

The Iliad – Book 1 – Lines 1 - 219

Anger be now your song, immortal one,
Akhilleus' anger, doomed and ruinous,
that caused the Akhaians loss on bitter loss
and crowded brave souls into the undergloom,
leaving so many dead men – carrion
for dogs and birds; and the will of Zeus was done.
Begin it when the two men first contending
broke with one another –

the Lord Marshal

Agamemnon, Atreus' son, and Prince Akhilleus.

Among the gods, who brought this quarrel on?
The son of Zeus by Leto. Agamemnon
angered him, so he made a burning wind
of plague rise in the army: rank and file
sickened and died for the ill their chief had done
in despising a man of prayer.
This priest Khryses, had come down to the ships
with gifts, no end of ransom for his daughter;
on a golden staff he carried the god's white bands
and sued for grace from the men of all Akhaia,
the two Atreidai most of all:

“O captains

Menelaos and Agamemnon, and you other
Akhaians under arms!
The gods who hold Olympos, may they grant you
plunder of Priam's town and a fair wind home,
but let me have my daughter back for ransom
as you revere Apollo, son of Zeus!”

Then all the soldiers murmured their assent:

“Behave well to the priest. And take the ransom!”

But Agamemnon would not. It went against his desire,
and brutally he ordered the man away:

“Let me not find you here by the long ships
loitering this time or returning later,
old man; if I do,
the staff and ribbons of the god will fail you.
Give up the girl? I swear she will grow old
At home in Argos, far from her own country,
working my loom and visiting my bed.
Leave me in peace and go, while you can, in safety.”

So harsh he was, the old man feared and obeyed him,
In silence trailing away
by the shore of the tumbling clamorous whispering sea,
and he prayed and prayed again, as he withdrew,
to the god whom silken-braided Leto bore:

“O hear me, master of the silver bow,
protector of Tenedos and the holy towns,
Apollo, Sminthian, if to your liking
ever in any grove I roofed a shring
or burnt thighbones in fat upon your altar –
bullock or fresh goat – let my wish come true:
your arrows on the Danaans for my tears!”

Now when he heard this prayer, Phoibos Apollo
walked with storm in his heart from Olympos' crest,
quiver and bow at his back, and the bundled arrows
clanged on the sky behind as he rocked in his anger,
descending like night itself. Apart from the ships
he halted and let fly, and the bowstring slammed

as the silver bow sprang, rolling in thunder away.
Pack animals were his target first, and dogs,
but soldiers, too, soon felt transfixing pain
from his hard shots, and pyres burned night and day.
Nine days the arrows of the god came down
broadside upon the army. On the tenth,
Akhilleus called all ranks to assembly. Hera,
whose arms are white as ivory, moved him to it,
as she took pity on Danaans dying.
All being mustered, all in place and quiet,
Akhilleus, fast in battle as a lion,
rose and said:

“Agamemnon, now, I take it,
the siege is broken, we are going to sail,
and even so many not leave death behind:
if war spares anyone, disease will take him...
We might, though, ask some priest or some diviner,
even some fellow good at dreams – for dreams
come down from Zeus as well –
why all this anger of the god Apollo?

Has he some quarrel with us for a failure
in vows or hekatombs? Would mutton burned
or smoking goat flesh make him lift the plague?”

Putting the question, down he sat. And Kalkhas,
Kalkhas Thestorides, came forward, wisest
by far of all who scanned the flight of birds.
He knew what was, what had been, what would be,
Kalkhas, who brought Akhaia’s ships to Ilion
by the diviner’s gift Apollo gave him.
Now for their benefit he said:

“Akhilleus
dear to Zeus, it is on me you call
to tell you why the Archer God is angry.

Well, I can tell you. Are you listening? Swear
by heaven that you will back me and defend me,
because I fear my answer will enrage
a man with power in Argos, one whose word
Akhaian troops obey.

A great man in his rage is formidable
For underlings: though he may keep it down,
he cherishes the burning in his belly
until a reckoning day. Think well
if you will save me.”

Said Akhilleus:

“Courage.
Tell what you know, what you have light to know.
I swear by Apollo, the lord god to whom
You pray when you uncover truth,
never while I draw breath, while I have eyes to see,
shall any man upon this beachhead dare
lay hands on you – not one of all the army,
not Agamemnon, if it is he you mean,
though he is first in rank of all Akhaians.”

The diviner then took heart and said:

“No failure
in hekatombs or vows is held against us.
It is the man of prayer whom Agamemnon
treated with contempt: he kept his daughter,
spurned his gifts: for that man’s sake the Archer
visited grief upon us and will again.
Relieve the Danaans of this plague he will not
until the girl who turns the eyes of men
shall be restored to her own father – freely,
with no demand for ransom – and until
we offer up a hekatomb at Khryse.

Then only can we calm him and persuade him.”

He finished and sat down. The son of Atreus, ruler of the great plain, Agamemnon, rose, furious. Round his heart resentment welled, and his eyes shone out like licking fire. Then, with a long and boding look at Kalkhas, he growled at him:

“You visionary of hell, never have I had fair play in your forecasts. Calamity is all you care about, or see, no happy portents; and you bring to pass nothing agreeable. Here you stand again before the army, giving it out as oracle the Archer made them suffer because of me, because I would not take the gifts and let the girl Khryseis go; I’d have her mine, at home. Yes, if you like, I rate her higher than Klytaimnestra, my own wife! She loses nothing by comparison in beauty or womanhood, in mind or skill.

For all of that, I am willing now to yield her if it is best; I want the army saved and not destroyed. You must prepare, however, a prize of honor for me, and at once, that I may not be left without my portion – I, of all Argives. It is not fitting so. While every man of you looks on, my girl goes elsewhere.”

Prince Akhilleus answered him:

“Lord Marshal, most insatiate of men, how can the army make you a new gift? Where is our store of booty? Can you see it? Everything plundered from the towns has been

distributed; should troops turn all that in? Just let the girl go, in the god’s name, now; we’ll make it up to you, twice over, three times over, on that day Zeus gives us leave to plunder Troy behind her rings of stone.”

Agamemnon answered:

“Not that way

will I be gulled, brave as you are, Akhilleus. Take me in, would you? Try to get around me? What do you really ask? That you may keep your own winnings, I am to give up mine and sit here wanting her? Oh, no: the army will award a prize to me and make sure that it measures up, or if they do not, I will take a girl myself, your own, or Aias, or Odysseus’ prize! Take her, yes, to keep. The man I visit may choke with rage; well, let him. But this, I say, we can decide on later.

Look to it now, we launch on the great sea a well-found ship, and get her manned with oarsmen, load her with sacrificial beasts and put aboard Khryseis in her loveliness. My deputy, Aias, Idomeneus, or Prince Odysseus, or you, Akhilleus, fearsome as you are, will make the hekatomb and quiet the Archer.”

Akhilleus frowned and looked at him, then said:

“You think-skinned, shameless, greedy fool! Can any Akhaian care for you, or obey you, after this on marches or in battle? As for myself, when I came here to fight, I had no quarrel with Troy or Trojan spearmen:

they never stole my cattle or my horses,
never in the black farmland of Phthia
ravaged my crops. How many miles there are
of shadowy mountains, foaming seas, between!
No, no, we joined for you, you insolent boor,
to please you, fighting for your brother's sake
and yours, to get revenge upon the Trojans.
You overlook this, dogface, or don't care,
and now in the end you threaten to take my girl,
a prize I sweated for, and soldiers gave me!

Never have I had plunder like your own
from any Trojan stronghold battered down
by the Akhaians. I have seen more action
hand to hand in those assaults that you have,
but when the time for sharing comes, the greater
share is always yours. Worn out with battle
I carry off some trifle to my ships.
Well, this time I make sail for home.
Better to take now to my ships. Why linger,
cheated of winnings, to make wealth for you?"

To this the high commander made reply:

"Desert, if that's the way the wind blows. Will I
beg you to stay on my account? I will not.
Others will honor me, and Zeus who views
the wide world most of all.

No officer

Is hateful to my sight as you are, none
Given like you to faction, as to battle –
rugged you are, I grant, by some god's favor.
Sail, then, in your ships, and lord it over
your own battalion of Myrmidons. I do not
give a curse for you, or for your anger.
But here is warning for you:

Khryseis

Being required of me by Phoibos Apollo,
she will be sent back in a ship of mine,
manned by my people. That done, I myself
will call for Briseis at your hut, and take her,
flower of young girls that she is, your prize,
to show you here and now who is the stronger
and make the next man sick at heart – if any
think of claiming equal place with me."