompromising. He was proud of his war craft and had no shame in boosting himself. His pride and obstinacy made him vulnerable. Though Achilles was the son of a goddess, yet, he was a mortal, and so he was fated to die.

Hector

Hector, the Prince of Troy and the eldest son of Trojan King Priam and Queen Hecuba was the heir-apparent of Troy. He was the husband of Andromache, and the father of his little son Astyanax and the chief warrior of the Trojan army. Hector was the commander of all the Trojan and allied forces. He was the most noble character in the Iliad. Hector was the great favourite of God Apollo who protected his dead body from being degraded after his death. Hector is always conscious of his duty and his responsibilities towards his people and does not let his personal interests interfere into his duties. (Jones, Homer, Revised Edition, 2003, P.26)

Hector comforts his wife Andromache that no one can kill him until it is his time to go. When Hector was finally getting ready to fight with Achilles, he gave an emotional speech to his wife Andromache and his son. With understanding, compassion, and tenderness, Hector emphasizes that he cannot refuse to fight. Before he goes to fight with Achilles, Hector prays to God Zeus that his son might be the Trojan chief after him, bring home the blood of his enemies and make his mother proud. All the Trojans knew that Hector would not come back. Hector and Paris pass through the gate and rally the Trojans, raising havoc among the Greeks.

Hector knew that though he was a great Trojan warrior, he was no match to Achilles, the Commander of the Greek expeditionary forces. Hector knew that eventually, he will have to encounter Achilles. The Trojans knew that Hector "would never survive the fury of the Greeks' assault and would not come back home from the battle." (Jones, Homer, Revised Edition, 2003, P.112) Despite an omen that their expedition would fail, Hector's resolve remained unshaken. The Achaeans were routed, the wall's gate was broken, and Hector created havoc to the Greek soldiers. The Trojan seer Polydamas urges Hector to retreat because of a bad omen but Hector ignored his warning. (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iliad) During the final moment,

Hector, shouted and asked Deiphobus for a long spear, but Deiphobus was nowhere near him. It was then Hector realized that “It’s over. ----- Evil death is no longer far away; it is staring me in the face and there is no escape.” (Jones, Homer, Revised Edition, 2003, P.388)

At a climactic point during the battle, “Hector saw Achilles and shook. He could not stand his ground; he left the gate and ran in panic. But the son of Pelus, counting on his speed, was after him.” (Jones, Homer, Revised Edition, 2003, P.384) When Hector saw Achilles approaching him, Hector’s will failed. He was seized by fear and turned to flee. Achilles chases Hector around the city three times, however, Hector musters his courage and turns to face Achilles. (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hector) Just before his death, Hector reminds Achilles that he, too, is fated to die. During his last moments, Hector begs Achilles for an honorable funeral: “I entreat you, by your knees, by your own life, and by your own parents, do not throw my body to the dogs by the Greek ships, but take a ransom for me.” (Jones, Homer, Revised Edition, 2003, P.389) Achilles replies that he will let the dogs and vultures devour Hector's flesh. Hector dies, predicting that Achilles' death will follow soon: “on the day when Paris and Phoebus Apollo bring you down in all your greatness at the Scaean gate.” (Jones, Homer, Revised Edition, 2003, P. 390)

Hector is mercilessly killed by Achilles, thereafter, Hector’s dead body was mistreated by the triumphant Achilles. However, Hector’s dead body remains preserved from all injury by the mercy of God Apollo. Hector's father Priam, along with God Hermes, makes a dangerous journey in the dark of the night to the Greek camp to meet Achilles. Priam begs Achilles for the return of his son’s dead body for burial. The emotional encounter between Priam and Hector has been powerfully depicted by Homer. “Achilles, respect the gods and have pity on me, remembering your own father. I have brought myself to do something that no one else on earth has done of the man who killed my son.” (Jones, Homer, Revised Edition, 2003. P.434)

Achilles is moved to tears and relents, softening his anger. Achilles and Priam, both, lament their great losses in the war. Achilles accepts the ransom and reconcile. Achilles agrees to return Hector's body and promises the old Priam, a truce of twelve days to allow the Trojans to perform funeral rites for their beloved leader. Priam returns with the dead body of Hector, and a funeral game is arranged in the city of Troy to honor the death of their beloved leader. Even Helen mourns Hector, for he had always been kind to her and had always protected her from abuse. Helen cries “Noone else is left in the wide realm of Troy to treat me kindly.” (Jones, Homer, Revised Edition, 2003, P. 441). Hector’s dead body was burnt as per the Greek religious rites: “they carried out daring Hector, weeping laid his body on top of the pyre and lit it.” (Jones, Homer, Revised Edition, 2003, P.441). Thereafter, the Trojans reassembled for a magnificent funeral feast in the palace of Priam. “Such were the funeral rites of horse-taming Hector.” (Jones, Homer, Revised Edition, 2003 P.442)

Hector’s character is that of a gentleman hero. He was a good son, a loving husband, a doting father, and a trustworthy friend. Hector’s attempt to console his beloved wife Andromache and his departure to face Achilles in the battlefield, have been movingly described. “But may the earth be piled high over my dead body before I hear your cries as they drag you off.” (Jones, Homer, Revised Edition, 2003 P.112) Hector was a great favourite of God Apollo, and later poets even described him as the son of a god (britannica.com/topic/Hector). Hector’s noble nature stands in contrast, against the arrogance and pride shown by Achilles. Hector’s life signifies military glory over the family life. (britannica.com/topic/Hector) Hector lived and died for the sake of Trojan pride and honor. Hector was the finest Trojan warrior, and his fighting prowess was admired and appreciated even by the Greeks.

Conclusion

Homer's narrative in the Iliad is focused on the exploits of the Greek warrior Achilles as well as his rage and the destruction it causes. The epic begins with Achilles' anger and ends with the funeral of Hector. The status given by the ancient Greeks to the character of Achilles, and the strong emotional attachment that goes with Achilles, is because of his god-gifted war prowess. However, Achilles, at times, has also displayed his emotional and vulnerable side which reveals his human qualities. There are two instances in the epic where Achilles seems to have displayed his emotional vulnerability: one, after the death of Patroclus, his close friend and companion, and second, when the grief-stricken, old Priam comes to his camp in the dark of the night and kneels before him. Yet, it's not easy to accept the heroic quality of this dark violent hero. On the other hand, it seems easy to arouse sympathy for Hector, the Trojan warrior, whose heart wrenching farewell to his wife and the little son, was an emotional outburst. Both, Achilles and Hector, had their strength and weaknesses. Their anger, jealousy, revenge and compassion made them human, and their human traits made them vulnerable.

During the time when Homer had written The Iliad, there was a deep-seated belief that a hero's life, couldn't be complete if he didn't die fighting in the battlefield. The fact remains that the Greek hero was not immortal. Death in the battlefield, enables the hero to ensure the prize of immortality. The climax of the war is when Achilles kills Hector. It was not that Hector was less brave than Achilles. However, somehow when Hector comes in front of Achilles, his will to fight fails. He becomes defensive. Hector's death wins the sympathy of readers, because he was a man of noble behaviour and responsible attitude. Yet, as per the belief, Hector was fated to die, and this was his destiny. Even Achilles was fated to die. Dying in the battlefield was the fate of a Greek hero.

Though Achilles is the protagonist and is often considered to be the hero of Homer's The Iliad. Yet Achilles' anger, pride and obstinacy might lead the readers to the conclusion that Achilles doesn't fit in the frame of a traditional hero. It can be argued that Hector is the true hero of Homer's Iliad because of his inherent heroic qualities and his unflinching loyalty to his family and his steadfast determination to defend his people. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Homer has never explicitly mentioned who the true hero is (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iliad). Perhaps, Homer was more concerned about the complexity and flaws of both characters, rather than dwelling on the idea of one hero in one epic.

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