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Iliad Close Reading

In *The Iliad*, Achilles uses his friendship with Patroclus as both a means to an end and an excuse for his actions. No one else in this lengthy epic seems to have a relationship described as in-depth as theirs, as their relationship is what turns the tide of war and decides the fates of many, Argives and Trojans alike. However, what may have once been a strong friendship is corrupted by Achilles' rage and pride.

Achilles, being considered one of the best fighters in the Achaean army, is ruled far more by pride and honor than the average soldier. Not even the deaths of his fellow Argives bothers him; the more he waits, the more honor he'll gain when he finally does go into battle. His lack of empathy for his fellow countrymen is made clear as he addresses Patroclus' grief by saying, "[I]f both of our fathers had died, we'd have some cause for grief. Or weeping over the Argives, are you? Seeing them die against the hollow ships, repaid for their offenses?" (413 lines 17-19). But Patroclus doesn't see it the same way: "But you are intractable, Achilles! Pray god such anger never seizes me, such rage you nurse... What good will a man, even one in the next generation, get from you unless you defend the Argives from disaster?" (413 lines 33-37). He continues also by asking to take Achilles' place and says, "[S]o the Trojans might take me for you, Achilles, yes, hold off from attack, and Achaea's fighting sons get second wind, exhausted as they are" (413 lines 46-48). This sympathy for their countrymen is completely absent in

Achilles. This makes Patroclus the antithesis of Achilles in this sense. He cares far more about the lives being lost than the honor Achilles demands. Achilles cares for himself, while Patroclus cares for the collective.

Still, Patroclus recognizes that Achilles can't be easily swayed. Achilles even admits himself that "I said I would not relax my anger, not till the cries and carnage reach my own ships" (414 lines 71-72). At this point, it's clear Achilles isn't even angry just about Agamemnon slighting him— he's angry for the sake of being angry. It's a pointless anger, and deep down, he knows it. But instead of giving up his rage, he passes it on to Patroclus. So he gives the order: "So you, you strap on my splendid armor on your back, you lead our battle-hungry Myrmidons into action" (414 lines 73-74). He could have listened to Patroclus. He could have let go of the pride his life revolved around and gone to battle alongside his friend. Instead, he stays behind and chooses to keep wallowing in that pit of rage.

When he sends Patroclus out, he only does so with the intention of gaining honor through him. Achilles demands Patroclus not chase the Trojans back to Troy, but return so he doesn't make "[Achilles'] glory that much less" (415 line 106). He wants them to destroy Troy together: "[S]o we could bring Troy's hallowed crown of towers toppling down around us—you and I alone" (415 lines 118-119). In most healthy friendships, one is meant to support and lift up the other when the latter succeeds at something. One is not meant to hold the other back so they themselves can succeed over their friend. Of course, the slaughter of men isn't exactly something that could be called 'success' or 'moral' these days, but there is still a general rule that should be upheld here. Achilles, still so blinded and consumed by his rage, doesn't even show any care for his closest friend's well-being. He disguises his need for glory as wanting Patroclus to be with

him when Troy falls. But his more selfish intentions become clear by the fact he will not allow his friend to earn more glory than him, to take down the city of Troy without him. After all, he is the great Achilles— he must be the deciding factor of whether the Argives win or lose.

There is also a subtle power play between them throughout this entire interaction. Achilles, of course, is riding on his rage and greed for honor. He considers himself and his honor far above that of anyone else's. This includes Patroclus. Achilles does not give his friend the credit for sending him into battle on the former's stead. He treats it like his own idea. Same with Patroclus's honor in battle; it can never be above Achilles', or else he will turn his rage on Patroclus. He demands honesty of Patroclus by saying, "Out with it now! Don't harbor it deep inside you. We must share it all" (413 lines 20-21). But when Patroclus rightly guesses that Achilles is doomed by a prophecy, Achilles denies it. Furthermore, he hides his true intentions of gaining glory by pretending that Patroclus must return so they can take down Troy together. Perhaps, before this war, they were honest and viewed each other as pure equals. But now that rage has blinded Achilles to all but how he was wronged, he cares only about himself and puts himself above everyone else.

Achilles and Patroclus are two characters with probably the longest-developed relationship within *The Iliad*. Their story is what defines the changing tide of war and the triumph of the Argives. If it weren't for Achilles' rage and pride, Patroclus might still live at least as long as Achilles. But because Achilles becomes blinded by his own selfishness, he harms his relationship with Patroclus and sends him to his death along with the many, many Argives that never make it back home.