

# Adler and Achilles

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Adler rejected Freud's theory that there was a biologically determined tendency to an incestuous relationship between the growing boy and his mother. This relationship, to which Freud gave the name Oedipus complex, was, in Adler's view, due solely to "an error of upbringing" (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1958, 185). Adler considered the name of the complex to be "poorly chosen" and thought that there was no "proper correspondence between its manifestation and its name" (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1958, 185). The Oedipus complex simply "characterises a pampered child who does not want to give up his mother" (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1958, p. 185). "The so-called Oedipus complex is in reality nothing more than a special instance of the 'narrow stable' of the neurotic" (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1958, p. 278). If the individual is unable to cultivate satisfying love relationships in the world at large, his sexual strivings will quite likely be elaborated within his family circle. The Oedipus complex, when it is present, is therefore one aspect of the child's neurotic struggle. It may be regarded as "a stage of the masculine protest . . . which in itself is insignificant although instructive in its context" (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1958, p. 69). The complex "is not very frequent" and "is but a figure of speech" (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1958, p. 375).

Many authorities, both literary and psychological, have in effect supported Adler's criticism of this Freudian concept. Sir Maurice Bowra, a famous classical scholar, has suggested a number of explanations of the Oedipus myth (Bowra, 1944, pp. 162-211), but none of them supports Freud's theory. May (1960) thought that Freud erred by interpreting the myth too literally, but even that view does not really bear examination. Ellis (1962), on the other hand, considers that Freud "was brilliantly **creating** clinical interpretations to make them fit the procrustean bed of his enormously one-sided Oedipal theories."

The results of an investigation by Valentine (1956) clearly demonstrated that the Oedipal situation certainly cannot be regarded as universal. More recently, Atkins (1966) has discussed the psycho-social aspects of the Oedipus legend. She concludes that Oedipus was "a power-striving individual with a superiority complex, who goes to the most extreme lengths to prove his superiority ---" ( p. 184).

The alternative view of the origin of the Oedipus complex put forward by Adler has a greater "face validity" than Freud's and is also in keeping with current theories about learning and the social development of children. For according to Adler, the so-called Oedipus complex can be induced in a child by its parents. All that is needed for the production of an Oedipus complex is for "his mother to spoil him . . . and for his father to be comparatively indifferent

or cold” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1958, p. 278). Adler attached enormous importance to the pre-school period of the child’s development and in his view the child’s “life style” was formed during these early years. Therefore it cannot be understood without reference to the people who looked after him when he was a child (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1958, pp. 127, 386). If the influence of the child’s environment is beneficent, then he can develop without any serious conflicts with his parents. If, on the other hand, the factors influencing the child’s development are unfavorable, then according to Adler, he may develop a pathological style of life. Thus, while Freud emphasized the inevitability of conflict between the child and its parents, Adler left the issue open. The presence or absence of child-parent conflict depended upon how the child was treated and not upon an inevitable developmental factor.

In Adler’s view, the pampered child acquires a number of maladaptive behaviors which it weaves together into a false style of life. This concept of the pampered child has been criticised because it is too all-embracing. But such a global concept is admirably suited to literary description. In literature characters are treated “in-the-round.” The author may spend considerable time and use many devices in order to produce a “three-dimensional character,” who stands out as a recognizable human being.

So in classical literature, the heroic figure of Achilles admirably illustrates the Adlerian concept of the pampered child. The correspondence between the character of Achilles and the spoilt child of Individual Psychology is so close that it would not be unreasonable to give the term “Achillean complex” to the system of psychological forces which produce the spoilt child.

Achilles is the main hero of Homer’s *Iliad*, and the major theme of the poem is the “wrath” of Achilles and his exploits at the siege of Troy. However, Homer does tell us enough about the childhood of Achilles to indicate that he was pampered as a child, in the manner described by Adler. Certainly, the adult career of this warrior figure conformed to Adler’s view that “pampered children do not develop social feeling; they become despots who expect society to conform to their self-centered wishes.” They are, “potentially the most dangerous class in society” (Hall & Lindzey, 1957, p. 127).

### **The childhood of Achilles**

Achilles seems to have been a precocious child. He “shot up like a young sapling” and his protective mother “nourished him like a young plant in a fruitful vineyard.” He was brought up in Phthia in western Greece. His father, Peleus, was the ruler of the Myrmidons. His mother, Thetis, was a goddess who had been compelled by Zeus to marry the mortal Peleus. Since her marriage was forced upon her, it is not surprising that after a difficult birth, Thetis should lavish her affection upon her son. There seems to have been little affection

between Thetis and her husband and when Achilles left home, Thetis herself went back to live with her aged father in the depths of the sea.

Peleus is never said to have taken any interest in his son, although on the eve of his departure for Troy, he seems to have had some misgivings about him. "You must control the stout-hearted spirit in your breast," he said. "Take no part in evil-breeding strife . . ." (Homer's *Iliad*, 1963, p. 258). Perhaps Peleus had been too busy ruling his warlike Myrmidons to give any time to the care of his son. If so, then it is fair to say that Achilles had an indifferent father and a pampering mother, which are the ideal conditions for producing a pampered child (Adler, 1952, pp. 54, 92).

The pampering process was also reinforced by Phoinix, the tutor of Achilles. Phoinix came as a suppliant to the house of Peleus, who received him and loved him "as a father might love his only son" (Homer's *Iliad*, 1963, p. 481). He also put him in charge of his young son Achilles, who became very attached to Phoinix and "was not willing to be in anyone else's company" (Homer's *Iliad*, 1963, p. 486). The tiresome behavior of the young Achilles supports the view that he was a spoilt child. For many years later, Phoinix reminded him of his annoying childish behavior.

Many times you soaked my shirt all down the front, by squirting out wine in your annoying, childish manner. Thus I endured much annoyance and put up with many things from you (Homer's *Iliad*, 1963, p. 490ff).

Since Phoinix has no children, he "adopted" Achilles as his son so that he might protect him from any unbearable hardship (Homer's *Iliad*, 1963, p. 495). Phoinix's self-interested concern for Achilles may therefore have led him to spoil the child, in the hope of attaching the lad to him.

There was also another significant figure within the family circle of Achilles. This was his bosom friend, Patroclus. Patroclus, when a youth, had killed a companion in a quarrel over a game of dice and his father Menoitios brought him as a suppliant to the palace of Peleus in Phthia. The two youths grew up together and formed a "David and Jonathan" type of friendship. Achilles was the dominant partner, being more extraverted and impetuous than Patroclus, who was gentler and milder, although older than Achilles.

Another significant fact about Achilles is that he was an only child. For although his father Peleus "surpassed all men in wealth and happiness . . . the god also gave him sorrow . . . because no offspring of powerful sons were born to him in his palace." Achilles was thus an **only** child and later, the **younger** child, within the extended family group. Not only was he "not dethroned" (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1958, p. 380), but in addition he had an older companion whose admiration must have increased his own self-esteem.

Thus the data on the early life of Achilles strongly suggests that he was the center of attention within his family group. He was spoilt by an indulgent tutor. He was watched over by a very solicitous mother and admired by an elder

foster-brother. By contrast, his own father showed little interest in him. He therefore knew no rival as a child, and as his subsequent history makes clear, he was endowed with more than ordinary physical prowess. So the young Achilles had an almost ideal opportunity to develop a pampered style of life. The hypothesis that he did so is substantiated by considering his behavior after he left home for Troy.

### **Achilles and Agamemnon.**

When we first meet Achilles in the *Iliad* he is on the point of having a bitter quarrel with Agamemnon, the Commander-in-Chief of the Argive expedition against Troy. The quarrel arose during an assembly of the chieftains which Achilles had called because an epidemic had broken out in the camp and was decimating the army. Achilles was quite entitled to summon such an assembly and to suggest that Calchas the soothsayer should be consulted about the cause of the epidemic. But somewhat rashly, Achilles also swore a great oath to protect Calchas if his diagnosis offended any of the Achaian chieftains, even if he "named" Agamemnon, "who now boasts that he is much the noblest of the Achaians." The initiative shown by Achilles and his promise to protect Calchas suggest that he was accustomed to exercising undisputed authority within his peer group.

Calchas said that Agamemnon was responsible for the plague, because he had angered Apollo by taking captive the daughter of one of Apollo's priests. To appease the god, the girl must be returned to her father at once. If she was to be sent back, then Agamemnon insisted that he should be given another girl in her place. Eventually he threatened to seize the girl that Achilles had captured. In addition, Agamemnon deliberately included Achilles at the tail end of a list of heroes who might be chosen for the important task of returning his own captive to her father. Thus Achilles was deliberately insulted by Agamemnon. For the first time in his life he was confronted by a superior authority and had to play second fiddle to someone else. He was therefore, at last, "dethroned" by a superior. He retaliated by accusing Agamemnon of lack of leadership in the forays and battles during the nine years that the Argive expedition had been campaigning in the Troad. "You never have had the courage either to arm with your troops for battle, or to lie in ambush with the noblest of the Achaians."

These accusations were accompanied by vituperative epithets hurled at Agamemnon. Achilles called him "dog-faced," "shameless," "dog-eyed and deer-hearted," "most avaricious of men," "ruler of rascals." Such "spiteful accusation" is a typical response of the individual with a pampered style of life when he is placed in an unfavorable situation (Adler, 1965, p. 98). The intense anger displayed by Achilles in the face of Agamemnon's threats and immediate withdrawal of Achilles from the fighting show the "hypersensitivity, impatience,

exaggerated emotion and phenomenon of retreat" in a person who "has not yet abandoned his early acquired pampered life style" (Adler, 1965, p. 98).

So incensed was Achilles by Agamemnon's insults that he actually contemplated an attack upon the commander-in-chief. "He was in two minds whether he should rouse the people, draw his sword and kill Agamemnon or subdue his anger. . . ." This episode is a good example of the manifestation of the Adlerian Oedipus complex in the adult. Achilles rages against the father figure of Agamemnon, "not on account of the repression of the Oedipus complex, but on account of the shock he receives when confronted by other situations" (i.e. by difficult and/or frustrating circumstances). Under such conditions the pampered adult "gets into such a frenzied state that he even harbors murderous designs against other persons who oppose his wishes" (Adler, 1949, p. 214). Then in a final burst of anger, Achilles swears a great oath that a "yearning for Achilles will come upon all Achaians" and that Agamemnon "will eat his heart out" because "he did not honour the noblest of the Achaians."

In personally striving to humiliate Agamemnon, Achilles completely disregards the injury he is causing to the other Argive leaders and their men. He is concerned only "to reach his goal of **personal** superiority" (Adler, 1965, p. 211). In striving for neurotic significance, he cares nothing for the sufferings of others. Without the help of Achilles the Argive expedition may well lose their bridgehead on the plain before Troy. But Achilles is prepared to allow the whole expedition to perish in revenge for a personal insult. He is completely without social concern. Chieftains and troops alike may be wounded and slaughtered, "so that they all may gain full benefit from their king." This waste of life is a result of Achilles' injured self-esteem. For Achilles not only ranks **himself** as more worthy of honour than any other Achaian leader, he also places the whole campaign in jeopardy, because he so bitterly resents the insults and superior power of Agamemnon. He also fixes the blame for the disaster when it comes, fairly and squarely upon the shoulders of Agamemnon. This again "is the style of life of a pampered child: he tries to make others responsible" (Adler, 1952, p. 87).

### **Mother and son**

After Achilles had vented his spite against Agamemnon, he wandered along the seashore far away from his comrades. "He sat down by himself and burst into tears. . . . Gazing over the boundless ocean, he stretched out his hands and prayed earnestly to his mother."

Far away "his lady mother heard him, as she was sitting beside her aged father in the depths of the sea. . . Like a mist, she arose from the hoary deep. She seated herself beside her son, caressed him with her hand and spoke to him, calling him by name." Achilles then poured out his complaints to his mother and displayed another characteristic of the pampered person who, "when faced with

difficulties (he) has only one method of meeting them, that is, to make demands on others” (Ansbacher, 1958, p. 370). He himself will do nothing but sulk by the ships. Zeus and Thetis must help him. In asking for the help of Zeus, Achilles was making an ultimate demand upon life, for there was no higher authority to which he could appeal than to “Zeus, the father of gods and men.” His appeal for help to the ultimate authority illustrates another characteristic of the pampered life style developed by a spoiled child. “Pampered children . . . think that it is sufficient that they should want something and that the world should hasten to fulfill their demands” (Adler, 1952, p. 233). It is not unreasonable to equate Adler’s term “the world” with Zeus, whose will was all-powerful and therefore represented the ultimate in environmental factors.

Achilles asked his mother to approach Zeus with the request that the Trojans should defeat the Achaians and so make Agamemnon realize how foolish he had been to insult Achilles. Thetis agrees to go and see Zeus after he returns from his visit to Ethiopia. Meanwhile she encourages her son in his wrath, “[S]ulk on,” she says, “and keep out of the war altogether.” So Achilles sits and sulks and waits for the defeat of the Achaians and for that bitter-sweet moment when Agamemnon will plead for his help and Achilles will take his full revenge by refusing to aid the Argives in their time of greatest need. No attitude could better illustrate the “pampered style of life” which is “filled with a personal ego-centric striving for superiority” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1958, p. 240).

### **The dotting mother**

The relationship between Achilles and his mother shows several of the characteristics associated with a pampered upbringing. In the main, these characteristics are shown by Thetis, rather than by Achilles. He does **not** show “inordinate affection for the mother” (Adler, 1949, p. 107), but he does make use of his mother to an extent which amounts to “exploiting the mother” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1958, p. 423). Thetis for her part does show an intense concern for her son. She comes to his aid immediately when he calls her. She obtains for him a new suit of armour made by Haephestus the Olympian smith. She prevents the corpse of his friend, Patroclus, from decaying, while Achilles goes in pursuit of Hector. She encourages him to make his peace with Agamemnon, so that he can again go into battle and clothe himself with honour. But in spite of her eagerness to help him, there is only one occasion on which Achilles shows any concern for his mother. That is when he tells her about the loss of his splendid armour, which “the gods gave as a glorious gift to Peleus on the day they put you in bed with a mortal man.” Then in a throw-away line he adds, “I wish you lived there with the sea goddesses and that Peleus were married to a mortal spouse.” This incidental reference is the only concern he shows for his mother’s unhappy marriage. On another occasion, he warns his mother not to try to interfere with his plans. “I am going to find Hector the

destroyer of my friend . . . . Don't try to keep me from the fight. You won't succeed." Even when Thetis finally comes to tell him that the gods are getting angry with him, he only grudgingly obeys her request to release the body of Hector. So it seems that Achilles had little affection for his mother.

By contrast, Thetis shows considerable affection for her son. She endures endless misery because he is unhappy. "Oh how wretched I am!" she exclaims to her companions, "Unhappy mother of the noblest of sons. . . . [W]hile he lives and sees the sunlight, he is in distress and I can do nothing to help him. . . ." Thetis's intense concern for her son suggests that she **did** pamper him, perhaps because he was her only child and she was afraid of losing him. For at some point, which is not made clear in the Iliad, Thetis knew that her son would die young. She is therefore all the more aggrieved that he sits sorrowful and inactive after his quarrel with Agamemnon. "I wish you could have remained by the ships tearless and unharmed, since now indeed your fate is near, it is not very far away." So she grieves for her son, who is "short-lived and miserable above all men."

The relationship between the adult Achilles and his mother illustrates another aspect of his pampered life style. He takes and never gives and has developed a view of a world "in which he expects everything from others" (Adler, 1965, p. 257). This demanding attitude would grow naturally out of a childhood experience in which he was the center of attention. He expected others to give him what he wanted and he carried this attitude over into his adult style of life.

The brief account of the childhood of Achilles given in the Iliad (1963) certainly suggests that he was a spoilt child. His adult behavior, which is described in much greater detail, is an excellent example of Adler's concept of a pampered life style.

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