The Quarrel by the Ships

[The invocation to the Muse; Agamemnon insults Apollo; Apollo sends the plague onto the army; the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon; Calchas indicates what must be done to appease Apollo; Agamemnon takes Briseis from Achilles; Achilles prays to Thetis for revenge; Achilles meets Thetis; Chryseis is returned to her father; Thetis visits Zeus; the gods converse about the matter on Olympus; the banquet of the gods]

Sing, Goddess, sing of the rage of Achilles, son of Peleus—that murderous anger which condemned Achaeans to countless agonies and threw many warrior souls deep into Hades, leaving their dead bodies carrion food for dogs and birds—all in fulfilment of the will of Zeus.

Start at the point where Agamemnon, son of Atreus, that king of men, quarrelled with noble Achilles. Which of the gods incited these two men to fight?

That god was Apollo, son of Zeus and Leto. Angry with Agamemnon, he cast plague down onto the troops—deadly infectious evil. For Agamemnon had dishonoured the god’s priest, Chryses, who’d come to the ships to find his daughter, Chryseis, bringing with him a huge ransom. In his hand he held up on a golden staff the scarf sacred to archer god Apollo. He begged Achaeans, above all the army’s leaders, the two sons of Atreus:

“Menelaus, Agamemnon, sons of Atreus, all you well-armed Achaeans, may the gods on Olympus grant you wipe out Priam’s city, and then return home safe and sound. Release my dear child to me. Take this ransom. Honour Apollo, far-shooting son of Zeus.”

All the Achaeans roared out their support:
“Respect the priest. Take the generous ransom.”

Displeased, Agamemnon dismissed Chryses roughly:

“Old man,
don’t let me catch you by our hollow ships,
sneaking back here today or later on.
Who cares about Apollo’s scarf and staff?
I’ll not release the girl to you, no, not before
she’s grown old with me in Argos, far from
home,
working the loom, sharing my bed. Go away.
If you want to get home safely, don’t anger me.”

The old man, afraid, obeyed his words, walked off in silence,
along the shore by the tumbling, crashing surf.
Some distance off, he prayed to lord Apollo,
Leto’s fair-haired child:

“God with the silver bow,
protector of Chryse, sacred
Cilla,
mighty lord of Tenedos, Sminthean Apollo,
hear my prayer:* If I’ve ever pleased you
with a holy shrine, or burned bones for you—
bulls and goats well wrapped in fat—
grant me my prayer. Force the Danaans
to pay full price for my tears with your arrows.”

So Chryses prayed. Phoebus Apollo heard him.
He came down from Olympus top enraged,
carrying on his shoulders bow and covered quiver,
his arrows rattling in anger against his arm.
So the god swooped down, descending like the night.
He sat some distance from the ships, shot off an arrow—
the silver bow reverberating ominously.

First, the god massacred mules and swift-running
dogs,
then loosed sharp arrows in among the troops themselves.
Thick fires burned the corpses ceaselessly.

For nine days Apollo rained death down upon the troops.
On the tenth, Achilles summoned an assembly.
White-armed Hera put that thought into his mind,
concerned for the Danaans, seeing them die.
The men gathered. The meeting came to order.
Swift-footed Achilles rose to speak:
“Son of Atreus,
I fear we’re being beaten back, forced home,
if we aren’t all going to be destroyed right here,
with war and plague killing off Achaeans.
Come now, let’s ask some prophet, priest,
interpreter of dreams—for dreams, too, come
from Zeus—
a man who might say why Apollo is so angry,
whether he faults our prayers and offerings,
whether somehow he’ll welcome sacrificial
smoke
from perfect lambs and goats, then rouse
himself
and release us from this plague.”

Achilles spoke and took his seat.
Then Calchas, Thestor’s son, stood up before them all,
the most astute interpreter of birds, who understood
present, future, past. His skill in prophecy,
Apollo’s gift, had led Achaean ships to Troy.
He addressed the troops, thinking of their common good:

“Achilles, friend of Zeus, you ask me to
explain
Apollo’s anger, the god who shoots from
far.
And I will speak. But first you listen to
me.
Swear an oath that you will freely help me
in word and deed. I think I may provoke
someone who wields great power over
Argives,
a man who is obeyed by everyone.
An angry king overpowers lesser men.
Even if that day his anger is suppressed,
resentment lingers in his chest, until one
day
he acts on it. So speak. Will you protect
me?”

In response to Calchas, swift-footed Achilles said:

“Take courage. State what your powers tell you.
By Apollo, whom Zeus loves, to whom you,
Calchas,  
pray in prophesy to the Danaans, I swear this—  
while I live to look upon the light of day,  
no Achaean will raise violent hands against you,  
nor, not even if you name  
Agamemnon,  
who claims he’s by far the best Achaean.”

Encouraged, the wise prophet then declared:

“Apollo does not fault us for prayers or offerings,  
but for his priest, disgraced by Agamemnon,  
who did not free his daughter and take ransom.  
That’s why the archer god has brought disaster,  
and will bring still more. He won’t remove  
this wretched plague from the Danaans,  
until we hand back bright-eyed Chryseis,  
give her to her beloved father, freely,  
without ransom, and offer holy sacrifice  
at Chryse. If we will carry out all that,  
we may change Apollo’s mind, appease him.”

So he spoke and sat back down. Then, Atreus’ son,  
wide-ruling, mighty Agamemnon, stood up before them,  
incensed, spirit filled with huge black rage.  
Eyes blazing fire, he rounded first on Calchas:

“Prophet of evil, when have you ever said  
good things to me? You love to predict the worst,  
always the worst! You never show good news.  
Now, in prophecy to the Danaans,  
you say archer Apollo brings us pain  
because I was unwilling to accept  
fine ransom for Chryses’ daughter, Chryseis.  
But I have a great desire to take her home.  
In fact, I want her more than Clytaemnestra,  
the wife I married. Chryseis is just as good  
in her shape, physique, intelligence, or work.  
Still, I’m prepared to give her back, if that’s best.  
I want the people safe, not all killed off.  
But then you’ll owe me another prize.  
I won’t be the only Argive left without a gift.
That would be entirely unfair to me. You all can see my spoils are going elsewhere.”

At that point, swift-footed Achilles answered the king:

“Noble son of Atreus, most acquisitive of men, how can brave Achaeans give you a prize now? There are none left for us to pass around. We’ve divided up what we allotted, loot from captured towns we devastated. For men to make a common pile again would be most unfair. Send the girl back now, as the god demands. Should Zeus ever grant we pillage Troy, a city rich in goods, we’ll give you three or four times as much.”

Mighty Agamemnon then said in reply:

“Achilles, you’re a fine man, like a god. But don’t conceal what’s in your heart. You’ll not trick me or win me with your words. You intend to keep your prizes for yourself, while the army takes my trophy from me. That’s why you tell me to give Chryseis back. Let Achaeans give me another prize, equal in value, something I’ll enjoy. If not, then I’ll take a prize myself by force, something from you or Ajax or Odysseus. The man I visit is going to be enraged. But let’s postpone discussion of all this. Let’s drag a black ship to the sacred sea, select a crew, load oxen on for sacrifice, and Chryseis, that fair-complexioned girl. Let’s have as leader some wise counsellor—Idomeneus, Ajax, godlike Odysseus, or you, Peleus’s son, most eminent of all, so with a sacrifice we may appease the god who shoots from far away.”

Scowling grimly, swift-footed Achilles interposed:

“You insatiable creature, quite shameless. How can any Achaean obey you willingly—join a raiding party or keep fighting with full force against an enemy? I didn’t come to battle over here because of Trojans. I have no fight with them.
They never stole my bulls or horses
or razed my crops in fertile Phthia,
where heroes grow. Many shady mountains
and the roaring sea stand there between us.
But you, great shameless man, we came with you,
to please you, to win honour from the Trojans—
for you, dog face, and for Menelaus.
You don’t consider this, don’t think at all.
You threaten now to confiscate the prize
I worked so hard for, gift from Achaea’s sons.
When we Achaeans loot some well-built Trojan
town,
my prizes never match the ones you get.
The major share of war’s fury rests on me.
But when we hand around the battle spoils,
you get much larger trophies. Worn out in war,
I reach my ships with something fine but small.
So I’ll return home now to Phthia.
It’s far better to sail back in my curved ships.
I don’t fancy staying here unvalued,
to pile up riches, treasures just for you.”

To that, Agamemnon, king of men, shot back:

“Fly off home then, if that’s your heart’s desire.
I’ll not beg you to stay on my account.
I have others around to honour me,
especially all-wise Zeus himself.
Of all the kings Zeus cherishes, it’s you
I hate the most. You love constant strife—
war and combat. So what if you’re strong?
Some god gave you that. So scurry off home.
Take ships and friends. Go rule your
Myrmidons.
I don’t like you or care about your rage.
But I’ll make this threat: I’ll take your prize,
fair-cheeked Briseis. I’ll fetch her in person.
You’ll see just how much I’m the better man.
And others will hate to speak to me as peers,
in public claiming full equality with me.”