

The Illiad

Cooke May 10, 2021

The Trojan war is said to have ended in 1184 BC. Homer's epic is dated between 850 and 630 BC. It is perhaps the greatest work in Western literature, so great that everyone can find in it what they want to see. Here's what I see: Homer is an atheist and pacifist and the Illiad is a searing indictment of religion and warfare with an appeal to the frail shred of good in humanity.

The book is mostly about the gods. They are vain, supercilious, cowardly, deceitful and thoroughly despicable. They are worshipped out of fear for retribution. History is just a game board for their amusement. Men attribute everything to the gods; if they act cowardly it's because the gods filled them with fear. If they take heart and prevail, the gods gave them that heart. Hercules killed his children because jealous Hera, to get even with Zeus for having screwed Hercules' mother, made them appear to Hercules as monsters. Humans lack any agency. Homer mocks the gods from beginning to end. Here's one example which I haven't seen others pick up. Hera wants to seduce Zeus so she can help the Greeks against Zeus' favored Trojans (Book 14). She tricks Aphrodite into loaning her magic bra, and tricks Sleep by promising him her daughter. Zeus is aroused and courts Hera by telling her that he is hornier for her than for all the other women and goddesses he has raped. *"But for us twain, come, let us take our joy couched together in love; for never yet did desire for goddess or mortal woman so shed itself about me and overmaster the heart within my breast—nay, not when I was seized with love of the wife of Ixion, who bare Peirithous, the peer of the gods in counsel; nor of Danaë of the fair ankles, daughter of Acmsius, who bare Perseus, pre-eminent above all warriors; nor of the daughter of far-famed Phoenix, that bare me Minos and godlike Rhadamanthys; nor of Semele, nor of Alcmena in Thebes, and she brought forth Heracles, her son stout of heart, and Semele bare Dionysus, the joy of mortals; nor of Demeter, the fair-tressed queen; nor of glorious Leto; nay, nor yet of thine own self, as now I love thee, and sweet desire layeth hold of me."*

Zeus doesn't know he's being played.

The Illiad comprises just a few weeks of the 10 year war, starting with Agamemnon seizing Achilles' salve girl prize Briseis (won by killing her parents), with whom Achilles has fallen in love and promises to marry - the very same crime for which the Greeks attacked Troy (the gods made Paris and Helen do it). Achilles pouts, the Trojans prevail under Hector until Hector kills Patroclus. Achilles then kills Hector and drags off his body to feed to the dogs. The body of Hector is a prize even greater than the fairest slave girl. Now Zeus asks Achilles to give up this prize and let Priam take the body for proper burial – for a proper ransom. Achilles accedes.

But when Priam visits Achilles, Achilles finally does something which the gods have not told him to do.

"Then spake to him in answer swift-footed, goodly Achilles: "Thus shall this also be aged Priam, even as thou wouldest have it; for I will hold back the battle for such time as thou dost bid." When he had thus spoken he clasped the old man's right hand by the wrist, lest his heart should any wise wax fearful."

Compassion! No god told Achilles to take Priam's hand. Finally someone acts on his own agency, free of the gods' manipulation. The Illiad ends with the burning of Hector's body and burial of this bones. It's frail hope but hope nonetheless. And the god worshippers don't even know they're being played.