



## BOOK 24. *The Ransom of Hector*

The gathering broke up, and the people scattered, each man  
going to his own ship. While the others took thought  
of the pleasure of a meal and sweet sleep, Achilles wept,  
thinking constantly of his dear companion. Sleep,  
5 who conquers all, did not come to him, but he tossed  
to this side and that, longing for the manliness and great strength  
of Patroklos. He thought of all they had done together,  
the pains they had suffered, the wars of men and the fierce  
waves of the sea. Remembering these things he poured  
10 down hot tears, lying now on this side, now on his back,  
now face down. Then standing up straight he wandered  
distraught along the shore of the salt sea. He always  
saw the dawn, rising over the sea and the land.

Then he would yoke his swift horses beneath his chariot  
15 and bind Hector to drag him behind his car. Three times  
he would drag him around the tomb of the dead son  
of Menoitios, then he would rest in his hut. He let Hector lie  
stretched out there, his face in the dust. But Apollo kept all outrage  
away from Hector's flesh, taking pity on him even though  
20 he was dead. Apollo held the golden goatskin fetish around  
him<sup>o</sup> so that Achilles could not rip up Hector's body as he  
dragged him around. Thus in his fury Achilles abused  
the magnificent Hector.

But the blessed gods took pity when  
they saw what was happening. They urged the far-seeing  
25 Hermes, killer of Argos, to steal away the corpse.  
The plan was pleasing to all the other gods, but not  
to Hera, nor Poseidon, nor the flashing-eyed daughter Athena,  
for they held on to their hatred for sacred Troy even as  
at first, and for Priam and his people too, because of the blind  
30 foolishness of Alexandros, who insulted them when they came

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21 *goatskin fetish*: The goatskin fetish (*aegis*) is variously the property of Zeus, Apollo, and Athena. It is an object that inspires terror but also is protective, as here.

to his courtyard, giving preference to her who furthered his horrid lust.<sup>o</sup>

But when the twelfth dawn had afterwards come, then Phoibos Apollo spoke to the deathless ones: “You gods are cruel, workers of harm! Has Hector never burned for you the thighs of bulls and goats without blemish?<sup>o</sup> Now you cannot bring yourselves to save him (though he is a corpse), for his wife to look upon and his mother and his child and his father Priam and the Trojan people, who would burn him with fire and offer the correct funeral rites. No, you gods want to help out the baneful Achilles, whose mind is ever against the ways of custom, and always the purpose in his breast cannot be bent, so he acts like a savage lion who trusting in his great strength and his noble spirit preys upon the sheep of men so that he can take a meal. Even so Achilles has ruined all pity, and there is no respect in him, which can be very hurtful to men—or help them out!<sup>o</sup> One may at some time lose someone even more dear than this, a brother from the same womb, or even a son, but when the person is bewailed and lamentation is made, then he makes an end of it. For the Fates<sup>o</sup> have given an enduring soul to men. But this man, now that he has taken away the life from noble Hector—he binds him to his chariot and drags him around the mound of his dear companion! He shall have neither honor nor profit from this. He should beware that we do not become angry with him, though Achilles is a good man. But in his fury he outrages the dumb clay!”

White-armed Hera answered him in anger: “This may even be as you say, O lord of the silver bow, but are we really going to grant equal honor to Achilles and to Hector? Why, Hector is mortal, he sucked at a woman’s breast! But Achilles is born of the goddess Thetis whom I myself nourished and reared

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32 *horrid lust*: Oddly, this is the only time that the Judgment of Paris is referred to in the *Iliad*—if in fact it is referred to. According to the later story, the goddess Eris (Strife) tossed in an apple at the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, saying it was for the most beautiful goddess: Athena, Hera, or Aphrodite. Paris served as judge and chose Aphrodite, for which Helen was the prize. What this has to do with Poseidon is not clear; his enmity toward Troy was explained in Book 21 as coming from Laomedon’s failure to pay him and Apollo for building the walls of Troy.

35 *without blemish*: An animal that was in any way disfigured was not an acceptable sacrifice.

46 *help them out*: How having respect for others can be hurtful to men is not apparent.

50 *Fates*: The Fates appear only here as a group in the *Iliad*.



**FIGURE 24.1 The Judgment of Paris.** On the right a youthful Paris sits on a stone in a rural location. The sheep near his feet indicates that he is a shepherd. He holds a lyre with a tortoise-shell sounding box because he is accustomed to the beauty of song. In front of him stand from left to right: Hera dressed in a demure robe; Athena, wearing the goatskin fetish as a snake-fringed collar; and a buxom Aphrodite, holding a scepter and the “apple of discord” that Paris has awarded to her. Athenian red-figure water jar, c. 450 BC.

and gave to a man to be his wife—to Peleus, dear to the heart of the immortals. And all you gods attended the wedding! You yourself dined there, holding your little lyre, a friend of wicked men, ever untrustworthy!”<sup>o</sup>

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Zeus the cloud-gatherer said in reply: “Hera, don’t be so utterly angry against the gods. There will never be an equal honor given these two men, but Hector was dearest to the gods of the mortals who live in Ilion. At least he was to me—he never failed of acceptable gifts. Never did my altar lack in the equal feast, or in the drink-offering, or in the smoke of sacrifice. We always got our prize of honor. But as for stealing the valiant Hector without Achilles knowing, let’s forget about that. For his mother comes constantly to his side, both night and day. But would some one of the gods please call Thetis to come to my side so that I can say to her something important—? that she arrange for Achilles to take gifts from Priam, and let Hector go.”

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So Zeus spoke, and Iris, swift as a storm, rushed to give the message. Between SAMOTHRACE and wooded IMBROS she plunged into the dark sea, and the waters resounded. She sank to the bottom like a lead weight, a weight attached to the horn of an ox of the field that goes bringing death to the ravenous fishes.<sup>o</sup> She found Thetis in a hollow cave. Other goddesses of the sea sat around her, all in a group. Thetis was complaining in the midst of them about the fate of her excellent son who to her sorrow was about to die in fertile Troy, far from the land of his fathers.

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Standing beside her, Iris swift of foot said: “Get up, Thetis! Zeus, knowing things that never perish, summons you!”

Then silver-footed Thetis said in reply: “What does that great god want of me? I am reluctant to socialize with the deathless ones, for I suffer anguish in my heart. But I will go. Whatever Zeus says will not be in vain.”

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65 *ever untrustworthy*: The wedding of Peleus and Thetis was celebrated in later Greek storytelling as the most glorious wedding ever. Hera’s kind words about Thetis here disagree, however, with Hera’s bitter suspicions in Book 1. According to the story popular later, Zeus took an interest in Thetis but then learned of a prophecy that Thetis’ child would be greater than the father. Zeus therefore quelled his interest, and Hera condemned Thetis to unite with a mortal man. Of course Achilles was greater than Peleus.

82 *ravenous fishes*: The lead weight has been explained as being wrapped around the line above a hook made of horn (or it is an artificial lure?) to protect it from the fish’s bite; or, the lead weight may simply be a sinker.

So speaking, the divine goddess  
put on a dark veil—there was no cloth more black.<sup>93</sup> And thus  
she set off. At first swift Iris, whose feet were like the wind,  
95 went ahead, and the waves of the sea parted before them.  
When they had come out on the shore, they sped toward heaven.  
They came to the far-thundering son of Kronos. All the other  
blessed gods who last forever were seated around him  
in a knot. Thetis took her seat next to father Zeus—  
100 Athena yielded her place, and Hera placed a beautiful  
golden cup in her hands and cheered her with words.  
Thetis took a drink and handed back the cup.

The father  
of men and gods was first to speak among them: “You have  
come to Olympos, goddess Thetis, though you are pained  
105 at heart, having always in your breast an unforgettable sorrow.  
I know it myself. But I will tell you why I have summoned  
you here. For nine days there has been a quarrel among the  
deathless ones about the corpse of Hector, and concerning Achilles  
the sacker of cities. They are urging that Hermes, the far-seeing  
110 slayer of Argos, should steal the body. But right now I want to accord  
glory to Achilles,<sup>94</sup> and at the same time preserve your respect  
and friendship for the future. So go quickly to the camp  
and give this order to your son: Say that the gods grow angry,  
and that I above all the deathless ones am filled with wrath  
115 because in the madness of his heart he holds Hector  
beside the hollow ships and will not give him up. Perhaps  
from respect for me he will let Hector go! But I will send forth  
Iris to great-hearted Priam to say that he should go to the ships  
of the Achaeans to ransom his son, bearing gifts that will warm  
120 the heart of Achilles.”

So he spoke, and the goddess Thetis  
of the silver feet obeyed. She went rushing from the peaks  
of Olympos, and she arrived at the hut of her son. There  
she found him groaning ceaselessly. His beloved companions  
hurried all around him to prepare their morning meal.  
25 Achilles had killed a large and shaggy ram for them in the hut.

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93 *more black*: In mourning for the impending death of Achilles; the only time in Homer that black is used as the color of mourning.

111 *to Achilles*: Apparently in the form of the treasure that will be offered for Hector's corpse.

Thetis sat down next to Achilles, his revered mother,  
 and stroked him with her hand. She spoke, calling his name:  
 “My child, for how long will you eat out your heart with sorrow  
 and mourning, and have no thought for food or sleep?  
 Also, it would be good if you lay with a woman, for you shall not  
 live long, as death and overwhelming fate stand near  
 you now. So listen to me, for I am a messenger from Zeus.  
 He says that the gods grow angry, and he especially  
 of the deathless ones is filled with wrath, because in the  
 madness of your heart you hold Hector beside the beaked ships  
 and will not let him go. But come, release him, taking  
 ransom for the corpse.”

Achilles the fast runner said in reply:  
 “Let it be so. Whoever brings ransom may carry away  
 the corpse, if that is what the Olympian himself really wants.”

Thus in the gathering of the ships, mother and son  
 spoke to one another many words that went like arrows.  
 And then the son of Kronos sent Iris to holy Ilion: “Go then,  
 swift Iris! Leave the seat of Olympos and announce to great-hearted  
 Priam in Ilion that he should go to the ships of the Achaeans  
 to ransom his son, bearing gifts that will warm the heart  
 of Achilles. Let him go alone, none other of the Trojan men  
 may go with him. An elderly herald may go along, someone  
 who can drive the mules and the wagon with its excellent wheels,  
 to carry the corpse back to the city—that man whom gallant  
 Achilles killed. May death not be his concern, nor terror.  
 We will send Hermes the killer of Argos as guide to lead him  
 to Achilles. When he gets inside the hut of Achilles,  
 Achilles will not kill him and he will not allow any  
 other to kill him. For Achilles is not mad, nor negligent,  
 nor evil, but with every kindness he will respect a suppliant.”

So Zeus spoke, and storm-footed Iris hurried  
 to carry his message. She came to the house of Priam, and  
 found therein all clamor and wailing. Priam’s sons were seated  
 around their father within the court, all of their clothes  
 wet with their tears. The old man sat in the middle of them,  
 close-wrapped in his cloak. Priam had rubbed excrement in his  
 hair and around his neck, rolling around in it and smearing it  
 around with his own hands.<sup>o</sup> His daughters and his sons’ wives

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163 *his own hands*: As a sign of mourning, but nothing is said later about Priam’s defiled condition.

wailed throughout the house, remembering all those fine  
165 and noble men who now lay in Hades' house, killed at the hands  
of the Argives.

The messenger of Zeus stood next to Priam,  
speaking softly while trembling took hold of his limbs:  
"Take courage in your heart, O Priam, son of Dardanos,  
and have no fear. I come here not to foretell any evil, but only  
170 with kind intent. I am a messenger from Zeus, who though  
he is far away from you has compassion and takes pity.  
Olympian Zeus has ordered that you go to the ships of the Achaeans  
and ransom your son, bearing gifts that will warm the heart of Achilles.  
You must go alone, no other of the Trojan men can go with you.  
175 Only an elderly herald may go along—one who can drive  
the mules and the wagon with its excellent wheels and then carry  
the corpse back to the city—that man whom gallant Achilles killed.  
Neither death nor terror should concern you, for he will send  
Hermes the killer of Argos as a guide to lead you to Achilles.  
180 When Hermes gets you inside the hut of Achilles,  
Achilles will not kill you and he will not allow any other  
to kill you. For Achilles is not mad, nor negligent, nor evil,  
but with every kindness he will respect a suppliant."

So speaking Iris swift of foot went off, and Priam  
185 ordered his sons to prepare a mule cart with excellent wheels,  
and to attach a wicker box to it.<sup>o</sup> He himself went down  
into his fragrant treasure-chamber, vaulted, made of cedar,  
that contained many precious things.

Then he called to his wife  
Hekabê and he said to her: "My darling, a messenger  
190 has come from Zeus on Olympos. She said that I should go  
to the ships of the Achaeans to ransom our son, bearing gifts  
that will warm the heart of Achilles. But come, I want to  
know—what do you think? For the desire in my heart urges  
me to do this now—to go to the ships inside the broad  
195 camp of the Achaeans."

So he spoke, but Hekabê uttered a shrill  
cry and answered: "Woe to me! Where has the wisdom gone

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186 *wicker box to it*: Apparently a device made of wicker for holding cargo, tied to the top of the wagon, but the word appears only here.

for which in earlier days you were famous in foreign lands  
and among those over whom you rule? How can you consider  
going alone to the ships of the Achaeans—to meet the eyes  
of the man who killed so many of your noble sons? 200  
Your heart is iron! That bloodthirsty and faithless man  
will disrespect you—if he sees you with his own eyes  
and gets you in his grip, he will have no pity on you!  
No, let us make our lament far away from him, sitting  
here in our chamber. Such a destiny did mighty Fate spin 205  
for Hector at his birth, when I bore my child—to glut  
the swift-footed dogs, far from his parents, in the house  
of a violent man. If only I could fasten my teeth into the middle  
of his liver and eat it! Payback for my son, whom he killed  
not while he was acting the coward, but while Hector 210  
stood forth on behalf of all Trojans and the deep-bosomed  
Trojan women. He did not think of flight or escape<sup>o</sup> then!”

Old man Priam, like a god, answered her: “Don’t hold me  
back, woman, when I want to go! Do not be a bird of ill-omen  
in my own halls. You will not persuade me. If some other of the men 215  
upon the earth ordered me to do this, one of the prophets who foretell  
things by looking at the smoke of offerings, or one of the holy men—  
then we would say that it was a false thing and would stay at home  
all the more. But as it is, I have myself heard it from the goddess.  
I saw her face to face. I will go and that is all there is to it. 220  
If it is my fate to die at the ships of the Achaeans who  
wear shirts of bronze, I am willing. Let Achilles kill me  
right away, once I have held my son close and have put  
from me the desire for lament.”

He spoke and opened  
the beautiful lids of the chests. From them he took twelve 225  
very beautiful robes and twelve woolen cloaks of a single fold  
and as many coverlets, and as many white cloths  
of linen, and as many shirts on top of these. He took up  
and weighed out ten talents of gold, and two shining tripods,  
four wash-basins, and a very beautiful cup that the Thracians 230  
gave to him when he went there on embassy—a great treasure.  
The old man did not spare even this in his halls, because  
in his heart he desired only to ransom his dear son.

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212 *flight or escape*: He did, however, run three times around the walls of Troy!

Then he drove all the Trojans out of the portico, reviling them  
235 as they went: “Get out you of here, you wretches, you bringers  
of shame! Don’t you have wailing enough in your own homes?  
Why should you have to come here and attend my grief? Do you  
make light of the fact that Zeus, the son of Kronos, has given me  
this agony—that my best son is killed? But you yourselves will learn  
240 soon enough. You will be easier for the Achaeans to kill now  
that he is dead. As for me, may I go down into the house of Hades  
before these eyes behold the city laid waste and sacked.”

So he spoke and with his staff he cleared the room of them.  
They scurried forth from the old man as he drove them along.  
245 Then he called aloud to his sons, upbraiding them—Helenos  
and Paris and noble Agathon and Pammon and Antiphonos  
and Polites good at the war cry and Deiphobos and Hippothoös  
and the noble Agauros.<sup>o</sup> To these nine the old man shouted orders:  
“Get out of here, you wicked children! Disasters all! I wish  
250 that you all had died beside the swift ships instead of Hector!  
Wretched me—I never had any luck. I begot many *fine* sons  
in broad Troy, but I don’t think that a single one is still alive—  
not godlike Mestor nor Troilos, who delighted in horses,  
nor Hector, who was like a god among men. He did not  
255 seem to be the child of a mortal man, but of a god. Ares killed  
them all. Yet shameless things are left— liars and acrobats!  
Great at beating out the dance! Thieves of your own  
people’s sheep and kids!<sup>o</sup> Would you *please* prepare  
a wagon for me as soon as possible, and put all these goods  
260 in it, so that we may get on the road?”

So Priam spoke, and in fear  
of their father’s rebuke the sons brought out the mule wagon  
with excellent wheels—lovely, recently made—and they bound  
the wicker box on top. They took the mule yoke down from a peg,  
made of an evergreen wood with a knob on it, fitted with guides  
265 for the reins. Then they brought out the yoke-binding, fourteen feet  
in length, and the yoke. They fitted the yoke properly onto the front  
end of the polished pole. Then they put the ring over the peg and  
tied the yoke-binding three times on each side of the knob.

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248 ... *noble Agauros*: In addition to well-known names (Helenos, Paris, Polites, Deiphobos) are other sons only mentioned here and probably invented for the occasion (Agathon, Pammon, Antiphonos, Agauros). A doublet of Hippothoös is mentioned as a leader of the Pelasgians (Book 2), later killed (Book 17).

258 *sheep and kids*: As delicacies in the party feast, to which Priam says his sons are given. It was no disgrace to steal flocks from abroad, but it was immoral to steal from your own people.

They bound the yoke-binding fast to the knob in a succession of turns, then tucked the end under the hook.<sup>o</sup>

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Then they brought forth the boundless ransom for Hector's head from the treasure chamber and heaped it on the highly polished wagon. They yoked the mules with powerful single hooves that work in harness, which once the Mysians had given to Priam as a splendid gift. They led horses beneath the yoke that the old man had himself nourished in the polished stall. Thus were wagon and chariot yoked for both Priam and his herald in the high-roofed palace, despite the deep foreboding in their hearts.

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Hekabê came up to Priam and his herald, stricken in heart. She had honeyed wine in a golden cup in her right hand, so that she could pour out a drink-offering before they went. She stood in front of the horses and spoke: "Take this. Pour out a drink-offering to father Zeus, and pray that you may come again from these evil men, because your heart bids you to go to the ships. But I am against it. So pray to the lord of the dark cloud, the son of Kronos who has a shrine on Ida, who sees whatever happens in Troy, and ask him to send his bird, his swift messenger that is the dearest of birds to him, whose strength is greatest, to appear on your right hand.<sup>o</sup> So seeing the omen with your own eyes, you can trust that it is safe to go to the ships of the Danaäns with their fast horses. If far-seeing Zeus will not give you this sign, then I would not urge you on, or bid you to go the ships of the Argives, even though you want very badly to do so."

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270 *under the hook*: A good example of Homer's ability to do with language what he wants: In the space of a few lines he uses six words that never appear again in Greek literature and one word that is used just once 600 years later! The meaning of these terms for the wagon assembly is by no means clear, and it is hard to understand Homer's description, but it may work like this: The wagon has four wheels and a detachable body. It has a single shaft to which a yoke for two mules is bound by means of an unexpectedly long cord (the "yoke-binding"). The yoke has the approximate shape of an "M." The yoke has a central "knob" on it, and there are hooks on top on either side to guide the reins back from the animal's head, over the yoke, to the driver. A peg goes through the pole into the yoke to hold the yoke and pole together, and a "ring" attached to the yoke is slipped over (or through?) the peg to hold it. Then for greater strength the yoke-binder is wrapped around the pole and yoke. First it is wrapped around the pole on either side of the "knob" on the yoke, then around the "knob" on the yoke by a succession of turns. Then the end of the yoke-binding is tucked under a "hook" (?) fastened to the pole. But all this is very obscure.

290 *right hand*: And thus a good omen.

Then godlike Priam  
answered her: "O woman, I won't deny you your request.  
It is a good thing to raise up your hands to Zeus, in hopes  
that he take pity."

Thus he spoke and then the old man told  
a female slave in attendance to pour out pure water  
300 over his hands. The slave came near, carrying in her hands  
a basin for hand washing, and a vase. When he had washed  
his hands, he took the cup from his wife. Then he prayed,  
standing near the middle of the court. He poured out the wine  
while looking up to heaven, and he said these words:  
305 "Father Zeus who rules from Ida, most glorious and  
greatest—grant that I come as a friend to Achilles,  
and that he take pity on me. Send me your bird, your swift  
messenger that is dearest to you of all birds and whose  
strength is the greatest—on my right hand so that seeing  
310 with my own eyes I may trust the sign and safely go  
to the ships of the Danaäns with their swift horses."

So he spoke in prayer, and Zeus the counselor heard him.  
At once he sent an eagle, the best omen among birds, a swamp eagle,  
a hunter that men also call the dappled eagle. As wide as is  
315 the door of a high roofed treasure-chamber of a man of wealth,  
a door well fitted and keyed, even so far did his wings  
reach on either side. He appeared to them on the right hand,  
swooping over the city. Everyone who saw it rejoiced,  
and the heart in every man was cheered.

Quickly the old man  
320 mounted his chariot and drove outside the gate and the echoing  
portico. In front the mules drew the wagon with four wheels,  
and wise *Idaios*<sup>o</sup> was the driver. Behind followed the old man,  
who with his whip drove the horses swiftly through the city.  
Priam's kin followed, loudly as if he were going to his death.  
325 But when they had gone down from the city and arrived  
on the plain, the kinsfolk went back then to Iliion, his sons  
and his daughters' husbands.

Far-seeing Zeus saw them  
as they came out onto the plain, and seeing the old man

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322 *Idaios*: The Trojan herald has appeared earlier in Books 3 and 7.

he took pity. At once he spoke to Hermes, his dear son:  
“Hermes, because you enjoy accompanying men, and you  
listen to whomever you want<sup>o</sup>—go now and lead Priam  
to the hollow ships of the Achaeans in such a way that no one  
of the other Danaäns sees him or is aware of his presence,  
until you get to the hut of the son of Peleus.” 330

So he spoke  
and the messenger, the killer of Argos, did not disobey. 335  
he bound his beautiful sandals beneath his feet—immortal,  
golden—that bore him over the watery deep and the endless  
dry land like the blast of the wind. He took up his wand  
by which he charms the eyes of men, of those whom he chooses,  
and then he rouses others from their sleep. Holding this wand 340  
in his hand, the powerful killer of Argos flew off.  
Quickly he came to the land of Troy and the Hellespont.  
He went in the likeness of a young prince just beginning  
to grow a beard, a man in whom youth is at its most charming.  
When they had driven beyond the great tomb of Ilos,<sup>o</sup> 345  
they stopped the mules and the horses so that they could drink  
from the river. Already darkness settled on the earth.<sup>o</sup>

Then the herald saw Hermes close at hand, he saw him  
and he spoke to Priam: “Think about this, O son of Dardanos—  
we had better be careful! I see a man, I think he will quickly 350  
cut us to pieces! Let us get out of here, in the chariot, or take hold  
of his knees and beg for our lives, in hopes that he takes pity!”

So he spoke, and the old man’s mind was distracted,  
and he was terribly afraid. The hair on his bent limbs stood on end  
and he stood in a daze. But Hermes the helper came near him 355  
and took hold of old man Priam’s hand, and Hermes questioned  
him: “Where, father, do you drive your horses and mules  
through the immortal night when other men are asleep? Do you  
not fear the Achaeans, who breathe fury, who are hostile and  
aggressive and very nearby? If one of them should see you bearing 360  
so many treasures through the swift dark night, what would  
you do then? You are not young yourself, and your companion is

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331 *you want*: A polite way of saying that Hermes should be open to Zeus’s suggestion that he accompany Priam.

345 *tomb of Ilos*: Mentioned as a landmark in Books 10 and 11.

347 *on the earth*: It is the evening of the thirty-eighth day of the poem.

an old man, too old to defend you against somebody who would attack you for no good reason. But I will do you no harm, and I will defend you against anyone else. You are like my own father.”

The old man Priam, like a god, then answered Hermes:  
“All these things, my dear son, are just as you say. Surely, some god has stretched forth his hand over me, who has sent a wayfarer such as you to meet me. You are a bringer of good fortune, one wonderful in form and beauty. And you are wise in your heart. You come from blessed parents.”

The messenger, the killer of Argos, then answered him: “You have spoken all these things in accord with what is right. But come now, tell me this and tell me truly—are you sending these many rich treasures to some foreign people so that they may remain safe for you, or are you all abandoning holy Ilion in fear? For so great a warrior has perished—your son, the best, who never held back from warring against the Achaeans.”

Then old man Priam, like a god, answered him: “Who are you, most excellent man, and who are your parents? For you have said fitting things about the fate of my luckless son.”

The messenger, the killer of Argos, then said: “You make trial of me, old man, asking about the brave Hector! For I often saw him with my own eyes in the battle where men win glory. After driving the Argives to the ships, he would kill many, raging with his sharp bronze. We stood there marveling. For Achilles, angry at the son of Atreus, would not let us fight. I am Achilles’ aide. We came in the same well-made ship. I am one of the Myrmidons. My father is Polyktor. He is rich, but an old man now, like you. He had six sons, and I was the seventh. We cast the lot and it fell to me to come here. Now I have come to the plain from the ships, for at dawn the bright-eyed Achaeans will launch their battle around the city. They do not like sitting around, and the chieftains of the Achaeans are not able to hold them back in their longing to go to war.”

Then the old man Priam, like a god, answered him:  
“If you are aide to Achilles son of Peleus, come, tell me the whole truth. Is my son still beside the ships? or has Achilles

already cut him to pieces, limb from limb, and fed him  
to his dogs?”

400

Then the messenger, the killer of Argos,  
said to him: “Old man, the gods and the birds have not yet  
eaten him, but he still lies beside the ship of Achilles, amid  
the huts, as he was at first. He has lain there for twelve days,  
but his flesh has not rotted, nor have the worms eaten him,  
which devour men killed in battle. Achilles ruthlessly drags  
him around the tomb of his beloved friend when daylight appears,  
but he does not mutilate the body. You yourself would marvel  
if you were to come and see how he lies there as fresh as dew.  
The blood is washed from him, and there is no stain anywhere.  
All the wounds are closed, wherever he was hit, for many  
drove their bronze into his flesh. Thus do the blessed gods  
care for your son, although he is dead, for he was dear  
to their hearts.”

405

410

So he spoke, and the old man rejoiced,  
and he answered him in this way: “O my child, in truth  
it is a good thing to give the gods the gifts that are their due,  
for not ever did my son—if he even existed!<sup>o</sup>—forget in his halls  
the gods who live in Olympos. So they have remembered him,  
although he is caught in the fate of death. But come, take this  
beautiful goblet from me, and guard me. Guide me with the  
blessings of the gods until I come to the hut of the son of Peleus.”

415

420

The messenger, the killer of Argos, then said: “You would  
try me, old man—I who am younger than you. But you shall  
not persuade me. You ask that I take gifts from you behind  
Achilles’ back, but I fear him and I respect him in my heart.  
If he should think that I defrauded him, in the future something  
bad could happen to me. But as your guide I would go even  
to famous Argos,<sup>o</sup> attending you kindly either in a swift ship  
or on foot. Nor would any man scorn me as a guide and attack us.”

425

Thus Hermes the helper spoke. Then he leaped upon the chariot  
and swiftly he took hold of the whip and took the reins in  
his hands. He breathed great strength into the horses and the mules.  
But when they came to the wall surrounding the ships, and the ditch

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417 *even existed*: A formulaic phrase expressing regret at how drastically things have changed.

428 *Argos*: He means “Pelasgian Argos,” in Thessaly, not the Argos in the Peloponnesus.

where the guards were just now busy with their meal,  
435 the messenger, the killer of Argos, poured out sleep on them all,  
and quickly he opened the gates and shoved back the bolts.  
Then he drove in Priam and his glorious gifts in the wagon.

They came to the high hut of the son of Peleus, which  
the Myrmidons had made for their king, hewing logs of fir,  
440 and they roofed it over with a shaggy thatch gathered from  
the meadow. And around the hut they built a great court  
of heavy beams for their king. The door had a single bolt made  
of fir, which three Achaeans would slam shut, and three men  
would draw it back— but Achilles slammed it shut all by himself.  
445 Hermes the helper opened the door for the old man and brought  
in the glorious gifts for the son of Peleus, the fast runner.

Hermes stepped off the car onto the ground and said:  
“Old man, I who have come to you am an immortal god:  
Hermes. My father sent me to be your guide. But now I will  
450 go back. I will not come into Achilles’ sight. It would be  
offensive for mortals to entertain an immortal god in this way,  
face to face. But you go in and seize the knees of the son  
of Peleus, and beseech him by his father, and his mother with  
the lovely hair, and his child, so that you might stir his spirit.”

455 So speaking, Hermes went off toward high Olympos.  
Priam leaped from the chariot to the ground. He left Idaios  
there to hold the horses and the mules. Then the old man  
went straight toward the house where Achilles dear to Zeus  
was accustomed to sit. He found him there, and his companions,  
460 who sat apart. Only two, the warriors Automedon and Alkimos<sup>o</sup>  
of the breed of Ares, busily waited on him. Achilles  
had just finished his meal, eating and drinking. The table  
still stood by his side. The aides did not notice great Priam  
as he came in. Standing nearby, he took Achilles’ knees  
465 in his hands, and Priam kissed the terrible man-killing  
hands that had taken so many of his sons. As when a painful  
madness takes hold of a man and he kills someone  
in his homeland, then comes to another people, to the house  
of a rich man, and wonder takes hold of those who see him,—  
470 even so Achilles was amazed when he saw godlike Priam.  
And the others were amazed too and glanced at one another.

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460 *Automedon and Alkimos*: These two aides, who have replaced Patroklos in the role of server, also appeared together in Book 19.



**FIGURE 24.2 Achilles and Priam.** The old man, leaning on his staff, approaches from the left. Behind him slaves carry the ransom. Achilles lies on his inlaid couch, holding a knife with which he has been cutting up the meat served on the table in front of the dining couch; strips of meat hang down over the side of the table, and he holds a strip in his left hand. He has not yet noticed Priam's presence, and he turns over his shoulder to call out to a slave boy to pour wine from a jug he holds. His shield (with Gorgon's head), helmet, shinguards, and sword hang from the wall. Beneath the couch lies Hector, his body pierced by many wounds. This is the most commonly represented scene from the *Iliad* in all of Greek art. Athenian red-figure drinking cup. c. 480 BC.

Making supplication, Priam spoke to Achilles:

“Remember your own father, O Achilles like to the gods!  
He is old as I am, on the wretched threshold of old age.

475 Probably those who live around him are wearing him down,  
and there is no one to ward off ruin and disaster.

But at least he rejoices in his heart when he hears that you  
are alive, and he hopes every day that he will see his dear  
son returning from Troy. But I have received an evil fate,

480 because I fathered many sons who were the best in broad  
Troy, but of them I do not think that any remain.

I had fifty sons when the sons of the Achaeans came, nineteen  
from one woman, the others from women in the palace.<sup>o</sup>

Though they were many, the fury of Ares has driven

485 most of them to their knees. And he who was left  
to me, who by himself protected the city and those within it—  
you have just killed him as he struggled to defend his homeland—  
Hector! On his account I have come to the ships of the Achaeans  
to ransom him from you. I bring boundless ransom.

490 So respect the gods, Achilles, and take pity on me,  
remembering your own father. For I am far more to be pitied  
than he—I who did what no man on earth has ever dared  
to do—to stretch the hands of my son’s killer to my mouth.”

So Priam spoke, and he stirred in Achilles a great urge

495 to weep for his own father. Taking Priam by the hand  
he gently pushed the old man away. And so the two men  
thought of those who had died. Priam wept copiously for Hector  
the killer of men, as he groveled before the feet of Achilles.

And Achilles cried for his own father and now, again, for Patroklos.

500 Their wailing filled the hut.

But when valiant Achilles

had his fill of wailing, and the desire for it had departed  
from his heart and limbs, immediately he rose from his seat.

He raised up the old man with his hand, taking pity on his white  
head and his white beard, and he spoke words that went like arrows:

505 “Yes, you wretched man, truly you have suffered many evils  
in your heart. How did you dare to come alone to the ships  
of the Achaeans beneath the eyes of the man who killed your many  
fine sons? Your heart must be iron! But come, sit on a chair.

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483 *palace*: Of Priam’s fifty sons, twenty-two are mentioned by name in the *Iliad*. Two died before the poem begins, eleven die during the course of the poem, and the remaining nine are named earlier in this book.

We will let our sufferings lie quiet in our hearts, though burdened by them. There is nothing to be gained from cold lament. 510

“For so have the gods spun the thread for wretched mortals— to live in pain, while they are without care. Two jars of gifts that he gives are set into the floor of Zeus, one of evils, the other of good things. To whomever Zeus who delights in the thunder gives a mixed portion, that man receives now evil, now good. But to the man to whom he gives only pain, he has made him to be roughly treated, and ravaging hunger drives him over the shining earth. He walks dishonored by gods and by men. 515

“So the gods gave to Peleus wonderful gifts from birth. He exceeded all men in wealth and riches, and he ruled over the Myrmidons, and the gods gave him a goddess for a wife, although he is mortal. But to him the god also gave evil, because in his halls there is no offspring who will one day rule. He fathered a single child, doomed to an early death. And I will not tend him when he grows old, for I sit here in Troy very far from my homeland, bringing misery to you and your children. 520

“And yet, old man, we hear that in earlier times you were rich—all the territory between LESBOS out to sea, the seat of Makar,<sup>o</sup> and inland to PHRYGIA, and to the boundless HELLESPONT. They say that you, old man, surpassed in wealth and in the number of your sons all those that lived in these lands. But from the time that the dwellers in heaven brought you this curse, there is always fighting around your city, and the killing of men. Bear up! Don’t be complaining forever in your heart. It’s no use to bemoan your son, for he will never live again, no matter what you do.” 530 535

Then the old man godlike Priam answered him: “Please don’t ask me to sit on a chair, O Achilles, fostered by Zeus, so long as Hector lies among the ships without the proper care due to the dead. But release him quickly so that I may see him with my own eyes. Take the abundant ransom that I have brought you. May you enjoy these things, and may you come to the land of your fathers, for from the first you have let me remain alive and behold the light of the sun.” 540 545

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531 *Makar*: A legendary colonist of Lesbos, also called Makaria after him.

Then looking angrily from beneath his brows  
Achilles the fast runner spoke: "Don't rile me, old man!  
I fully intend to let you have Hector. My mother came to me  
as a messenger from Zeus, she who bore me, the daughter  
550 of the Old Man of the Sea. And I know full well in my heart,  
O Priam, nor does it escape me, that some god has led  
you to the swift ships of the Achaeans. For no mortal would  
dare come to the camp, no, not even one very young. And he  
would not escape the notice of the guards, nor would he easily  
555 open the bolts of our gates. Therefore, do not stir more of wrath  
in me, or perhaps I will *not* spare you within the huts, old man—  
even though you are a suppliant—and so transgress the commands  
of Zeus."

Thus Achilles spoke, and the old man  
was afraid, and did what he said. Then the son of Peleus sprang  
560 forth from the house like a lion, and he was not alone, for with him  
followed two of his aides, the warriors Automedon and Alkimos,  
whom he honored above all his companions after the dead  
Patroklos. They unharnessed the horses and the mules  
from the yoke, and they led in the herald, the crier of the old man,  
565 and they set him on a chair. They took down from the well-polished  
car the boundless ransom for Hector's head. They left two cloaks  
and a finely woven shirt so that Achilles could wrap the corpse  
and free him to be taken home. Then Achilles summoned  
two slave girls to wash the body and anoint it, moving the corpse  
570 to the side so that Priam could not see his son and in his grief  
be unable to restrain his anger if he saw him, and Achilles'  
own heart be then roused to anger so that he killed Priam  
against the strict command of Zeus.

When the slave girls  
had washed the body and anointed it with olive oil, they put  
575 a beautiful cloak and a shirt around him. Achilles himself  
raised Hector up and placed him on a bier. Together with  
his aides, Achilles then lifted him into the polished wagon.

And then Achilles groaned and called out to his companion  
by name: "Don't be angry, Patroklos, if you learn, though you are  
880 in the house of Hades, that I have given up the valiant Hector  
to his dear father. He brought a proper ransom, and I will  
give you as many as is fitting of the things he brought."

So he spoke, and then glorious Achilles went back into his hut.  
He sat on the inlaid chair on the opposite wall from which  
he had arisen, and he spoke to Priam: “Your son is given back,  
old man, just as you requested. He lies on a bier. At dawn  
you will see him when you take him from here. Now let us  
think of food.

585

“For even Niobê with the lovely hair  
thought of food. Twelve were her children who perished  
in her halls, six daughters and six lusty sons. Apollo killed  
the boys with his silver bow, for he was angry at Niobê,  
and Artemis, who rejoices in arrows, killed the girls.  
For Niobê had matched herself with their mother, Leto  
with the lovely cheeks. Niobê said that Leto had borne  
two children, but she herself had given birth to many. And so  
Apollo and Artemis, though they were only two, killed all  
of Niobê’s children. For nine days they lay in their gore, and  
there was no one to bury them, because the son of Kronos had turned  
the people into stones. But on the tenth day the heavenly gods  
buried them, and Niobê bethought herself of food, for she was  
wasting away with her weeping.

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“Now somewhere amid  
the rocks, in the lonely mountains, on Sipylos, where they say  
the beds of goddesses are, the divine nymphs who dance  
around the Acheloös river—there, although she is a stone,  
she broods over her agonies sent by the gods.”

605

“So come,  
good old man, let us also think of food. Then you can bewail  
your dear son, when you have carried him to Ilion. He will  
cost you many tears.”

So Achilles spoke. Then he  
sprang up and slaughtered a white sheep. His companions  
flayed it and prepared it in accordance with custom.  
They cut it up and skillfully threaded the pieces on spits.  
They roasted them carefully, then drew them all off.

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605 *of the gods*: The origins of the story must come from a rock image carved on Mount Sipylos, in LYDIA, northeast of SMYRNA, the water on its face likened to the tears of Niobê (a daughter of Tantalos). Such an image has been discovered: It is a Hittite carving of a mother goddess, probably Cybele, c. 1300 BC. The famous river Acheloös is in AETOLIA in southeast mainland Greece, but evidently there was another river of this name in Lydia.

Automedon took up bread and set it around the table  
in beautiful baskets, while Achilles shared out the meat.

615 Then they put out their hands to take the good things set out  
before them.

When they had put aside the desire for drink  
and food, then Priam the son of Dardanos wondered at Achilles—  
how tall he was and of what bearing. For he was like the gods  
to look on. And Achilles wondered at Priam, the son of  
620 Dardanos, beholding his fine face and hearing his words.

When they had had their fill looking at each other,  
then the old man Priam, like a god, spoke first. “Let me now  
to bed as soon as possible, O Zeus-nourished one, so that  
we might lie down and be renewed in sweet sleep. For sleep  
625 has not yet fallen upon my eyes beneath their lids from  
the time that my son lost his life at your hands. Always,  
I have been crying and nursing my ten thousand pains,  
rolling through excrement in the closed spaces of the court.  
But now I have tasted food and let flaming wine pass down  
630 my throat. Before, I ate nothing.”

He spoke, and Achilles ordered  
his companions and his slave girls to set up a bed in the portico  
and to spread out beautiful purple blankets, and on top to place  
coverlets, and to place on top of all woolen cloaks for clothing.  
The girls went outside the hut holding torches in their hands,  
635 and in haste they quickly spread two beds.

Achilles, the fast runner,  
now spoke mockingly<sup>o</sup> to Priam: “You sleep outside, dear  
old man, in case some counselor of the Achaeans comes in.  
They are always sitting down and taking counsel, as is only right.  
But if someone should see you through the swift black night,  
640 he might at once tell Agamemnon shepherd of the people  
and then there would be delay in ransoming the corpse.

“But come now, and tell me truly, how many days  
will you need to bury valiant Hector properly? For so long  
I will myself hold back from the fight and I will restrain the others.”  
645 The old man Priam, like a god, then answered him: “If you really  
want me to accomplish the burial of valiant Hector, then you

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636 *mockingly*: Perhaps because Achilles suspects that Priam will use sleeping outside under the portico as an opportunity to return to Troy, as in fact he does.

should do this, and it would please me greatly, O Achilles.  
You know how we are pent-up in the city. It is far to bring wood  
from the mountains, and the Trojans are very afraid. But we  
would mourn his body for nine days in the halls, and on the tenth  
we would bury him and the people would feast. On the eleventh day  
we will make a tumulus for him. On the twelfth day we will fight  
again, if we must.”

650

Then brave Achilles, the fast runner,  
said to him: “It will be as you say, old man Priam. I will suspend  
the war for as long as you say.”

655

So speaking he took hold  
of the old man’s right hand by the wrist,<sup>o</sup> so that he would not be  
afraid. Then they lay down to sleep in the forecourt of the house,  
the herald and Priam, with hearts of wisdom in their breasts.  
But Achilles slept in the innermost part of his well-built hut,  
and beside him lay Briseïs of the beautiful cheeks.

660

The other gods and men, the masters of chariots,  
slept all the night long, overcome by gentle sleep. But sleep  
did not come over Hermes the helper as he pondered in his mind  
how he would guide King Priam forth from the ships unseen  
by the holy keepers of the gates.<sup>o</sup> Hermes stood over  
Priam’s head and spoke: “O old man, you must have  
no thought of anything evil, if you still sleep in the midst  
of the enemy simply because Achilles has spared you.  
So you have ransomed your son, and you gave a high price.  
But your remaining sons would pay three times as much  
to have you back alive if Agamemnon, the son of Atreus,  
should know that you are here, and all the Achaeans knew it too.”

665

670

So he spoke and then the old man was seized by fear.  
He roused his herald. Hermes yoked the horses and the mules  
for them, and swiftly Hermes drove them through the camp—  
no one recognized them! But when they came to the ford  
of the fair-flowing river, of the whirling Xanthos that deathless  
Zeus had fathered, Hermes went off to high Olympus.  
Saffron-robbed dawn was spreading out over all the earth as they  
drove the horses to the city, and the mules carried the corpse.

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656 *by the wrist*: A gesture of reassurance.

665 *holy keepers of the gate*: “holy” because of the seriousness of their role.

Nor did any other man or fine-belted woman recognize them, except Cassandra, like golden Aphrodite, who had gone up to Pergamos and saw her dear father standing in the car, and the herald, the city-crier.<sup>o</sup>

685 Seeing Hector lying in the bier drawn by  
mules, she cried out shrilly and called throughout the entire city:  
“Trojan men and women, come and see Hector, if you ever rejoiced  
when he returned alive from the battle, a great joy to the city  
and to all the people!”

690 So she spoke, and no man or woman  
stayed in the city. An unbearable sorrow came over all, and they  
gathered around Priam at the gates as he brought in the corpse.  
First of all Hector’s dear wife and his revered mother threw  
themselves on the light-running wagon and tore their hair,  
holding Hector’s head, while the throng stood around and wept.  
And they would have spent all day until the sun went down  
695 weeping and wailing for Hector in front of the gate, if the old  
man had not stood up in the car and spoken to the people:  
“Make a way for the mules to pass through! Later you can have  
your fill of lament, when I have brought him to the house.”  
So he spoke, and they stood aside and allowed the wagon  
700 to come through. When they came to his famous house, they placed  
Hector on a corded bed, and beside them they set singers, leaders  
of the lament, who began the song of mourning. They chanted it,  
and the women made lament.

705 Among them white-armed Andromachê  
led the dirge for Hector, the killer of men, holding his head  
in her hands: “O my husband, you have perished at a young age,  
and left me a widow in our halls. Our child is still an infant,  
whom we bore, you and I, doomed to a wretched fate. But I don’t think  
he will arrive at manhood—before that this city shall be utterly  
destroyed. For you who watched over the city have perished—  
710 you, who guarded it and kept safe its noble wives and little  
children. Soon they will be carried away in the hollow ships,  
and I among them. You, my child, will follow along with me  
to a place where you will perform degrading tasks, working

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684 ... *the city-crier*: Pergamos is the highest point of the city. Cassandra is mentioned only once before, in Book 13, where one Othryoneus is said to want to marry her, the most beautiful of Priam’s daughters. Homer says nothing specific about Cassandra’s prophetic powers, an important part of the later tradition, although her role as the crier of sad news may imply such powers.

for some ungentle master—or one of the Achaeans in his anger  
will take you by the arm and throw you from the walls 715  
to a savage death—someone whose brother Hector killed,  
or his father, or his son.<sup>o</sup> For full many of the Achaeans have bitten  
the vast earth with their teeth at the hands of Hector. Your father  
was not gentle in the bitter war. And so the people wail for him  
throughout the city, and you have made grief and unspeakable 720  
sorrow for your parents, Hector. Savage pain is left for me  
above all. You did not reach out your hands as you lay dying  
on a bed, nor did you say to me some words full of meaning  
that I might remember while weeping for you day and night.”

So she spoke, wailing, and the other women wailed too. 725  
Among them Hekabê began her sobbing complaint: “Hector,  
much the dearest to my heart of all my children ... while  
you were alive you were dear to the gods. And they still  
care for you, although you are snared in the fate of death.  
Achilles, the fast runner, sold others of my sons whom 730  
he captured beyond the untiring sea, to Samothrace and Imbros  
and misty Lemnos. When he took your breath-soul with  
his long-edged bronze, he used often to drag you around the tomb  
of his companion Patroklos, whom you killed. But he could not  
raise him up. Now you are as fresh as new-morning dew and lie 735  
out in my halls like one freshly killed—like one whom Apollo  
of the silver bow has come upon and killed with his gentle arrows.”

So she spoke, weeping, and she roused endless wailing.  
Then Helen, third among the women, began her lament:  
“Hector, much the dearest to my heart of all my brothers-in-law, 740  
for my husband is godlike Alexandros who brought me to Troy—  
would that I had perished before! It is already the twentieth  
year since I went forth from there and abandoned the land  
of my fathers. But I never heard an evil or unkind word  
from you. And if some other of my brothers-in-law, or sisters-in-law, 745  
or brother’s wives with elegant dresses would reprove me  
in my halls, or your mother—but your father was always  
as gentle as if he had been my own father—you would restrain  
them with your speech, and hold them back through your good  
nature and your gentle words. And so I lament you, and I lament 750  
my luckless self, with grief in my heart. For no longer

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717 ... *his son*: According to later tradition, Andromachê becomes the captive and concubine of Neoptolemos, the son of Achilles. Astyanax, the son of Hector and Andromachê, is thrown from the towers.

is there anyone in Troy so gentle to me and such a friend.  
Everyone abhors me!”

So she spoke, weeping, and the huge  
throng moaned. And now old man Priam spoke to the people:  
755 “Bring wood to the city, my Trojans. Have no fear of a cunning  
ambush. When Achilles sent me off from the black ships,  
he promised he would do us no harm until the twelfth day  
has come.”

So he spoke, and they yoked oxen and mules  
to wagons, and quickly they gathered in front of the city.  
760 For nine days they gathered a boundless supply of wood.  
But when the tenth Dawn, who sends light for mortals, arose,  
they carried out the brave Hector, pouring down tears.  
They placed him on top of the pyre, and they cast in fire.  
As soon as Dawn with her fingers of rose appeared, the people  
765 gathered around the pyre of glorious Hector. When they  
were gathered and assembled in a group, they first extinguished  
the fire with flaming wine—all of it, as deep as the vast strength  
of the fire had penetrated. Thereafter his brothers and companions  
gathered the white bones in sorrow. Hot tears ran down their  
770 cheeks. They took the bones and placed them in a golden chest,  
covering them with delicate purple cloths. Then they placed  
the chest in a hollow grave, and over the grave stacked great  
thick stones. Quickly they built up a barrow, and all around it  
they placed watchmen, in case the Achaeans with their fancy  
775 shinguards should set on them before the end of the truce.  
After they heaped up the barrow, they went back to the city.  
Gathered together, they dined on a splendid meal  
in the house of Zeus-nourished Priam, the king. In this way  
they held the funeral for Hector tamer of horses.