

from: Book 6: Hector Returns to Troy

At Thetis' request, Zeus intervenes to help the Trojans defeat the Achaeans. Bitter fighting resumes, causing massive casualties on both sides. Although the Achaeans suffer a disadvantage from Achilles' absence, they manage to subdue the Trojans. Under the leadership of Diomedes, the Achaeans drive the Trojans back into temporary retreat behind the city gates. Realizing the gravity of the Trojan cause, Hector and his men go to Priam's palace to urge the gods to take pity on Troy. Hector also tries to persuade his brother Paris, who caused the war by abducting Helen, to fight. Finally, Hector goes in search of his wife, Andromache.

A flash of his helmet

and off he strode and quickly reached his sturdy,
well-built house. But white-armed Andromache—

Hector could not find her in the halls.

5 She and the boy and a servant finely gowned

were standing watch on the tower, sobbing, grieving.

When Hector saw no sign of his loyal wife inside

he went to the doorway, stopped and asked the servants,

“Come, please, tell me the truth now, women.

10 Where's Andromache gone? To my sisters' house?

To my brothers' wives with their long flowing robes?

Or Athena's shrine where the noble Trojan women

gather to win the great grim goddess over?”

A busy, willing servant answered quickly,

15 “Hector, seeing you want to know the truth,

she hasn't gone to your sisters, brothers' wives

or Athena's shrine where the noble Trojan women

gather to win the great grim goddess over.

Up to the huge gate-tower of Troy she's gone

20 because she heard our men are so hard-pressed,

the Achaean fighters coming on in so much force.

She sped to the wall in panic, like a madwoman—

the nurse went with her, carrying your child.”

At that, Hector spun and rushed from his house,

25 back by the same way down the wide, well-paved streets

throughout the city until he reached the Scaean Gates,¹

the last point he would pass to gain the field of battle.

There his warm, generous wife came running up to meet him,



Andromache the daughter of gallant-hearted Eetion²

30 who had lived below Mount Placos³ rich with timber,

in Thebe below the peaks, and ruled Cilicia’s people.⁴

His daughter had married Hector helmed in bronze.

She joined him now, and following in her steps

a servant holding the boy against her breast,

35 in the first flush of life, only a baby,

Hector’s son, the darling of his eyes

and radiant as a star . . .

Hector would always call the boy Scamandrius,

townsmen called him Astyanax, Lord of the City,

40 since Hector was the lone defense of Troy.

The great man of war breaking into a broad smile,

his gaze fixed on his son, in silence. Andromache,

pressing close beside him and weeping freely now,

clung to his hand, urged him, called him: “Reckless one,

45 my Hector—your own fiery courage will destroy you!

Have you no pity for *him*, our helpless son? Or me,

and the destiny that weighs me down, your widow,

now so soon? Yes, soon they will kill you off,

all the Achaean forces massed for assault, and then,

50 **bereft** of you, better for me to sink beneath the earth.

What other warmth, what comfort's left for me,
once you have met your doom? Nothing but torment!

I have lost my father. Mother's gone as well.

Father . . . the brilliant Achilles laid him low

55 when he stormed Cilicia's city filled with people,

Thebe with her towering gates. He killed Eetion,
not that he stripped his gear—he'd some respect at least—
for he burned his corpse in all his blazoned bronze,
then heaped a macr-mound high above the ashes

60 and nymphs₅ of the mountain planted elms around it,

daughters of Zeus whose shield is storm and thunder.

And the seven brothers I had within our halls . . .

all in the same day went down to the House of Death,
the great godlike runner Achilles butchered them all,

65 tending their shambling oxen, shining flocks.



And mother,

who ruled under the timberline of woody Placos once—

he no sooner haled her here with his other plunder

than he took a priceless ransom, set her free

and home she went to her father's royal halls

70 where Artemis,₆ showering arrows, shot her down.

You, Hector—you are my father now, my noble mother,

a brother too, and you are my husband, young and warm and strong!



Pity me, please! Take your stand on the rampart here,

before you orphan your son and make your wife a widow.

75 Draw your armies up where the wild fig tree stands,

there, where the city lies most open to assault,
the walls lower, easily overrun. Three times
they have tried that point, hoping to storm Troy,
their best fighters led by the Great and Little Ajax,⁷
80 famous Idomeneus,⁸ Atreus' sons, valiant Diomedes.⁹

Perhaps a skilled prophet revealed the spot—
or their own fury whips them on to attack.”

And tall Hector nodded, his helmet flashing:

“All this weighs on my mind too, dear woman.

85 But I would die of shame to face the men of Troy

and the Trojan women trailing their long robes

if I would shrink from battle now, a coward.

Nor does the spirit urge me on that way.

I've learned it all too well. To stand up bravely,

90 always to fight in the front ranks of Trojan soldiers,

winning my father great glory, glory for myself.

For in my heart and soul I also know this well:

the day will come when sacred Troy must die,

Priam must die and all his people with him,

95 Priam who hurls the strong ash spear . . .

Even so,

it is less the pain of the Trojans still to come

that weighs me down, not even of Hecuba¹⁰ herself

or King Priam, or the thought that my own brothers

in all their numbers, all their gallant courage,

100 may tumble in the dust, crushed by enemies—

That is nothing, nothing beside your agony

when some brazen Argive hales you off in tears,

wrenching away your day of light and freedom!

Then far off in the land of Argos you must live,

105 laboring at a loom, at another woman's beck and call,

fetching water at some spring, Messeis or Hyperia,¹¹

resisting it all the way—

the rough yoke of necessity at your neck.

And a man may say, who sees you streaming tears,

110 'There is the wife of Hector, the bravest fighter

they could field, those stallion-breaking Trojans,

long ago when the men fought for Troy.' So he will say

and the fresh grief will swell your heart once more,

widowed, robbed of the one man strong enough

115 to fight off your day of slavery.

No, no,

let the earth come piling over my dead body

before I hear your cries, I hear you dragged away!"

In the same breath, shining Hector reached down

for his son—but the boy recoiled,

120 cringing against his nurse's full breast,

screaming out at the sight of his own father,

terrified by the flashing bronze, the horsehair crest,

the great ridge of the helmet nodding, bristling terror—

so it struck his eyes. And his loving father laughed,

125 his mother laughed as well, and glorious Hector,

quickly lifting the helmet from his head,

set it down on the ground, fiery in the sunlight,

and raising his son he kissed him, tossed him in his arms,



lifting a prayer to Zeus and the other deathless gods:

130 “Zeus, all you immortals! Grant this boy, my son,
may be like me, first in glory among the Trojans,
strong and brave like me, and rule all Troy in power
and one day let them say, 'He is a better man than his father!'—
when he comes home from battle bearing the bloody gear

135 of the mortal enemy he has killed in war—

a joy to his mother's heart.”

So Hector prayed

and placed his son in the arms of his loving wife.

Andromache pressed the child to her scented breast,
smiling through her tears. Her husband noticed,

140 and filled with pity now, Hector stroked her gently,
trying to reassure her, repeating her name: “Andromache,
dear one, why so desperate? Why so much grief for me?

No man will hurl me down to Death, against my fate.

And fate? No one alive has ever escaped it,



145 neither brave man nor coward, I tell you—

it's born with us the day that we are born.

So please go home and tend to your own tasks,

the distaff and the loom, and keep the women

working hard as well. As for the fighting,

150 men will see to that, all who were born in Troy

but I most of all.”

Andromache goes home, where she and her handmaidens mourn Hector in anticipation of his death. Paris takes arms and joins Hector in driving the Achaeans out of Troy. Hector and the Trojans campaign vigorously until they completely drive the Achaeans off the battlefield back to their ships. To prevent the Achaeans from sailing away, the Trojans light watchfires and camp on the plain overnight, ready to attack in the morning. The demoralized Achaean army feels handicapped

by Achilles' absence. To persuade their most valuable fighter to reconsider and join the battle, Agamemnon sends Ajax and Odysseus on an embassy to Achilles.

In his speech to Achilles, Odysseus reminds him of his father's advice. Peleus had told Achilles that the Argives would hold him in higher honor if he did not let the anger of his proud heart get the best of him. Odysseus adds that if Achilles gives up his anger and joins the Achaeans in battle, Agamemnon has promised to give Achilles numerous war prizes, including the prize he stole: Briseis. Finally, Odysseus pleads with Achilles to fight, if not in acceptance of Agamemnon's offer, at least for the afflicted Achaeans who will honor Achilles as a god. Agamemnon's offer serves only to drive Achilles deeper into his pride. Hurt, dishonored, and, above all, angry, he refuses to help the Greeks defeat Hector and the Trojans. Odysseus and Ajax return to Agamemnon with the news of their unsuccessful embassy.

Critical Reading

- 1. Respond:** With whom would you side in the argument between Achilles and Agamemnon in Book 1? Why?
- 2. (a) Recall:** As the *Iliad* begins, what problem confronts the Greeks? **(b) Infer:** Why is the problem of such importance to the soldiers and their campaign?
- 3. (a) Recall:** Why does Agamemnon claim Briseis as his prize? **(b) Analyze Causes and Effects:** How does this action relate to Achilles' decision to withdraw from battle?
- 4. (a) Recall:** In Book 6, what prediction does Hector make about Troy's destiny? **(b) Compare and Contrast:** In light of this prediction, compare and contrast the poem's portrayals of Achilles and Hector as heroes so far.
- 5. (a) Generalize:** What does the concept of honor seem to mean in the Homeric world? Explain. **(b) Take a Position:** Do you agree with this notion of honor? Why or why not?