

Icarus June

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Classical Mythology

Mythological Achilles (Question 3)

The name 'Achilles' is well known in the classics sphere and beyond, with dozens of texts and myths recorded about the legendary Greek warrior. As a well known Greek hero, Achilles had many different interpretations written about him and stories spread over time as people retained his memory and his myth. Not all myths written about Achilles stayed true to his original appearance in the Iliad and the Odyssey, and his persona and personality grew and changed through time as other civilizations took hold of his person and began writing their own stories about and around him. Some authors wrote from the perspective of the women around Achilles, and others from the view of other heroes that interacted with Achilles in life or in the Underworld after his death in the Trojan war. Depending on who he spoke to and what he did, Achilles' personality adapted to the whims of the author speaking about him and gave depth to the hero who came to being in the times of ancient Greece. His name is timeless and his stories are varied and never perfectly the same, but that in of itself makes him an even more fascinating figure in Greek myth.

Arguably the most well known myth of Achilles is the epic poem 'The Iliad', which spoke of Achilles' achievements during the Trojan war and the way that he reacted to the situations thrown at him during the war. He changes drastically several times throughout the text, showing a range of emotion that some heroes would not be displayed to have during their

journeys. Many Greek heroes are not written to display more vulnerable emotions or dramatics over seemingly trivial matters such as the divide of war spoils. The Iliad opens speaking on the rage of Achilles, but quickly shows Achilles as a stubborn man who refuses to join the fight against the Trojans if Agamemnon does not give him the woman that he wants from the conquered cities they've attacked while besieging the city of Troy. Achilles goes as far as to call Agamemnon a tyrant, accusing him of depriving the soldiers of his army from their right to war prizes. This argument between them shows Achilles to be combative and stubborn, and his stubbornness is only further shown when he outright refuses to continue to fight in the Trojan war and help take the city of Troy. Not long after the argument, Achilles leaves to be by himself, and the text of the Iliad shows how his stubborn nature is almost something inhuman, saying "While stern Achilles in his wrath retired: (His was the strength that mortal might exceeds, And his the unrivall'd race of heavenly steeds:)" (Iliad, 048) His stubbornness and anger is not exclusive to the Iliad, as the Latin text of the Heroides makes note of it as well in a message from Briseis to Achilles, where she writes "Though you be cruel, though more savage than your mother's waves..." in reference to the immortality of his mother and her control over the oceans. (Heroides, 132)

Throughout his myths, Achilles is frequently said to be more than mortal, equated to divinity in multiple texts. His mother was Thetis, a titan-goddess of the ocean, and with the blood of a deity in his veins, Achilles is never only regarded as human. One passage of the Iliad states "Even great Achilles scarce their rage can tame, Achilles sprung from an immortal dame." (Iliad, 190) This statement refers to his immortal mother and how difficult it is to best Achilles. Other texts refer to Achilles after his death, proving that he is far from immortal, but comparisons to immortality and divinity are not uncommon throughout the myths of Achilles. He

is even called divine in those words, with a line from the Iliad declaring “From the high throne divine Achilles rose...” (Iliad, 444) Achilles’ godly bloodline is spoken of frequently throughout the myths and texts, making his mother an important part of his identity, as it is her divinity that allows Achilles to have aspects to him that are more than human. Achilles is seen as something beyond a man, his presence at Troy necessary to the success of the war. The gods are frequently involved with Achilles in some way, whether it be talking about how to handle his treatment of Hector or how to get him to Troy. Achilles is a high priority for the Greeks during the Trojan war, placed above the common warrior due to the divine blood in his veins and the words of oracles and seers about his importance to the fight.

Contrasting the comparisons to the divine, Achilles’ rage is often compared to an animal or a beast, most commonly a lion. In the text of the Iliad, the god Apollo states that “A lion, not a man, who slaughters wide, In strength of rage, and impotence of pride; Who hastes to murder with a savage joy, Invades around, and breathes but to destroy! Shame is not of his soul; nor understood, The greatest evil and the greatest good. Still for one loss he rages unresign'd, Repugnant to the lot of all mankind...” (Iliad, 431) This speech shows the lack of humanity in Achilles’ rage, adding another aspect to his legend and displaying the extent of his rage at the death of Patroclus. Calling Achilles a beast is meant to display the savagery of his rage, to show how Achilles loses himself to the rage that comes from the death of Patroclus. Whatever mortality Achilles had before Patroclus’ death is gone, even the gods becoming wary of Achilles’ power and the intensity of his rage as he killed Trojan soldiers without hesitation or any sign of slowing down. Achilles is commonly referred to as ‘swift-footed’, a testament to his speed and capabilities in battle. Swiftiness is an emphasized trait of Achilles, the speed he could

move at being one of the main concentrations during his murder of Hector and the fight he launched himself into after the death of Patroclus. (Dunkle, 228)

As a warrior, glory and anger are common aspects attributed to Achilles. In the *Heroides*, Ovid has Briseis write in her letter to Achilles a reference to his desire for glory in battle, saying “Once the deed of renown, rather than safety, was your pleasure, and glory won in warring was sweet to you. Or can it be that you favoured fierce war only till you could make me captive, and that your praise lies dead, o’ercome together with my native land? Ye gods forbend! and may the spear of Pelion go quivering from your strong arm to pierce the side of Hector!” (*Heroides*, 121-126) Achilles is a fearsome warrior in all his myths, with the Trojan war always hanging over his head and sealing his fate. His death is brought about in war, and from the very beginning of his story he is meant to fight. The *Achilleid* speaks of his mentor, Chiron, the centaur who became Achilles’ father figure and taught him everything he knew. Though, notably, Chiron does not only teach Achilles about combat and war, and the songs Achilles plays on his lyre and teaches to his eventual wife Deidamia were taught to him by Chiron. His music adds another level of depth to who Achilles is as a person, as many warriors would not distract themselves with things that did not in some way contribute to warfare and strength. Yet, Achilles is written to have lyre playing as a hobby, singing songs of heroes during his time away from the fight at Troy, a detail noted in the *Iliad*.

The rage of Achilles is the thing that he is the most well-known for, and for good reason. Myths and texts about him reference his anger in some way almost every time, though the *Iliad* is the one that speaks on it the most, with many lines and passages referencing his rage. One of many comes from when the seer of Troy speaks to Hector, saying “...Not thus Achilles taught our hosts to dread, Sprung though he was from more than mortal bed; Not thus resistless ruled the

stream of fight, In rage unbounded, and unmatch'd in might.” (Iliad, 112) Achilles’ rage is what leads to his defilement of the body of Hector, which leads to many discussions amongst the gods and the eventual death of Achilles. His anger is spoken of in the *Heroides* as well, when it is written from the perspective of Briesis “For me your anger was stirred, through me let it be allayed; and let me be both the cause and the measure of your gloomy wrath.” (*Heroides*, 88-90) This section is in reference to the beginning of the *Iliad*, when Achilles’ anger at Agamemnon leads him to abandon the fight against Troy, only returning to the war after Patroclus is slain. Achilles’ anger feeds into his stubbornness, which turns into a deadly combination more often than not. The rage of Achilles is not easily assuaged, if it can be stopped at all; he retains his anger until death, reluctant to give up the body of Hector even after disgracing the fallen man by dragging his body around the walls of Troy as revenge for Hector killing Patroclus.

Achilles’ anger can be contrasted by his rare calmer sides, shown in passages where he plays the lyre, which is not a common skill for men of his status to have. Despite being a warrior most famous for his rage, Achilles is much more than his anger, and different aspects of him are touched on in some of the myths written about him. While being clearly stubborn and often decisive in his actions, Statius’s *Achilleid* shows a more hesitant side to the warrior when Thetis decides to hide Achilles away from warfare for a while. The text says “...His mother sees his indecision, sees that he would fain be forced, and throws the folds over him. Then she softens the stiff neck, lowers the weighty shoulders, loosens the strong arms; she subdues the unkempt hair, fixing and arranging, and transfers her necklace to the beloved neck. Constraining his steps with an embroidered hem, she teaches him how to walk and move and how to speak with modesty.” (Statius, 337) While staying disguised as a woman, Achilles’ softer traits are more commonly displayed, pulling on his ability to play the lyre and showing his capability to be more than just a

rough warrior despite his initial reluctance to blend in and hide from the call of war. Though, despite his ability to do tasks that are less violent, he later expresses his distaste for them when speaking to himself before making the decision to return to war. While he's clearly capable of being softer and doing tasks typically allocated to women, he does not like to do them and would much rather be on the battlefield instead of hidden away from the fight by his mother. Only his lyre playing stays true through the different texts, a skill that he does not outwardly express a hatred for in the same way he expresses his hatred for other tasks commonly done by women.

In the grand scheme of the legends, Achilles is best known for his rage, but his myths also speak to his love on some occasions. His rage against the Trojans and Hector sources directly from the death of Patroclus, and the declarations that Achilles makes about the fallen man are telling of how intensely he loved Patroclus, which adds another layer to Achilles' personality. After Patroclus has fallen in battle, during the aftermath, Achilles declares "...Hear then; and as in fate and love we join, Ah suffer that my bones may rest with thine! Together have we lived; together bred, One house received us, and one table fed; That golden urn, thy goddess-mother gave, May mix our ashes in one common grave." (Iliad, 407) These words show how intense of a love the two shared and the grief that overwhelmed Achilles after the death of Patroclus. His rage comes after Patroclus' funeral rites, and the intensity of that rage stems directly from the force with which Achilles loves. The Iliad makes clear how much Achilles loved Patroclus, with several lines and passages referring to this, one such section outright saying "Achilles lifts it to the funeral bed: Then, while the body on the car they laid, He groans, and calls on loved Patroclus' shade..." (Iliad, 446) Achilles raged, but he raged because he loved, which is not a common occurrence for Greek heroes or other epic poems. Showing the way that Achilles' greatest rage began from the intensity of his love gives Achilles another layer of

personality. The argument can be made for Achilles' love extending to Briseis, though his rage from Agamemnon's refusal to hand over Briseis comes from the king not sharing spoils of war, a definition that Briseis would have fallen under as she was taken from one of the cities that the Greeks destroyed during their siege of Troy. While he does rage at Agamemnon as a result of Brises, whether or not that rage stemmed from love is debatable. His rage for the death of Patroclus, on the other hand, is a clear display of the love Achilles had.

Achilles has many aspects attributed to him in myth, with texts and stories from various authors and cultures expanding on the persona of the Greek hero. Through the variety of storytelling and authors, Achilles became a dynamic character with various sides to him, despite the most famously known aspect of his personality being his rage during the Trojan war. Through his rage it is possible to see the way he loved and the divinity in his veins, and even with his primary emotion throughout mythos being rage, it is impossible to dismiss the other facets of his personality that turn him from a bloodthirsty warrior into a mortal with the pressure of a war on his shoulders and the blood of the divine in his veins.

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