

The Iliad

Book Twenty Four Achilles and Priam

[Achilles continues to mourn and to dishonour Hector's corpse; the gods debate his action; Zeus resolves to deal with the problem; Iris goes off to fetch Thetis; Zeus instructs Thetis to visit Achilles; Thetis tells Achilles Zeus' instructions; Achilles agrees to give up Hector's body for ransom; Iris visits Priam, telling him to go to the Achaean ships; Hecuba objects to the trip; Priam insults his sons, then collects the ransom and leaves with Idaios, the herald; Zeus sends Priam an omen and tells Hermes to guide Priam to Achilles; Hermes meets Priam on the road; Hermes takes Priam to the Achaean camp; Priam meets Achilles; Achilles agrees to give back Hector; Achilles and Priam have dinner; Priam sleeps overnight outside Achilles hut; Priam and Idaios return to Troy with Hector's body; the women lament over Hector; the Trojans bury Hector]

Once the funeral gathering broke up, the men dispersed,
each one going to his own ship, concerned to eat
and then enjoy sweet sleep. But Achilles kept on weeping,
remembering his dear companion. All-conquering Sleep
could not overcome him, as he tossed and turned,
longing for manly, courageous, strong Patroclus,
thinking of all he'd done with him, all the pain
they'd suffered, as they'd gone through wars with other men
and with the perilous sea. As he kept remembering,
[10] he cried heavy tears, sometimes lying on his side,
sometimes on his back or on his face. Then he'd get up,
to wander in distress, back and forth along the shore.
He'd see Dawn's approach across the sea and beaches,
then he'd harness his fast horses to their chariot,
tie on Hector and drag him behind, driving
three times around the tomb of Menoetius' dead son.
Then in his hut he'd rest again, leaving Hector
stretched out, face down in the dust. But Apollo,
feeling pity for Hector, though he was dead,
[20] guarded his skin from any lacerations,
covering his whole body with the golden aegis,
so as Achilles dragged him, he did not tear his skin.
Still Achilles kept dishonouring godlike Hector.

Then the blessed gods, looking on, pitied Hector.
So they urged keen-eyed Hermes, killer of Argus,
to steal the corpse, an idea that pleased them all,
except for Hera, Poseidon, and Athena,
the girl with glittering eyes, who kept up the hatred
they'd felt when they first started to loathe Ilion,
[30] Priam and his people, for Alexander's folly—
he'd been contemptuous of those goddesses,
when they were visiting his sheep-fold, choosing
the one who volunteered to serve his dangerous lust.*
But after the twelfth dawn had come since Hector's death,
Phoebus Apollo spoke out to the immortals:

“You gods are cruel and vindictive.
Did Hector never sacrifice to you,
burning thighs of perfect bulls and goats?
And can't you now rouse yourself to save him,
[40] though he's a corpse, for his wife, his mother,
and his child to look at, and for Priam, too,
his father, and the people, who'd burn him
with all speed and give him burial rites?
No, you want to help ruthless Achilles,
whose heart has no restraint. In that chest
his mind cannot be changed. Like some lion,
he thinks savage thoughts, a beast which follows
only its own power, its own proud heart,
as it goes out against men's flocks, seeking
[50] a feast of cattle—that's how Achilles
destroys compassion. And in his heart
there's no sense of shame, which can help a man
or harm him. No doubt, a man can suffer loss
of someone even closer than a friend—
a brother born from the same mother
or even a son. He pays his tribute
with his tears and his laments—then stops.
For Fates have put in men resilient hearts.

But this man here, once he took Hector's life,
[60] ties him behind his chariot, then drags him
around his dear companion's burial mound.
He's done nothing to help or honour him.
He should take care he doesn't anger us.
Though he's a fine man, in this rage of his
he's harming senseless dust."

Then Hera,
angry at Apollo, replied

"Lord of the silver bow,
yes, indeed, what you say may well be true,
if you gods give Hector and Achilles
equal worth. But Hector is a mortal man,
[70] suckled at a woman's breast, while Achilles
is the child of a goddess I raised myself.
I brought her up and gave her to Peleus
to be his wife, a man dear to the hearts
of the immortal gods. All of you were there,
when they got married. You, too, were with us
at the banquet, you friend of evil men,
clutching your lyre, as slippery as ever."

Cloud gatherer Zeus then answered Hera, saying:

"Hera, don't get so angry with the gods.
[80] These two will not both share equal honours.
Still, of all mortal men in Ilion,
Hector was the favourite of the gods.
At least that's what he was to me.
He never failed to offer me fine gifts.
At their communal feasts, my own altar
never went without the proper offerings,
libations and sacrificial smoke,
as is our right. But we'll not let this corpse,
brave Hector's body, be taken secretly.

[90] Achilles would for certain learn of it,
since his mother sees him all the time,
both day and night. But one of the gods
should tell Thetis to come here before me,
so I can put a useful plan to her,
how Achilles can get gifts from Priam
and then give Hector back to him.”

Once Zeus had spoken, storm-swift Iris rushed away,
bearing Zeus’ message. Half way between Samos
and rocky Imbros she plunged into the sea.

[100] As waters roared above her, she sank way down,
just as a plummet sinks when fastened to a lure,
one fashioned out of horn from some farmyard ox
to bring death to hungry fish. She met Thetis
sitting in a hollow cave with other sea gods
thronging there around her. In the middle of them all,
Thetis was lamenting the fate of her fine son,
who would die in fertile Troy, far from his home.
Standing right beside her, swift-footed Iris spoke:

“Rouse yourself, Thetis. Zeus, whose thoughts
[110] endure forever, is calling for you.”

Silver-footed Thetis then said in reply:

“Why is that mighty god now summoning me?
I’m ashamed to associate with immortals,
my heart holds such immeasurable grief.
But I’ll go. And no matter what he says,
his words will not be wasted.”

Saying this,
Thetis, queen of goddesses, took a dark veil,
the blackest of her garments, then set off on her way.
Swift Iris, with feet like wind, went on ahead.

[120] The surging sea parted round the two of them.

When they emerged on shore, they raced on up to heaven.
They found the wide-seeing son of Cronos in the midst
of all the other blessed gods, who live forever.
Once Athena had made room for her, Thetis sat
with Father Zeus. Hera placed a gold cup in her hand,
with words of welcome. She drank, then handed back the cup.
The father of the gods and men spoke first:

“You’ve come here to Olympus, goddess Thetis,
though you’re grieving, with endless sorrows
[130] in your heart. I know that. But even so,
I’ll tell you the reason why I’ve called you here.
For nine days immortals have been quarrelling
about Achilles, sacker of cities,
and Hector’s corpse. They keep urging Hermes,
keen-eyed killer of Argus, to steal the body.
But I want to give honour to Achilles,
maintain my respect for you in future,
and keep our friendship. So you must leave quickly.
Go to the army. Tell your son what I say.
[140] Tell him the gods are annoyed at him,
that of all immortals I’m especially angry,
because, in his heartfelt fury, he keeps
Hector at his beaked ships, won’t give him back.
Through fear of me, he may hand Hector over.
I’ll also send Iris to great-hearted Priam,
telling him to go to the Achaean ships,
to beg for his dear son, bearing presents
for Achilles to delight his heart.”

Silver-footed Thetis did not disagree with Zeus.
[150] She went speeding from Olympus’ peak to her son’s hut.
She found him there, still mourning endlessly.
Around him, his close companions were all busy,
in a hurry to get their morning meal prepared.
Inside the hut they’d butchered a large woolly sheep.
His noble mother sat close by him, caressed him

with her hand, then spoke to him, saying:

“My son,
how long will you consume your heart with tears,
with this grieving, not thinking about food
or going to bed. To have sex with a woman
[160] would do you good. I won’t see you still alive
much longer—for at this moment, Death,
your powerful fate, is standing close at hand.
But quickly, listen to me. For I’m here
as messenger from Zeus. He told me this—
the gods are angry with you. Zeus himself
is the angriest of all immortals,
because, in your heartfelt fury, you keep
Hector by your beaked ships, won’t return him.
So come, now. Give him back, and for that corpse
accept a ransom.”

[170] Swift-footed Achilles
then replied to Thetis, saying:

“So be it.
Whoever brings the ransom, let that man
have the corpse, if that’s what the Olympian
in his own heart truly desires.”

Thus, among the assembled ships, mother and son
spoke to each other many winged words.

Meanwhile, Cronos’ son urged Iris to be off
to sacred Ilion:

“You must go right away,
swift Iris. Leave your home here on Olympus.
[180] Take this message to great-hearted Priam,
inside Ilion—tell him he must visit
Achaean ships to ransom his dear son,

taking gifts to please Achilles' heart.
He must go alone. No other Trojan man
is to accompany him. One herald,
an older man, can make the journey with him,
to drive the mules and sturdy wagon
and bring back to the city the body
of the godlike man Achilles killed.

[190] He mustn't think of death or be afraid.
A fitting escort will accompany him—
Hermes, killer of Argus—as a guide,
until he brings him to Achilles.
Once he's led him to Achilles' hut,
that man will not kill him—he'll restrain
all other men. For he's not stupid,
blind, or disrespectful of the gods.
He'll spare a suppliant, treat him kindly.”

Zeus spoke. Storm-footed Iris rushed off with the message.

[200] Reaching Priam's house, she found him weeping there
and mourning. His sons were sitting with their father
inside the courtyard, wetting garments with their tears.
The old man sat with them, cloak tightly wrapped around him.
Both his head and neck were covered with the dung
he'd grovelled in and grabbed up by the handful.
His daughters and sons' wives were crying through the house,
thinking of many noble warriors who'd been killed
at Achaean hands. Zeus' messenger approached.
Standing beside Priam, she spoke in a soft voice,
[210] but nonetheless his limbs began to tremble.

“Let your heart be brave, Priam, son of Dardanus.
Don't be afraid. I've not come with news
of any harm to you, but to do good.
I am a messenger to you from Zeus—
he may be far off, but he looks out for you,
cares very much, and feels pity for you.
The Olympian is telling you to ransom

- godlike Hector. Take presents to Achilles,
fine things his heart will find delightful.
- [220] You must go alone. No other Trojan man
is to go along with you. A herald,
an older man, may make the journey with you,
to drive the mules and sturdy wagon
and bring back to the city the body
of the godlike man Achilles killed.
You mustn't think of death or be afraid.
A proper escort will accompany you—
Hermes, killer of Argus—to guide you,
until he brings you to Achilles.
- [230] Once he's led you to Achilles' hut,
that man will not kill you—he'll restrain
all other men. For he's not stupid,
blind, or disrespectful of the gods.
He'll spare a suppliant, treat him kindly."

- With these words, swift-footed Iris went away.
Priam told his sons to prepare a sturdy mule cart
and lash on a wicker box. Then he went in person
down to the sweet-smelling vaulted storage chamber
lined with cedar, which held many of his treasures.
- [240] He summoned Hecuba, his wife, then said:

"My lady,
a messenger has come to me from Zeus,
instructing me to ransom our dear son.
I'm to go to the Achaean ships, taking
gifts for Achilles to delight his heart.
So come, tell me what you feel about this.
My own heart and spirit are urging me,
in a strange and fearful way, to go there,
to the ships and wide Achaean camp."

At Priam's words, his wife cried out. Then she replied:

[250] “Where’s your mind gone, that wisdom you once had,
for which in earlier days you were well known
among your subjects and with strangers, too?
How can you want to visit the Achaean ships,
to go alone, before the eyes of the man
who’s killed so many of your noble sons?
You’ve an iron heart. If he captures you,
once he sees you, that man’s so savage,
so unreliable, he’ll show no pity.
He’ll not respect you. No, let’s mourn here,
[260] in our home, sitting far away from Hector.
That’s what mighty Fate spun out for him
when he was born, when I gave birth to him—
that swift-running dogs would devour him
far from his parents beside that powerful man.
How I wish I could rip out that man’s heart,
then eat it. That would be some satisfaction
for my son, who wasn’t playing the coward
when he killed him. No, he was standing there,
defending deep-breasted Trojan women
[270] and Trojan men, not thinking of his safety
or running off in flight.”

The old man,
godlike Priam, then said in response to Hecuba:

“I want to go. Don’t try to stop me.
Don’t be a bird of ill omen in our house.
You won’t convince me. If some other man,
some earthly mortal, had told me this,
a prophet who interprets sacrifices
or some priest, we’d think it false, reject it.
But this time I heard the goddess for myself.
[280] I stared her in the face. So I will go.
Her message won’t be wasted. If I’m fated
to die by the bronze-clad Achaeans’ ships,
that’s what I wish. Let Achilles kill me,

once I've embraced my son and satisfied
my desire to mourn."

Priam finished speaking.

Then he threw open fine lids on the storage chests.

From there he took twelve lovely robes, twelve single cloaks,
as many blankets, white coverlets, and tunics.

He brought gold, weighing out a total of ten talents,

[290] then two gleaming tripods, four cauldrons, and a cup,
a splendid one given to him by men of Thrace,
when he'd gone there as an envoy, a fine treasure.

Even this cup the old man didn't leave at home—
he was so eager to pay ransom for his son.

Then Priam chased the Trojans from his courtyard,
shaming them with angry words:

"Go away,

you wretches! You ought to be ashamed.

Have you nothing to cry about back home,
so you come here tormenting me like this?

[300] Isn't it enough that Zeus, Cronos' son,
gives me this grief, that I must lose my son,
the best one of them all? Well, you'll soon find out.
Now he's been killed, it will be easier
for Achaeans to kill you, too. As for me,
may I go down to Hades' home, before I see
this city plundered and destroyed."

With these words, Priam went at the people with his staff,
lashing out. They moved off, beyond the old man's rage.

Then he began shouting at his sons, cursing them—

[310] Helenus, Paris, noble Agathon, Pammon,
Antiphonus, Polites, skilled in war shouts,
Deïphobus, Hippothous, and proud Dios.
To these nine, the old man yelled his orders.

"Hurry up, you useless children, my shame.

I wish you'd all been killed instead of Hector
by those swift ships—the entire bunch of you!
My life's so miserable and empty.
I fathered sons, the best in spacious Troy.
I don't think a single one of them is left—
[320] not Mestor, or horseman Troilus, or Hector,
that god among men. He didn't seem to be
the child of any mortal man, but of a god.
Ares destroyed all those sons of mine.
The ones still left here are disgraceful—
liars, prancing masters of the dance floor,
who steal lambs and goats from their own people.
Will you not prepare a wagon for me—
and quickly? Put all those items in it,
so we can start out on our way.”

Priam finished.
[330] The sons, shaken by their father's torrent of abuse,
brought out the sturdy, well-made wagon, a new one.
They lashed the wicker basket on it, then took down
from its peg a box-wood yoke to fit a team of mules,
furnished with guiding rings and with a knob on top.
They brought out with the yoke the lashing for it,
a strap five metres long. They placed the yoke with care
across the polished pole at its front end, then set
the rope's eye on the peg and bound it up securely
with three twists round the knob. They lashed it to the pole,
[340] twisting the end below the hook. Next, they brought out
from the storeroom and stowed in the well-polished cart
the huge ransom to be paid for Hector's head. The mules
they then put into harness, underneath the yoke,
strong-footed beasts, a splendid gift which Mysians
once gave Priam. Then to Priam's chariot they yoked up
the team the old man kept for his own personal use,
taking care of them in his own gleaming stables.

While harnessing these animals went on this way

in the lofty courtyard for Priam and his herald,
[350] two men with wisdom in their hearts, Hecuba approached.
She came up to them with her heart in great distress.
In her right hand she held out in a golden cup
some honey wine, so the men could pour libations
before setting out. Standing there beside their horses,
she addressed them, saying:

“Take this wine.
Pour a libation out to Father Zeus,
and pray that you’ll come home again,
back from your enemies, since your heart
urges you against my will to those swift ships.
[360] So pray to Cronos’ son, lord of dark clouds
and god of Ida, who sees the land of Troy,
and ask him to send a bird of omen,
that fast messenger which is to him
the favourite of all birds, the mightiest.
Let that bird appear over to your right,
so, once you witness it with your own eyes,
you can have faith, as you go to the ships
of those fast-riding Argives. But should Zeus,
who sees far and wide, not send that messenger,
[370] I’d not urge you or advise you go there,
to Achaean ships, for all your eagerness.”

Godlike Priam then said in reply to Hecuba:

“Wife, I’ll not disregard what you advise.
It’s good to extend one’s hand to Zeus,
if he’s inclined to pity.”

Priam spoke.
Then the old man ordered his servant woman
to pour pure water on his hands. She came out,
bringing with her a basin and a water jug.
Priam washed his hands. Taking the cup from his wife,

[380] he prayed, standing in the middle of the courtyard.
Gazing up to heaven, he poured out some wine,
then spoke aloud, saying:

“Father Zeus,
lord of Ida, most glorious and great,
grant that when I come to Achilles’ hut,
I’ll be welcomed kindly and with pity.
Send me a bird as omen, a swift messenger,
the one that is your favourite, the strongest.
Let it appear to my right overhead,
so, once I witness it with my own eyes,
[390] I can have faith as I go to those ships
of the fast-riding Danaans.”

So Priam prayed.
Counsellor Zeus heard him. At once he sent an eagle,
of all flying things the surest omen, a dark one,
which people call black eagle, with wings as wide
as doors on some rich man’s vaulted store house,
one fitted well with bolts—that’s how wide this eagle
spread its wings on either side, appearing on the right,
speeding across the city. When they saw that bird,
they all rejoiced. Hearts in their chests felt great relief.
[400] The old man, in a hurry, climbed in his chariot,
then drove out through the gate and echoing courtyard.
In front the mules drew on the four-wheeled wagon,
led by wise Idaios. The horses came behind.
The old man kept laying on the whip, urging them
swiftly through the city. All his family followed him
in tears, as if Priam were going off to his death.
When they’d passed the gate and reached the plain,
his sons and sons-in-law turned back to Ilion.
But as those two men came out into the plain,
[410] they did not go unobserved by wide-seeing Zeus.
Looking down on that old man, Zeus pitied him.
At once he spoke to Hermes, his dear son:

“Hermes, since your favourite task by far
is acting in a friendly way to men
and listening to any man you like,
go down there. Guide Priam to Achaeans,
to their hollow ships, so no one sees him,
so no Danaan even is aware of him,
until he comes to the son of Peleus.”

[420] Hermes the Guide, killer of Argus, hearing Zeus,
did not disobey. At once he laced up on his feet
his lovely sandals, immortal golden shoes
which carry him across the seas and boundless earth
as fast as winds can blow. With him he took the rod
which puts to sleep the eyes of any man he wishes
or wakes up others who are slumbering.
With this rod in hand, mighty Hermes flew away.
He quickly came to Troy and to the Hellespont.
There he walked on in the form of a young prince
[430] with his first hair on his lip, looking that age
when charms of youth are at their loveliest.

When the two men had passed the burial mound of Ilus,
they reined in the mules and horses, stopping there
beside the river for a drink. For by this time
darkness had come down over the earth. Looking round,
the herald saw Hermes approaching. He said to Priam:

“Be careful, son of Dardanus. At this point,
we need to think with prudence. I see a man,
and it seems we may be cut to pieces soon.
[440] Come, let's go in your chariot, or at least
clasp him by the knees and beg for mercy.
He may feel pity for us.”

Idaios spoke.
The old man's mind was very troubled.

He was dreadfully afraid. On his bent limbs,
the hairs stood out, and he stayed there in a daze.
But Hermes the Helper came up by himself,
took the old man's hand, then asked him questions:

“Father, where are you going with these horses
and these mules through this immortal night,
[450] when other living men are fast asleep?
Aren't you afraid of those Achaeans,
hostile, fury-breathing, ruthless soldiers—
they're not far off. If one of them should see you
bearing all this treasure in the swift black night,
what would you do then? You're not that young.
Your escort here is elderly, too old
to defend himself against someone
who wants to start a fight. But as for me,
I'll not harm you. In fact, I will protect you
[460] from other men, because in you I see
my own dear father.”

Old godlike Priam
then said to Hermes in reply:

“My dear child,
Things are indeed just as you say. But some god
holds his hand over me, to send me here
a traveller like you who comes to meet us,
an auspicious sign, with your handsome shape
and your fine common sense. Those parents of yours
who gave birth to you are surely fortunate.”

Messenger Hermes, killer of Argus, then said:

[470] “Old man, what you say is very true.
But come now, tell me—and tell me truly—
are you sending so much treasure out
for foreign people to keep safe for you,

or are you leaving sacred Ilion
in fear, now that the finest man's been killed,
your own son, who never was reluctant
in any battles with Achaeans."

Old godlike Priam spoke again to Hermes:

"Who are you, good sir? Who are your parents?
[480] You speak so fairly of my doomed son's fate."

Hermes the Guide, killer of Argus, then replied:

"You want to test me, old man, by asking me
of godlike Hector. My eyes have seen him
many times in fights where men win glory.
And when he drove the Argives to their ships,
killing and butchering them with his sharp bronze,
we stood there astonished. For Achilles,
still in a furious rage with Agamemnon,
would not let us fight. I attend on him.
[490] The same ship brought us here. I'm a soldier,
one of the Myrmidons. My father's Polyctor,
a man of substance, about as old as you.
He has six other sons—I'm the seventh.
By casting lots with them I was selected
to sail here. I've come now from our ships
here to the plain. At dawn bright-eyed Achaeans
will organize for battle round the city.
They're restless, just sitting idly there.
And it's impossible for Achaea's kings
[500] to keep in check their eagerness for war."

Old godlike Priam then said to Hermes:

"If you, indeed, do serve with Achilles,
son of Peleus, then tell me the whole truth—
is my son still beside the ships, or has Achilles

already carved his body limb from limb
and thrown him to the dogs to eat?”

Hermes the Guide, killer of Argus, answered:

“Old man, birds and dogs have not yet fed on him.
He’s lying still beside Achilles’ ship,
[510] among the huts, the same as when he died.
For twelve days he’s lain there, but his flesh
has not decayed. Worms are not eating him,
as they do with men who die in battle.
Each dawn, Achilles drags him ruthlessly
around his dear companion’s burial mound,
but that does not lacerate the corpse.
It would amaze you, if you went in person,
to see how he lies there as fresh as dew,
with all blood washed away, no stain on him.
[520] All the wounds he got have closed completely,
and many people stuck their bronze in him.
But that’s how blessed gods care for your son,
though he’s a corpse. For their hearts loved him.”

At these words, the old man felt joy. He replied:

“My son, it’s good to pay immortal gods
what’s due to them. It’s certainly the case,
as true as that my son was once alive,
he never once neglected in our home
the gods who hold Olympus. That’s the reason
[530] they now remember him for what he did,
even his dead body after death. Come now,
take this lovely goblet as my gift to you.
Protect me. Be my guide with the gods’ help,
until I reach the hut of Peleus’ son.”

Messenger Hermes, killer of Argus, answered Priam:

“You’re testing me, old man, because I’m younger.
You won’t convince me when you ask me
to take your gift without Achilles’ knowledge.
My heart fears that man, but I respect him
[540] too much to rob him, in case something bad
comes to me later. But I’ll be your guide—
even all the way to famous Argos—
attending to your every need on a swift ship
or else on foot. No man will fight against you
because he’s thinks too little of your guide.”

With these words, Hermes jumped up in the chariot
behind the horses, quickly grabbing reins and whip.
He breathed great strength into those mules and horses.

When they reached the ditch and towers round the ships,
[550] the sentries there were starting to prepare their meal.
Hermes, killer of Argus, poured sleep on all of them,
then opened up the gates at once, pulling back the bars.
He led in Priam with the wagon load of priceless gifts.
They then reached the lofty hut of Peleus’ son,
which Myrmidons had built there for their king, cutting
pine beams for it, then roofing it with downy reeds
gathered from the meadows. They’d built around it
a large courtyard for their king, strongly fenced with stakes.
A single beam of pine kept the gate securely closed.
[560] It needed three Achaeans to push it into place,
and three to draw that great bolt from the door,
three of the rest of the Achaeans, for Achilles
could push it into place alone. Helper Hermes
opened the gate himself for old man Priam,
then brought in those splendid gifts for swift Achilles.
He climbed down from the chariot and said:

“Old man,
I am Hermes, an immortal god. I’ve come,
because my father sent me as your guide.

But I'll go back now. I won't approach
[570] within sight of Achilles. There'd be anger
if an immortal god greeted mortal men
face to face. But you should go inside,
appeal to him in his father's name,
his mother with her lovely hair, his child,
so you may stir his heart."

With these words,
Hermes went on his way, back to high Olympus.
Priam then climbed from his chariot to the ground.
He left Idaios there to tend the mules and horses.
The old man went directly in the hut
[580] where Achilles, dear to Zeus, usually sat.
He found Achilles there, with only two companions,
sitting some distance from him—warrior Automedon
and Alkimus, offshoot of the war god Ares—
busy attending him. He'd just completed dinner.
He'd had food and drink, but the table was still there.
The men did not see great Priam as he entered.
He came up to Achilles, then with his fingers
clasped his knees and kissed his hands, those dreadful hands,
man-killers, which had slain so many of his sons.
[590] Just as sheer folly grips a man who in his own land
kills someone, then runs off to a land of strangers,
to the home of some rich man, so those who see him
are seized with wonder—that's how Achilles then
looked on godlike Priam in astonishment.
The others were amazed. They gazed at one another.
Then Priam made his plea, entreating:

"Godlike Achilles,
remember your own father, who's as old as me,
on the painful threshold of old age.
It may well be that those who live around him
[600] are harassing him, and no one's there
to save him from ruin and destruction.

But when he hears you're still alive,
his heart feels joy, for every day he hopes
he'll see his dear son come back home from Troy.
But I'm completely doomed to misery,
for I fathered the best sons in spacious Troy,
yet I say now not one of them remains.
I had fifty when Achaea's sons arrived—
nineteen born from the same mother's womb,
[610] others the women of the palace bore me.
Angry Ares drained the life of most of them.
But I had one left, guardian of our city,
protector of its people. You've just killed him,
as he was fighting for his native country.
I mean Hector. For his sake I've come here,
to Achaea's ships, to win him back from you.
And I've brought a ransom beyond counting.
So Achilles, show deference to the gods
and pity for myself, remembering
[620] your own father. Of the two old men,
I'm more pitiful, because I have endured
what no living mortal on this earth has borne—
I've lifted up to my own lips and kissed
the hands of the man who killed my son."

Priam finished. His words roused in Achilles
a desire to weep for his own father. Taking Priam's hand,
he gently moved him back. So the two men there
both remembered warriors who'd been slaughtered.
Priam, lying at Achilles' feet, wept aloud
[630] for man-killing Hector, and Achilles also wept
for his own father and once more for Patroclus.
The sound of their lamenting filled the house.

When godlike Achilles had had enough of weeping,
when the need to mourn had left his heart and limbs,
he stood up quickly from his seat, then with his hand
helped the old man to his feet, feeling pity

for that grey head and beard. Then Achilles spoke—
his words had wings:

- “You unhappy man,
your heart’s had to endure so many evils.
[640] How could you dare come to Achaea’s ships,
and come alone, to rest your eyes on me,
when I’ve killed so many noble sons of yours?
You must have a heart of iron. But come now,
sit on this chair. Though we’re both feeling pain,
we’ll let our grief lie quiet on our hearts.
For there’s no benefit in frigid tears.
That’s the way the gods have spun the threads
for wretched mortal men, so they live in pain,
though gods themselves live on without a care.
[650] On Zeus’ floor stand two jars which hold his gifts—
one has disastrous things, the other blessings.
When thunder-loving Zeus hands out a mixture,
that man will, at some point, meet with evil,
then, some other time, with good. When Zeus’ gift
comes only from the jar containing evil,
he makes the man despised. A wicked frenzy
drives him all over sacred earth—he wanders
without honour from the gods or mortal men.
Consider Peleus. The gods gave him gifts,
[660] splendid presents, right from birth. In wealth,
in his possessions, he surpassed all men.
And he was king over the Myrmidons.
Though he was a mortal, the gods gave him
a goddess for a wife. But even to him
the gods gave evil, too, for in his palace
there sprang up no line of princely children.
He had one son, doomed to an early death.
I’ll not look after him as he grows old,
since I’m a long way from my native land,
[670] sitting here in Troy, bringing pain to you
and to your children. Think of yourself, old man.

We hear that you were fortunate in former times.
In all the lands from Lesbos to the south,
where Macar ruled, and east to Phrygia,
to the boundless Hellespont, in all these lands,
old man, they say that you surpassed all men
for wealth and children. But from the time
you got disaster from the heavenly gods,
man-killing battles round your city
[680] have never ceased. You must endure it all,
without a constant weeping in your heart.
You achieve nothing by grieving for your son.
You won't bring him to life again, not before
you'll have to suffer yet another evil."

Old godlike Priam then answered Achilles:

"Don't make me sit down on a chair, my lord,
while Hector lies uncared for in your huts.
But quickly give him back, so my own eyes
can see him. And take the enormous ransom
[690] we've brought here for you. May it give you joy.
And may you get back to your native land,
since you've now let me live to see the sunlight."

With an angry look, swift-footed Achilles snapped at Priam:

"Old man, don't provoke me. I myself intend
to give you Hector. Zeus sent me here
a messenger, the mother who bore me,
a daughter of the Old Man of the Sea.
And in my heart, Priam, I recognize—
it's no secret to me—that some god
[700] led you here to the swift Achaean ships.
No matter how young and strong, no living man
would dare to make the trip to our encampment.
He could not evade the sentries or push back
our door bolts—that would not be easy.

So don't agitate my grieving heart still more,
or I might not spare even you, old man,
though you're a suppliant here in my hut.
I could transgress what Zeus has ordered."

Achilles spoke. The old man, afraid, obeyed him.
[710] Then Peleus' son sprang to the door, like a lion.
Not alone—his two attendants went out with him,
warrior Automedon and Alcimius, whom he honoured
the most of his companions after dead Patroclus.
They freed the mules and horses from their harnesses,
led in the herald, the old man's crier, sat him on a stool.
Then from the polished wagon they brought in
that priceless ransom for Hector's head, leaving there
two cloaks and a thickly woven tunic, so Achilles
could wrap up the corpse before he gave it back
[720] for Priam to take home. Achilles then called out,
ordering his servant women to wash the body,
and then anoint it, after moving it away,
so Priam wouldn't see his son, then, heart-stricken,
be unable to contain his anger at the sight.
Achilles' own spirit might then get so aroused
he could kill Priam, disobeying Zeus' orders.
Servants washed the corpse, anointed it with oil,
and put a lovely cloak and tunic round it.
Achilles himself lifted it and placed it on a bier.
[730] Then together he and his companions set it
on the polished wagon. Achilles, with a groan,
called to his dear companion:

"O Patroclus,
don't be angry with me, if you learn,
even in Hades' house, that I gave back
godlike Hector to his dear father.
He's brought to me a fitting ransom.
I'll be giving you your full share of it,
as is appropriate."

Godlike Achilles spoke,
then went back once more into the hut and sat
[740] on the richly decorated chair he'd left
by the opposite wall. Then he spoke to Priam:

“Old man, your son has been given back,
as you requested. He's lying on a bier.
You'll see him for yourself at day break,
when you take him. We should think of eating.
Even fair-haired Niobe remembered food,
with twelve of her own children murdered in her home,
her six young daughters and her six strong sons.
Apollo was so enraged at Niobe,
[750] with his silver bow he killed the sons. The daughters
Artemis the Archer slaughtered, for Niobe
had compared herself to lovely Leto,
saying the goddess only had two children,
while she had given birth to many. Even so,
though only two, those gods killed all her children.
For nine days they lay in their own blood—
there was no one there to give them burial.
Cronos' son had turned the people all to stone.
The tenth day, the gods in heaven buried them.
[760] That's when, worn out with weeping, Niobe
had thoughts of food. And now, somewhere in the rocks
in Sipylus, among the lonely mountains,
where, men say, goddess nymphs lie down to sleep,
the ones that dance beside the Achelous,
there Niobe, though turned to stone, still broods,
thinking of the pain the gods have given her.
But come, royal old man, let's think of food.
Later you can lament for your dear son,
when you have taken him to Ilion,
[770] where you'll shed many tears for him.”

Swift Achilles finished. Then, jumping up, he killed

a white-fleeced sheep. His companions skinned it,
then prepared the meat, slicing it skilfully
and putting it on spits. They cooked it carefully,
then pulled spits from the pieces. Taking bread,
Automedon set it in fine baskets on the table.
Achilles served the meat. Then their hands went to it,
taking the food prepared and set beside them.
When they'd satisfied their need for food and drink,
[780] then Priam, son of Dardanus, looked at Achilles,
wondering at his size and beauty, like gazing
face to face upon a god. Achilles looked at Priam,
marvelling at his royal appearance and the words he heard.
Once they'd had their fill of looking at each other,
the first to speak was the old man, godlike Priam:

“My lord, show me my bed now with all speed,
so we may lie down and enjoy sweet sleep.
For since your hands took my son's life away,
my eyelids have not closed my eyes, not once.
[790] I always weep, brooding on my sorrows,
my endless grief. I grovel in the dung
inside my closed-in courtyard. Now I've eaten,
tasted meat, and let myself drink gleaming wine.
Before this, I'd eat nothing.”

Priam spoke.
Achilles told his comrades and the servants
to set beds out on his portico, laying on them
fine purple rugs with blankets spread on top,
placing above them wool-lined cloaks for clothing.
Women slaves went from the hall with torches.
[800] Right away they spread out two beds, working quickly.
Then swift-footed Achilles spoke to Priam,
in a joking tone:

“Sleep here outside, my dear old man,
in case some Achaean counsellor arrives.

They always come to see me to make plans,
as is our custom. If one of them saw you
on this pitch black night, he might run off
to tell Agamemnon, his people's shepherd.
Then giving back the corpse might be delayed.
But come, tell me—and speak truthfully—
[810] how many days do you require to bury
godlike Hector, so I can stop that long
and keep the troops in check?"

Old godlike Priam
then said in answer to Achilles:

"If you're willing
for me to give lord Hector a full burial,
then, Achilles, as a personal favour,
there is something you could do for me.
You know how we're restricted to our city.
It's a long way to the mountains to get wood.
Besides, the Trojans are especially fearful.
[820] We'll mourn Hector for nine days in our home.
On the tenth day we'll have his funeral.
Then there'll be a banquet for the people.
On the eleventh, we'll make his burial mound.
The twelfth day, if we must, we'll go to war."

Swift-footed Achilles then said to Priam:

"All right, old Priam, things will be arranged
as you request. I'll suspend the fighting
for the length of time you've asked for."

As he said this, Achilles took the old man's wrist
[830] on his right hand, in case his heart was fearful.
So by that house on the porch they lay down to sleep,
Priam and his herald, both men of wisdom.
Achilles slept in a corner of his well-built hut,

with lovely Briseis stretched out there beside him.

Meanwhile, other gods and warrior charioteers,
all conquered by sweet sleep, slept the whole night through.
But slumber did not grip the Helper Hermes,
as he considered in his heart what he might do
to guide king Priam from the ships in secret,
[840] without the strong guard at the gate observing.
So standing above Priam's head, he said to him:

“Old man, you're not expecting any harm,
as you sleep like this among your enemies,
since Achilles spared your life. Your dear son
is ransomed for that huge amount you paid.
But if Agamemnon, son of Atreus,
or all Achaeans learn that you are here,
those sons you've left behind will have to pay
a ransom three times greater for your life.”

[850] Hermes spoke. At his words, the old man grew afraid.
He woke up the herald. Hermes harnessed mules and horses,
then guided them himself quickly through the camp,
attracting no attention. But when they reached the ford
across the swirling river Xanthus, immortal Zeus' child,
Hermes left them and returned to high Olympus.

As Dawn spread her yellow robes over all the earth,
the two men drove their horses inside the city,
weeping and groaning. The mules pulled in the corpse.
No one noticed them, no man, no well-dressed woman,
[860] except Cassandra, a girl as beautiful
as golden Aphrodite. She'd climbed up Pergamus.
She saw her father standing in his chariot,
together with his herald, the town crier.
In the mule cart she saw the corpse lying on the bier.
With a scream, Cassandra cried out to all the city:

“See, men and women of Troy, come and see—
look on Hector, if, while he was still alive,
you would rejoice when he came back from war,
for he was a great joy to all our city
and its people.”

[870] At Cassandra’s shout,
no man or woman was left unaffected.
There in the city all were overcome with grief
beyond anyone’s control. Close to the gates,
they met Priam bringing home the body.
First Hector’s dear wife and his noble mother,
tearing their hair, ran to the sturdy wagon,
trying to touch Hector’s head. People crowded round,
all weeping. They would have stayed there by the gates,
shedding tears for Hector the entire day
[880] until the sun went down, but from the chariot
the old man cried out to the crowd:

“Make way there—
let the mules get through. There’ll be time enough,
once I’ve got him home, for everyone to weep.”

At Priam’s words, the crowd moved back, making room.
The wagon pushed on through. Once they’d got him home,
inside their great house, they laid him on a corded bed,
then placed singers there beside him, to lead their songs.
They sang a mournful funeral dirge. Then the women
began their wailing, led by white-armed Andromache,
[890] who held in her arms the head of man-killing Hector.

“My husband—you’ve lost your life so young,
leaving me a widow in our home,
with our son still an infant, the child
born to you and me in our wretchedness.
I don’t think he’ll grow up to adulthood.
Before that, our city will all be destroyed.

For you, who kept watch over for us, are dead.
You used to protect our city, keeping
its noble wives and little children safe.

[900] Now, soon enough, they'll all be carried off
in hollow ships. I'll be there among them.
And you, my child, you'll follow with me,
to some place where you'll be put to work
at menial tasks, slaving for a cruel master.
Or else some Achaean man will grab your arm
and throw you from the wall—a dreadful death—
in his anger that Hector killed his brother,
or his father, or his son. For Hector's hands
made great numbers of Achaeans sink their teeth
[910] into the broad earth. In wretched warfare,
your father was not gentle. So in our city
they now weep for him. O Hector, what sorrow,
what untold grief you've laid upon your parents.
What painful sorrows will remain for me,
especially for me. As you were dying,
you didn't reach your hand out from the bed,
or give me some final words of wisdom,
something I could remember always,
night and day, as I continue my lament."

[920] Andromache said this in tears. The women all wailed with her.
Then Hecuba took her turn in leading their laments:

"Hector, dearest by far of all my children,
loved by the gods, as well, when you were living.
Now, at your death, they still take care of you.
When swift Achilles took my other sons,
he'd ship them off across the boundless seas,
to Samos, or Imbros, or foggy Lemnos.
When his long-edged bronze took away your life,
he dragged you many times around the mound
[930] for his comrade Patroclus, whom you killed.
Yet even so, he could not revive him.

Now you lie here in our house, fresh as dew,
like someone whom Apollo of the silver bow
has just come to and killed with gentle arrows.”

As she spoke, Hecuba wept. She stirred them on
to endless lamentation. Helen was the third
to lead those women in their wailing:

“Hector—of all my husband’s brothers,
you’re by far the dearest to my heart.

[940] My husband is godlike Alexander,
who brought me here to Troy. I wish I’d died
before that happened! This is the twentieth year
since I went away and left my native land,
but I’ve never heard a nasty word from you
or an abusive speech. In fact, if anyone
ever spoke rudely to me in the house—
one of your brothers or sisters, some brother’s
well-dressed wife, or your mother—for your father
always was so kind, as if he were my own—

[950] you’d speak out, persuading them to stop,
using your gentleness, your soothing words.
Now I weep for you and for my wretched self,
so sick at heart, for there’s no one else
in spacious Troy who’s kind to me and friendly.
They all look at me and shudder with disgust.”

Helen spoke in tears. The huge crowd joined in their lament.
Then old Priam addressed his people:

“You Trojans,
you must fetch some wood here to the city.
Don’t let your hearts fear any ambush,

[960] some crafty Achaean trick. For Achilles,
when he sent me back from the hollow ships,
gave me his word they’d not harm us
until the twelfth day dawns.”

Priam finished.

The people hitched up mules and oxen to their wagons
and then gathered before the city with all speed.

For nine days they brought in wood, an immense amount.

When the tenth dawn came, they brought brave Hector out,
then, all in tears, laid his corpse on top the funeral pyre.

They set it alight. When rose-fingered Dawn came up,

[970] they gathered around that pyre of glorious Hector.

Once they'd all assembled there together,

first they doused the pyre with gleaming wine, every part
that fire's strength had touched. His brothers and comrades
collected Hector's ash-white bones, as they mourned him—
heavy tears running down their cheeks—and placed them
in a golden urn, wrapped in soft purple cloth.

They quickly set the urn down in a shallow grave,
covered it with large stones set close together,
then hurried to pile up the mound, posting sentries

[980] on every side, in case well-armed Achaeans

attacked too soon. Once they'd piled up the mound,
they went back in, gathered together for a splendid feast,
all in due order, in Priam's house, king raised by Zeus.

And thus they buried Hector, tamer of horses.