

From the Chapter: "Monsters"

4. The Quest: Priam and Achilles

We can infer from all of this that allusions in the *Iliad* to earlier heroic encounters with monsters have a specific thematic connection to the main single combat between Achilles and Hector in Book 22, and that this connection is established as early as Book 6. The comparatively few important passages in which the exploits of the earlier heroes are narrated, and the complete absence of monsters from the later world of Troy, can sometimes make us assume that the poet has entirely left behind the patterns of action of hero myths of the former generations. But, as we have seen, the monsters may have disappeared, but the basic patterns of heroic action have not. A man can become a monster if certain things happen to him in life - and they happen to Achilles when he loses Patroclus. Monstrosity of form need not necessarily accompany monstrosity of action, just as a god in Homer can seem, to all intents and purposes, human. All the different levels of existence can operate within an outwardly human appearance. In the final books of the poem Achilles is both an epic hero himself, and one whose violence and cruelty also bestow heroic status on those who have to confront him. As we have seen, the first such quest ends with the death of Hector and the mutilation of his body. But the final books of the *Iliad* deal with two quests to confront Achilles, not just one. We now turn briefly to the second quest, the ransom journey of Priam to retrieve his son's body in the final book of the poem.

It is one thing for a young warrior like Hector to confront the violence and cruelty that Achilles perpetrates on his enemies, but quite another for an old man to do so. After Hector fails in his quest against Achilles, it falls to Priam to embark on one of his own. The physical remains of one failed quest (ie. Hector's body) now become the object of the second quest. The aim of most quests is to bring something back, and this is certainly the task for Priam. The body of Hector requires burial, and so Priam's aim is to get it back, and thereby unite the Trojans in an appropriate funerary ritual. It falls to Priam to heal the suffering of his entire community. But Hector's recent fate only increases the desire of the Trojans that their king should not follow in his son's footsteps. Andromache, Priam and Hecuba had all pleaded with Hector not to go and face Achilles (6.407ff.; 22.38ff.; 22.82ff.). Better to stay inside the walls and try to fight off defeat from there. But Hector will not be denied, even if he eventually runs away at the sight of Achilles in his Olympian armor (22.131ff). In Priam's case the mission seems so foolhardy to his fellow Trojans that serious questions are raised about his state of mind: 'Alas' says Hecuba 'where has that wisdom gone for which you used to be renowned among strangers and among those over whom you rule?' (*ô moi, pēi dê toi phrenes oichonth', hēis to paros per/ ekle' ep' anthrōpous xeinous êd' hoisin anasseis*; 24.201-2; cf. 22.408ff.). Hecuba's funereal wailing (*kôkusen*, 24.200) at the thought of Priam's departure signals her initial perception that the venture will end in certain death for her husband (cf. 24.206ff.).

Hecuba does not actually say it in as many words, but old men are not really meant to undertake quests like this. It is a young

man's task, and it is not for those who are unable to meet the physical demands involved (cf. Vergil's response to this, with his account of Priam and Hecuba in *Aeneid* 2.515ff.). The heroes Jason, Bellerophon, Perseus *et al.* are usually young, and the confrontation with the monster is a youthful rite of passage in many cases. But the *Iliad* has a way of turning up surprises, and of radically adapting traditional mythic themes. Old age, as it turns out, proves to be an advantage for Priam in his mission (24.486ff.), not least because of the impact that it has on Achilles himself (24.507ff.). It is really love and courage and the favor of the gods that help in the success of this quest. The physical power of youth was not much use to Hector in the face of Achilles' wrath, especially when the gods turn from him. In the final book of the *Iliad* old age succeeds where youth has just failed. Priam, trusting in the signs of the gods (as Bellerophon did, 6.183; cf. 6.171), is able to undertake a successful mission. The poem ends with a powerful and poignant adaptation of the traditional quest myth in which Achilles, the creature who was so loathed and feared by all the Trojans, becomes an agent of goodwill for them. The figure to be supplicated in Priam's quest is completely transformed within the narrative of the quest itself.

Quest myths of the earlier generations usually involve a journey: Bellerophon to Lycia, Jason to Colchis, Heracles to Hades, Perseus to a land in the remote west, and so forth. Confronting the unknown by physical movement outside of one's own world is the keynote of quest narratives. The *Odyssey* is based around two quest-journeys, that of the father Odysseus to get home, and that of the son Telemachus to get news of his missing father. One

significant similarity in the two Homeric poems is that parallel quests are undertaken by fathers and sons - Hector and Priam in the *Iliad*, and Odysseus and Telemachus in the *Odyssey*. In the *Iliad* the attempt to reunite the family (in death) is undertaken by the father (in Book 24), whereas in the *Odyssey* it is the son who goes out to get news of the father, in the hope ultimately of getting him back (in Books 1-4 and 15). The fundamental urge for communion with one's family in the face of fear and suffering is a common theme in both Homeric poems. The physical movement involved in the quest is often driven by elemental human impulses of love for one's kin.

At first glance the *Iliad* seems to stand apart from this notion of physical movement, in that on the whole the poem is not very concerned with 'journeys' in the usual sense of the word. In fact this is one of the things that distinguishes the two Homeric epics, that the *Odyssey* is very concerned with physical movement by sea (and to a lesser degree by land in Book 4) in different parts of the world; whereas the *Iliad* describes a siege in which movement, by definition, is limited. The earlier generations of heroes in the *Iliad* seem to have been free to roam the world, but the current crop all seem to be 'stuck' at Troy. In *Iliad* 6 Bellerophon goes first to Lycia, and then (presumably) he goes outside of the kingdom, or at least outside of the king's city, to confront the Chimaera. Hector, by contrast, in Book 6 just walks out of the gates on to the field of battle; and the next description of his return is when he is dead.

Despite this fundamental difference in the two Homeric epics we do find important journey narratives in the first and last books

of the *Iliad*, in each of which a father is re-united with a child from whom he has been separated.⁵³ These are very different kinds of journeys, not least because one father, Chryses, is re-united with his daughter still alive (although a recent victim of forced captivity), whereas Priam in the final book goes on a ransom mission for the body of his son. The first journey (1.308ff.), which is conducted by sea during the daytime, describes the Greek mission to return Chryseis to her father. This follows Agamemnon's decision, under no small pressure from various quarters, to let the girl go. Chryseis is conducted back by Odysseus and twenty rowers.

The details of their movement there are conveyed in two parts, first the arrangements for the loading of the ship and the departure (1.308-11), and second, their arrival at the harbor (1.430-35). They disembark, hand Chryseis back to her father, and then conduct the ceremonies to Apollo including the offer of a hecatomb (1.435-66). Chryses urges Apollo to cease his anger against the Greeks, which the god agrees to do. They then feast, drink, and sing to Apollo (1.467-74). When darkness comes they sleep beside the ships (1.475-6), and then return the next morning (1.477-87). Having sailed back they disperse immediately to their various camps (1.487). The description of the journey 'frames' the taking away of Briseis from Achilles (1.318-48), and Achilles' impassioned discussion with Thetis in response to this (1.348-427). The narrative of the girl's return to her father is not greatly concerned with the detail of the journey itself. Some details of the passage of the ship are set out in the narrative (esp.1.432-9; 477-83); but the emphasis is largely on the solemn rituals that placate

the god Apollo (esp. 1.447-68).⁵⁴ The description of the actual journey (that is, the movement to and fro over the sea) seems to have no particular symbolic importance of the sort that we see in some quest-narratives in early epic.⁵⁵

The ransom journey of Priam for Hector's body in Book 24, could scarcely be more different from this earlier one. Whereas the Greek sailors in Book 1 undertake a collective mission within the known world, within their own sphere of control, by day, Priam passes virtually alone, with only an old herald to accompany him, from safe territory, from within the walls of Troy, into a realm that is fundamentally hostile.⁵⁶ Thus, in keeping with the basic danger of the mission, this is a night journey.⁵⁷ The heroism of the journey is also founded upon the recent fate of Hector, who was not only killed by Achilles, but whose body is now the object of a terrible cruelty not seen elsewhere in the poem.⁵⁸ Despite the fact that the gods precipitate the journey, Priam still risks death every step of the way (note esp. *Il.* 24.203ff.; 328; 337ff.; 353ff. 364ff.; 519ff.). Divine goodwill in the mission, and the prompting by the gods to undertake it in the first place (24.74ff.), do not diminish the fear of the old man. There is usually no heroism without fear, and this is certainly the case with both Hector and Priam.⁵⁹ In keeping with the danger of Priam's journey, the narrative has some striking symbolism usually associated with the heroic passage to the Underworld (the so-called *catabasis*).⁶⁰ In many ways Priam's journey is much more obviously drawing on traditional quest narratives than Hector's encounter with Achilles. This is largely because of the movement involved in the description, and the fact

that we can identify with ease some of the core elements of the descent myth to the Underworld.

Thus Priam first descends from his home on the citadel, down through the city, out through the gates, and on to the plain (for the downward movement, *kata astu*, 24.327 and *kateban*, 24.329). Moreover, added emphasis is given within very few lines (24.349-53) to various 'otherworldly' elements: the tomb of Ilus that they drive past (*hoi d' epei oun mega sêma parex Iloio elassan*, 24.349); the river at which they stop so that the mules and horses can drink (*stêsan ar' hêmionous te kai hippous, ophra pioien/, en potamôi*, 24.350-1); the darkness that suddenly comes upon the land (*dê gar kai epi knephas êluthe gaian*, 24.351); and the fact that they encounter Hermes, the divine guide and psychopomp (*ton d' ex agchimoloio idôn ephrassato kêrux/ Hermeian...*24.352-3). Similarly, the emphasis on liminality in the description of their journey (that is, the guards and gates through which they must pass, 24.440ff.), has much in common with the journey to the afterlife in the *Iliad* (cf. Heracles in the Underworld at *Il.* 8.366ff. and Patroclus' ghost at 23. 71ff.). Hermes puts the guards of the Greek camp to sleep (not unlike the way that Aeneas's guide, the Sibyl, puts Cerberus to sleep in the Underworld in *Aeneid* 6.417ff.). The central description of Priam on his mission, therefore, bears comparison with other narratives in which heroes encounter monsters or journey to the Underworld.

In keeping with the nature of Priam's mission, Achilles no longer occupies a rough camp on the fringe of the Greek army. In earlier books (cf. 1.326ff.; 9.182ff.; 11.599ff.; 16.1ff.; 18.1ff.) we have seen Achilles in his 'domestic' setting when he refuses to fight, but

the poem has shown little interest in what his camp is actually like. Were we to ponder the question earlier in the poem of what his camp actually looks like, one would probably think of it (there being no particular evidence to the contrary), as a fairly makeshift arrangement constructed next to his ships at one end of the Greek army (for the position of Achilles' structure at the end of the line of Greek ships, see 8.222-6=11.5-9).

This vague picture of a temporary camp all changes in Book 24. The camp of Achilles is the final destination for Priam in his quest, and therefore important attention is given to a description of it. The different mood and setting of Book 24 help to transform it into a large structure (*all' hote dê klisiên Pêlêiadeô aphikonto/ hupsêlên*, 24.448-9), characterized most especially by its huge doors (24.453ff.; cf. the notion of it as a house, not a camp, 471, *oikou*; 512, *dômat'*; 572, *oikoio*; 647, *megaroio*). It would usually take three men to lift the bolt to open the door, although Achilles (like Hermes, who lets Priam through, 24.457ff.) can do so on his own (24.453-6). The size of the structure therefore, at the very least, informs the greatness and power of Achilles, and the affection in which he is held by his men who had built it for him (24.449ff.). Whereas previously we have seen Achilles sitting outside in the light, in the final book he occupies a space behind a huge door in the gloom of night.

A close Homeric parallel for the door of Achilles' camp is the cave of Polyphemus in *Odyssey* 9 where great emphasis is given to the entrance to the cave (*Od.* 9.240-3; cf. 9.313 and 340). In this case however there is no real door as such, but rather a huge boulder that effectively operates as a door (twenty-two fine wagons could

not lift the boulder from the ground!). On his return to his cave Polyphemus blocks the entrance with this huge rock, thereby locking the Ithacans inside. To the horror of Odysseus and his men when they introduce themselves, Polyphemus rejects both Zeus and his ritual practice of *xenia* ('guest-friendship', 9.273ff.). Polyphemus is not a human, but a monstrous cannibal, who almost immediately eats two of Odysseus' men, and then plans the same fate for all the others whom he has captured (9.287ff.; 9.310ff.; 9.343ff.; 9.369f.). His response to the gift of wine by Odysseus is to offer to eat him last. The quest for Odysseus is now to get out of the cave by circumventing the great boulder; something which he is able to achieve through his characteristic *mêtis*. The cave and the boulder therefore help to signify the kind of inhabitant who lives within. The habitat helps to point to the primordial nature of Polyphemus' existence (cf. 9.116ff.; 9.181ff.). The cave and its 'door' are a kind of a polar opposite to the highly civilized palaces that kings like Menelaus or Alcinous occupy in the *Odyssey* (4.43ff.; 4.71ff.; 6.297ff.; 7.81ff.).⁶¹

In a similar way, the vast structure which Achilles occupies in *Iliad* 24 has the effect of conveying some of the power and greatness of the inhabitant, and, presumably, a sense of the awe and menace that greets the old wayfarer who arrives there. It helps to give Priam's supplicatory journey an otherworldly air, like a journey into the labyrinth or into the Underworld itself. But there is no Polyphemus lurking behind Achilles' doors, even if Priam might have expected to find a similarly fearsome 'flesh-eater' there (cf. 22.408ff.; 24.200ff.; 24.328) . Despite his fears of what might await him, Priam encounters a man who does

precisely what Zeus and the gods tell him to do. Far from rejecting Zeus (as Polyphemus does, *Od.* 9.273ff.) Achilles accepts immediately the need for the ransom exchange to occur. As an audience, we know from early in the final book (24.139-40) that Achilles will do what Zeus has told him to do, and that he will accept the ransom. But the *manner* of the exchange has not been ordained by Zeus. This is left entirely to Achilles. And the fact that it is Priam himself who conducts the quest (unbeknownst to Achilles, for Thetis made no specific reference to this, 24.128ff.), seems completely to surprise and disarm him (24.477ff.).

The ransom of Hector's body is conducted with the highest level of humanity and compassion, not least because Thetis tells Achilles in no uncertain terms where he stands in relation to his own destiny (24.128ff). Death (*thanatos*) and fate (*moira*) stand right beside him, and he should get on with living again for the brief time that he has left. The encounter between Achilles and Priam is constructed on the fact that the two of them have much in common. Not only have they both endured the recent bereavement of loved ones, but they also have a short time left to live. There is great emphasis in Book 24 upon Achilles' renewal, the fact that he takes up again the major elements of life - the things that he rejected after Patroclus' death: sleep, sex, food and drink, and compassion for human suffering. Thetis tells him quite explicitly (24.128ff.) not to spend his brief time remaining in a state of grief and lamentation. Achilles' most cruel moments in the poem coincide with his conscious rejection of the things of life in response to Patroclus' death by Hector (cf. 19.206-14; 19.303-8; 19.319-21; 19.342ff.). With the intervention of the gods these things

are taken up again (this is signaled initially by his eating at 24.475-6); and Priam, at the climax of his quest, finds himself with a very different kind of person from the one who had dragged his son's body around.

The ransom is completed with alacrity, and there is at the same time a genuine mutual awe and respect between the two. The culmination of this is an offer by Achilles, out of the blue, to hold up the fighting so that Priam can conduct the funeral for Hector. He asks the old man (24.656ff.) how many days he intends for the funeral of his son; for he will hold back the Greeks for the period required. Priam replies (24.660ff.) that they would mourn him for nine days, make his funeral on the tenth, and then feast on the eleventh. The fighting would therefore resume on the twelfth day if it must. And so Achilles, in his last words in the *Iliad*, agrees that this is the way it will be, for he will hold back the battle for the due length of time. Hector will be released to his final resting place whilst Achilles will restrain the Greeks, who are no doubt restless for the conflict (cf. Hermes at 24.403-4). After this final exchange between the two, and the brief sleep that they have (Achilles with Briseis [24.676], in keeping with his mother's speech), Hermes wakes Priam and then leads him back to the city as the sun rises (24.671-95). They duly emerge from the darkness, and only Cassandra on the acropolis recognizes them. As they come back through the gloom it is almost as if they emerge from the Underworld itself.

As we have seen therefore, the *Iliad* concludes with two separate quests to confront the same individual; first Hector, and then Priam face up to Achilles. The one leads directly to the other,

but, for all that, the two quests could not be more different. One is by a warrior bearing weapons in his prime of life, the other by a very old man with nothing really in the way of a physical presence to protect him. One is conducted in the bright light of day, the other in the gloom of night without a hint of any torches or lights or stars to help show the way.⁶² Hector encounters Achilles at the peak of his ferocity, with all the brightness and power of Olympian fire, whereas his father receives a level of compassion, and even altruism, seen nowhere else in the *Iliad*. The failure of one quest and the success of the other have everything to do with the role of the gods, who ensure the destruction of Hector and the survival of Priam. The support of the gods and the power of Priam's love for his son provide him with the necessary resolve to succeed in his mission. As with the tasks of many other great hero figures, the success of Priam's quest brings great relief and solace and unity to his people. Priam helps to restore his community's proper processes by ensuring that the appropriate funerary ritual takes place. The restoration of proper ritual means that it is really a sense of reintegration and healing with which the *Iliad* ends.⁶³

We can see therefore from the poem's isolated references to the earlier generations of heroes that the poet and his audience are immersed in traditional tales of personal quests into wild and dangerous locations. The journey to the Underworld and the confrontation with monsters were presumably a central part of the corpus of myth that the poet must have had at his disposal, be it in the form of earlier hexameter poems, or as part of myth in a more general sense. Some allusions to these stories of the earlier

generations are included within the poem to give a context to the later war being fought out for Troy. When one thinks of other epic heroes from surviving poems, Gilgamesh, Odysseus, Jason, Aeneas, Beowulf, among others, it does seem to be important that within the *Iliad* Achilles should neither meet a monster nor undertake a journey to the Underworld. Nestor almost calls Achilles' heroism into question by suggesting that the challenges of earlier men are not available to the modern day hero, who is therefore not really as good as those great men of earlier times.

But the remarkable thing about the *Iliad* is not that the challenges of confronting monsters and of descending to the Underworld have disappeared from the heroic landscape. That certainly seems to make Achilles an unusual or an 'un-traditional' type of epic hero, in so far as it differentiates him from the earlier epic figure of Gilgamesh, and many later epic heroes. But it is probably not so remarkable in itself. The truly remarkable thing is that the *Iliad* incorporates myths of monsters and Underworld journeys into the patterns of action of the poem itself. Narratives of monster-quests and Underworld journeys are given a human appearance. Rather than dispensing with monstrosity altogether the poem reveals an inversion of the traditional quest pattern, in which the hero himself has an otherworldly capacity for violence and cruelty. Achilles embraces both ends of the traditional epic quest in the *Iliad*: he is both the hero of the epic, the 'best of the Achaeans', and the figure of fundamental violence who himself has to be confronted.