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HOMER

The Iliad

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Translated by ROBERT FAGLES

H O M E R

The
Iliad

TRANSLATED BY
Robert Fagles

INTRODUCTION AND
NOTES BY
BERNARD KNOX

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The Rage of Achilles

Rage—Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles,
 murderous, doomed, that cost the Achaeans countless losses,
 hurling down to the House of Death so many sturdy souls,
 great fighters' souls, but made their bodies carrion,
 feasts for the dogs and birds,
 and the will of Zeus was moving toward its end.
 Begin, Muse, when the two first broke and clashed,
 Agamemnon lord of men and brilliant Achilles.

What god drove them to fight with such a fury?
 Apollo the son of Zeus and Leto. Incensed at the king
 he swept a fatal plague through the army—men were dying
 and all because Agamemnon spurned Apollo's priest.
 Yes, Chryses approached the Achaeans' fast ships
 to win his daughter back, bringing a priceless ransom

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and bearing high in hand, wound on a golden staff,
 the wreaths of the god, the distant deadly Archer.
 He begged the whole Achaean army but most of all
 the two supreme commanders, Atreus' two sons,
 "Agamemnon, Menelaus—all Argives geared for war!
 May the gods who hold the halls of Olympus give you
 Priam's city to plunder, then safe passage home. 20
 Just set my daughter free, my dear one . . . here,
 accept these gifts, this ransom. Honor the god
 who strikes from worlds away—the son of Zeus, Apollo!"

And all ranks of Achaeans cried out their assent:
 "Respect the priest, accept the shining ransom!"
 But it brought no joy to the heart of Agamemnon.
 The king dismissed the priest with a brutal order
 ringing in his ears: "Never again, old man,
 let me catch sight of you by the hollow ships! 30
 Not loitering now, not slinking back tomorrow.
 The staff and the wreaths of god will never save you then.
 The girl—I won't give up the girl. Long before that,
 old age will overtake her in *my* house, in Argos,
 far from her fatherland, slaving back and forth
 at the loom, forced to share my bed!

Now go,
 don't tempt my wrath—and you may depart alive."

The old man was terrified. He obeyed the order,
 turning, trailing away in silence down the shore
 where the battle lines of breakers crash and drag. 40
 And moving off to a safe distance, over and over
 the old priest prayed to the son of sleek-haired Leto,
 lord Apollo, "Hear me, Apollo! God of the silver bow
 who strides the walls of Chryse and Cilla sacrosanct—
 lord in power of Tenedos—Smintheus, god of the plague!
 If I ever roofed a shrine to please your heart,
 ever burned the long rich bones of bulls and goats
 on your holy altar, now, now bring my prayer to pass.
 Pay the Danaans back—your arrows for my tears!"

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His prayer went up and Phoebus Apollo heard him. 50
 Down he strode from Olympus' peaks, storming at heart
 with his bow and hooded quiver slung across his shoulders.
 The arrows clanged at his back as the god quaked with rage,
 the god himself on the march and down he came like night.
 Over against the ships he dropped to a knee, let fly a shaft
 and a terrifying clash rang out from the great silver bow.
 First he went for the mules and circling dogs but then,
 launching a piercing shaft at the men themselves,
 he cut them down in droves—
 and the corpse-fires burned on, night and day, no end in sight. 60

Nine days the arrows of god swept through the army.
 On the tenth Achilles called all ranks to muster—
 the impulse seized him, sent by white-armed Hera
 grieving to see Achaean fighters drop and die.
 Once they'd gathered, crowding the meeting grounds,
 the swift runner Achilles rose and spoke among them:
 "Son of Atreus, now we are beaten back, I fear,
 the long campaign is lost. So home we sail . . .
 if we can escape our death—if war and plague
 are joining forces now to crush the Argives. 70
 But wait: let us question a holy man,
 a prophet, even a man skilled with dreams—
 dreams as well can come our way from Zeus—
 come, someone to tell us why Apollo rages so,
 whether he blames us for a vow we failed, or sacrifice.
 If only the god would share the smoky savor of lambs
 and full-grown goats, Apollo might be willing, still,
 somehow, to save us from this plague."

So he proposed
 and down he sat again as Calchas rose among them,
 Thestor's son, the clearest by far of all the seers 80
 who scan the flight of birds. He knew all things that are,
 all things that are past and all that are to come,
 the seer who had led the Argive ships to Troy
 with the second sight that god Apollo gave him.
 For the armies' good the seer began to speak:

"Achilles, dear to Zeus . . .

you order me to explain Apollo's anger,
the distant deadly Archer? I will tell it all.

But strike a pact with me, swear you will defend me
with all your heart, with words and strength of hand. 90

For there is a man I will enrage—I see it now—
a powerful man who lords it over all the Argives,
one the Achaeans must obey . . . A mighty king,
raging against an inferior, is too strong.

Even if he can swallow down his wrath today,
still he will nurse the burning in his chest
until, sooner or later, he sends it bursting forth.
Consider it closely, Achilles. Will you save me?"

And the matchless runner reassured him: "Courage!
Out with it now, Calchas. Reveal the will of god, 100
whatever you may know. And I swear by Apollo
dear to Zeus, the power you pray to, Calchas,
when you reveal god's will to the Argives—no one,
not while I am alive and see the light on earth, no one
will lay his heavy hands on you by the hollow ships.
None among all the armies. Not even if you mean
Agamemnon here who now claims to be, by far,
the best of the Achaeans."

The seer took heart
and this time he spoke out, bravely: "Beware—
he casts no blame for a vow we failed, a sacrifice. 110
The god's enraged because Agamemnon spurned his priest,
he refused to free his daughter, he refused the ransom.
That's why the Archer sends us pains and he will send us more
and never drive this shameful destruction from the Argives,
not till we give back the girl with sparkling eyes
to her loving father—no price, no ransom paid—
and carry a sacred hundred bulls to Chryse town.
Then we can calm the god, and only then appease him."

So he declared and sat down. But among them rose
the fighting son of Atreus, lord of the far-flung kingdoms, 120

Agamemnon—furious, his dark heart filled to the brim,
 blazing with anger now, his eyes like searing fire.
 With a sudden, killing look he wheeled on Calchas first:
 “Seer of misery! Never a word that works to my advantage!
 Always misery warms your heart, your prophecies—
 never a word of profit said or brought to pass.
 Now, again, you divine god’s will for the armies,
 bruit it about, as fact, why the deadly Archer
 multiplies our pains: because I, I refused
 that glittering price for the young girl Chryseis. 130
 Indeed, I prefer *her* by far, the girl herself,
 I want her mine in my own house! I rank her higher
 than Clytemnestra, my wedded wife—she’s nothing less
 in build or breeding, in mind or works of hand.
 But I am willing to give her back, even so,
 if that is best for all. What I really want
 is to keep my people safe, not see them dying.
 But fetch me another prize, and straight off too,
 else I alone of the Argives go without my honor.
 That would be a disgrace. You are all witness, 140
 look—*my* prize is snatched away!”

But the swift runner
 Achilles answered him at once, “Just how, Agamemnon,
 great field marshal . . . most grasping man alive,
 how can the generous Argives give you prizes now?
 I know of no troves of treasure, piled, lying idle,
 anywhere. Whatever we dragged from towns we plundered,
 all’s been portioned out. But collect it, call it back
 from the rank and file? *That* would be the disgrace.
 So return the girl to the god, at least for now.
 We Achaeans will pay you back, three, four times over, 150
 if Zeus will grant us the gift, somehow, someday,
 to raze Troy’s massive ramparts to the ground.”

But King Agamemnon countered, “Not so quickly,
 brave as you are, godlike Achilles—trying to cheat *me*.
 Oh no, you won’t get past me, take me in that way!
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P E N G U I N



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