

A Study of Aretē and Kleos in The Iliad of Homer

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Most people today have a certain picture of a Greek hero: maybe it involves a shiny gold helmet, or huge toned muscles, or glorious sandals. Maybe they imagine them performing great feats of strength, or slaying horrific monsters, or even tearing through enemies on the battlefield. This common pop-culture perception of the Greek hero is unsurprisingly wrong, albeit not completely far off. While, yes, the heroes found in ancient Greek epics often do end up slaying enemies and showing their strength, the meaning behind these feats and the end goal of each hero usually ends up getting lost behind the shallow retellings and cartoon depictions so pervasive across modern media. Two philosophies in particular were rampant in the classic Greek epic, the inspiration for so many heroic tales, and the great work of the legendary Greek poet. Of course this work is *The Iliad* of Homer. The poet, whether he was one person or many, weaves many themes throughout this story, and two of them are simultaneously the most essential and most missed. These themes are the philosophies relating to *aretē* and *kleos*.

The definition of *aretē* can best be summed up by *excellence*. Homer often uses it to refer to the physical strength of a warrior in *The Iliad*, which is consistent with the warlike nature of its setting and characters.¹ For example, the line “Tomorrow he will learn of his own strength”² is one such use of this word.³ In the *Odyssey*, a less war-heavy book, its usage applies also to a woman’s excellent qualities and possibly her beauty or virtue.^{4 5} *Aretē* as a theme of *The Iliad* shows up even when the actual word is absent. For instance, in the funeral games between Greek warriors, they unanimously award Agamemnon a first place prize without him having to fight, because they know he is the best at that skill.⁶ When Achilles, the best of the Achaians, was a

¹ Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: V. 1: Ideals of Greek Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 6.

² Homer, *The Iliad of Homer* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 8.535.

³ “Virtue - Main.” n.d. www.goddess-athena.org. Accessed October, 2023.
http://www.goddess-athena.org/Dictionary/V/Virtue_m.htm.

⁴ “Virtue - Main.”

⁵ Homer, *Odyssey* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 2002), 2.206.

⁶ Homer, *The Iliad*, 23.884-897.

young boy, his father told him “to be always best in battle and pre-eminent beyond all others.”⁷ In the *Iliad* the theme of *aretē* encapsulates an ideal excellence that each hero should and does strive for, to excel above their peers. This quality is deserving of recognition.

Another term of significance in Homer’s writing is *kleos*. *Kleos* is often used by Homer to mean simply *news* or *rumor* of some event or person. In *The Odyssey* Homer uses it in speaking of a man “whose fame is wide through Hellas and mid-Argos.”^{8 9} In the world of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the concept behind *kleos* is far deeper, however; it really encapsulates a renown and honor from others. German-American classicist Werner Jaeger claimed that the Greek heroes in *The Iliad* “have all an insatiable thirst for honour, a thirst which is itself a moral quality of individual heroes... the sources of honour and dishonour are praise and blame...”¹⁰ The hero longs most to receive the reward of glory. This honor was often shown through physical prizes. Margalit Finkelberg, Vice President of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, writes “Homer sees honour as inseparable from such outward manifestations of it as honourable cuts of meat, gifts, and possessions.”¹¹ The physical rewards represented renown, which was especially important for the heroes of *The Iliad*. In a world where they could die on the battlefield at any time, the promise of their memories living forever was desirable, envious, and glorious. In a way, *kleos* was a guarantee that they would live on past their almost certain deaths.

These ideas of excellence achieved through hard work (*aretē*) and renown awarded by others (*kleos*) are closely wrapped up in each other. They represent two sides of the same coin for

⁷ Homer, *The Iliad of Homer* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 11.782-783.

⁸ “κλέος,” Uchicago.edu, accessed October 2023, <https://logeion.uchicago.edu/%CE%BA%CE%BB%CE%AD%CE%BF%CF%82>.

⁹ Homer, *Odyssey* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 2002), 1.343.

¹⁰ Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: V. 1: Ideals of Greek Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 9.

¹¹ Margalit Finkelberg “Timē and Aretē in Homer,” *The Classic Quarterly*, No. 1 (1998): page cited, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/63974>

the hero. The goal was fame *for* greatness. Victory *for* a hard-fought battle. The *aretē* that is denied its natural reward is unfulfilled. And the *kleos* that is undeserved and disproportionate is no longer *kleos*. The Homeric hero wants both of these things. Much of the conflict in the *Iliad* begins when one or both of these values is unmet or unfulfilled. Homer's themes of *kleos* and *aretē* run deep in Agamemnon's folly, Achilles' wrath, and Hektor's shame.

Agamemnon is the marshal of the many kings over the combined Greek armies, often called the "lord of men."¹² At the story's beginning, his character is not lacking in *aretē*, but he never puts it to use, and instead claims an unearned share of *kleos*. Achilles' own account is proof of this: "Always the greater part of the painful fighting is the work of my hands; but when the time comes to distribute the booty yours is far the greater reward, and I with some small thing yet dear to me go back to my ships when I am weary with fighting..."¹³ Here we see a preexisting consistent mistreatment of *aretē* and *kleos*: the former being exaggerated and the latter being overindulged. Agamemnon's undeserved reward is shameful, and this is such a big deal that it sets off the main conflict of the book. When Agamemnon takes the daughter of a priest of Apollo as plunder from a victorious battle, the priest offers a generous ransom for his daughter, which Agamemnon refuses. After nine days of Apollo's subsequent divine retribution that brings destruction on the Greeks, the Greek soldiers advise their commander to give her back, promising a future compensation of their own rewards. Despite this generous offer, Agamemnon so cherishes his current *kleos* for his self-inflated *aretē* that it drives him to anger and paranoia. He staunchly refuses to give up his prize, thinking his soldiers will betray him and withhold their loot. He is so angry that he decides to take for himself only *one* of his soldiers'

¹² Homer, *The Iliad of Homer* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 1.172.

¹³ Homer, *The Iliad*, 1.1.65-168

prized women. Agamemnon takes the woman of Achilles, who was the main advisor in this circumstance, and a better fighter than himself.

Werner Jaeger observes that “Achilles, when he is refused the honour which he has earned, feels that... a pre-eminent *aretē* has been denied its honour.”¹⁴ Homer agrees, marking this decision as gravely foolish and shameful many times. The first evidence of this is found in Achilles’ response, “And now my prize you threaten in person to strip from me, for whom I labored much, the gift of the sons of the Achaians.”¹⁵ Later it is said that Agamemnon “has dishonored Achilleus, a man much better than he is.”¹⁶ Achilles’ anger toward Agamemnon reveals the depth of the latter’s unworthiness: “never once have you taken courage in your heart to arm with your people for battle... King who feed on your people.”¹⁷ Agamemnon never entered into battle, never proved his *aretē*, and always claimed the largest prize. The *kleos* given to him was undeserved. He was preying on, not protecting, his people. His mistreatment of the sacred *aretē* and *kleos* was his folly.

Achilles is rightfully angry. His dishonor at the hands of Agamemnon is something he has no power to stop. A warrior who exceeded the skill and *aretē* of any other on the battlefield has lost his prized woman, his *kleos*. The conflict of the story reaches its head as Achilles in his wrath leaves the fighting, and holes up in his tent for the majority of the book. His refusal to fight may at first have been justified, but it soon proves a problem for the Greeks. They are left without their best fighter, and are understandably struggling to win the city. As the plot unfolds, the tides of victory shift back and forth between the Trojans and the Greeks. Many heroes on both sides prove their own *aretē*, lives are lost, and duels are won. All the while Achilles, a

¹⁴ Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: V. 1: Ideals of Greek Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 10.

¹⁵ Homer, *The Iliad of Homer* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 1.161-162.

¹⁶ Homer, *The Iliad*, 2.235.

¹⁷ Homer, *The Iliad*, 1.225-227,231.

walking Chekov's gun, is sitting in his tent fuming over his lost *kleos*. And then one begins to wonder, cannot the great hero let it go? Can he not accept that the lives of his friends and brothers at arms are more important than his pride, his fame, his *kleos*? Achilles' anger over his dishonorable treatment eventually reaches a point where his own excellence begins to deteriorate because he is not putting it to good use. Nestor, a wise old Greek king, warned Achilles that holding his grudge will make his *aretē* useless as no one is benefiting from it.¹⁸ Finkelberg writes about the one with *aretē* who "refuses to exercise it for public purposes or... is the only one to profit from his *aretē*. Judging by the subsequent development of events in the *Iliad*, Homer meant to show that in such cases as this the *aretē* ceases to exist... By not exercising the competitive value of *aretē* Achilles failed to fulfill it."¹⁹ Here Homer is extending the concept of *aretē*, claiming that it is not just an ability, but a responsibility. It must be used and proven to be fully realized. Achilles eventually recognizes this himself, after a tragedy shakes his world and breaks through his anger to show him that he has become "a useless burden on the earth."²⁰

Achilles' misuse of *aretē* occurs as the climax of the conflict, adding a surprising nuance to the beloved values Homer has shown are so vital. Achilles' excessive wrath mirrors Agamemnon's excessive greed. While one lets his rightful desire for reward corrupt his right to it, the other lets his unrightful desire for reward expose his unworthiness. Achilles' fixation on the *kleos* he thinks he should have received is just as excessive as Agamemnon's. The result is the same as well. The Greeks end up being preyed upon rather than protected. All for the sake of one hero's *aretē* and *kleos*.

¹⁸ Homer, *The Iliad of Homer* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 11.763.

¹⁹ Margalit Finkelberg "Timē and Aretē in Homer," *The Classic Quarterly*, No. 1 (1998): page cited, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/639748>

²⁰ Homer, *The Iliad*, 18.98-106.

Now the focus of this paper must turn from one side of the war to the other. Homer portrays the Trojan side to be just as deeply human as the Greek. The main character on this side is Hektor, the crown prince of Troy. As one born with status and an inherent form of *kleos*, Hektor's desire is not to sit back and enjoy his fame, as his brother Paris does. Rather, he longs to gain an *aretē* in battle and earn the right to his *kleos*. He will multiply his glory and honor while doing so. Even when his wife, Andromache, begs him to stay behind and remain safe inside the city walls, Hektor's resolve to achieve greatness and "great glory" in battle is too strong.²¹ In Finkelberg's words, "The stimulus behind the Homeric warriors' behaviour is first of all the drive to meet the expectations that flow from their status."²²

Much like his enemies, this Trojan prince lets his longing for *kleos* and *aretē* blind him and ruin his pursuits to achieve them. He is so set on his goal of achieving glory in battle that Hektor refuses the sage advice of one wiser than him. When his brother at arms advises him to order Trojan troops back behind the city walls, Hektor makes the grave mistake of pressing on in close combat with the enemy instead. This leads to devastating losses on their side, and when the rest of his people have long retreated, Hektor has no choice but to recognize his foolishness and continue fighting outside the gates on his own. The reason for this is found amidst his own lament, "Now, since by my own recklessness I have ruined my people, I feel shame before the Trojans."²³ A foolish decision he made from a narrow-minded view of *aretē* and *kleos* made Hektor lose the grasp he had on the promise of a worthy legacy. He receives the opposite, which is shame before his own people. His inheritance of fame is tarnished rather than built upon.

²¹ Homer, *The Iliad of Homer* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 6.440-446.

²² Margalit Finkelberg "Timē and Aretē in Homer," *The Classic Quarterly*, No. 1 (1998): page cited, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/639748>

²³ Homer, *The Iliad*, 22.100-110.

The *Iliad* portrays conflict in many forms, but the biggest of these come in the mistakes of Agamemnon, Achilles, and Hektor. These mistakes are, at a glance, pretty simple. But if one considers the deep values of *aretē* and *kleos* and how tightly Homer weaves them through the mistakes his characters make, the motivations behind their actions become a lot more complex, nuanced, and tragic. All these characters are commonly motivated: they all strive for *kleos*. Agamemnon strives for what he does not deserve. Achilles stops striving once his *kleos* is stolen and lets his *aretē* become stagnant. Hektor strives so stubbornly and foolishly that he is closed off to wisdom, thus losing the chance for *kleos*. These motivations are all fascinating in and of themselves. But as with any story, and especially a work as ancient and long standing as this, the reader must consider one question: What is Homer really attempting to say here? Is he condemning the pursuit of excellence, the pursuit of any fame that comes with it? Or is he using his characters to communicate the dangers of departures from those values? The latter is far more likely, considering the tragedy that befalls all his characters when they lose sight of true *aretē*.

So what can readers learn, as they pursue their own *aretē* in whatever their lives demand? They can expect no praise for what they have failed to do excellently. Even when they are denied the reward they deserve, they can continue to fight on anyway, because the value of their gifts is only as great as what they put it towards. They can strive for greatness with an open mind, listening to those wiser than them. All three of these lessons are just as important to take through the battles of everyday life as they were to the Greeks and Trojans during *The Iliad*. And just like these heroes, each one must decide how they want to pursue *aretē* and *kleos*. What they choose just might determine their destinies forever.

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