

The Better Man: Hector Versus Agamemnon

Moriah Echlin

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Instructor: Joan Faust

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The ancient Greek civilization, encompassing those people from what is now considered to be Greece as well as those in the surrounding area that were under similar influences, had a perception of an ideal man, characterized by those traits deemed best by society. Due to this culture being a shame instead of guilt culture, a considerable number of the ancient Greeks' conventions were largely based on the individual's earthly gain. However, the ancient Greeks also prized some of the more noble and intellectual attributes. More specifically, these ancient people valued qualities such as esteem, glory, prowess in battle, bravery, and responsibility. As an epic, Homer's *The Iliad* embodies these traits, portraying them through various comments, scenarios, and characters. Based on these Greek ideals, Homer demonstrates that the Trojan hero Hector is a better man than the Achaean king Agamemnon.

In ancient Greece, every man's merit was judged by certain criteria, one of which was esteem, which was decided by the admiration his peers held for him. As king, Agamemnon is undoubtedly respected by his soldiers. This fact is illustrated by his soldiers' loyalty in waging a ten-year siege on Troy. However, Agamemnon's peers, such as Odysseus and Telamonian Ajax, only seem to respect Agamemnon as appointed head of the Achaean army instead of as a man. His peers, therefore, treat him as an equal rather than as someone greatly admired. Diomedes is even willing to "oppose [him] in [his] folly," and Odysseus confronts him, disrespectfully ending his retort by saying "You and your bluster – you are talking nonsense!" (9.36, 4.414). Even Nestor always has a narrative ready to reveal to Agamemnon an error in his thinking. Achilles

outright despises the king, proclaiming that “[he] hate[s] the man like the very Gates of Death” (9.378). On the other side of the war, though, not a single Trojan exists that does not respect and admire Hector. The prince is their hero; moreover, he is the sole defense of Troy from the Achaeans. Lycaon’s son, Pandarus, even states that “[he] marched [his] Trojans hard to [the] lovely town of Troy, to please Prince Hector” (5.36-37). Also, when Hector dies, Hecuba chants, “You were . . . / a blessing to us all, the men and women of Troy: / throughout the city they saluted you like a god” (22.509-11). This clearly demonstrates the Trojans admiration of Hector. Therefore, it is apparent that Hector is more esteemed than Agamemnon.

The ancient Greek concept of glory, closely related to esteem, included glory for oneself, for one’s family, and for one’s people. While both Agamemnon and Hector desire all three types, Agamemnon places a great deal more emphasis on personal glory. In the beginning of *The Iliad*, Agamemnon ignores his people’s cry to “[r]espect the priest, accept the shining ransom!” (1.26). Instead, he keeps Chryseis to maintain his own glory (for he fought to win that battle prize), bringing Apollo’s wrath against his troops. Even when he seems to be concerned about the Achaeans, Agamemnon is mostly worried about how others will judge the Achaeans as ruled by him. After Pandarus injures Menelaus, Agamemnon shows little sorrow for his brother’s pain, instead lamenting, “But I will suffer grief for you Menelaus, / if you die now . . . / and I go back to parching Argos in disgrace” (4.196-98). Contrary to this behavior, Hector places equal importance on each type of glory. During every moment of battle, he fights for himself, his parents, and the Trojans, struggling to win glory for them. The Trojan prince comments to Andromache that he must return to battle, for the spirit urges him “[t]o stand up bravely, / always to fight in the front ranks . . . / winning my father great glory, glory for myself” (6.527-29). Furthermore, angered that the Trojans might lose glory previously gained, Hector berates Paris

when he shrinks from Menelaus after boasting pompously: “You . . . / curse to your father, your city and all your people, / a joy to our enemies, rank disgrace to yourself!” (3.57-59). With this comment, Hector reveals that he not only cares about the effects of his actions on the glory gained by his people, but also the effects of others’ actions. Therefore, because of the distinction between the importance Hector places on the different types of glory and the importance that Agamemnon does, Hector is closer to the Grecian ideal in this aspect.

In order to gain glory, one usually had to seize it through prowess in battle, which was also ideal in the ancient Greek culture. It is undeniable that the two heroes in question, Agamemnon and Hector, can boast skill in combat, having survived nine years of warfare; however, Hector is definitely the fiercer, more able warrior of the two. Evident of this, according to the glossary of the Robert Fagles translation, Hector slays twenty-eight Achaeans in *The Iliad* alone, while Agamemnon kills a mere twelve Trojans. Hector also holds a greater reputation as a soldier, which represents his fighting ability. When Hector rushes towards his enemies, he “fill[s] the Argive’s hearts with sudden terror” (5.782). Agamemnon, on the other hand, strikes no such great fear into the hearts of the Trojans. In addition to this, Agamemnon himself acknowledges Hector’s skills by warning Menelaus, “[D]on’t rush to fight with a better man, with Hector . . . / Many others shrink before him. / Even Achilles dreads to pit himself against him . . .” (7.128-30). Since Achilles is considered to be the best soldier in the Achaean camps, it can be inferred from this warning that Agamemnon thinks Hector is a better warrior than he is.

Bravery was also a highly desirable trait of the Greeks, and, in fact, was one of the most prominent ones. Since most men were soldiers at one point or another, bravery was a necessity. The more courageous a man was, the more enemies he was likely to kill, and the more celebrated he would be. In this area, Agamemnon and Hector could almost be equal, except Agamemnon’s

bravery is faltering. He definitely has his moments of intrepidity during battle, yet he also has moments of cowardice. At the point when the tide of the battle turns in favor of the Trojans, it is noted that “Agamemnon dare[s] not stand his ground” (8.91). Shortly after fleeing, Agamemnon addresses his troops, ordering them, “Cut and run! Sail home to the fatherland we love! / We’ll never take the broad streets of Troy” (9.30-31). Such cowardice is well described when Achilles depicts Agamemnon as having a “fawn’s heart” (1.264). Contrarily, Hector is often described as being the bravest of the Trojans, both by his family and his comrades. Andromache remarks that “[Hector’s] own fiery courage will destroy [him]!” (6.483). Even in dire straits, Hector remains courageous. After the Achaeans have once again become victorious, “Hector knew full well the tide of battle had turned / but still stood firm, defending die-hard comrades” (16.427-28).

Certainly, Hector does flee from Achilles after internal debate, rightfully fearing for his life.

However, when he finally faces Achilles, Hector is fearlessly prepared to die, demonstrating the ultimate form of bravery.

One last way in which Hector is closer than Agamemnon to the ideal ancient Greek is responsibility, which was definitely a relative concept. There were those people who blamed the gods for their actions, and there were those people who did not, instead taking responsibility for their actions. Both of these actions were acceptable, yet those people who did not use the gods as scapegoats were seen as that much more respectable. Belonging to the former group, Agamemnon never truly takes responsibility for his actions or their effects, though he may seem to at times. When he refuses to give Chryseis back to her father, and it is divined that the strife that strikes his army is a result of this, Agamemnon curses the seer, implying that he does not speak the truth, and he merely “bruit[s] [his divination] about, as fact” (1.128). Agamemnon acts in a similar manner during his quarrel with Achilles. After Achilles returns to battle and declares

that he will forget his anger, Agamemnon responds by exclaiming, “But I am not to blame! / Zeus and Fate and the Fury stalking through the night, / they are the ones who drove that savage madness in my heart, / that day in assembly when I seized Achilles’ prize . . .” (19.100-103).

While Agamemnon never assumes blame, Hector is one to take responsibility. He never calls upon the gods, remarking about their tampering in his will. Hector, in fact, directly states his own blame: “Now my army’s ruined, thanks to my own reckless pride” (22.124).

In conclusion, the ancient Greeks, like any other culture, had characteristics they held that constituted the ideal man. Such qualities included esteem, glory, prowess in battle, bravery, and responsibility. Thus, based on these criteria, of the heroes Hector and Agamemnon in *The Iliad*, Hector, with his great esteem, desire for glory, prowess in battle, outstanding bravery, and constant responsibility, is nearer to being the ideal man.

Works Cited

Homer. *The Iliad*. Trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Penquin Books, 1990.