

Background to the Iliad.

1) The tale begins—if we are forced to point to a beginning—with *Eris*, goddess of strife. Proclus, a late mythographer, records (in summary format) the now-lost narratives that tell of events *before* the Trojan war.

Proclus' Summary of the *Cypria*, attributed to Stasinus of Cyprus

- 1 Zeus, together with Themis, plans the Trojan War.
For Eris, while attending a feast of the gods at the wedding of Peleus, instigates a feud [*neikos*] among Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite about beauty.
They, by order of Zeus, are led by Hermes to Mount Ida for judgment by Alexandros.
Alexandros judges for Aphrodite, encouraged by a promise of Helen in marriage.
 - 5 On the advice of Aphrodite, he has ships built.
Helenos prophesies to him about what is going to happen.
Aphrodite tells Aineias [Aeneas] to sail with him.
Then Cassandra foretells the events of the future.
When he gets to Lakedaimonia, Alexandros is entertained as a *xenos* 'guest' by the sons of Tyndaros,
 - 10 and afterwards by Menelaos at Sparta.
Alexandros gives Helen gifts during the feast.
Menelaos sails off to Crete, telling Helen to provide proper hospitality for their *xenoi* while he is away.
Aphrodite brings Helen and Alexandros together.
After their intercourse, they load up a great many valuables and sail away by night.
- 2) Eris = goddess of strife, of discord. She is the *aition*, the 'reason', for the war. But there are always multiple reasons: (Eris not invited to the wedding, Helen's infidelity, etc.)
 - 3) The major Trojan characters:
 - a) Paris (Alexandros): stole Helen to Troy, 'caused' the Trojan war
 - b) Hektor: brother of Paris, despises his brother's actions, but fights for dignity and salvation of Troy
 - c) Priam: king of Troy, father of both Paris and Hektor
 - d) Andromache: wife of Hektor and mother of Astyanax
 - e) Sarpedon: king of Lycia, and son of Zeus
 - 4) The major Greek characters:
 - a) Menelaos: king of Mycenae, husband of Helen, avenger of her rape
 - b) Agamemnon: king of Sparta, brother of Menelaos, commander-in-chief of the siege of Troy
 - c) Akhilles: king of Phthia, ally of Menelaos and Agamemnon
 - d) Patroklos: Akhilles' best friend (*philos*) and ultimately substitute
 - e) Odysseus: king of Ithaca, craftiest of the Greeks

5) Gods allied with the Trojans:

- a) Aphrodite: goddess of sexual desire, protector of Paris and Helen, and mother of Aeneas
- b) Apollo: god of prophecy, music, and archery
- c) Ares: god of war and martial mayhem

6) Gods allied with the Greeks:

- a) Hera: wife of Zeus and goddess of marriage
- b) Poseidon: brother of Zeus and god of the sea
- c) Athena: daughter of Zeus (sort of), goddess of war and protector of Odysseus

7) Miscellaneous gods:

- a) Thetis: nymph (a water goddess) and mother of Achilles
- b) Iris: messenger goddess

8) This Trojan war, through the singing of it, becomes a medium for *kleos*: the *Iliad* is that medium. Working definition of *kleos*: 'glory, fame (especially as conferred by poetry); that which is heard'. An illustrative example of how *kleos* works in a martial context:

Analysis of the today's readings:

9) Iliad scroll XI line 218ff.: Tell me now you Muses that dwell in the mansions of Olympus, who, whether of the Trojans or of their allies, was first to face Agamemnon? It was Iphidamas son of Antenor, a man both brave and of great stature, who was brought up in fertile Thrace the mother of sheep. Cisses, his mother's father, brought him up in his own house when he was a child-- Cisses, father to fair Theano. When he reached manhood, Cisses would have kept him there, and was for giving him his daughter in marriage, but as soon as Iphidamas had married he went off to seek the *kleos* of the Achaeans with twelve ships that followed him.

10) For Iphidamas, the event of the Trojan war—whatever its human suffering and whatever its cost—is an opportunity for *kleos*, for the acquisition of 'glory or fame through song.' The *macro-narrative* (large-scale narrative) of the *Iliad* is the record of heroes' *kleos*. In this part of the *Iliad*, Iphidamas is killed, yet he does receive a bit of *kleos* by being included in the masterpiece of Greek literature. In death, Iphidamas achieves *kleos* through his encapsulation in music.

Bach's St. Matthew Passion, #78, final movement:

Wir setzen uns mit Tränen nieder
Und rufen dir im Grabe zu
Ruhe sanfte, sanfte ruh!
Ruht, ihr ausgesognen Glieder!
Euer Grab und Leichenstein
Soll dem ängstlichen Gewissen
Ein bequemes Ruhehissen
Und der Seelen Ruhstatt sein
Höchst vergnügt schlummern da die Augen ein.

In tears of grief, we set ourselves down and we
call out to you in your grave
Lie softly, softly there.
Rest your worn and bruised body.
May your grave and tombstone
become, for the most anxious conscience,
a comforting pillow
and resting place for the soul.
In the utmost bliss may your eyes shut down in
slumber there.

11) In the case of Achilles, the *Iliad* is a special song – Achilles' relationship to his *kleos* is a complicated one, but intimately tied to his stature as a hero. See the following:

12) Iliad scroll IX line 410ff.: (Achilles is speaking): My mother Thetis tells me that there are two ways in which I may meet my end [**telos**]. If I stay here and fight, I shall not have a return [**nostos**] alive but my glory [**kleos**] will be imperishable [**aphthiton**]: whereas if I go home my glory [**kleos**] will perish, but it will be long before the end [**telos**] shall take me.

13) Achilles has *two* lives: his life is weirdly bifurcated (as we will see, this is often the case for a hero – he is 'out of synch' with nature.) If he chooses not to fight at Troy, he will have a long life, and his *telos* [his ending] will be distant. If he stays at Troy, he will die young, but his *kleos* will be unwilting.

14) To reiterate: the *Iliad* itself is the medium of *kleos*. The Homeric voice as much as says so when it prays to the Muses

15) Iliad II 484-486: Tell me, Muses, you who live in your Olympian abodes, since you are goddesses and you were there and you know everything, but we [= the Narrator] only hear the *kleos* and we know nothing.

16) The Muses, then, are metaphors for cultural memory: *they* are witnesses to history ('you were there and you know everything') and inspire through song. Song then *replaces* history, at least in context of myth: the *Iliad* is true. [Videoclip: Disney's *Herakles*.]

17) Back to Achilles and his *kleos*. Unlike Iphidamas, who ends up only getting a bit part in the *Iliad* (a tiny bit of *kleos* – still, not bad, though), Achilles can garner *great kleos* – but only if he follows through with the path of short life/large *kleos*. The opening quarrel of the *Iliad* presents a problem for our hero, then.

18) A quick recap of the events of Book One: Agamemnon has taken Chryseis, daughter of the Trojan priest, as a war prize, *geras*. Chryses, the father, asks for his daughter's return; Agamemnon rebukes him. Chryses prays to Apollo for vengeance, and a plague strikes the Greeks. Calchas, a Greek priest, advises that Agamemnon must give up the *geras*; Achilles tries to protect the priest from Agamemnon's anger. A quarrel ensues: Agamemnon gives up his *geras*, but demands Achilles' own *geras*, the slave girl Briseis. Angry and wounded, Achilles withdraws from the war after hurling imprecations upon the Greeks, and thereby turning the tide of battle.

19) Achilles' withdrawal is devastating, and he knows it: 1.230. "Therefore I say, and swear it with a great oath—by this my scepter which shall sprout neither leaf nor shoot, [235] nor bud anew from the day on which it left its parent stem upon the mountains—for the axe stripped it of leaf and bark, and now the sons of the Achaeans bear it as judges and guardians of the decrees [*themis* pl.] of heaven—so surely and solemnly do I swear [240] that hereafter they shall look fondly for Achilles and shall not find him. In the day of your distress, when your men fall dying by the murderous hand of Hektor, you shall not know how to help them, and shall rend your heart with rage for the hour when you offered insult to the best of the Achaeans."

20) The effect of Achilles' withdrawal means, in effect, that he is turning his back on *kleos*: if the *Iliad* sings *kleos* through martial victory—and a martial death—then Achilles' actions seem to fly in the face of the heroic code. There is yet another complicating factor, however:

21) **timê**, pl. **timai** ‘honor; honor paid to a supernatural force by way of cult’. For Iliadic heroes (and, we shall see, Athenian and civic ones), *timê* is the public record of status within a community – one’s *timê* fluctuates with one’s fortunes and esteem within a hierarchy.

22) From *Iliad* book 1: Then Achilles went all alone [350] by the side of the hoary sea [*pontos*], weeping and looking out upon the boundless waste of waters. He raised his hands in prayer to his immortal mother, “Mother,” he cried, “you bore me doomed to live but for a little season; surely Zeus, who thunders from Olympus, might have given me honor [*timê*]. It is not so: he has not honored me. [355] Agamemnon, son of Atreus, has done me dishonor, and has robbed me of my prize [*geras*] by force.”

23) Note the essential link between the prize (Briseis) and *timê*: Achilles views that war prize as a crucial component of his heroic make-up. No prize, no *timê*: and therefore no point in continuing.

24) It’s important to put yourself in a Homeric framework, here: the question is *not* ‘why is Achilles acting so petulantly? can’t he just get another slave?’ [that would be a consumerist American viewpoint--*shudder*] but rather ‘why does the song of the *Iliad* indicate that Achilles is *right* to be so angry?’

25) Agamemnon admits he goofed, after the interrogation of Nestor. Book 9.108ff. “I urged you not to do so, but you yielded to your own pride, and dishonored a hero whom heaven itself had honored—for you still hold the prize that had been awarded to him. Now, however, let us think how we may appease him, both with presents and fair speeches that may conciliate him.” [115] And King Agamemnon answered, “Sir, you have reprov’d my derangement [*atê* pl.] justly. I was wrong. I own it.”

26) Both *kleos* and *timê* are components of the heroic world and their A beautiful Homeric counterexample, of a *timê*-less individual: Thersites at 2.210ff.

27) In class assignment (tackle as many or as few as you wish):

- a) *Why* is Thersites introduced at this crucial juncture in the epic?
- b) How does he exemplify the *anti*-hero?
- c) How are the notions of *kleos* and *timê* manipulated in this short episode?
- d) What are the correspondences or resonances between the speech of Thersites and the speech of Akhilles at 1.120ff?

The rest now took their seats and kept to their own several places, but Thersites still went on wagging his unbridled tongue—a man of many words, and those unseemly; a monger of sedition, a railer against all who were in authority [*kosmos*], who cared not what he said, [215] so that he might set the Achaeans in a laugh. He was the ugliest man of all those that came before Troy—bandy-legged, lame of one foot, with his two shoulders rounded and hunched over his chest. His head ran up to a point, but there was little hair on the top of it.

[220] He was hateful to Achilles and Odysseus most of all, for it was with them that he used to wrangle the most; now, however, with a shrill squeaky voice he began heaping his abuse on Agamemnon. The Achaeans were angry and disgusted, but nevertheless he kept on brawling and bawling at the son of Atreus.

[225] “Agamemnon,” he cried, “what ails you now, and what more do you want? Your tents are filled with bronze and with fair women, for whenever we take a town we give you the pick of them. Would you have yet more gold, [230] which some Trojan is to give you as a ransom for his son, when I or another Achaean has taken him prisoner? or is it some young girl to hide and lie with? It is not well that you, the ruler of the Achaeans, should bring them into such misery. [235] Weakling cowards, women rather than men, let us sail home, and leave this man here at Troy to stew in his own prizes of honor, and discover whether or not we were of any service to him. Achilles is a much better man than he is, and see how he has treated him— [240] robbing him of his prize and keeping it himself. Achilles takes it meekly and shows no fight; if he did, son of Atreus, you would never again insult him.”

Thus railed Thersites, but Odysseus at once went up to him [245] and rebuked him sternly. “Check your glib tongue, Thersites,” said he, “and babble not a word further. Chide not princes when you have no one to back you. There is no viler creature that has come to Troy with the sons of Atreus. [250] Drop this chatter about kings, and neither revile them nor keep harping about homecoming [*nostos*]. We do not yet know how things are going to be, nor whether the Achaeans are to return with good success or evil. How dare you gibe at Agamemnon [255] because the Danaans have awarded him so many prizes? I tell you, therefore—and it shall surely be—that if I again catch you talking such nonsense, I will either forfeit my own head [260] and be no longer called father of Telemakhos, or I will take you, strip you stark naked to reveal your shame [*aidôs*], and whip you out of the assembly till you go blubbing back to the ships.”

[265] At this he beat him with his staff about the back and shoulders till he dropped and fell a-weeping. The golden scepter raised a bloody welt on his back, so he sat down frightened and in pain, looking foolish as he wiped the tears from his eyes.

[270] The people were sorry for him, but they laughed heartily....