

‘Describe the characters of Agamemnon and Achilles as they are revealed in Book 1 of *The Iliad*. Who do you think was more to blame for their quarrel and its immediate outcome?’

In book 1 of the *Iliad* the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles establishes their characters. We see Agamemnon as proud and authoritative yet often uncaring and uncompromising. Achilles is by contrast practical, powerful, yet deeply and sometimes dangerously passionate.

Agamemnon is repeatedly unreasonable. When Chryses comes for his daughter (an entirely normal and natural request in the ancient world), Agamemnon does not listen, even though “all the other Achaeans shouted their agreement”. He is rude and arrogant towards the priest and “sent him... on his way”, with threats and taunts about Chryseis, who will “serve my bed”. When Kalchas, who has repeatedly stated that Agamemnon will not like what he says blames Agamemnon for the plague among the Greeks, Agamemnon reacts vehemently. “in deep anger... he spoke... ‘prophet of evil, you have never told me anything to your liking”.

It is this unreasonable and uncompromising attitude that contributes to his quarrel with Achilles. He persists with his demand for compensation for the loss of Chryseis, even after he has seen how much this angers Achilles.

Achilles however often displays a practical and compromising approach to problems. When the plague is ravaging the Greeks, it is Achilles who calls the assembly and takes the lead. When Agamemnon first demands compensation, Achilles simply states that there isn’t anything to give Agamemnon. He goes on to promise that “we will recompense you three and four times over if... ever... we... sack Troy”. And when Agamemnon decides to take Briseis, Achilles holds back from attacking Agamemnon. Nor does he bear any grudge against the servants of Agamemnon who come to take Briseis. “It is not you I blame,” he says.

Another aspect of Agamemnon’s character is his arrogance. He sees women as mere objects, describing Chryseis as “to serve my bed” and “work at the loom”, a girl who he prefers to his wife Klytaimnestra. He is arrogant towards Chryses, a respected priest, and even to his fellow kings, Ajax and Odysseus, whose prizes he threatens to take. He arrogantly demands compensation, and never once apologises for taking Briseis. He is repeatedly insensitive towards Achilles’ anger and sense of injustice and deliberately takes Briseis, so that Achilles can see “how much I am your superior”.

Undoubtedly these attitudes fuel the disagreement between Agamemnon and Achilles. Agamemnon is a leader, and leaders are supposed to compromise and not abuse their power. The Greeks need Achilles, yet Agamemnon’s pride seems to overrule this. “Yes, run home, if that is what your heart urges”

Achilles’ is extremely passionate and one of the more human of the Homeric heroes. He often expresses his emotion quite openly, “he threw the staff to the ground”, “broke into tears”. He launches savage verbal attacks of “stinging

words" on Agamemnon, describing him as "dog-face" who "never has the courage" and "whose shamelessness is your very clothing". Achilles anger is such that he stops fighting, leaving his fellow Greeks to the mercy of the Trojans, even though he is "yearning for battle". Achilles is passionate about his rewards and has an almost egalitarian streak about him. "Your prize is by far the larger, when I have worn myself out in the fighting", he says, "I have no mind to stay here reaping up treasures for you". Achilles passion nearly leads him attacking Agamemnon, and his hand is only stayed by the intervention of a goddess.

Nestor correctly identifies that Achilles feels that Briseis is his prize, not to be taken by anybody, and that Agamemnon feels that to back down would be to call his own authority into question. Yet the men respond quite differently to Nestor's words. Agamemnon makes yet more savage accusations against Achilles claiming that he wants to "rule all, to dictate all" – when all he has wanted so far is to keep possession of what is his.

Achilles however responds quite reasonably. He backs down and decides "not to come to hand-fighting over the girl", accepting that "you Achaians gave her, and you shall take her away" – which is exactly what wise Nestor had asked him to do – not to "seek open quarrel with the king".

Agamemnon must therefore be more to blame for the quarrel. He is leader of the Greeks. It is his duty to compromise and unify the Greeks. He never offers Achilles any form of compensation for the loss of Briseis. He ignores the wishes of his fellow Greeks and the wisdom of Nestor. Achilles may be impulsive sometimes, but it is the duty of a leader to control that impulsiveness.