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The Curse of a Necessity: Art and Beauty in The Iliad

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THE CURSE OF A NECESSITY: ART AND BEAUTY IN THE ILIAD

One subtle theme of Homer’s Iliad centers around the curse of a necessity, the human need for art and beauty. Homer examines this theme—the need for art and beauty—as both a curse and a necessity. The background for The Iliad begins with an argument concerning the goddesses Athena, Aphrodite, and Hera. Each of the goddesses is jealous of the others and wants to be proclaimed the most beautiful of the three. Zeus wisely stays out of the argument by sending the goddesses to Alexandros (Paris, a prince of Troy) to make the decision.

Ironically, Paris chooses Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love and Beauty, because (1) Aphrodite has promised Paris the fairest woman in the world (Helen) if he would choose her, and (2) Paris wants to avoid the wars that would have resulted from accepting Hera’s or Athena’s bribe. With this choice the scene is set for the Trojan war and for Homer’s Iliad.

Paris’ choice presents one of the symbols of The Iliad—Aphrodite represents the main curse and blessing of a necessity in the book (and to Paris) because she represents erotic love and beauty. Helen’s beauty is indirectly the cause of the war. The Trojans and the Greeks fight not merely for the property of a woman, but also because of her beauty. The counselors of Priam realize this as they sit on the tower of Troy watching the battle:

...and watching Helen as she climbed the stair in the undertones they said to one another:

"We cannot rage at her, it is no wonder that Trojans and Akhaians under arms should for so long have borne the pains of war for one like this."

"Unearthliness. A goddess the woman is to look at."
"Ah, but still, still, even so, being all that she is, let her go in the ships and take her scourge from us and from our children."

(pp. 72-73)
However, the curse of the necessity of possessing this beauty will not let them release Helen and quit the war. Homer underscores this with another argument over the beautiful woman Briseis.

Achilles' and Agamemnon's quarrel over Briseis draws two more concepts into Homer's theme. First, Briseis is given to Achilles as a prize of war because he is a great warrior and she is beautiful. This is important because the most beautiful and best wrought (artistically and in strength) prizes of war belonged to the strongest and best warriors. These prizes were necessary status symbols that were immediately recognized, and the warrior was often identified by these. Homer provides an example of this when Patroklos wears Achilles' gear to war and everyone thinks it is Achilles.

The workmanship of the armor was often as beautiful as it was practical. Homer's description of Agamemnon's gear as the Danaans prepare for battle provides an example:

The son of Atreus cried out, "Troops in arms!" and clothed himself in armor of bright bronze. Upon his legs he fitted beautiful greaves with silver ankle straps. Around his chest he buckled on a cuirass, long ago a pledge of friendship from the Lord Kinryras, who heard his fame at Kypros, on the eve of the Achaean sailings against Troy.

To please the Achaean king he made this gift, a cuirass with ten bands of dark enamel, twelve of gold, twenty of tin. Dark blue enamel serpents, three on either side, arched toward the neck, like rainbows that Lord Zeus will pose on cloud as Presages to men. Across his shoulder and chest hung a sword whose hilt bore shining golden studs, and bands of cuirass glistened on the scabbard, hooked to a gilt baldric. Next he took his shield, a broad one and a work of art for battle, circled ten times with bronze; the twenty studs were pale tin round the rim, the central boss dark blue enamel that a fire-eyed Gorgon's horrifying maw enclosed, with Rout and Terror flanking her. Silver the shield strap whereon a dark blue serpent twined—three heads, put forth by one trunk, flexing every way. Then Agamemnon fitted on his a helmet double-ridged, with horsehair nodding savage. Last, two tough spears he took, whetted sharp, and that close gleams of sunlight far into a necessity in itself (in the sense that beauty was that they have to possess it). For example, he is a man of the arts and a man of war. When Achilles of forgetting the fight over Briseis (beauty) can be persuaded to give her back to Achilles in the war. The Trojan counselors recognize the necessity when practicality is needed.

"Ah, but still, even so, being all that is and take her scourge from us and But they do not act on this feeling and are ever

Homer stresses this part of his theme in made by Hephaistos for Achilles is a work of and all living things (for a description of the
Cessity of possessing this beauty will not suit the war. Homer underscores this with another woman Briseis.

Briseis is given to Akhilleus as a prize of war and she is beautiful. This is important because wrought (artistically and in strength) prizes of war and best warriors. These prizes were necessary status recognized, and the warrior was often identified by example of this when Patroklos wears Akhilleus' gear it is Akhilleus.

Armor was often as beautiful as it was practical. Homer's gear as the Danaans prepare for battle:

Of Atreus cried out, "Troops in arms!" clothed himself in armor of bright bronze, leggs he fitted beautiful greaves silver anklets straps. Around his chest a broadened on a cuirass, long ago of friendship from the Lord Kinyres, and his fame at Kypros, on the eve Akhalian sailings against Troy, the Akhalian king he made this gift, gold, twenty of tin. Dark blue serpents, three on either side, toward the neck, like rainbows that Lord Zeus on cloud as Presages to men.

his shoulder and chest hung a sword built bore shining golden studs, and bands glinted on the scabbard, hooked salt balfred. Next he took his shield, one and a work of art for battle, ten times with bronze; the twenty studed tin round the rim, the central boss gold, twelve enamelled that a fire-eyed Gorgon's ring enamel enclosed, with Rout terror flanking her. Silver the shield strap a dark blue serpent twined—three heads, with one trunk, flexing every way.

Then Agamemnon fitted on his brow a helmet double-ridged, with four white crests of horsehair nodding savagely above it. Last, two tough spears he took with brazen spearheads whetted sharp, and that clear bronze reflected gleams of sunlight far into heaven... (p. 252)

Yet, just as important as the aesthetics of the gear was to the warrior, so was the curse it brought. Beautiful or superbly crafted gear was a greatly prized spoil of war. (Homer shows the reader this repeatedly as hundreds of bodies are stripped of their gear when they are killed—even during the midst of the battle and at great danger to the person trying to take it.) Because beautiful and greatly crafted gear was an important status of war, the men who wore it were cursed in that they attracted more people to fight them in the hopes of gaining their shield or weapons.

Along with his concept of beauty as a necessary curse (i.e. spoil) of war, Homer also deals with the practicality of the necessity of the curse. Homer seems to indicate that men would be in a far better condition if beauty was not a necessity in itself (in the sense that beauty is a necessity because men feel that they have to possess it). For example, Homer shows Akhilleus to be both a man of the arts and a man of war. When Akhilleus can accept the practicality of forgetting the fight over Briseis (beauty) because of the war and Agamemnon can be persuaded to give her back to Akhilleus, the Greeks once again do well in the war. The Trojan counselors recognize the same concept—the curse of a necessity when practicality is needed.

"Ah, but still,
still, even so, being all that she is, let her go in the ships and take her scourge from us and from our children." (p.73)

But they do not act on this feeling and are eventually defeated.

Homer stresses this part of his theme in yet another way. The shield made by Hephaistos for Akhilleus is a work of art that represents all of life and all living things (for a description of the shield see pp. 450-454 of
The Iliad. Yet for all its beauty and all its wonder, the practical gold layer in the shield stopped the spears and saved Akhilleus' life—not the beautiful art work. This theme of Homer's is subtly discovered—the curse of the necessity for art and beauty can be tempered only by the practicality of the object in its art or beauty. Hektor demonstrates this theme when he taunts Paris for his cowardly behavior in Book 3:

"You bad-luck charm!
Paris, the great lover, a gallant sight!
You should have had no seed and died unmarried.
Would to god you had!
Better than living this way in dishonor,
in everyone's contempt.
Now they can laugh, Akalans
who thought you were a first-rate man, a champion,
going by looks—and no backbone, no staying
power is in you." (p. 68-69)

This theme is also stated by Priam as he rages at his beautiful—but in war useless—sons in Book 24 as he prepares to retrieve Hektor's body:

"Bestir yourselves, you misbegotten whelps, share of my house! Would god you had been killed instead of Hektor at the line of ships.
How curst I am in everything! I fathered first-rate men, in our great Troy; but now I swear not one is left: Mésor, Tróilos,
laughing amid the war-cars; and then Hektor—a god to soldiers, and a god among them, seeming not a man's child, but a god's.
Ares killed them. These poltroons are left, hollow men, dancers, heroes of the dance, light-fingered pillagers of lambs and kids from the town pens!... (pp. 575-576)

The Iliad is a bold book that describes the details of a war. It is also a subtle book that discovers the elements of a civilization.