# Book I: The Book of the Quarrel

An epic, Aristotle says, is a poem about men in action. Ezra Pound, a modern poet and student of the classical tradition, defines the form as 'a poem containing history." As will be seen, the archaeological discovery of the ruins of Troy has confirmed the basic accuracy of Homer's account, but "action" is the real concern of both the poet and today's reader. *The Iliad* reflects what was known of the geography of the east Mediterranean; but, more importantly, it reflects the character of every people known to the Greeks, and veritably every human activity and emotion. In the *Iliad,* although the city of Troy as setting would seem to limit Homer's scope, it is here that the world's greatest heroes and gods convene.

Like other ancient epic poems, *The Iliad* presents its subject clearly from the outset. Indeed, the poem names its focus in its opening word: menin, or "rage". While the poem appears to deal with Trojan war, it has been argued that the real topic here is Achilles' anger. Indeed, in the Greek language anger is the first word of the entire work, and the rage referred to here belongs to Achilles. For Achilles is the one who quarrels with Agamemnon; Achilles is the one who refuses to fight and prays for the demise of his fellow warriors until his own honor has been restored; Achilles is the one who only returns to the battle to avenge the death of his friend, Patroclus; Achilles is the one who kills priam's son, Hector, in revenge for the death of Patroclus; and finally, Achilles is the one who, consumed by his wrath, drags Hector's lifeless body up and down the plains of Troy until Priam begs for the return of his son's body so that he may prepare it for a proper burial. Indeed, Achilles, the paradigmatic warrior, is the angry man.

But while the epic focuses most centrally on the rage of a mortal, it also concerns itself greatly with the motivations and actions of the gods. This epic begins with the lesser, personal contention between Achilles and Agamemnon. In a raid on part of the Troad the Greeks have captured a girl named Chryseis, the daughter of a priest of Apollo Chryses. It is Agamemnon's intention to keep the girl as a slave and concubine.

Chryses comes to the Greek ships, beached on the shore across a wide plain from Troy, to beg Agamemnon to accept a ransom for his daughter. The Greek refuses. Chryses therefore asks Apollo to punish Agamemnon and his company. Apollo rains the Greek camp with arrows bearing the plague, shooting first the mules and hunting dogs, and then the men.

For nine days Apollo shoots the plague arrows. On the tenth, Hera, mother of the gods and wife of the supreme Zeus, tells Achilles to call an assembly, at which he suggests to Agamemnon that they consult a priest as to the cause of the plague. Kalchas, the bird –interpreter, explains that Apollo is angry with the Greeks because Agamemnon had refused to accept Chryses' ransom for his daughter.

Agamemnon agrees to give the girl back, but will take Achilles' female prize, Briseis, instead. Achilles is furious, naturally, and there ensues the first of the bitter quarrels staged throughout the poem.

The quarrel characterizes both men. Agamemnon, for all his greatness as king and military commander, is revealed as a jealous, greedy, and selfish man. His actions are clearly presented as childish and indefensible. The reader must realize, however, that the structure of Greek society allowed such petulance; in a nation of heroes, personal honor determined social stature, and a great part of such honor was, in times of war, represented by spoils of victory. Achilleus is short-tempered and headstrong, yet Agamemnon is no less stubborn than he. The irony of this quarrel, then, must not be missed: the two chief warriors ague bitterly over the possession of a girl who belongs to neither of them even while they are in the midst of a cruel war over the possession of another woman, Helen.

Agamemnon mocks the angry Achilles, encouraging him to follow his heart and leave like a coward; others will fight for him; he will not beg Achilles to stay to fight. Besides, Achilles is always arguing and quarrelling. Achilles prowess as a warrior has nothing to do with his natural talents; according to Agamemnon, they are gifts of the god. As Achilles reaches for his sword, intending to slay Agamemnon, the goddess, Hera, who loved both men equally sends Athene to stay Achilles anger. Visible only to Achilles , Athene prevents the angry warrior from completely drawing his sword from its scabbard; she tells him that he should not kill Agamemnon but that he may abuse the king with words. This Achilles does, calling Agamemnon a wine sack, with a dog's eyes, with a deer's heart( Lattimore, Il. I, l. 225, p. 65), accusing him of cowardice and greed, and of being a king who feeds on his people who are nonenties ( Lattimore, Il. I, l. 231, p. 65). Achilles concludes his angry diatribe against Agamemnon by swearing an oath on the scepter before the assembly. At some time in the near future, Achilles warns, the coalition armies will face man-slaughtering Hector and they will regret having dishonored Achilles , the best of the Achaians( Lattimore, Il. I, l. 244, p.65). Dashing the scepter to the ground, Achilles takes his seat.

Finally, Achilles enlists his mother Thetis to seek Zeus assistance in avenging him by allowing the Trojans to kill his fellow warriors until Agamemnon recognizes the way in which he has harmed Achilles and restores his honor. Thetis promises that she will plead his case before the father of gods and men, and does. Zeus agrees to give Achilles honor greater than that of all other men. It is known to these immortals that Achilles' fate is to have a short but glorious life, but the terms of his glory have not yet been worked out. Zeus consents to give Achilles revenge upon the rest of the Greeks at the expense of angering Hera, whose heart is with the Argive forces and against the Trojans.

Hera and Zeus squabble, until Zeus threatens her with physical violence. The quarrel ends badly for Hera. Her son, the lame smith and architect of the gods, Hephaestus, god of fire, comforts her, and reminds her that one cannot withstand Zeus. The first book ends with the gods being served nectar by Hephaestus, whose limping causes them all to laugh. The last line of the book shows us Zeus and Hera sleeping peacefully beside each other.

Note that the book has a well balanced symmetry: it opens with the imperfections of humankind and closes with a picture of the perfect life of the gods. The gods are aloof, ultimately untroubled by the unevenness of existence. Their quarrels end in harmony; imperfection to them is something to laugh at. Human disharmony, on the other hand, is difficult to mend. The action of the first book has split the command of the Greek armies. The peacemaker Nestor, who smoothed over the anger of Achilles and Agamemnon, can never be as effective as Hephaestus. Thus, at the outset,

Homer sets up the great contrast between the life of men and the life of gods that will be one of the strong themes of the epic.

All the art of Homer's time tended to be built symmetrically. Note the way in which Homer has balanced matters in the first book: the funeral pyres of the plague victims and the sacrificial burning of the hundred oxen that Agamemnon sends to Chryses to propitiate Apollo; the two prize girls, Chryseis and Briseis; the anger of Agamemnon and the anger of Achilles repeated in the anger of Hera and Zeus: the supplication of Chryses and the supplication of Thetis.

Homer begins his epic in medias res, as the Roman poet Horace said ("in the middle of the plot"). It would be just as well to say that he begins toward the end. All but the final sweep of action is left to happen in the Iliad. Homer fills in what went before as he progresses-and fills in a lot more, so that what seems to be a narrow scope for an epic turns out to be the focus for hundreds of details- biographies, myths, geography, history- which will be woven into the fabric of the main action.