

The Iliad

Book Three Paris, Menelaus, and Helen

[The armies move together; Paris volunteers to fight Menelaus in single combat; both sides prepare make a truce; Iris visits Helen; Helen goes to the Scaean Gate, looks at the Achaean troops with Priam; Priam leaves Troy to visit the armies and administer the treaty oath; Agamemnon utters the prayer for the treaty; Paris and Menelaus fight in single combat; Aphrodite rescues Paris; Paris and Helen meet in Troy; Agamemnon demands compensation from the Trojans]

Once troops had formed in ranks under their own leaders,
Trojans marched out, clamouring like birds, like cranes
screeching overhead, when winter's harsh storms drive them off,
screaming as they move over the flowing Ocean,
bearing death and destruction to the Pygmies,
launching their savage attack on them at dawn.*
Achaeans came on in silence, breathing ferocity,
determined to stand by each other in the fight.
Just as South Wind spreads mist around the mountain peak,
[10] something shepherds hate, but thieves prefer to night,
for one can see only a stone's throw up ahead,
so, as men marched, dense dust clouds rose from underfoot.
They advanced at full speed out across the plain.
The two armies moved in close towards each other.
Then godlike Paris stepped out, as Trojan champion,
on his shoulders a leopard skin. He had bow and sword.
Brandishing two bronze-tipped spears, he challenged
the best men in the whole Achaean force to fight—
a single combat, to the death. War-loving Menelaus
[20] noticed Alexander striding there, his troops
bunched up in ranks behind him, and he rejoiced,
like a famished lion finding a large carcass—
antlered stag or wild goat—and devouring it at once,
though fierce young hunters and swift dogs attack.*
So Menelaus was pleased to see Paris there,
right before his eyes. Menelaus had in mind
taking revenge on the man who'd injured him.

At once Menelaus jumped from his chariot,
down to the ground, his weapons in his fists.
[30] When godlike Alexander saw Menelaus there,
among the fighters at the front, his heart sank.
He moved back into the ranks, among his comrades,
avoiding death. Just as a man stumbles on a snake
in some mountainous ravine and gives way, jumping back,
his limbs trembling, his cheeks pale, so godlike Paris,
afraid of Atreus' son, slid back into proud Trojan ranks.
Seeing this, Hector went at Alexander, insulting him:

“Despicable Paris, handsomest of men,
but woman-mad seducer. How I wish
[40] you never had been born or died unmarried.
That's what I'd prefer, so much better
than to live in shame, hated by others.
Now long-haired Achaeans are mocking us,
saying we've put forward as a champion
one who looks good, but lacks a strong brave mind.
Was this what you were like back on that day
you gathered up your faithful comrades,
sailed sea-worthy ships across the ocean,
went out among a foreign people,
[50] and carried back from that far-off land
a lovely woman linked by marriage
to warrior spearmen, thus bringing on
great suffering for your father and your city,
all your people—joy to your enemies
and to yourself disgrace? And can you now
not face Menelaus? If so, you'd learn
the kind of man he is whose wife you took.
You'd get no help then from your lyre, long hair,
good looks—Aphrodite's gifts—once face down,
[60] lying in the dirt. Trojans must be timid men.
If not, for all the evil things you've done
by now you'd wear a garment made of stones.”

To Hector godlike Alexander then replied:

“Hector, you’re right in what you say against me.
Those complaints of yours are not unjustified.
Your heart is tireless, like a wood-chopping axe
wielded by a craftsman cutting timber for a ship.
The axe makes his force stronger. Your mind’s like that—
the spirit in your chest is fearless. But don’t blame me
[70] for golden Aphrodite’s lovely gifts.
Men can’t reject fine presents from the gods,
those gifts they personally bestow on us,
though no man would take them of his own free will.
You want me now to go to battle.
Get others to sit down—Trojans and Achaeans.
Put me and war-loving Menelaus
in their midst to fight it out for Helen,
all her property. The one who triumphs,
comes off victorious, the better man,
[80] let him take all the goods and lead her home,
as his wife. Let others swear a solemn oath,
as friends, either to live on in fertile Troy
or to return to horse-breeding Argos,
land of the lovely women of Achaea.”

So Paris spoke. Hearing those words, Hector felt great joy.
He went to the middle ground, between the armies,
halted Trojan troops, grasping the centre of his spear shaft.
The men sat. But long-haired Achaeans kept on shooting,
attempting to hit Hector with rocks and arrows.
[90] Then Agamemnon, king of men, roared out at them:

“Argives, Achaean lads, stop hurling things.
Hector of the flashing helmet wants to talk to us.”

Once Agamemnon spoke, the men stopped fighting
quickly falling silent. Hector then addressed both sides:

“You Trojans, you well-armed Achaeans,
listen now to what Paris has to say,
the man whose actions brought about our fight.
He bids the other Trojans, all Achaeans,
set their weapons on the fertile ground.

[100] He and war-loving Menelaus here
will fight it out alone between the armies
for Helen and for all her property.
Whichever one comes out victorious,
the stronger man, let him seize all the goods,
and take the woman as his wife back home.
Let others swear a solemn oath as friends.”

So Hector spoke. The soldiers all grew silent.
Then Menelaus, loud in war, answered Hector:

“Listen now to me. More than anyone,
[110] my heart has suffered pain. So now I think
Argives and Trojans should part company,
since you have suffered many hardships,
thanks to the fight between myself and Paris,
a fight that he began. Whichever one of us
death takes, our fate, let that man perish.
You others quickly go your separate ways.
So bring two lambs here—white male, black female—
for earth and sun. We’ll bring one more for Zeus.
Lead out great Priam to administer the oath
[120] in person, for his sons are over-proud,
untrustworthy. No man should transgress
by violence oaths sworn in Zeus’ name.
Young men’s minds are fickle. An older man
who joins them thinks of past and future,
so with both groups things happen for the best.”

Achaeans and Trojans were elated, full of hope
that wretched war would end. They pulled the chariots back
into the ranks, climbed out, disarmed, and placed their weapons

next to each other on the ground, with little room
[130] between both groups. Hector sent two heralds to the city,
to fetch the lambs with speed and summon Priam.
Agamemnon sent Talthibius to the hollow ships,
instructing him to bring a sacrificial lamb.
Talthibius obeyed god-like Agamemnon's orders.

Then Iris came as messenger to white-armed Helen
taking on the image of her sister-in-law,
wife of Antenor's son, fine Helicaon.
Her name was Laodice, of all Priam's daughters
the most beautiful. She found Helen in her room,
[140] weaving a large cloth, a double purple cloak,
creating pictures of the many battle scenes
between horse-taming Trojans and bronze-clad Achaeans,
wars they suffered for her sake at the hands of Ares.
Standing near by, swift-footed Iris said:

"Come here, dear girl,
Look at the amazing things going on.
Horse-taming Trojans and bronze-clad Achaeans,
men who earlier were fighting one another
in wretched war out there on the plain,
both keen for war's destruction, are sitting still.
[150] Alexander and war-loving Menelaus
are going to fight for you with their long spears.
The man who triumphs will call you his dear wife."

With these words the goddess set in Helen's heart
sweet longing for her former husband, city, parents.
Covering herself with a white shawl, she left the house,
shedding tears. She did not go alone, but took with her
two attendants, Aethrae, daughter of Pittheus,
and ox-eyed Clymene. They soon reached the Scaean Gates.
Oucalegaon and Antenor, both prudent men,
[160] elder statesmen, sat at the Scaean Gates,
with Priam and his entourage—Panthous, Thymoetes,

Lampus, Clytius, and brave Hicataeon. Old men now,
their fighting days were finished, but they all spoke well.
They sat there, on the tower, these Trojan elders,
like cicadas perched up on a forest branch, chirping
soft, delicate sounds. Seeing Helen approach the tower,
they commented softly to each other—their words had wings:

“There’s nothing shameful about the fact
that Trojans and well-armed Achaeans
[170] have endured great suffering a long time
over such a woman—just like a goddess,
immortal, awe-inspiring. She’s beautiful.
But nonetheless let her go back with the ships
Let her not stay here, a blight on us, our children.”

So they talked. Priam then called out to Helen.

“Come here, dear child. Sit down in front of me,
so you can see your first husband, your friends,
your relatives. As far as I’m concerned,
it’s not your fault. For I blame the gods.
[180] They drove me to wage this wretched war
against Achaeans. Tell me, who’s that large man,
over there, that impressive, strong Achaean?
Others may be taller by a head than him,
but I’ve never seen with my own eyes,
such a striking man, so noble, so like a king.”

Then Helen, goddess among women, said to Priam:

“My dear father-in-law, whom I respect and honour,
how I wish I’d chosen an evil death
when I came here with your son, leaving behind
[190] my married home, companions, darling child,
and friends my age. But things didn’t work that way.
So I weep all the time. But to answer you,
that man is wide-ruling Agamemnon,

son of Atreus, a good king, fine fighter,
and once he was my brother-in-law,
if that life was ever real. I'm such a whore."

Priam gazed in wonder at Agamemnon, saying:

"Son of Atreus, blessed by the gods, fortune's child,
divinely favoured, many long-haired Achaeans
[200] serve under you. Once I went to Phrygia,
that vine-rich land, where I saw Phrygian troops
with all their horses, thousands of them,
soldiers of Otreus, godlike Mygdon,
camped by the banks of the Sangarius river.
I was their ally, part of their army,
the day the Amazons, men's peers in war,
came on against them. But those forces then
were fewer than these bright-eyed Achaeans."

The old man then spied Odysseus and asked:

[210] "Dear child, come tell me who this man is,
shorter by a head than Agamemnon,
son of Atreus. But he looks broader
in his shoulders and his chest. His armour's stacked
there on the fertile earth, but he strides on,
marching through men's ranks just like a ram
moving through large white multitudes of sheep.
Yes, a woolly ram, that's what he seems to me."

Helen, child of Zeus, then answered Priam:

"That man is Laertes' son, crafty Odysseus,
[220] raised in rocky Ithaca. He's well versed
in all sorts of tricks, deceptive strategies."

At that point, wise Antenor said to Helen:

“Lady, what you say is true. Once lord Odysseus
came here with war-loving Menelaus,
as an ambassador in your affairs.
I received them both in my residence
and entertained them. I got to know them—
from their appearance and their wise advice.
When they mingled with us Trojans
[230] in our meeting and Menelaus rose,
his broad shoulders were higher than the other’s.
But once they sat, Odysseus seemed more regal.
When the time came for them to speak to us,
setting out their thoughts quite formally,
Menelaus spoke with fluency—few words,
but very clear—no chatter, no digressions—
although he was the younger of the two.
But when wise Odysseus got up to speak,
he just stood, eyes downcast, staring at the ground.
[240] He didn’t move the sceptre to and fro,
but gripped it tightly, like some ignoramus—
a bumpkin or someone idiotic.
But when that great voice issued from his chest,
with words like winter snowflakes, no man alive
could match Odysseus. We were no longer
disconcerted at witnessing his style.”

Priam, the old man, saw a third figure, Ajax, and asked:

“Who is that other man? He’s over there—
that huge, burly Achaean—his head and shoulders
tower over the Achaeans.”

[250] Then Helen
long-robed goddess among women, answered:

“That’s massive Ajax, Achaea’s bulwark.
Across from him stands Idomeneus,
surrounded by his Cretans, like a god.

Around him there stand the Cretan leaders.
Often war-loving Menelaus welcomed him
in our house, whenever he arrived from Crete.
Now I see all the bright-eyed Achaeans
whom I know well, whose names I could recite.

[260] But I can't see two of the men's leaders,
Castor, tamer of horses, and Pollux,
the fine boxer—they are both my brothers,
whom my mother bore along with me.
Either they did not come with the contingent
from lovely Lacedaemon, or they sailed here
in their seaworthy ships, but have no wish
to join men's battles, fearing the disgrace,
the many slurs, which are justly mine."

Helen spoke. But the life-nourishing earth
[270] already held her brothers in Lacedaemon,
in their own dear native land.

Through Troy,
heralds brought offerings to seal the binding oaths,
two lambs and in a goatskin sack some sparkling wine,
fruit of the earth. Idaios, the herald, brought in
the gleaming mixing bowl and golden cups.
Standing close by Priam, he encouraged him.

"Son of Laomedon, the leading officers
among horse-taming Trojans and bronze-clad Achaeans
are calling you to come down to the plain,
[280] to administer their binding promises.

Paris and war-loving Menelaus
are going to fight it out with their long spears
over the woman. The man who wins,
who comes off the victor, gets the woman
and her property. The others will all swear
an oath of friendship, a binding one—
we will live in fertile Troy, they in Argos,

where horses breed, and in Achaea,
land of lovely women.”

Idaios finished.

[290] The old man trembled, then ordered his attendants
to prepare his chariot. They obeyed at once.
Priam climbed in and pulled back on the reins.
Antenor climbed in the fine chariot beside him.
The two men led swift horses through the Scaean Gate,
out to the plain. Once they reached the Trojans and Achaeans,
they climbed out of the chariot onto fertile ground,
in the space between the Trojan and Achaean troops.
At once, Agamemnon and crafty Odysseus
stood up to greet them. Noble heralds fetched the offerings,
[300] to ratify their solemn oaths pledged to the gods.
They prepared wine in the mixing bowl, then poured water
over the kings’ hands. Atreus’ son drew out the dagger
which always hung beside his sword’s huge scabbard,
then sliced hairs off lambs’ heads. Attendants passed these hairs
among the leaders of the Trojans and Achaeans.
Raising his hands, Agamemnon then intoned
a mighty prayer on their behalf:

“Father Zeus,
ruling from Mount Ida, most glorious,
most powerful, and you, too, god of the sun,
[310] who sees everything, hears everything,
you rivers, earth, you gods below the earth,
who punish the dead when men swear false oaths,
you gods are witnesses. Keep this oath firm.
If Alexander slays Menelaus,
let him keep Helen, all her property.
Let us return in our sea-worthy ships.
But if fair-haired Menelaus kills Alexander,
then let the Trojans hand back Helen,
with all her property, and compensate
[320] Achaeans with something suitable,

which future ages will remember.
If Alexander's killed and Priam
and Priam's children are unwilling
to reimburse me, then I'll remain here,
fight on until I'm fully satisfied,
until I end this war appropriately."

So Agamemnon prayed. With his bronze dagger,
he slit the lambs' throats, placed them on the ground,
gasping in their death throes as their life ebbed out,
[330] their spirit sliced away by Agamemnon's knife.
Next from the mixing bowl, they drew off wine in cups,
poured out libations to the deathless gods.
Then Trojans and Achaeans all spoke out this prayer:

"Most powerful, mighty Zeus, and you others,
you immortal gods, may you make sure
the men who first violate these oaths
will have their brains spill out onto the ground,
just like this wine, they and their children.
May their wives be carried off by other men."

[340] So they prayed. But the son of Cronos didn't grant their wish.
Then Priam, descendant of Dardanus, addressed them all:

"Hear me, you Trojans, you well-armed Achaeans.
I am returning now to windy Troy.
I have no wish to see with my own eyes
my dear son fight war-loving Menelaus.
Zeus and other immortal gods know well
which of them is fated to end up dead."

So Priam spoke. He placed the lambs in his chariot.
The god-like man climbed in, held back the reins.
[350] Antenor climbed in the fine chariot by Priam.
Then both men set off, moving back toward Troy.

Then Hector, Priam's son, and lord Odysseus
first measured out the ground, took lots, and shook them up
in a bronze helmet, to see who'd throw his bronze spear first.
Then every Trojan and Achaean held up his hands,
praying to the gods:

“Father Zeus, ruling from Mount Ida,
mighty, all-powerful, of these two men,
let the one who brought this war to both sides
be killed and then go down to Hades' house.
[360] And grant our oath of friendship will hold firm.”

So they prayed. Hector of the flashing helmet
turned his eyes to one side and shook out the lots.
Alexander's token fell out immediately.
The troops sat down in their respective places,
by their high-stepping horses and their inlaid armour.
Paris, husband to Helen with the lovely hair,
hoisted his fine armour on his shoulders. On his shins,
he clipped leg armour fitted with silver ankle clasps.
Then he put around his chest the body armour
[370] belonging to his brother Lycaon. It fit him well.
On his shoulder he looped his bronze, silver-studded sword,
his huge strong shield. On his handsome head he put
a fine helmet with nodding horse-hair plumes on top,
full of menace. Then he picked out a brave spear
which fit his grip. Menelaus prepared himself as well.
When the two men, standing on each side with their troops,
had armed themselves, they strode out to the open space
between the Trojans and Achaeans, staring ferociously.
As horse-taming Trojans and well-armed Achaeans
[380] gazed at the two men, they were overcome with wonder.
The two men approached each other over measured ground,
brandishing their spears in mutual fury.
Alexander was the first to hurl his spear.
It struck Menelaus' shield, a perfect circle,
but the bronze did not break through, the point deflected

by the powerful shield. Then Menelaus, Atreus' son,
threw in his turn. First he made this prayer to Zeus:

“Lord Zeus, grant I may be revenged on this man,
who first committed crimes against me,
[390] lord Alexander. Let him die at my hands,
so generations of men yet to come
will dread doing wrong to anyone
who welcomes them into his home as friends.”

Menelaus then drew back his long-shadowed spear,
and hurled it. It hit the son of Priam's shield,
a perfect circle. The heavy spear pierced through it,
went straight through the fine body armour, through the shirt
which covered Alexander's naked flesh.

But Paris twisted to the side, evading a black fate.
[400] Pulling out his silver-studded sword, the son of Atreus
raised it and struck the crest of Paris' helmet.
But the sword shattered into three or four pieces,
falling from his hand. The son of Atreus, in vexation,
looked up into wide heaven, crying out:

“Father Zeus,
what god brings us more trouble than you do?
I thought I was paying Alexander
for his wickedness, but now my sword
has shattered in my fist, while from my hand
my spear has flown in vain. I haven't hit him.”

[410] As Menelaus said these words, he sprang forward,
grabbing the horse hair crest on Paris' helmet,
twisting him around. He began dragging Paris off,
back in the direction of well-armed Achaeans.
The fine leather strap stretched round Paris' soft neck,
right below his chin, was strangling him to death.
At that point Menelaus would have hauled back Paris
and won unending fame, if Aphrodite, Zeus' daughter,

had not had sharp eyes. Her force broke the ox-hide strap,
leaving Menelaus clutching in his massive hands
[420] an empty helmet. Whipping it around, Menelaus
hurled the helmet in among well-armed Achaeans.
His loyal companions retrieved it. He charged back,
with his bronze spear, intent on killing Alexander.
But Aphrodite had snatched Paris up—for a god
an easy feat—concealed him in a heavy mist,
and placed him in his own sweetly scented bedroom.

Then Aphrodite went to summon Helen.
She found her on the high tower, in a crowd
among the Trojan women. She clutched Helen
[430] by her perfumed dress, twitched it, then addressed her,
in the form of an old woman, a wool carder,
someone who used to live in Lacedaemon,
producing fine wool, a woman Helen really liked.
In this shape, divine Aphrodite spoke to Helen:

“Alexander is asking you to come back home.
He’s in the bedroom, on the carved-out bed,
his beauty and his garments glistening.
You wouldn’t think he’s just come from some fight.
He looks as if he’s going to a dance,
[440] or if he’s sitting down right after dancing.”

Aphrodite spoke, stirring emotion in Helen’s heart.
Noticing the goddess’ lovely neck, enticing breasts,
her glittering eyes, Helen was astonished.

“Goddess, why do you wish to deceive me so?
Are you going to take me still further off,
to some well-populated city somewhere
in Phrygia or beautiful Maeonia,
because you’re in love with some mortal man
and Menelaus has just beaten Paris
[450] and wants to take me, a despised woman,

back home with him? Is that why you're here,
you and that devious trickery of yours?
Why don't you go with Paris by yourself,
stop walking around here like a goddess,
stop guiding your feet toward Olympus,
and lead a miserable life with him,
caring for him, until he makes you his wife
or slave. I won't go to him in there—
that would be shameful, serving him in bed.
[460] Every Trojan woman would revile me afterwards.
Besides, my heart is hurt enough already.”

Divine Aphrodite, angry at Helen, answered her:

“Don't provoke me, you obstinate girl.
I might lose my temper, abandon you,
and hate you just as much as I have loved you.
I could make Trojans and Danaans hate you, too.
Then you'd suffer death in misery.”

Aphrodite spoke. Helen, born from Zeus, was too afraid.
She covered herself in her soft white linen shawl,
[470] went off in silence, unnoticed by all the Trojan women.
With goddess Aphrodite in the lead,
they came to Alexander's lovely house.
There the attendants quickly set about their work.
Helen, goddess among women, went to her room upstairs,
where laughter-loving goddess Aphrodite
picked up a chair and carried it for Helen.
She placed it facing Paris. Helen, child of Zeus,
who bears the aegis, sat down. With eyes averted,
she began to criticize her husband:

[480] “You've come back from the fight. How I wish
you'd died there, killed by that strong warrior
who was my husband once. You used to boast
you were stronger than warlike Menelaus,

more strength in your hands, more power in your spear.
So go now, challenge war-loving Menelaus
to fight again in single combat.
I'd suggest you stay away. Don't fight it out
man to man with fair-haired Menelaus,
without further thought. You might well die,
[490] come to a quick end on his spear."

Replying to Helen, Paris said:

Wife,
don't mock my courage with your insults.
Yes, Menelaus has just defeated me,
but with Athena's help. Next time I'll beat him.
For we have gods on our side, too. But come,
let's enjoy our love together on the bed.
Never has desire so filled my mind as now,
not even when I first took you away
from lovely Lacedaemon, sailing off
[500] in our sea-worthy ships, or when I lay with you
in our lover's bed on the isle of Cranae.
That's how sweet passion has seized hold of me,
how much I want you now."

Paris finished speaking.

He led the way to bed. His wife went, too.
The two lay down together on the bed.

Atreus' son paced through the crowd, like a wild beast,
searching for some glimpse of godlike Alexander.
But no Trojan nor any of their famous allies
could reveal Alexander to warlike Menelaus.
[510] If they'd seen him, they had no desire to hide him.
For they all hated Paris, as they hated gloomy death.
Agamemnon, king of men, addressed them:

"Listen to me, Trojans, Dardanians, allies—

victory clearly falls to war-loving Menelaus.
So give back Argive Helen and her property,
compensate us with a suitable amount,
something future ages will all talk about.”

As he finished speaking, the other Achaeans cheered.