Achilles and Thetis

Achilles and Agamemnon attacked each other mercilessly as they stood before the captains of Achaea’s army. Achilles shouted his anger for all to hear:

“Shameless! Armored in shamelessness. Always shrewd with greed! How could any Argive soldier obey your orders? No, you colossal … shameless. We all followed you, to please you, to fight for you, to win your honor back from the Trojans—Menelaus and you, you dog-face! And now you threaten to strip me of my prize in person? The one I fought for long and hard? And sons of Achaea handed her to me? No more now. Back I go to Phthia. Better that way by far, to journey home in the beaked ships of war. I have no mind to linger here, disgraced, brimming your cup and piling up your plunder.”

But the lord of men Agamemnon shot back:

“Desert, by all means— if the spirit drives you home! You are nothing to me—you and your overweening anger! But let this be my warning on your way: since Apollo insists on taking my Chryseis, I’ll send her back in my own ships with my crew. But I—I will be there in person at your tents to take Briseis in all her beauty—your own prize—so you can learn just how much greater I am than you.

But Achilles rounded on Agamemnon once again, lashing out at him, not relaxing his anger for a moment:

“Staggering drunk, with your dog’s eyes, you fawn’s heart! Never once did you arm with the troops and go to battle! I tell you this, and I swear a mighty oath upon it: someday, I swear, a yearning for Achilles will strike Achaea’s sons and all your armies! But then, Atrides, harrowed as you will be, nothing you do can save you—not when your hordes of fighters drop and die, cut down by the hands of man-killing Hector! Then—then you will tear your heart out, desperate, raging that you disgraced the best of the Achaeans!”
Once the two had fought it out with words, battling face-to-face, both sprang to their feet and broke up the muster beside the Argive squadrons. Achilles strode off to his trim ships and shelters, back to his friend Patroclus and their comrades. Agamemnon had a vessel hauled down to the sea. He picked out twenty oarsmen to man her locks, put aboard the cattle for sacrifice to the god, and led Chryseis in all her beauty amidships.

Versatile Odysseys took the helm as captain. All embarked. The party launched out on the sea’s foaming lanes, while the son of Atreus told his troops to wash, to purify themselves from the filth of plague. They scoured it off, threw scourings in the surf and sacrificed to Apollo full-grown bulls and goats along the beaten shore of the fallow barren sea. And savory smoke went swirling up the skies.

So the men were engaged throughout the camp. But King Agamemnon would not stop the quarrel. The first threat he hurled against Achilles. He called Talthybius and Eurybates briskly, his two heralds, ready, willing aides:

“Go to Achilles’ lodge. Take Briseis at once--his beauty Briseis--by the hand and bring her here. But if he will not surrender her, I’ll go myself, I’ll seize her myself with an army at my back--and all the worse for him!”

He sent them off with the strict order ringing in their ears. Against their will, the two men made their way along the breaking surf of the barren salt sea and reached the Myrmidon shelters and their ships. They found him beside his lodge and black hull, seated grimly. And Achilles took no joy when he saw the two approaching. They were afraid. They held the king in awe, and stood there, silent. Not a word to Achilles. Not a question.

But he sensed it all in his heart--their fear, their charge, and broke the silence for them:

“Welcome, couriers! Good heralds of Zeus and men. Here, come closer. You have done nothing to me. You are not to blame … no one but Agamemnon. He is the one who sent you for Briseis. Go, Patroclus, Prince: bring out the girl and hand her to them so they can take her back. But let them both bear witness to my loss. In the face of blissful gods and mortal men, in the face of that unbending, ruthless king--If the day should come when the armies need me to save their ranks from ignominious, stark defeat.
The man is raving with all the murderous fury in his heart. He lacks the sense
to see a day behind, a day ahead and safeguard the Achaeans battling by the
ships.”

Patroclus obeyed his great friend’s command. He led Briseis in all her beauty from the lodge and handed her over to the men to take away.
And the two walked back along the Argive ships while she trailed on behind, reluctant every step.

But Achilles wept, and slipping away from his companions, far apart, sat down on the beach of the heaving gray sea and scanned the endless ocean.

Reaching out his arms, again and again he prayed to his dear mother:

“Mother! You gave me life, short as that life will be, so at least Olympian Zeus, thundering up on high, should give me honor. But now he gives me nothing. Atreus’ son Agamemnon, for all his far-flung kingdoms! The man disgraces me, seizes and keeps my prize. He tears her away himself!”

So he wept and prayed. And his noble mother heard him, seated near her father, The Old Man of the Sea, in the salt green depths. Suddenly, up she rose from the churning surf like mist, and settling down beside him as he wept, stroked Achilles gently, whispering his name:

“My child, why in tears? What sorrow has touched your heart? Tell me please. Don’t harbor it deep inside you. We must share it all.”

And now from his depths, the proud runner groaned:

“You know, you know. Why labor through it all? You know it all so well. We raided Thebe once, Eeetion’s sacred citadel. We ravaged the place, hauled all the plunder here, and the armies passed it round, share and share alike. And they chose the beauty Chryseis for Agamemnon.

But soon her father, the holy priest of Apollo the distant deadly Archer, Chryses, approached the fast trim ships of the Argives armed in bronze to win his daughter back, bringing a priceless ransom and bearing high in hand, wound on a golden staff, the wreaths of the god who strikes from worlds
away. He begged the whole Achaean army, but most of all the two supreme commanders, Atreus’ two sons.

“And all ranks of Achaean cried out their assent: ‘Respect the priest, accept the shining ransom!’”

“But it brought no joy to the heart of Agamemnon. Our high and mighty king dismissed the priest with a brutal order ringing in his ears. And shattered with anger, the old man withdrew; but Apollo heard his prayer—he loved him, deeply—he loosed his shaft at the Argives, withering plague, and now the troops began to drop and die in droves. The arrows of god went showering left and right, whipping through the Archaeans’ vast encampment. But the old seer who knew the cause full well revealed the will of the archer god Apollo.

“And I was the first, mother, I urged them all: ‘Appease the god at once!’

“That’s when the fury gripped the son of Atreus. Agamemnon leapt to his feet and hurled his threat—his threat’s been driven home. One girl, Chryseis, the fiery-eyed Achaean ferry out in a fast trim ship to Chryse Island, laden with presents for the god. The other girl—just now the heralds came and led her away from camp--Briseus’ daughter, the prize the armies gave me.

“But you, mother, if you have any power at all, protect your son! Go to Olympus, plead with Zeus, if you ever warmed his heart with a word or any action . . . now go and sit beside him, grasp his knees. Persuade him, somehow, to help the Trojan cause, to pin the Achaean back against their ships, trap them round the bay and mow them down. So all can reap the benefits of their king—so even mighty Atrides can see how mad he was to disgrace Achilles, the best of the Achaean!”

And Thetis answered, bursting into tears:

“Oh my son, my sorrow, why did I ever bear you? All I bore was doom. Would to god you could linger by your ships without a grief in the world, without a torment! Doomed to a short life, you have so little time. And not only short, now, but filled with heartbreak too, more than all other men alive—doomed twice over. Ahh … to a cruel fate I bore you in our halls!
“Still, I shall go to Olympus crowned with snow and repeat your prayer to Zeus, who loves the lightning. Perhaps he will be persuaded. But you, my child, stay here by the fast ships. Rage on at the Achaeans. Just keep clear of every foray in the fighting. Only yesterday, Zeus went off to the Ocean River to feast with the Ethiopians--loyal lordly men--and all the gods went with him. But in twelve days, the Father returns to Olympus. Then for your sake, up I go to the bronze floor, the royal house of Zeus. I’ll grasp his knees. I think I’ll win him over.”

With that vow, his mother went away and left him there alone, with his heart inflamed for the sashed and lovely girl they’d wrenched away from him against his will. But he raged on, grimly camped by his fast fleet, the royal son of Peleus, the swift runner Achilles. Now he no longer haunted the meeting grounds where men win glory. Now he no longer went to war. But day after day he ground his heart out, waiting there, yearning, always yearning for battle cries and combat.

But now, as the twelfth dawn after this shone clear, the gods who live forever marched home to Olympus, all in a long cortege, and Zeus led them on. And Thetis did not forget her son’s appeals. She broke from a cresting wave at first light, and soaring up to the broad sky and Mount Olympus, found the son of Cronus gazing down on the world, peaks apart from the other gods and seated high on the topmost crown of rugged, ridged Olympus.

And crouching down at his feet, quickly grasping his knees with her left hand, her right hand holding him underneath the chin, she prayed to the lord god Zeus, the son of Cronus:

“Zeus, Father Zeus! If I ever served you well among the deathless gods with a word or action, bring this prayer to pass: honor my son Achilles!—doomed to the shortest life of any man on earth. And now the lord of men Agamemnon has disgraced him, seizes and keeps his prize, tears her away himself. But you—exalt him, Olympian Zeus. Your urgings rule the world! Come, grant the Trojans victory after victory till the Achaean armies pay my dear son back, building higher the honor he deserves!”

She paused but Zeus who commands the storm clouds answered nothing. The Father sat there, silent. It seemed an eternity.
But Thetis, clasping his knees, held on, clinging, pressing her question once again:

“Grant my prayer, once and for all, Father. Bow your head in assent! Or deny me outright. What have you to fear? So I may know, too well, just how cruelly I am the most dishonored goddess of them all.”

Filled with anger, Zeus who marshals the storm clouds answered her at last:

“Disaster! You will drive me into war with Hera. She will provoke me--she with her shrill abuse. Even now in the face of all the immortal gods, she harries me perpetually. Hera charges me that I always to go battle for the Trojans.

“Away with you now. Hera might catch us here. I will see to this. I will bring it all to pass. Look, I will bow me head if that will satisfy you. That, I remind you, that among the immortal gods is the strongest, truest sign that I can give. No word or work of mine—nothing can be revoked, there is no treachery, nothing left unfinished once I bow my head to say it shall be done.”

So he decreed. And Zeus, the son of Cronus, bowed his craggy dark brows, and the deathless locks came pouring down from the thunderhead of the great immortal king, and giant shock waves spread through all Olympus.

So the two of them made their pact and parted. Deep in the sea she dove from radiant Mount Olympus. Zeus went back to his own halls, and all the gods in full assembly rose from their seats at once to meet the Father striding toward them now.

None dared remain at rest as Zeus advanced. They all sprang up to greet him face-to-face as he took his place before them on his throne.

But Hera knew it all. She had seen how Thetis--the Old Man of the Sea’s daughter--Thetis quick on her glistening feet was hatching plans with Zeus.

And suddenly Hera taunted the Father, son of Cronus:

“So, who of the gods this time, my treacherous one, was hatching plans
with you? Always your pleasure, whenever my back is turned, to settle things in your grand clandestine way. You never deign, do you, freely and frankly, to share your plots with me—never, not a word!”

The father of men and gods replied sharply:

“Hera—stop hoping to fathom all my thoughts. You will find them a trial, though you are my wife. Whatever is right for you to hear, no one, trust me, will know of it before you, neither god nor man—whatever I choose to plan apart from all the gods—no more of your everlasting questions, probe and pry no more.”

And Hera the Queen, her dark eyes wide, exclaimed:

“Dread majesty, son of Cronus, what are you saying? Now surely I’ve never probed or pried in the past. Why, you can scheme to your heart’s content without a qualm in the world for me. But now I have a terrible fear that she has won you over--Thetis, the Old Man of the Sea’s daughter, Thetis with her glistening feet. I know it. Just at dawn, she knelt down beside you and grasped your knees, and I suspect you bowed your head in assent to her—you granted once and for all to exalt Achilles now and slaughter hordes of Achaeans pinned against their ships.”

And Zeus who marshals the thunderheads returned:

“Maddening one! You and your eternal suspicions—I can never escape you. Ah … but tell me, Hera, just what can you do about all this? Nothing! Only estrange yourself from me a little more—and all the worse for you. If what you say is true, that must be my pleasure. Now go sit down. Be quiet now. Obey my orders, for fear the gods—however many Olympus holds—are powerless to protect you when I come to throttle you with my irresistible hands.”

He subsided but Hera the Queen, her eyes wider, was terrified. She sat in silence. She wrenched her will to his. And throughout the halls of Zeus the gods of heaven quaked with fear.

At last, when the sun’s fiery light had set, each immortal went to rest in his own house -- the splendid high halls that Hephaestus had built for each with
all his craft and cunning--the famous crippled blacksmith. And Olympian Zeus, the Lord of Lightning, went to his own bed where he had always lain when welcome sleep came upon him. There he climbed, and there he slept. And by his side lay Hera the queen, the goddess of the golden throne.