

RETRIBUTION AND RECONCILIATION IN HOMERIC EPIC

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The themes of retribution and reconciliation are central to Western Civilization's earliest surviving literary works, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Homer. Both are wartime epics. The *Iliad* describes the tragic events of the Trojan War and the role played in them by the Greek hero Achilles, while the *Odyssey* recounts the dramatic exploits of the Greek hero Odysseus as he struggled to return home after the war's conclusion.

Retribution and Reconciliation in Homer's *Iliad*

The tragic events of the Trojan War described in Homer's *Iliad* clearly show the futility of retribution and the need for reconciliation within the context of human affairs. Here at the headwaters of Western literature an extraordinarily gifted storyteller crafted together the legends of his time to capture the final days of a long ten-year struggle. And, in so doing, he provided his audiences, as well as untold generations to follow, a reflective image of the larger legendary conflict that provoked the war in the first place. Additionally, he told his story in such a way as to allow his audiences to see both sides of the conflict. It was, in fact, this neutrality of vision that created a perfect vehicle for him to explore the futility of retribution and the need for reconciliation.

But what was this story, this legend? And how did Homer make his point?

The legend began with the unnatural marriage of the mortal Peleus to the goddess Thetis. At that wedding, the uninvited goddess of discord provoked a quarrel between three goddesses, Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite, as to which one was the fairest. Zeus, king of the gods, was called upon to settle the issue, but wisely deferred it to a shepherd named Paris, who just happened to be the son of Priam, the powerfully rich patriarch of Troy. Each of the goddesses tried to bribe Paris with gifts befitting her status, with Aphrodite promising him the most beautiful woman in the world for his wife. Without hesitation, the young and impressionable prince opted for Aphrodite's gift.

Years later, Paris went on an adventurous mission to Sparta, a Greek city ruled by Menelaus, who was married to Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world. With Menelaus away on a journey, Aphrodite fulfilled her promise by making Paris and Helen fall passionately in love, after which they eloped to Troy.

Incensed by this insult to his honor, Menelaus turned to his brother Agamemnon, ruler of the Greek city of Mycenae, who summoned all the Greek chiefs—among them Achilles, the son of Peleus and Thetis, and Patroclus, Achilles' comrade and closest friend—to help restore Menelaus' honor by sailing against the gold-rich city of Troy. Thus was initiated perhaps the first major conflict between West and East.

The real subject of Homer's *Iliad* is what happens in the final days of that conflict. The Greeks, so we learn, have pounded the smaller, coastal cities allied with Troy for ten long years, plundering their riches, killing their men, and abducting their women. Now they are camped before the walls of Troy itself, weary with battle but restless to lay siege to the city. A plague is besetting the Greek camp, a situation that results in an internal conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon. To divert the plague, Achilles insists Agamemnon must return the woman he has been awarded to her father, an aged priest and now a suppliant on behalf of his daughter. Although Agamemnon relents, he then demands Briseis, the woman Achilles has been awarded. With his honor insulted, Achilles withdraws from battle, takes all his troops with him, and grieves with only Patroclus by his side.

But without Achilles on the field, the Greeks are clearly at a disadvantage, especially since Hector, noble son of Priam, is leading the Trojan charge. For the next few days, the bloody battle ebbs and flows, favoring now the Greeks, then the Trojans. Under pressure from his chiefs, Agamemnon sends an emissary to beseech Achilles to return to battle, with promises of gifts and the return of

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Briseis. Achilles hosts the emissaries as befits their status, but spurns Agamemnon's offer, refusing to be bribed.

When all seems lost for the Greeks, Patroclus seeks permission to go into battle wearing Achilles' armor. That granted, he storms the walls of Troy and is slaughtered by Hector. Achilles, newly outfitted with armor made by the god Hephaestus, reenters the fight to avenge his beloved comrade. After a prolonged chase, he kills Hector, then, still possessed by uncontrollable anger and grief, brutally drags the body back to the Greek camp, where he periodically drags it about the pyre now prepared for Patroclus' funeral.

As we come to the end of the *Iliad*, we come also to Homer's dynamic statement concerning retribution and reconciliation. The final chapter is framed by two funeral scenes—of Patroclus, and of Hector—a framing that seems fitting, given Homer seems to be saying revenge ends in death.

Homer did not have the language of modern psychology at his disposal to make his final statement. Nor did he need it. He was a master storyteller, and the story itself and the telling of it were the tools of his trade.

The events that transpire in this chapter are orchestrated by the gods, so he tells us, yet Homer makes clear the meaning of those events run deeply personal for both Priam and Achilles. Under the cover of night and the protection of Hermes, Priam comes to the hut of Achilles to beg for his son's body. Achilles, forewarned and instructed by the gods, knows already Hector's body has been divinely protected from deterioration; and knows also he cannot refuse a suppliant. What he does not know is how the sight of an aging father begging for his son's body will affect him. And affect him it does, as, when he looks on the magnificent figure of Priam, he thinks of his own father, of the extreme desolation wrought on the plains of Troy, and of the cruel realities of our own mortality.

After the feasting and prior to the truce—with Priam still uncertain about the outcome of his mission, and Achilles still struggling with his loyalty to Patroclus—the two men, so we are told, gaze upon each other for a sustained, silent moment. Homer does not tell us what ripples of sensation each man experienced or what cognitive shifts took place; rather, like the master storyteller he was, he leaves all that to our imagination. But no audience could fail to recognize a change did occur, one that arose out of the ashes of the past. Even though both men knew, as we know from legend, the fighting would resume, Troy would fall, and neither of them would survive, no audience could fail to understand retribution brings only destruction and reconciliation offers our only hope for peace.

Retribution and Reconciliation in Homer's *Odyssey*

When Troy fell after a decade of fighting, the battle-worn Greek army packed up their ships with the spoils of war and sailed for home. Almost all returned to Greece as conquering heroes and did their best to pick up their

lives again. But of all those who had said goodbye to Troy one veteran remained unaccounted for.

His name was Odysseus, though later tradition would call him Ulysses. He was the king of a small island named Ithaca and had joined the war against Troy unwillingly, for his young wife Penelope had only recently given birth to their first child, a son named Telemachus, and Odysseus wanted nothing more than to stay home with his family and shepherd his people. But the gods had other plans.

As it turned out, it took Odysseus ten more years to get back home, swept across the sea by storm winds, attacked by monsters, and seduced by temptresses who wanted to keep him from reaching his goal. In the interim, his lonely wife and his young son, now grown to manhood (but without a male role model for guidance) had lost virtually all hope of ever seeing him again alive. Meanwhile, a pack of arrogant nobles who had not sailed off to war took advantage of their king's absence to camp out in his palace, where they slept with the serving maids, gambled, swilled Odysseus' wine, and devoured his livestock, all the while pressuring Queen Penelope to pick one of them to be her next husband and Ithaca's next king. Indeed, they had even conspired to murder Prince Telemachus.

Once Odysseus finally returned to Ithaca, he came to see reclaiming his throne would be no easy matter. Penelope's suitors and their armed hangers-on numbered over a hundred, and even with the help of Telemachus and a few loyal servants the odds against success were formidable. What Odysseus needed was a plan, a plan to give him a tactical advantage and even the odds. A brainy more than a brawny hero, he was the ideal man to devise such a plan, a man who time and again had used his shrewdness, imagination, and quick wits to evade any trap and escape any peril.

With the help of his Olympian "guardian angel," Athena, the Greek goddess of intelligence, Odysseus was transformed into an old and shabby beggar, just the kind of person none of his enemies would fear or even pay much attention to. Such a disguise would enable Odysseus to gain entry to the palace grounds and, once inside, personally gauge the character and intent of the suitors while formulating a plan for victory that would employ the element of surprise. When it came, retribution would be swift and merciless, for the nobles in his palace had not only dishonored him and his family but also represented a form of corruption that could only imperil the future of his kingdom. Rather than contributing to society, they abused the power and privilege they possessed to take what was not rightfully theirs.

Unlike the *Iliad* that reflects the martial spirit of Greece's Mycenaean Age, the *Odyssey* echoes the despair and hope of the Dark Ages of Greece that followed the fall of the Mycenaean Empire and persisted for centuries—an era of lawlessness and disorder brought on by the destruction of palaces and the collapse of royal power. Though most people tend to think of the *Odyssey* as a tale of exotic

adventures in far-flung places, only eight of the *Odyssey's* twenty-four books, are set in a fairy-tale landscape. Two-thirds of the epic takes place in the very Greece Homer and his audience knew first-hand. Rather than mostly being about fantasy, the *Odyssey* is mainly about reality, about the reconstruction of domestic society. Seen from this historical perspective, the hubris of Ithaca's aristocracy signified a set of values that, if permitted to thrive, would inevitably undermine the moral foundations of civilization itself. Homer is telling his audience, yearning for the return of social stability and justice, you *can* go home again, the lost world they and their ancestors once knew can be reclaimed for future generations. That is why Odysseus must prevail and why the suitors must be defeated. They are a cancer growing in the body of the state, a tumor that must be excised before it can metastasize.

This social context also explains why the suitors are dispatched so mercilessly by Odysseus once he has shocked his enemies by revealing his true identity. Having trapped the suitors and their allies in a single room where they lack the weaponry to defend themselves, with Telemachus by his side, Odysseus picks them off with bow and arrow one by one, spurning an offer from their leader for financial compensation for the damage they had done. In rejecting that offer, Odysseus' hardness of heart parallels the inflexibility Achilles demonstrated in the *Iliad* when he refused financial compensation from Agamemnon for the insult done to his honor. Some crimes, Homer seems to be saying, cannot be paid for in the currency of material goods, nor can forgiveness be bought for a simple price.

Odysseus' problems, however, do not end with his execution of the suitors and their allies. Their relatives, learning of their deaths, rise up and march on Odysseus' palace, thirsting for revenge. In the melee that follows—described in the *Odyssey's* final book—Odysseus and Telemachus are about to kill all the relatives of the suitors when Athena steps in and orders an end to the fighting. Frightened by her sudden appearance, the remaining relatives panic and run with Odysseus in hot pursuit. Insistent upon an end to all fighting, Zeus hurls a lightning-bolt at Athena's feet to make his point. Prompted by this lightning strike and the goddess' further appeal, Odysseus at last relents.

In the concluding verses of the epic, Homer describes how Athena, the goddess of intelligence, helped to draw up a peace treaty between both sides. Significantly in his final verse, Homer says she did so not in her divine form but in the shape and voice of a human being, disguising herself as Odysseus' old and trusted friend Mentor.

Why did she not do so in her full splendor as a goddess? Why did she not hand down the peace treaty from heaven? Because, Homer the humanist argues, it is only we humans who can build a lasting peace. Ultimately, peace cannot be imposed from on high. Instead, guided by intelligence, we must sit down and reason together as individuals united by a shared hope for a better way of life, a way that transcends the instinctual demand for retribution. For only *we* can save ourselves from ourselves.

In the final books of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Homer makes the case reconciliation must triumph over retribution. Thus, directed by the gods, Odysseus controls his desire for revenge and instead chooses reconciliation with his enemies' kin. Similarly Achilles, also in keeping with a divine directive, relinquishes the body of Hector and returns it to his enemy's father.

For Odysseus, the issue was simple. Athena, then Zeus, said "stop" and he stopped, mindful one must respect the will of the gods. But for Achilles there was no external lightning bolt, only an inner pragmatic realization retribution is useless. Achilles saw dragging his enemy's body around his best friend's grave could not bring his best friend back to life. Nor could dragging the corpse even serve to mutilate his enemy's flesh. For Odysseus, unrestrained violence would have been unproductive as well, for rather than bringing lasting peace to Ithaca, it could have only fueled endless vendetta. Reconciliation, Homer argues, allows us to move forward; retribution keeps us stuck in the rut of the past. And if we ourselves cannot immediately see that truth, the gods from their higher vantage point can.

Yet if reconciliation *is* preferable to retribution, how do we apply that ancient lesson to bridge the sea of seething hatred that separates peoples and nations today? Perhaps it is by following the example of Priam and Achilles. Though warring enemies, they looked into each other's eyes and recognized the fragile links of mortality that connected them. Perhaps it is by similarly recognizing our common humanity we can—Israeli and Palestinian, Sunni and Shia, Muslim and Christian—rise above the differences that threaten to destroy us all.

Ever the realist, however, Homer understood the war between Trojan and Greek would go on even after the interlude in Achilles' hut. That is the tragedy of his time—and ours.