

from the
Iliad
Homer

Translated by Robert Fagles



THE RAGE OF ACHILLES

GUIDE FOR READING

FOCUS In this excerpt from Book 1 of the *Iliad*, you will learn about the feud between Achilles and Agamemnon. As you read, evaluate the causes of the conflict between them and decide who is more to blame.

As the poem opens, the Greek army is suffering from a deadly plague. Apollo has sent the plague to punish the Greeks. The god is angry because Agamemnon, the Greek commander, has taken the daughter of Chryses, Apollo's priest, as a war prize. When a prophet reveals the cause of Apollo's anger, Agamemnon reluctantly agrees to give her up. He insists, however, on being given Achilles' war prize as compensation. Achilles feels insulted and in his fury threatens to kill Agamemnon. The wise Nestor tries to make peace, with only partial success.

Rage—Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles,
murderous, doomed, that cost the Achaeans countless losses,
hurling down to the House of Death so many sturdy souls,
great fighters' souls, but made their bodies carrion,
5 feasts for the dogs and birds,
and the will of Zeus was moving toward its end.
Begin, Muse, when the two first broke and clashed,
Agamemnon lord of men and brilliant Achilles.

1 **Goddess:** a Muse (goddess of poetry and music) whom the poet calls upon for inspiration.

2 **Achaeans** (ə-kē'enz): Greeks.

4 **carrion:** decaying flesh.



Greek helmet and breast plate. Archaeological Museum, Sofia, Bulgaria.

What god drove them to fight with such a fury?
 10 Apollo the son of Zeus and Leto. Incensed at the king
 he swept a fatal plague through the army—men were dying
 and all because Agamemnon spurned Apollo's priest.
 Yes, Chryses approached the Achaeans' fast ships
 to win his daughter back, bringing a priceless ransom
 15 and bearing high in hand, wound on a golden staff,
 the wreaths of the god, the distant deadly Archer.
 He begged the whole Achaean army but most of all
 the two supreme commanders, Atreus' two sons,
 "Agamemnon, Menelaus—all Argives geared for war!
 20 May the gods who hold the halls of Olympus give you
 Priam's city to plunder, then safe passage home.
 Just set my daughter free, my dear one . . . here,

10 Leto (lē'tō): a goddess; incensed: enraged.

16 Archer: Apollo, who was thought to be able to cause diseases by shooting people with his arrows.

18 Atreus' (ā'trōōs').

19 Argives (ār'jīvz'): Greeks.

20 Olympus (ə-līm'pəs): the highest mountain in Greece, believed to be the home of the gods.

WORDS TO KNOW

spurn (spûrn) v. to reject in a scornful way

s: a Muse (goddess of music) whom the poet turned to for inspiration.
 10 Leto (lē'tō): a goddess; incensed: enraged.
 16 Archer: Apollo, who was thought to be able to cause diseases by shooting people with his arrows.
 18 Atreus' (ā'trōōs').
 19 Argives (ār'jīvz'): Greeks.
 20 Olympus (ə-līm'pəs): the highest mountain in Greece, believed to be the home of the gods.

accept these gifts, this ransom. Honor the god
who strikes from worlds away—the son of Zeus, Apollo!”

25 And all ranks of Achaeans cried out their assent:
“Respect the priest, accept the shining ransom!”
But it brought no joy to the heart of Agamemnon.
The king dismissed the priest with a brutal order
ringing in his ears: “Never again, old man,
30 let me catch sight of you by the hollow ships!
Not loitering now, not slinking back tomorrow.
The staff and the wreaths of god will never save you then.
The girl—I won’t give up the girl. Long before that,
old age will overtake her in *my* house, in Argos,
35 far from her fatherland, slaving back and forth
at the loom, forced to share my bed!

Now go,
don’t tempt my wrath—and you may depart alive.”

The old man was terrified. He obeyed the order,
turning, trailing away in silence down the shore
40 where the roaring battle lines of breakers crash and drag.
And moving off to a safe distance, over and over
the old priest prayed to the son of sleek-haired Leto,
lord Apollo, “Hear me, Apollo! God of the silver bow
who strides the walls of Chryse and Cilla sacrosanct—
45 lord in power of Tenedos—Smintheus, god of the plague!
If I ever roofed a shrine to please your heart,
ever burned the long rich bones of bulls and goats
on your holy altar, now, now bring my prayer to pass.
Pay the Danaans back—your arrows for my tears!”

50 His prayer went up and Phoebus Apollo heard him.
Down he strode from Olympus’ peaks, storming at heart
with his bow and hooded quiver slung across his shoulders.
The arrows clanged at his back as the god quaked with rage,
the god himself on the march and down he came like night.
55 Over against the ships he dropped to a knee, let fly a shaft
and a terrifying clash rang out from the great silver bow.
First he went for the mules and circling dogs but then,
launching a piercing shaft at the men themselves,
he cut them down in droves—
60 and the corpse-fires burned on, night and day, no end in sight.

36 loom: a device used for weaving cloth, a principal job of women in ancient Greek households.

44 Chryse (krī’sē): Chryses’ hometown, site of a temple of Apollo;
Cilla (sīl’ē): another Trojan town.

45 Tenedos (tēn’ē-dōs): a small island off the Trojan coast;
Smintheus (smīn’t’hōōs): a title of Apollo.

49 Danaans (de-nā’ēns): Greeks.

50 Phoebus (fē’bēs): a title of Apollo in his role as god of the sun.

57 mules and circling dogs: the animals that are the first to be affected by the plague.

WORDS TO KNOW

assent (ə-sēnt’) *n.* agreement

Nine days the arrows of god swept through the army.
On the tenth Achilles called all ranks to muster—
the impulse seized him, sent by white-armed Hera
grieving to see Achaean fighters drop and die.

65 Once they'd gathered, crowding the meeting grounds,
the swift runner Achilles rose and spoke among them:
"Son of Atreus, now we are beaten back, I fear,
the long campaign is lost. So home we sail . . .
if we can escape our death—if war and plague
70 are joining forces now to crush the Argives.
But wait: let us question a holy man,
a prophet, even a man skilled with dreams—
dreams as well can come our way from Zeus—
come, someone to tell us why Apollo rages so,
75 whether he blames us for a vow we failed, or sacrifice.
If only the god would share the smoky savor of lambs
and full-grown goats, Apollo might be willing, still,
somehow, to save us from this plague."

67 Son of Atreus: Agamemnon.

76-77 If only . . . full-grown goats:
If Apollo would accept an animal
sacrifice from the Greek forces.

So he proposed
and down he sat again as Calchas rose among them,
80 Thestor's son, the clearest by far of all the seers
who scan the flight of birds. He knew all things that are,
all things that are past and all that are to come,
the seer who had led the Argive ships to Troy
with the second sight that god Apollo gave him.
85 For the armies' good the seer began to speak:
"Achilles, dear to Zeus . . .

80 seers: prophets.

81 scan the flight of birds: In
ancient Greece, the behavior of
birds was thought to provide signs
of future events.

you order me to explain Apollo's anger,
the distant deadly Archer? I will tell it all.
But strike a pact with me, swear you will defend me
90 with all your heart, with words and strength of hand.
For there is a man I will enrage—I see it now—
a powerful man who lords it over all the Argives,
one the Achaeans must obey . . . A mighty king,
raging against an inferior, is too strong.
95 Even if he can swallow down his wrath today,
still he will nurse the burning in his chest
until, sooner or later, he sends it bursting forth.
Consider it closely, Achilles. Will you save me?"

And the matchless runner reassured him: "Courage!
100 Out with it now, Calchas. Reveal the will of god,
whatever you may know. And I swear by Apollo

dear to Zeus, the power you pray to, Calchas,
when you reveal god's will to the Argives—no one,
not while I am alive and see the light on earth, no one
105 will lay his heavy hands on you by the hollow ships.
None among all the armies. Not even if you mean
Agamemnon here who now claims to be, by far,
the best of the Achaeans.”

The seer took heart
and this time he spoke out, bravely: “Beware—
110 he casts no blame for a vow we failed, a sacrifice.
The god's enraged because Agamemnon spurned his priest,
he refused to free his daughter, he refused the ransom.
That's why the Archer sends us pains and he will
send us more
and never drive this shameful destruction from the Argives,
115 not till we give back the girl with sparkling eyes
to her loving father—no price, no ransom paid—
and carry a sacred hundred bulls to Chryse town.
Then we can calm the god, and only then appease him.”

118 appease: satisfy.

So he declared and sat down. But among them rose
120 the fighting son of Atreus, lord of the far-flung kingdoms,
Agamemnon—furious, his dark heart filled to the brim,
blazing with anger now, his eyes like searing fire.
With a sudden, killing look he wheeled on Calchas first:
“Seer of misery! Never a word that works to my advantage!
125 Always misery warms your heart, your prophecies—
never a word of profit said or brought to pass.
Now, again, you divine god's will for the armies,
bruit it out, as fact, why the deadly Archer
multiplies our pains: because I, I refused
130 that glittering price for the young girl Chryseis.
Indeed, I prefer *her* by far, the girl herself,
I want her mine in my own house! I rank her higher
than Clytemnestra, my wedded wife—she's nothing less
in build or breeding, in mind or works of hand.
135 But I am willing to give her back, even so,
if that is best for all. What I really want
is to keep my people safe, not see them dying.
But fetch me another prize, and straight off too,
else I alone of the Argives go without my honor.
140 That would be a disgrace. You are all witness,
look—*my* prize is snatched away!”

128 bruit it out: report it.

130 Chryseis (krī-sē'Ys): Chryses'
daughter.

133 Clytemnestra (klī'tēm-nēs'trē)

But the swift runner

Achilles answered him at once, "Just how, Agamemnon,
great field marshal . . . most grasping man alive,
how can the generous Argives give you prizes now?

145 I know of no troves of treasure, piled, lying idle,
anywhere. Whatever we dragged from towns we plundered,
all's been portioned out. But collect it, call it back
from the rank and file? *That* would be the disgrace.
So return the girl to the god, at least for now.
150 We Achaeans will pay you back, three, four times over,
if Zeus will grant us the gift, somehow, someday,
to raze Troy's massive ramparts to the ground."

145 **troves:** collections.

But King Agamemnon countered, "Not so quickly,
brave as you are, godlike Achilles—trying to cheat *me*.

155 Oh no, you won't get past me, take me in that way!
What do you want? To cling to your own prize
while I sit calmly by—empty-handed here?
Is that why you order me to give her back?

No—if our generous Argives *will* give me a prize,
160 a match for my desires, equal to what I've lost,
well and good. But if they give me nothing

I will take a prize myself—your own, or Ajax'
or Odysseus' prize—I'll commandeer her myself
and let that man I go to visit choke with rage!

165 Enough. We'll deal with all this later, in due time.
Now come, we haul a black ship down to the bright sea,
gather a decent number of oarsmen along her locks
and put aboard a sacrifice, and Chryseis herself,
in all her beauty . . . we embark her too.

152 **raze:** demolish; **ramparts:**
defensive walls.

170 Let one of the leading captains take command.
Ajax, Idomeneus, trusty Odysseus or you, Achilles,
you—the most violent man alive—so you can perform
the rites for us and calm the god yourself."

162 **Ajax** (ā'jāks'): the strongest
Greek warrior next to Achilles—
known as the Greater Ajax to
distinguish him from another war-
rior of the same name.

163 **commandeer** (kōm'ən-dīr'):
seize by force.

A dark glance
and the headstrong runner answered him in kind:

"Shameless—

175 armored in shamelessness—always shrewd with greed!

How could any Argive soldier obey your orders,
freely and gladly do your sailing for you
or fight your enemies, full force? Not I, no.

It wasn't Trojan spearmen who brought me here to fight.

180 The Trojans never did *me* damage, not in the least,

171 **Idomeneus** (ī-dōm'ə-nōōs'):
the ruler of the island of Crete.

they never stole my cattle or my horses, never
in Phthia where the rich soil breeds strong men
did they lay waste my crops. How could they?
Look at the endless miles that lie between us . . .
185 shadowy mountain ranges, seas that surge and thunder.
No, you colossal, shameless—we all followed you,
to please you, to fight for you, to win your honor
back from the Trojans—Menelaus and you, you dog-face!
What do *you* care? Nothing. You don't look right or left.
190 And now you threaten to strip me of my prize in person—
the one I fought for long and hard, and sons of Achaea
handed her to me.

My honors never equal yours,
whenever we sack some wealthy Trojan stronghold—
my arms bear the brunt of the raw, savage fighting,
195 true, but when it comes to dividing up the plunder
the lion's share is yours, and back I go to my ships,
clutching some scrap, some pittance that I love,
when I have fought to exhaustion.

No more now—
back I go to Phthia. Better that way by far,
200 to journey home in the beaked ships of war.
I have no mind to linger here disgraced,
brimming your cup and piling up your plunder.”

But the lord of men Agamemnon shot back,
“*Desert*, by all means—if the spirit drives you home!
205 I will never beg you to stay, not on *my* account.
Never—others will take my side and do me honor,
Zeus above all, whose wisdom rules the world.
You—I hate you most of all the warlords
loved by the gods. Always dear to your heart,
210 strife, yes, and battles, the bloody grind of war.
What if you are a great soldier? That's just a gift of god.
Go home with your ships and comrades, lord it over your
Myrmidons!

You *are* nothing to me—you and your overweening anger!
But let this be my warning on your way:
215 since Apollo insists on taking my Chryseis,
I'll send her back in my own ships with *my* crew.
But I, I will be there in person at your tents
to take Briseis in all her beauty, your own prize—

182 Phthia (fthī'e): Achilles' home-
land.

193 sack: capture and loot.

212 Myrmidons (mŭr'mē-dŏnz'):
Achilles' people.

213 overweening: arrogant.

218 Briseis (brī-sē'īs): a captive
Trojan woman who was given to
Achilles.

WORDS TO KNOW

pittance (pĭt'ns) n. a small reward; tiny amount

so you can learn just how much greater I am than you
220 and the next man up may shrink from matching words
with me,
from hoping to rival Agamemnon strength for strength!”

PAUSE & REFLECT The angry Achilles has threatened to take his men and return home. Why do Achilles and Agamemnon become so enraged at each other, and, in your judgment, who is more to blame?

FOCUS The anger of Achilles—“the most violent man alive”—is always dangerous. Read to find out how various characters, both human and divine, respond to his anger.

He broke off and anguish gripped Achilles.
The heart in his rugged chest was pounding, torn . . .
Should he draw the long sharp sword slung at his hip,
225 thrust through the ranks and kill Agamemnon now?—
or check his rage and beat his fury down?
As his racing spirit veered back and forth,
just as he drew his huge blade from its sheath,
down from the vaulting heavens swept Athena,
230 the white-armed goddess Hera sped her down:
Hera loved both men and cared for both alike.
Rearing behind him Pallas seized his fiery hair—
only Achilles saw her, none of the other fighters—
struck with wonder he spun around, he knew her at once,
235 Pallas Athena! the terrible blazing of those eyes,
and his winged words went flying: “Why, why now?
Child of Zeus with the shield of thunder, why come now?
To witness the outrage Agamemnon just committed?
I tell you this, and so help me it’s the truth—
240 he’ll soon pay for his arrogance with his life!”

232 Pallas (păl’ēs): a title of Athena.

Her gray eyes clear, the goddess Athena answered,
“Down from the skies I come to check your rage
if only you will yield.
The white-armed goddess Hera sped me down:
245 she loves you both, she cares for you both alike.
Stop this fighting, now. Don’t lay hand to sword.
Lash him with threats of the price that he will face.
And I tell you this—and I *know* it is the truth—

one day glittering gifts will lie before you,
250 three times over to pay for all his outrage.
Hold back now. Obey us both.”

So she urged
and the swift runner complied at once: “I must—
when the two of you hand down commands, Goddess,
a man submits though his heart breaks with fury.
255 Better for him by far. If a man obeys the gods
they’re quick to hear his prayers.”

And with that
Achilles stayed his burly hand on the silver hilt
and slid the huge blade back in its sheath.
He would not fight the orders of Athena.
260 Soaring home to Olympus, she rejoined the gods
aloft in the halls of Zeus whose shield is thunder.

But Achilles rounded on Agamemnon once again,
lashing out at him, not relaxing his anger for a moment:
“Staggering drunk, with your dog’s eyes, your fawn’s heart!
265 Never once did you arm with the troops and go to battle
or risk an ambush packed with Achaea’s picked men—
you lack the courage, you can see death coming.
Safer by far, you find, to foray all through camp,
commandeering the prize of any man who speaks against
you.

262 rounded on: attacked with words.

270 King who devours his people! Worthless husks, the men
you rule—

268 foray: raid.

if not, Atrides, this outrage would have been your last.
I tell you this, and I swear a mighty oath upon it . . .
by this, this scepter, look,
that never again will put forth crown and branches,
275 now it’s left its stump on the mountain ridge forever,
nor will it sprout new green again, now the brazen ax
has stripped its bark and leaves, and now the sons of Achaea
pass it back and forth as they hand their judgments down,
upholding the honored customs whenever Zeus commands—

271 Atrides (ā-trī’dēz’): “son of Atreus”—that is, Agamemnon.

280 This scepter will be the mighty force behind my oath:
someday, I swear, a yearning for Achilles will strike
Achaea’s sons and all your armies! But then, Atrides,
harrowed as you will be, *nothing* you do can save you—
not when your hordes of fighters drop and die,
285 cut down by the hands of man-killing Hector! Then—

273 scepter: a rod symbolizing authority, handed in turn to each speaker in the warriors’ assembly.

283 harrowed: distressed.

WORDS TO KNOW

comply (kəm-plī’) *v.* to agree to a request or carry out an order; obey

then you will tear your heart out, desperate, raging
that you disgraced the best of the Achaeans!”

Down on the ground
he dashed the scepter studded bright with golden nails,
then took his seat again. The son of Atreus smoldered,
290 glaring across at him, but Nestor rose between them,
the man of winning words, the clear speaker of Pylos . . .
Sweeter than honey from his tongue the voice flowed on
and on.

291 Pylos (pī'lōs').

Two generations of mortal men he had seen go down by now,
those who were born and bred with him in the old days,
295 in Pylos' holy realm, and now he ruled the third.
He pleaded with both kings, with clear good will,
“No more—or enormous sorrow comes to all Achaea!
How they would exult, Priam and Priam's sons
and all the Trojans. Oh they'd leap for joy
300 to hear the two of you battling on this way,
you who excel us all, first in Achaean councils,
first in the ways of war.

298 exult: rejoice.

Stop. Please.

Listen to Nestor. You are both younger than I,
and in my time I struck up with better men than you,
305 even you, but never once did they make light of me.
I've never seen such men, I never will again . . .
men like Pirithous, Dryas, that fine captain,
Caeneus and Exadius, and Polyphemus, royal prince,
and Theseus, Aegeus' boy, a match for the immortals.
310 They were the strongest mortals ever bred on earth,
the strongest, and they fought against the strongest too,
shaggy Centaurs, wild brutes of the mountains—
they hacked them down, terrible, deadly work.
And I was in their ranks, fresh out of Pylos,
315 far away from home—they enlisted me themselves
and I fought on my own, a free lance, single-handed.
And none of the men who walk the earth these days
could battle with those fighters, none, but they,
they took to heart my counsels, marked my words.
320 So now you listen too. Yielding is far better . . .
Don't seize the girl, Agamemnon, powerful as you are—
leave her, just as the sons of Achaea gave her,
his prize from the very first.
And you, Achilles, never hope to fight it out
325 with your king, pitting force against his force:

307–309 Pirithous (pī-rith'ō
Dryas (drī'ēs) . . . Caeneus
(sē'nōōs) and Exadius (ĭg-zī
. . . Polyphemus (pōl'ē-fē'm
Theseus (thē'syōōs), Aegeus
(ē'jōōs') boy: heroes of the
endary war fought by the
against the Centaurs (a mo
race with bodies half huma
half horse).



Fresco of Athena restraining Achilles from killing Agamemnon (1757), Giambattista Tiepolo. Villa Valmarana, Vicenza, Italy. Scala/Art Resource, New York.

no one can match the honors dealt a king, you know,
a sceptered king to whom great Zeus gives glory.
Strong as you are—a goddess was your mother—
he has more power because he rules more men.
330 Atrides, end your anger—look, it's Nestor!
I beg you, cool your fury against Achilles.
Here the man stands over all Achaea's armies,
our rugged bulwark braced for shocks of war."

But King Agamemnon answered him in haste,
335 "True, old man—all you say is fit and proper—
but this soldier wants to tower over the armies,
he wants to rule over all, to lord it over all,
give out orders to every man in sight. Well,
there's one, I trust, who will never yield to him!
340 What if the everlasting gods have made a spearman of him?"

HUMANITIES CONNECTION Athena intervenes in the argument between Achilles and Agamemnon. Note that Achilles is drawing his sword while Agamemnon has reacted defensively.

333 **bulwark:** defensive barrier.

Have they entitled him to hurl abuse at *me*?”

“Yes!”—blazing Achilles broke in quickly—
“What a worthless, burnt-out coward I’d be called
if I would submit to you and all your orders,
345 whatever you blurt out. Fling them at others,
don’t give me commands!
Never again, *I* trust, will Achilles yield to *you*.
And I tell you this—take it to heart, I warn you—
my hands will never do battle for that girl,
350 neither with you, King, nor any man alive.
You Achaeans gave her, now you’ve snatched her back.
But all the rest I possess beside my fast black ship—
not one bit of it can you seize against my will, Atrides.
Come, try it! So the men can see, that instant,
355 your black blood gush and spurt around my spear!”

Thinking Through the Literature

1. How do Athena, Agamemnon, and Nestor respond to the anger of Achilles?
2. Do you think Achilles or Agamemnon bears the greater share of the blame for their **conflict**? Explain your reasoning.
3. What do you learn about the **characters** of Agamemnon and Achilles in the excerpt from Book 1? Support your conclusions with details from the text.
4. Hera sends Athena to intervene in the conflict. Describe Athena’s actions, and discuss what they suggest about the relationship between gods and mortals.
5. Review the oath that Achilles swears in lines 281–287. What future events might be **foreshadowed** by his words?