

The Iliad

Book Nineteen Achilles and Agamemnon

[Thetis brings the divine armour to Achilles; Achilles summons an assembly of Achaeans; Achilles and Agamemnon are reconciled; Agamemnon explains the origin of his folly; Odysseus urges Achilles to eat, Achilles refuses; Agamemnon gets his gifts for Achilles brought to the assembly; Agamemnon swears he has not touched Briseis; Briseis laments over the corpse of Patroclus; the elders continue to mourn Patroclus; Zeus sends Athena to help Achilles deal with his hunger; the troops move out to battle again; Achilles speaks to his horses, who prophesy his death]

When Dawn in her yellow robe rose from Ocean's stream,
bringing her light to immortal gods and mortal men,
Thetis reached the ships bearing Hephaestus' gifts.
She found her dear son lying beside Patroclus,
crying bitterly. Many of his companions
mourned around him. The noble goddess went to them.
Standing by Achilles, she clasped his hand, then said:

“My son, we must let this man lie here
for all our grief. He's dead once and for all.
[10] It's the gods' will. Now you must accept
this splendid armour from Hephaestus—
no man has ever had such gorgeous armour
to wear around his shoulders.”

With these words,
the goddess set the armour down before Achilles.
The wonderfully crafted metal rang out loudly.
Fear gripped all the Myrmidons. Not one of them
dared look directly at those weapons. They shrank away.
But when Achilles saw them, his anger grew.
His eyes glared underneath his eyelids, like a fire—
[20] a terrifying light. But as his hands went over
the god's priceless gifts, he felt great joy. He gazed at them,
filling his heart with pleasure at the rich designs.
Then he spoke to his mother—his words had wings:

“Mother, this armour the god has given me
is a work fit for the immortals, something
no living human could create. So now,
I’ll arm myself for war. In the meantime,
I have a dreadful fear that flies may burrow
into those wounds carved by the slicing bronze
[30] in the body of Menoetius’ noble son.
They may breed worms in him, defile his corpse,
now that the life in him is gone. If so,
all his flesh will fester.”

Then Thetis,
goddess with the silver feet, answered Achilles:

“My child, don’t let such things distress your heart.
I’ll make the effort to protect him here
from those cruel swarms of flies which feed
on warriors who’ve been killed in battle.
Even if he lies here an entire year,
[40] his flesh will stay just as it is or better.
But you must summon the Achaean warriors
to assembly, to renounce your anger
with Agamemnon, his people’s shepherd.
After that, arm yourself for battle quickly—
clothe yourself in all your fighting strength.”

Saying this, Thetis filled him with fearless power.
Then she inserted ambrosia and red nectar
into Patroclus, through his nostrils, so his flesh
would stay uncorrupted.

But Achilles, like a god,
[50] strode down along the seashore, raising fearful shouts,
stirring Achaean warriors into action.
So even those who up to now used to remain
with the assembled ships—helmsmen who worked

ships' steering oars and stewards who stayed with the ships
rationing provisions—these men all showed up
for the assembly, because Achilles had appeared
after his long absence from that painful war.
Two associates of the war god Ares came in limping,
the brave offspring of Tydeus and lord Odysseus,
[60] leaning on their spears—their wounds still pained them.
They came and sat down at the front of the assembly.
Last to arrive was Agamemnon, king of men,
still suffering from the wound Coön had given him,
Antenor's son, who in deadly conflict stabbed him
with his bronze-tipped spear. Once all Achaeans
were assembled, swift-footed Achilles rose to speak:

“Son of Atreus, has it been good for us,
for you and me, to continue squabbling
in a heart-rending quarrel full of grief
[70] for both of us, over some girl? I wish
she'd been killed by Artemis' arrow
right beside my ships, the day I got her
as my prize, after we destroyed Lyrnessus.
Fewer Achaeans would have sunk their teeth
into this wide earth at enemy hands,
if I'd not been so angry. That's really helped
lord Hector and his Trojans. But Achaeans,
will, I think, long recall this argument
you and I have had. Still, though it hurts,
[80] we should let all this pass, repressing hearts
within our chests—we must do that. So now,
I end my anger. It's not appropriate
for me to remain enraged for ever.
But come, quickly urge long-haired Achaeans
on to battle, so I may go out once again
to face the Trojans and see if they still wish
to spend the night beside our ships. I think
many of them will be glad to get some rest,
the ones who escape this deadly warfare

and who evade my spear.”

[90] Achilles finished speaking.

The well-armed Achaeans then were full of joy
that Peleus’ great-hearted son had set aside
his anger. Next, Agamemnon, king of men,
addressed them:

“My friends, Danaan warriors,
companions of the war god Ares, it’s good
to listen to a man who’s standing up
to speak and not to interrupt him.
That makes things difficult, even for a man
skilled in speaking. When men all shout at once,

[100] how can any one speak up or listen?

Even a clear-voiced speaker gets upset.
I’m going to address the son of Peleus,
but you other Argives pay attention—
let every one of you mark my words well.
You Achaeans have often criticized
and spoken ill of me. But I’m not to blame.
It’s Zeus’ fault and Fate—those Furies, too,
who walk in darkness. In our assembly,
they cast a savage blindness on my heart,

[110] that day when on my own I took away

Achilles’ prize. But what was I to do?
It is a god who brought all this about.
Zeus’ eldest daughter, Ate, blinds all men
with her destructive power. Her feet are soft,
she walks, not on the ground, but on men’s heads,
and she brings folly onto humankind,
seducing them at random. Even Zeus,
who they say is the greatest of the gods
and men, was blinded by her, when Hera,

[120] a mere female, with her cunning tactics,
deceived him that very day Alcmene
was to give birth to mighty Hercules,

in Thebes, city with the splendid walls.
Zeus then boasted openly to all the gods,

‘Listen to me, you gods and goddesses,
so I can say what the heart inside me bids.
The goddess of childbirth, Eileithyia,
today brings into the sun’s light a man
who will rule all those who live around him,
[130] one of the race of men with my blood in them.’

But then that deceitful lady Hera said to Zeus,

‘You’re not being candid. You don’t really mean
what you now say. So come, Olympian,
swear a binding oath for me that the man
who falls out today between a woman’s feet
will, in fact, rule those who live around him,
one of the race of men with your blood in them.’

That’s what she said. Zeus didn’t see the trick.
He swore a binding oath in his great blindness.
[140] Hera then left that peak on Mount Olympus.
Darting off, she quickly came to Argos,
in Achaea, where she knew the strong wife
of Sthenelus, Perseus’ son, was pregnant
with a son, in her seventh month. This child
Hera induced into the light before its term.
She then delayed Alcmene’s childbirth,
getting the Eileithyiae to hold it back.
Then she brought the news to Zeus, Cronos’ son,
saying,

‘Father Zeus, lord of bright lightning,
[150] I’ll tell you my heartfelt news. Just now,
a noble man was born who’ll rule the Argives,
Eurystheus, son of Sthenelus, Perseus’ son,
of your own lineage. So it’s fitting

he should become king of all the Argives.’

When Hera said that, sharp pain seized Zeus
deep in his heart. He seized Ate at once
by the shining hair wound round her head.
His heart was furious. He swore a great oath
that Ate, who blinds everyone, would no more
[160] come to Olympus or to starry heaven.

That said, in one hand he swung her round,
then flung her clear out of the star-filled skies.
She quickly landed among toiling men.
Whenever Zeus saw his dear son Hercules
carrying out menial work in all his labours
for Eurystheus, he’d always groan aloud,
thinking of Ate. That’s how I was, too,
when great Hector of the shining helmet
was killing Argives off at the ships’ sterns.

[170] I could not forget Ate, who blinded me
when all this started. But since I was blind,
since Zeus robbed me of my wits, I will agree
to make amends, to give priceless gifts.
But prepare yourself for battle, rouse up
all your other men. As for me, I’m ready
to give every gift which lord Odysseus
promised you in your hut yesterday.
Or, if you prefer, don’t turn right now to war.
Though you’re keen to go, let my servants fetch
[180] those presents from my ship and bring them here,
so you can see if you approve of them.”

Swift-footed Achilles then answered Agamemnon:

“Most glorious son of Atreus, Agamemnon,
king of men, if you wish to give me presents,
as is appropriate, or to withhold them,
that’s up to you. Now we must think of war,
and with all speed. We should not be wasting time

in conversation or with such delays.
We have great work to do, so once again
[190] men see Achilles with the front-line warriors,
destroying Trojan ranks with his bronze spear.
Keep this in mind when you confront your man.”

Resourceful Odysseus then addressed Achilles:

“Though you’re a brave man, god-like Achilles,
don’t encourage Achaea’s sons to fight
against the Trojans on empty stomachs.
If so, the fight won’t last for long if troops
engage right now, once some god infuses strength
into both sides. No. Instruct Achaeans
[200] to have some food and wine by their swift ships.
For they give strength and courage. No soldier
can fight the enemy all day till sunset
without some food. However fierce his heart
may be for battle, his limbs grow heavy
without his knowledge. Once thirst and hunger
overtake him, his knees get tired as he moves.
But the man who’s had sufficient food and wine
fights all day long against his enemies
with a courageous heart. His limbs don’t tire
[210] until all warriors have left the battle.
So dismiss your men. Tell them to make a meal.
Let Agamemnon, king of men, present his gifts,
so all Achaeans here in our assembly
can see them first hand and delight your heart.
Let him stand up there among the Argives,
swear an oath to you he’s never climbed
in that girl’s bed to have sex with her,
as is usual, my lord, with men and women.
Let the heart in your own chest be open
[220] to reconciliation. Then, Agamemnon
should offer you a fine and pleasing dinner
in his hut, so there’ll be nothing due to you

which remains unsatisfied. As for you,
son of Atreus, you should be more righteous
with others from now on. There's no shame
when a king pays someone compensation,
if the king was the first to lose his temper."

Agamemnon, king of men, answered Odysseus:

"Son of Laertes, I am glad to hear
[230] what you've just said. You've explained this well,
exploring all these matters very fairly.
I'm prepared to swear the oath, as my heart bids,
and, before the gods, I'll not swear falsely.
But let Achilles stay here a little while,
though he desires to fight, and let others
stay gathered here, until the gifts are brought
out of my hut and we can sacrifice
to seal our oaths. To you I assign this task—
select from the entire Achaean force
[240] the five best young men to carry from my ships
all those gifts we promised yesterday
to give Achilles—that includes the woman.
Let Talthybius at once prepare for me
in the middle of this wide Achaean camp
a sacrificial boar to offer up
to Zeus and Helios, god of the sun."

Swift-footed Achilles then replied to Agamemnon:

"Mighty son of Atreus, Agamemnon,
ruler of men, it would be far better
[250] to worry about all this some other time,
when there's a let up in the fight, when the heart
here in my chest is less enraged. For now,
all those killed by Hector, son of Priam,
when Zeus gave him glory, are lying there,
all mangled, and you are urging us to eat!

For my part, I'd lead Achaea's sons to war
right now, unfed, with empty stomachs,
then at sunset make them a great dinner,
when we've avenged our shame. Until that time,
[260] no drink or food will pass my throat, at least,
while my dead comrade lies inside my hut,
mutilated by sharp bronze, with his feet
still pointing at the door, while his companions
mourn there around him. That's why my heart
cannot concern itself with what you've said,
only with killing, blood, men's dying groans."

To this, resourceful Odysseus then replied:

"Achilles, Peleus' son, of all Achaeans
the mightiest by far. You're stronger than me,
[270] more than a little better with your spear,
but I might say I'm far better with advice,
since I'm older and know more. So your heart
should listen now to what I have to say.
In battle men quickly have enough, for there
bronze slices piles of straw onto the ground,
but there's a slender harvest, once Zeus
lifts up his scales, establishing for men
the outcome of the battle. Achaeans
cannot mourn a corpse by eating nothing.
[280] Too many men are dying every day,
one after another. When would anyone
get some relief from fasting? No, the dead
we must bury, then mourn a single day,
hardening our hearts. But those who do survive
grim battle must remember food and drink,
so we can fight our enemies once more,
on and on incessantly, covering our flesh
with bronze which never tires. So let no soldier
hang back, waiting for another call to war.
[290] This is the call, and things will not go well

for anyone left at Achaean ships.
Let's all set off together as one army,
taking cruel war to those horse-taming Trojans."

Odysseus finished. Then he took along with him
splendid Nestor's sons, Meges, son of Phyleus,
Thoas, Meriones, and Lycomedes,
Creon's son, and Melanippus. They went off
to the huts of Agamemnon, Atreus' son.

As soon as they gave out the order, the task was done.

[300] From the hut they took seven tripods, as he'd promised,
twenty gleaming cauldrons and twelve horses.
They quickly led out seven women, all well skilled
in lovely handiwork. Eighth came the fair Briseis.
Odysseus weighed out a sum of ten gold talents.
Then he led them back, with the young Achaean men
carrying the gifts. These they placed in the assembly,
in the middle of them all. Agamemnon stood up.
Talthybius, whose voice was like a god's, was there,
by Agamemnon's side, his hands gripping a boar.

[310] Agamemnon drew out the knife he always wore
by his sword's scabbard. He cut hairs from the boar
to start the ritual. Lifting up his arms,
he prayed to Zeus. Argives all sat in silence,
listening to their king with suitable respect,
as he gazed up to spacious heaven, saying this prayer:

"Let Zeus, the loftiest and finest god,
first witness, then Sun and the Erinyes,
those Furies under the earth who punish
men who've made false oaths—I hereby swear

[320] I've never laid a hand on that girl Briseis,
either for sex or any other reason.
In my huts she stayed untouched. If what I say
is not the truth, then let gods punish me
with many painful sorrows, the sort they give
to men who in their oaths blaspheme them."

This said, he cut the boar's throat with the ruthless bronze.
Talthybius swung the body round, then threw it
in the vast grey sea, food for fish. Then Achilles,
standing up, addressed war-loving Argives:

“Father Zeus,
[330] you keep afflicting humans with great blindness.
For Atreus' son would never make my heart
so totally enraged here in my chest,
nor would he take that girl away from me,
so arbitrarily against my will,
if Zeus did not somehow desire the deaths
of Argives in large numbers. But now,
you should all eat, so we can start the fight.”

Saying this, Achilles quickly ended the assembly.
The men dispersed, each one going off to his own ship.
[340] Great-hearted Myrmidons looked after all the gifts,
taking them to godlike Achilles' ship and storing them
inside his huts. They left the women there, as well.
His noble attendants drove the horses to his herd.

Briseis, looking like golden Aphrodite,
then saw Patroclus mutilated by sharp bronze.
With a cry, she threw herself on him, hands tearing
at her breast, her tender neck, her lovely face,
fair as a goddess, lamenting:

“Patroclus,
you who brought the utmost joy to my sad heart,
[350] I left you here alive, when I went off,
taken from these huts. But now, at my return,
I find you dead, you, the people's leader.
Again for me, as always, evil follows evil.
I saw the husband I was given to
by my father and my noble mother killed

by sharp bronze before our city. My brothers,
three of them, whom my own mother bore,
whom I loved, have all met their fatal day.
But when swift Achilles killed my husband,
[360] you wouldn't let me weep. You told me then
you'd make me lord Achilles' wedded wife,
he'd take me in his ships back to Phthia,
for a marriage feast among the Myrmidons.
You were always gentle. That's the reason
I'll never stop this grieving for your death."

As Briseis said this, she wept. The women joined her
in wailing for Patroclus, although each of them
had her own private sorrows. The Achaean elders
gathered round Achilles, urging him to eat.
[370] But he refused, continuing his laments:

"If any of my dear companions here
wishes to obey me, then I beg you
don't ask me to satisfy my heart
with food or drink when painful sorrow
grips me. I'll remain like this till sunset,
enduring everything."

Achilles finished speaking.
Then he sent away the leaders. But some remained—
both sons of Atreus, lord Odysseus, Nestor,
Idomeneus, and old horseman Phoenix,
[380] each trying to console him in his painful grieving.
But his heart would find no joy until he'd entered
the bloody mouth of war. Thinking of Patroclus,
he sighed repeatedly, then said:

"Poor man,
most loved of all my comrades, in the past
you used to set out tasty meals right here,
making them well and quickly in my hut,

when we Achaeans were in such a rush
to set out against horse-taming Trojans
in wretched war. Now you lie disfigured,
[390] my heart refuses meat and drink, though both
are in this hut, because I miss you so.
I could suffer nothing worse than this,
not even if I learned my father's died—
he must be shedding gentle tears in Phthia,
missing a son like me, while I stay here
among strange people, fighting Trojans
over Helen, whom I detest, or if I heard
my dear son had died, who's being raised for me
on Scyros, if, in fact, he's still alive,
[400] godlike Neoptolemus.* Up to now,
the heart here in my chest hoped I alone
would perish here in Troy, so far from Argos,
where horses breed. You'd return to Phthia,
taking my child in your swift black ship
away from Scyros, show him all my things,
possessions, servants, my high-roofed palace.
For by now Peleus is either dead and gone,
I must assume, or just barely living,
afflicted with hateful old age, waiting
[410] all the time for distressful news of me,
when he finds out that I have died.”

As he spoke, Achilles wept. The elders also mourned,
each one remembering what he had left at home.
As they lamented, the son of Cronos saw them.
Feeling pity for them, Zeus spoke to Athena—
his words had wings:

“My child, here's a man
you seem to be neglecting totally,
a special favourite of yours—Achilles.
Does your heart no longer care for him at all?
[420] There he sits in front of his beaked ships,

mourning his dear companion. Other men
have all gone off to dinner, but he's fasting
and won't eat. Go now. Put into his chest
some nectar and beautiful ambrosia,
so hunger won't consume him."

With these words,
Zeus spurred Athena, already eager, into action.
She swooped down through the air, screaming shrilly,
like a broad-winged hawk. Then as Achaeans, with all speed,
armed themselves throughout the camp, she inserted
[430] nectar and beautiful ambrosia in Achilles' chest,
so his limbs would not suffer pangs of hunger.
Then she left for her mighty father's well-built home.

Achaeans then came swarming out from their fast ships.
Just as freezing snowflakes fall thick and fast from Zeus,
driven by the raging sky-born North Wind—that's how
crowds of them streamed out then, pouring from the ships—
brightly gleaming helmets, strong-plated body armour,
ash spears and embossed shields—the glitter of it all
flashed up to heaven. All around, earth chuckled
[440] to see that gleaming bronze. A noise like thunder rose,
drummed by the soldiers' marching feet. Amid them all,
noble Achilles armed himself for battle,
his teeth clenched, eyes blazing with a fiery light,
his heart filled with a sorrow not to be endured.
As he pulled on the divine gifts which Hephaestus
had made for him, he raged against the Trojans.
First, he strapped on his leg armour, beautifully made,
fitted with silver ankle clasps. Then on his chest
he fixed the body armour. Around his shoulders,
[450] he slung his bronze silver-studded sword, then picked up
his huge strong shield which, like the moon, shone everywhere.
Just like the blazing light that sailors glimpse at sea
from a fire burning in some isolated farm,
high in the mountains, as winds blow them further out,

taking them against their will over the fish-filled seas
away from loved ones—that's how Achilles' shield,
so finely crafted, burned out far into the sky.
Then raising the great helmet, he set it on his head.
It glittered like a star, that helmet with its horse-hair plumes,
[460] adorned with the golden hairs Hephaestus placed
so thickly round the crest. Noble Achilles,
trying out the armour for himself, made sure
it fit him so his splendid limbs could move with ease.
It was like his own set of wings, lifting him up,
this shepherd of his people. Then from its case,
he took his father's spear, heavy, huge, and strong.
No other Achaean could control that spear.
He was the only one with skill enough to wield it.
Made of ash wood from the top of Pelion,
[470] that spear had been given to own his dear father
by Cheiron, so he could kill heroic warriors.

Automedon and Alcinous kept themselves occupied
yoking the horses, tying fine chest straps round them,
setting bits inside their jaws, and aligning reins
back in the well-made chariot. Taking the shining whip
which fit his grip, Automedon jumped in the chariot.
Achilles, fully armed, climbed up beside him,
his armour gleaming like dazzling Hyperion.
Then he called out to those horses of his father,
in a terrifying voice:

[480] "Xanthus, Balius,
you famous children of Podarge, this time
make sure you bring your charioteer back safely
to the Danaan army, once we've had enough
of battle. Don't leave him out there slaughtered,
as you did Patroclus."

From under the yoke,
his swift-footed horse called Xanthus spoke to him,

ducking his head down quickly, so all his mane
streamed down from underneath his shoulder harness
beside the yoke towards the ground. Goddess Hera
gave Xanthus power to speak:

[490] “Mighty Achilles,
on this occasion we will bring you safely back.
But the day you’ll die is fast approaching.
We won’t be the cause, but some mighty god
and a strong fate. It was not our laziness
or lack of speed which helped the Trojans
strip that armour from Patroclus’ shoulders.
A powerful god born to Leto killed him
among those fighting at the battle front,
then gave Hector glory. The two of us
[500] could run as quickly as the West Wind’s blasts—
men say they are the fastest thing there is—
your fate still stays the same, to die in war,
killed by a mortal and a god.”

Once Xanthus had said this,
the Erinyes removed his voice. Then Achilles,
in a fury, said to his horse:

“Xanthus,
why do you prophesy my death? There is no need.
I know well enough I’m fated to die here,
far from my loving parents. No matter.
I will not stop till I have driven the Trojans
[510] to the limit of what they can endure in war.”

With these words, he drove his sure-footed horses off,
speeding forward to the front, screaming as he went.