



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

THE ILIAD

The Taming Of Achilles

Volume VI of seven - Part Six

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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PART SIX: THE TAMING OF ACHILLES

CHAPTER 24: PRIAM'S JOURNEY

The sun went down like a dying ember behind the walls of Troy, and Priam (PRYE-am) drove his horses into darkness.

No torch lit his way. No stars pierced the thick veil of cloud that hung over the plain. The old king could hear his own breathing, shallow and quick, and the creak of the wagon behind him where Idaeus (eye-DEE-us) guided the mules laden with treasure. The sound of the wheels seemed loud enough to wake the dead. Worse, it might wake the Greeks.

They passed the great tomb of Ilius (IL-ee-us), founder of the city, its stone pale in the gloom. They drove on, past the ridges where Hector had once stood alone against the Greek army, past the

scarred earth where the Trojans had camped before their defeats. Every shadow concealed a threat. Every rustle of wind through the dry grass might be a sentinel's call, a spear being lowered, a bowstring pulled taut.

Priam was eighty years old. He had fifty sons once. Now he drove alone through the camp of the men who had killed them.

He thought of turning back. The thought came to him not as a coward's thought but as a father's: he had other sons still living in Troy, sons who were not Hector but who were still his blood. If he died tonight, they would lose a father as well as a brother. The city would lose its king at the moment it needed him most. And yet Hector's body lay at the ships, unburied, denied even the simple dignity of returning to dust. Priam could not bear it. A king must protect his city, but a father must bury his son. Tonight, he chose to be a father.

When they reached the river, they stopped to let the horses and mules drink. The water was black, moving slowly, carrying the reflection of no moon. Idaeus was bending to fill a skin when he froze. He squinted into the darkness beyond the bank.

"My king," he whispered. "There is a man."

Priam's heart stopped. Then it hammered against his ribs so hard he thought it might crack them. He saw the figure now: young, upright, moving towards them with the easy stride of someone who had every right to be there. A Greek. A soldier. Perhaps a sentry who had slipped his post, or a raider prowling for spoils.

"We should run," Idaeus breathed.

Priam did not run. He could not. His old legs would not carry him fast enough, and the wagon was too heavy. He sat frozen on his chariot, his hand trembling on the reins, and waited for the blade or the arrow that would end him.

The young man approached. He was beautiful in the way that only the young can be: smooth-faced, bright-eyed, with the down of first beard just showing on his chin. He wore a traveler's cloak pinned at the shoulder, and his movements were fluid as water. He stopped beside the chariot and took Priam's hand in his own.

"Father," he said, and his voice was warm as summer air, "where are you driving your mules and horses through the dead of night, when other men are asleep? Are you not afraid of the fierce Achaeans? If one of them saw you bearing so much treasure, what do you think would happen? You are no longer young, and your companion is too old to defend you."

He paused, still holding Priam's hand. "But do not fear. I will do you no harm. I will defend you from anyone else, for you remind me of my own father."

Priam looked into that young face, and something in him loosened. Not trust exactly, but the first cousin of trust: the willingness to hope. "You are kind, my son," he said. "Some god has sent you to meet me. Your face is good, and your judgment excellent. Your parents must be blessed."

The young man smiled. "Tell me, sir. Are you taking this treasure to safety among foreign people? Or are you leaving Troy now that your bravest son has fallen?"

At the mention of Hector, Priam's voice thickened. He gripped the rim of his chariot to steady himself. "Who are you, friend? Who are your parents, that you speak so truly of my unhappy son?"

"I have seen him many times in battle," the young man said easily. "When he drove the Argives to their ships, we stood and marvelled. I am a Myrmidon (MER-mi-don), a squire to Achilles (ah-KILL-eez). My father is Polyctor (pol-IK-tor), a rich man about as old as you, with seven sons. I drew the lot to sail here."

Priam seized on this. "If you are truly Achilles's squire, tell me the truth. Is my son still at the ships? Or has he..." He could not say the words. "Has Achilles given him to his hounds?"

"Neither hounds nor vultures have touched him," the young man said gently. "Twelve days he has lain there, and his flesh is not wasted. Apollo has kept him fresh as dew, his wounds closed, his blood washed away. The gods loved your son, sir. They have taken care of him."

Priam wept. He could not help it. The tears ran down the grooves of his aged face and fell onto the hand that still held the young man's. "Accept this cup," he said, fumbling for the beautiful Thracian chalice. "Guard me, and guide me to Achilles's tent."

The young man shook his head, laughing softly. "You tempt me, old sir, but I will not take gifts behind Achilles's back. I fear him too much. But as your guide, I will go with you to Argos (AR-gos) itself. No one shall attack you while I am with you."

He sprang onto the chariot, took the whip and reins, and breathed new life into the horses. They moved forward with a will that surprised Priam, as if youth itself were contagious, as if the driver's energy had flowed into their old bones.

They reached the Greek wall.

Priam had seen it from Troy's battlements a thousand times. A rough thing of earth and timber, a trench before it, stakes pointing outward. He had watched Greek soldiers march through its gates, had seen their watch-fires burning along its length. Now he was on the wrong side of it, and every instinct screamed at him to turn back.

But the sentries on guard were eating their supper, and the young man did something strange. He raised a slender wand he carried, ivory and tipped with gold, and touched the air. The sentries' heads drooped. One by one, they slumped against the wall, their bread falling from their hands, their wine cups tipping onto the earth. They did not collapse. They simply slept, deeply and immediately, as if the god of sleep himself had breathed in their faces.

The young man drew back the heavy bolt of the gate. It took three men to move it, Priam knew. This boy moved it alone. He guided the wagon through, closed it behind them, and led the horses on.

Past the wall. Past the ditch. Through the maze of tents and cook-fires and sleeping men. Priam could hear snoring, could smell the residue of wine and roasted meat, could see the shapes of

warriors rolled in their cloaks. Any one of them might wake. Any one of them might recognise the Trojan king and raise the alarm.

But no one woke. No one saw. The darkness itself seemed to fold around them like a cloak.

They came at last to a large enclosure fenced with close-set pine stakes. Within stood a house built of hewn timber, roofed with coarse grass from the plain. Priam knew this place. He had heard reports from spies. This was the house the Myrmidons had built for their king, the man who had killed his son.

The young man drew the wagon to a halt. He handed the reins back to Idaeus, then sprang down and stood before Priam. And in that moment, something changed.

The air around him seemed to shimmer, like heat rising from summer stone. His form grew taller, brighter. A faint radiance, the colour of dawn on water, played about his shoulders. Priam found himself looking not at a young squire but at something else entirely: a god, golden-sandaled, with eyes that held the speed of thought.

"Sir," said Hermes (HER-meez), the slayer of Argus, guide of souls, messenger of Olympus, "it is I, immortal Hermes. My father Zeus sent me to conduct you. I will leave you now, for it would anger Achilles to see a god befriending mortals so openly. Go within. Embrace his knees. Beseech him by his father, his mother, his son. That is how you may move him."

He was gone before Priam could speak. A streak of light rose towards the stars, leaving nothing behind but the faint scent of something sweet and otherworldly, like crushed herbs on a mountainside.

Priam and Idaeus looked at each other. The wagon stood in the middle of the Greek camp, surrounded by fifty thousand sleeping enemies, and the god who had guided them had departed. For a moment, the old king felt the full weight of his isolation. He was alone. Truly alone. No god held his hand now. No divine power shielded him from the eyes of the enemy.

And yet Hermes had brought him this far. The gate was open. The path was clear. If the gods had meant him to turn back, they would not have delivered him to the very door of his enemy's house.

Priam sat alone on his chariot. Idaeus wept silently beside the mules. The Greek camp surrounded them, fifty thousand men who would tear them apart if they knew who had come among them.

The old king climbed down. His joints ached. His heart hammered. He walked to the gate of the compound, found the single pine bolt that secured it, and drew it back. It moved easily, as if some god had loosened it for him.

He entered the courtyard. He crossed to the door of the house.

Inside, Achilles sat with two companions: Automedon (aw-TOM-eh-don) and Alcimus (AL-si-mus), his squires. They had just finished eating. The table still stood before them, littered with the bones of their meal, and the smell of roasted lamb hung in the air. They did not see Priam at first. The old man moved like a ghost, like a shadow of grief given human form, stepping silently across the floor of packed earth.

Then he was there, standing before Achilles, and the two squires started to their feet with a cry.

But Priam did not look at them. He looked only at Achilles. He saw the face that had launched a thousand ships' worth of destruction, the broad shoulders that had borne divine armour, the eyes that had burned with a rage hot enough to scorch the earth. And he saw the hands. They were still stained, those hands, still marked with the dirt of the plain and the blood of the man they had killed. Those hands had held a spear through his son's throat.

Those hands.

Priam knelt. He clasped Achilles's knees. And he kissed the hands that had killed his son.

The hands that had dragged Hector's body through the dust. The hands that had built the pyre. The hands that had held Patroclus while he wept.

Those hands.

Priam kissed them.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

Priam's journey to Achilles's tent is the most dangerous passage in the entire Iliad, not because of monsters or battles, but because of what it represents. An old man voluntarily places himself in the power of his worst enemy. This act, called *hiketeia* (supplication) in Greek culture, was considered sacred. Once a suppliant touched your knees, you were religiously and morally bound to hear them out. But Homer goes further than custom requires. Priam does not merely supplicate. He embraces the very hands that killed Hector. That kiss is the moral turning point of the poem. It transforms Achilles not through divine command, not through military force, but through the power of shared humanity. When a grieving father kisses the hands of his son's killer, something breaks open that no sword could ever touch.

FOOTNOTES

Hermes as psychopomp and guide: Hermes's role in escorting Priam reflects one of his oldest divine functions. In Greek religion, Hermes was psychopomp, literally "soul-guide," the deity who conducted souls to the underworld. But he was also the protector of travelers, thieves, and anyone who moved between boundaries. His disguise as a young man is characteristic: Hermes was the god of deception as well as truth, of crossing lines as well as drawing them. That he should guide a father to reclaim his dead son's body is fitting in ways that Homer's original audience would have recognised immediately. Hermes does not simply protect Priam's body. He guides him across the border between life and death, between enemy and friend, between rage and forgiveness.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Hermes disguises himself as a young man rather than revealing his divinity immediately. Why do gods in the Iliad so often appear in disguise? What does Priam's willingness to trust a stranger tell us about the nature of hope?

Priam kisses the hands that killed his son, the most shocking and powerful gesture in the entire poem. What does this act mean? Is it submission, or is it something stronger? What would it take

for you to embrace the person who had destroyed what you loved most?

The Greek camp sleeps while Priam walks through it unseen. The sentries do not wake, the soldiers do not stir. Is this divine protection, or does it symbolize something about how grief and love can move unseen through a world of violence?

CHAPTER 25: THE MEETING OF ENEMIES

The old man's lips touched the hands that had killed his son, and the world held its breath.

For a long moment, neither man moved. Priam (PRYE-am) knelt at Achilles's (ah-KILL-eez) feet, his white head bowed, his mouth pressed against the knuckles that had held the spear through Hector's throat. The tent was silent. Even the wind outside seemed to stop. Achilles stared down at the crown of Priam's head, at the thin white hair matted with dust from the road, and felt something shift inside him. Not a decision. Not a thought. Something deeper. Something that had been wound tight as a bowstring since the moment he heard that Patroclus was dead.

"Think of your father," Priam said, and his voice was barely more than a whisper, cracked with age and grief. "Think of Peleus (PEL-ee-us), who is such a one as I am, on the sad threshold of old age. Perhaps his neighbours harass him now, and there is none to keep war and ruin from him. Yet when he hears that you are still alive, he is glad. His days are full of hope that he will see his dear son come home."

He paused, and his shoulders shook. "But I. I am the wretched one. I had the bravest sons in all Troy, and there is not one of them left. I had fifty sons when the Achaeans came here. Nineteen from a single womb. The others born to me by the women of my household. The greater part of them, fierce Ares has laid low. And Hector... Hector, who was the guardian of the city and ourselves - him you have lately slain."

Priam raised his face. His cheeks were wet, his eyes red-rimmed, but there was no hatred in them. Only a grief so vast it had swallowed fear itself. "Therefore I am come to the ships of the Achaeans to ransom his body from you with a great ransom. Fear the wrath of heaven, Achilles. Think on your own father, and have compassion upon me, who am more pitiable still. I have steeled myself as no man on earth has ever steeled himself before me. I have kissed the hand of the man who slew my son."

Achilles heard the words, and something broke.

It was not dramatic. There was no cry, no sudden collapse. But the hardness that had been his only armour since Patroclus fell - that diamond shell of rage that had let him slaughter rivers full of men, that had let him drag a noble corpse through the dust day after day, cracked. Just a hairline fracture at first. Then wider. Then open.

He looked at Priam, and he saw not the king of Troy, not the enemy, not the father of the man he had killed. He saw a father. He saw Peleus. He saw himself, sitting by the sea, weeping for a dead friend while his own father grew old alone across the water.

And Achilles wept.

He wept as he had not wept since the first night, when the news came and he lay in the dust screaming. But these were different tears. They came not from the hot fountain of rage, but from a deeper well. He wept for Peleus, his father, whom he would never see again. He wept for Patroclus, whose body lay cold in its golden urn while his spirit wandered at the gates of Hades, waiting. And he wept for Priam, kneeling at his feet, an old man who had crossed a battlefield in the dark to kiss the hands of his son's killer.

The two of them wept together, and the sound of it filled the tent. Automedon (aw-TOM- eh-don) and Alcimus (AL-si-mus) looked at each other and said nothing. There are moments when even the closest companions must simply stand aside and let grief have its way.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

The weeping of Achilles is the emotional and moral climax not only of the Iliad, but of all Western literature that follows it. This is the moment when the greatest warrior in the world, a man who has been defined entirely by his capacity for destruction, discovers his capacity for compassion. Homer structures the scene with extraordinary care. Achilles does not weep for Hector, his enemy. He weeps first for Peleus, then for Patroclus, then for Priam. The circle widens with each wave of grief: from his own father, to his lost friend, to the grieving father before him. By the time the weeping subsides, Achilles has moved from self to other, from rage to pity, from isolation to shared humanity. It is one of the most carefully constructed scenes of emotional transformation ever written.

When the tears finally subsided, Achilles took Priam's hand and lifted him gently. He guided the old man to a seat and stepped back, wiping his face with the back of his arm. For a moment, he stood there, collecting himself, and when he spoke, his voice was steady but changed. The hard edge was gone. In its place was the sound of a man who had been through something and come out the other side.

"You must be hungry," Achilles said.

It was an absurd thing to say. Priam had just kissed the hands that killed Hector. They had wept together until the tent rang with it. And now: you must be hungry. But that is how grief works. It does not resolve neatly. It simply makes room for the ordinary facts of living. The body needs bread. The throat needs wine. Even Niobe, Achilles would later say, even Niobe remembered to eat.

Priam shook his head. "Bid me not be seated while Hector is still lying uncared for in your tents. Accept the ransom I have brought, and give him to me at once, that I may look upon him."

Achilles held up a hand. "Do not vex me, sir. I am already minded to give up the body. My mother came to me from Zeus with that command. I know, too, that some god brought you here - no mortal man could have passed our guards unseen. So let us wait until dawn. For now, let us eat."

He went to the door of the tent and called his servants. They came running, wide-eyed at the sight of the Trojan king seated in their master's house, but they knew better than to question. Achilles gave orders: wash the body, anoint it, wrap it in clean robes. But do it out of sight, where Priam could not see. He knew, with the practical wisdom of a man who had spent too much time with grief, that the sight of Hector's wounds would break the old man's composure and set them both

weeping again.

The servants took Hector's body away. Achilles stood at the door of the tent and watched them go. Then he turned back inside and did something he had not done in twelve days: he prepared a meal as a host prepares a meal, with care and attention, as if the world were normal.

He killed a sheep himself, one of the silvery-white ones his men kept. He watched them skin it and cut the meat, watched them spit the pieces and roast them over the fire. Automedon brought bread in baskets. Alkimus poured wine. And when it was ready, Achilles set the food before Priam with his own hands.

This was *xenia* (guest-friendship), the oldest and most sacred bond in the Greek world. Once you broke bread with a man, he was under your protection. The same Zeus who hurled thunderbolts was also Zeus Xenios, the protector of guests. To harm a man who had eaten at your table was to insult the god himself.

And so, in the strangest dining room in all of literature, two enemies shared a meal. Achilles, who had dragged Hector's body through the dust that very morning. Priam, whose city Achilles had sworn to burn. They ate in silence at first, then in quiet conversation, and with each bite, the distance between them shrank. Not to friendship - that would be too much, too fast, an insult to the dead. But to something rarer. To recognition.

They spoke of Niobe, whom Achilles mentioned as they ate. "Even lovely Niobe had to think about eating, though her twelve children were all slain in her house. Apollo killed the sons with arrows, and Artemis slew the daughters, because Niobe had vaunted herself against their mother Leto. Nine days they lay weltering, and there was none to bury them. But on the tenth day, the gods buried them, and Niobe took food, being worn out with weeping. They say she still lives among the rocks of Mount Sipylus, turned to stone, nursing her sorrows. So you and I, old

sir, will eat. You can weep for your dear son later, when you bear him back to Troy. And you will weep. Many a tear will he cost you."

After the meal, Priam asked for rest. He had not slept since Hector died. His eyes were bruised with exhaustion, his hands trembling.

Achilles ordered beds made up in the gatehouse, with good red rugs and woollen cloaks. "You will lie outside," he said, not unkindly, "lest one of the commanders come to advise with me and see you here in the darkness. Word might reach Agamemnon, and then there would be delay."

Priam nodded. He understood. In war, even mercy required discretion.

"Tell me truly," Achilles said, "for how many days will you celebrate the funeral rites? I will hold the army back for that long."

"Nine days we will mourn him in my house," Priam answered. "On the tenth we will bury him. On the eleventh we will build his mound. On the twelfth, if we must, we will fight again."

"It shall be as you say," Achilles said. "I will stay our fighting for all of those days."

He laid his hand on Priam's wrist, a gesture of promise, and the old man allowed himself to be led to his bed. Idaeus was already there, waiting, his own face slack with relief and weariness. Achilles returned to his inner room, where Briseis (BRYE-sis) lay waiting. He stretched out beside her, but he did not touch her. His mind was far away, wandering the borderlands between wakefulness and sleep, where Patroclus's ghost sometimes walked.

All through the camp, the Greeks slept. All through the city, the Trojans slept. The gods themselves slept, for once, leaving the world to mortals. All except Hermes (HER-meez).

The god hovered over Priam's sleeping form and spoke into his dream: "Sir, now that Achilles has spared your life, you seem to have no fear of sleeping among your foes. But think - if Agamemnon and the others knew you were here, how much ransom do you think your sons would have to pay? Get up. It is time to go."

Priam woke with a start. He shook Idaeus awake, and together they crept out into the grey light of earliest dawn. Hermes was waiting. He had already yoked the horses and mules, already loaded Hector's body onto the wagon, already cleared a path through the sleeping camp. He helped Priam onto his chariot, took the reins himself, and drove them forward with that same supernatural speed that had brought them in.

No guard stirred. No sentry called out. The camp might as well have been enchanted, which, in a sense, it was. They passed the wall, crossed the trench, reached the ford of the river Scamander (skuh-MAN-der) as the first true light of dawn touched the eastern sky.

There Hermes paused. "I will leave you now, King Priam. I have brought you safely through the host of your enemies. The road to Troy is clear. Go, and bury your son."

He was gone in a streak of light, leaving Priam and Idaeus alone on the Trojan plain with the body of Hector on the wagon behind them. The old man took the reins himself. He did not look back. He drove towards the walls of Troy, and as the sun rose, the city came into view, and with it, the beginning of the end.

FOOTNOTES

Xenia (the sacred bond of guest-friendship): In Bronze Age Greek culture, xenia was far more than mere hospitality. It was a religious obligation protected by Zeus himself, who bore the title Xenios - protector of guests and strangers. When two men shared a meal, they entered into a sacred bond that transcended all other loyalties, even war. This is why Achilles must feed Priam before sending him away, and why the meal scene is not a digression but the moral completion of the supplication. By sharing bread and wine, Achilles and Priam become, in the eyes of the gods, host and guest - and therefore no longer merely enemies. Archaeological evidence from Mycenaean Greece suggests that elaborate guest-gifts and hospitality rituals were central to aristocratic life, and Homer treats these customs with the utmost seriousness.

The two urns of Zeus: Achilles's speech about the two urns on Zeus's floor: one filled with evil gifts, one with good. This reflects one of the oldest and most widespread ideas in Greek thought: that human suffering is distributed unevenly and arbitrarily by divine will. A similar concept

appears in Near Eastern literature, including the Hebrew Bible's idea of the righteous sufferer. The image would profoundly influence later Greek tragedy, where the question of why the good suffer and the wicked prosper becomes a central obsession. When Achilles tells Priam that Peleus too received evil from the gods despite his blessings, he is not offering empty comfort. He is acknowledging that suffering binds them together across the gulf of enmity. Both men have lost what they loved most to the caprice of fate.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Achilles weeps first for Peleus, then for Patroclus, then for Priam. Why does Homer structure the scene in this order? What does each wave of grief represent in Achilles's emotional journey?

After the most emotionally intense scene in the poem, Achilles says, "You must be hungry," and prepares a meal. Why does Homer include this ordinary moment? What does it tell us about grief, and about what it means to return to human connection after rage has consumed everything?

Priam kisses the hands that killed Hector - an act of radical humility that transforms Achilles. Can hatred ever truly be overcome without one side making themselves vulnerable? Is Priam's act a surrender, or is it the bravest thing anyone does in the entire Iliad?

CHAPTER 26: THE RETURN OF HECTOR

The walls of Troy were gold with dawn when Cassandra (kah-SAN-drah) saw them coming.

She stood on the heights of Pergamus (PER-gah-mus), the citadel's highest tower, her hair unbound and wild in the early light. Cassandra was Priam's daughter, a prophetess cursed by Apollo (ah-POL-oh) - he had given her the gift of true vision, then twisted it so that no one would ever believe her. She had foreseen all of this: Hector's death, Achilles's rage, the city's fall. She had screamed warnings until her throat bled, and Troy had ignored her. Now she saw her father's chariot crossing the plain, and the body on the wagon behind it, and her cry split the morning like a spear.

"Come, Trojans!" she shrieked, her voice carrying across the rooftops. "Come look on Hector! If ever you rejoiced to see him coming alive from battle, look now on him who was the glory of our city and all our people!"

At the gates, the wagon stopped. Priam (PRYE-am) sat upright, exhausted but dignified, and spoke to the crowd that had already begun to gather. "Make way for the mules. Let us bring him home. Afterward, you shall have your fill of weeping."

They parted like water. The wagon rolled through the Scaean Gates (SEE-an), past the stone lions that had watched over Troy for centuries, and into the streets of the city. And there, at the first turning, Andromache (an-DROM-ah-kee) saw it. She had been walking towards the gates, drawn by some terrible instinct, and now she stood frozen as the wagon passed her. She did not scream. She did not faint. She simply walked to the wagon and laid her hands on Hector's head.

His body had been washed. Achilles's servants had done their work well. The wounds were cleaned, the dust washed away, the limbs arranged with care. Apollo's protection had kept him

whole through twelve days of desecration, and now he looked almost as he had in life, except for the stillness. That stillness. Hector had never been still.

"Husband," Andromache said, and the word came out soft, almost tender, as if she were waking him from sleep. "You have died young, and left me a widow in your house. Our son is still a child, and I fear he will not reach manhood. Before he can grow, our city will fall, for you who watched over it are no more. You were its saviour, the guardian of our wives and children."

She reached down and touched his cheek. "You did not stretch forth your arms to embrace me as you lay dying. You did not speak words that I might have held in my heart forever." Her voice cracked, but she forced herself on. "The child - you and I are the unhappy parents of him, and he is still a mere infant. Now that you are gone, you can do nothing for him, nor he for you. Even if he escapes the horrors of this war, his life will be labour and sorrow. Others will seize his lands. The day that robs a child of his parents severs him from his own kind. He will go about destitute, plucking one by the cloak and another by the shirt. Some child whose parents are alive will drive him from the table with blows and angry words. 'Out with you,' he will say. 'You have no father here.' And the boy will go crying back to his widowed mother: Astyanax (ah-STY-ah-naks), who used to sit upon his father's knees and have none but the choicest morsels set before him."

She wept, and the women around her wept with her. Andromache had lost her father, her brothers, her city, all before she married Hector. He was all she had left, and now she held his cold head in her hands and spoke to him as if he could still hear.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

The three laments for Hector are one of the most carefully structured sequences in the Iliad. Each woman speaks from a different relationship and mourns a different Hector. Andromache laments the husband and father, focusing on what his death means for her son's future. Her grief is practical, prophetic, rooted in the real consequences of loss. Hecuba laments the son, focusing on what the gods owed him and how Achilles denied him dignity. Her grief is maternal, fierce, protective even in defeat. Helen laments the friend, the one decent man in a family that has treated her with contempt. Her grief is personal, quiet, almost ashamed. Together, the three laments form a complete portrait of Hector's character and the full scope of what Troy has lost. This technique, called ring composition by scholars, shows Hector from three angles, giving the reader a fuller picture than any single speech could provide.

Hecuba (heh-KYOO-bah) pushed through the crowd. The old queen moved like a woman made of broken stone, her face grey, her eyes sunken. She had buried children before. She had watched Priam father fifty sons and seen most of them fall. But Hector was different. Hector was the one who had made it all bearable.

"Hector," she said, her voice trembling but clear, "dearest to me of all my children. So long as you were alive, the gods loved you well. Even in death they have not forgotten you. When Achilles took my other sons, he would sell them beyond the seas: to Samos, or Imbrus (IM-brus), or rugged Lemnos (LEM-nos). But you he dragged round his comrade's tomb, again and again, as if that could bring the dead back to life. Yet here you lie, fresh as dew, as if Apollo himself had struck you down with his painless shafts."

She looked up at Priam, who sat motionless on the wagon. "Bring him inside," she said. "Bring my son home."

They bore the body into the palace and laid it on a bed. Minstrels came and sat around it, striking the chords of the dirge, and the women joined in the sad music. And then a third woman stepped forward, and her presence changed the tone of the grief entirely.

Helen (HEL-en) stood at the foot of the bed, and she did not weep as the others had wept. She was the most beautiful woman in the world, the face that had launched a thousand ships, and she had watched this war unfold from behind Troy's walls for ten years. She was also, in many ways, the loneliest person in the city.

"Hector," she said, "dearest of all my brothers-in-law. I am wife to Paris, who brought me here, and I wish every day that I had died before he did so. Twenty years have come and gone since I left my home and came from over the sea. In all that time, I never heard one word of insult from you. Not one unkindness. When your brothers or sisters chided me, when your brothers' wives spoke cruelly, when even my mother-in-law turned her face away. You would rebuke them with words of gentleness. You were the only one in this whole city who was kind to me."

Her tears fell on Hector's covered feet. "And now there is no one else in Troy who is kind to me. All shrink and shudder as they pass me in the street. My tears flow both for you and for my unhappy self. What will become of me when this city falls?"

It was perhaps the quietest of the three laments, but in its own way, the most devastating. Helen mourned not a husband, not a son, but a friend: the one person in Troy who had seen her as a human being rather than a prize, a curse, or a symbol. With Hector gone, she had no one.

Speaker	Relationship to Hector	What She Mourns
Andromache	Wife and mother of his child	The protector; the father of

Astyanax; the guardian of Troy's
future. She fears for her son's
orphaning and the city's fall.

Hecuba	Mother	The son; the one the gods loved;
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the last and best of her fifty
children. She grieves the
desecration of his body and the
cruelty of his killer.

Helen	Sister-in-law and friend	The only kind man in Troy; her one
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protector in a hostile city. She

grieves the loss of human decency,
and her own isolation.

After the laments, Priam addressed the people. "Bring wood to the city," he commanded. "Do not fear ambush. Achilles gave me his word: no Greek will attack us until the twelfth day."

The Trojans went out in parties, yoking oxen and mules, hauling timber down from the slopes of Mount Ida (EYE-dah) and gathering it in great heaps before the gates. For nine days, the sound of axes and the creak of wagons filled the air. For nine days, Hector lay in state in Priam's palace while Troy mourned him as they had mourned no one else, not even the brothers and sons who had fallen before him. Nine days of dirges. Nine days of women singing the old songs of grief. Nine days of silence from the Greek camp across the plain.

On the morning of the tenth day, they bore Hector out. The Trojans assembled in their thousands, and the body was laid upon the summit of the pyre. Priam himself struck the first spark, though his hands shook so badly that his sons had to help him. The flames caught, rising gold and red into the autumn sky, and the city of Troy watched its greatest son burn.

All day the pyre burned, consuming the wood and the body it held. The Trojans stood around it in a great circle, not speaking, not weeping anymore - they had wept themselves dry, only watching. Priam stood at the front, Hecuba on one side, Andromache on the other, Helen a little apart from the rest. When the flames began to die, they poured wine over the embers to quench them, and the hissing steam rose like a final breath.

On the eleventh day, when the pyre had cooled, Hector's brothers and closest comrades gathered the white bones. They handled them gently, separating them from the ashes, wrapping them in soft robes of purple cloth. These they placed in a golden urn, Priam's own, a treasure from the royal store. The urn they laid in a grave lined with stone. They covered it with large rocks set close together, building a barrow in haste, always looking towards the Greek camp, always expecting the attack that Achilles had promised to hold back.

But the Greeks did not come.

When the barrow was finished, the Trojans returned to the city and held a great feast in Priam's house. It was not a celebration. No one sang or danced - but it was the necessary completion of the rite. The dead had been honoured. The body had been returned to the earth. Hector, who had protected Troy through ten years of war, was laid to rest in the soil of the city he had loved.

FOOTNOTES

Cassandra and the tragedy of prophetic knowledge: Cassandra's brief appearance at Hector's return is one of the most poignant moments in the Iliad. Cursed by Apollo to speak true prophecies that no one would believe, she embodies the agony of seeing clearly in a world that prefers blindness. Her mad cries from the walls, which will continue throughout the fall of Troy, becoming the template for the tragic prophetess in Western literature. Aeschylus would later make her the centerpiece of Agamemnon, and her character has resonated through two and a half millennia as a symbol of truth-tellers

ignored by those in power. In this scene, Homer gives her only a few lines, but they are enough to remind us that Troy's destruction was not only foreseen but foretold, and that the city's tragedy was, in part, a tragedy of deafness.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

The three women each mourn a different Hector: husband, son, friend. Which of the three laments speaks to you most powerfully, and why? What does each lament reveal about the speaker as much as about Hector?

Helen says Hector was the only person in Troy who was kind to her. After ten years and a war caused by her presence, why might Hector have treated her with decency when his own family did not? What does this tell us about his character?

The Greeks do not attack during the funeral. Achilles keeps his word. Is this the final proof that he has truly changed. That the man who dragged a corpse through the dust has become someone capable of honouring his enemy? What does keeping one's word to an enemy say about a person's character?

CHAPTER 27: THE TAMING OF ACHILLES

Sing, goddess, of the anger of Achilles. That is how we began.

Not with Helen's beauty, though it launched a thousand ships. Not with the wooden horse, though it would bring the city down. Not even with the war itself, though ten years of blood and fire stretched behind and before. Homer chose to begin with anger: *menis* in Greek, a word that means something far more terrible than ordinary rage. It is divine wrath. Cosmic fury. The kind of anger that shakes the foundations of the world.

And now, twenty-seven chapters later, that anger has been transformed into something so different that the word itself barely recognises it.

Think of where we found Achilles (ah-KILL-eez) at the beginning. A young man in his prime, the greatest warrior of his age, dishonoured by a king who took what was rightfully his. His response was to withdraw, to sulk, to let the world burn until the world recognised his worth. He asked his mother to make the Greeks suffer, and she did. He watched from the beach as his comrades fell, and he felt justified. His anger was clean, righteous, focused on a single point: Agamemnon had wronged him, and Agamemnon must pay.

That anger would have burned itself out eventually. Most anger does. What happened instead was far worse, and far more important. Patroclus died.

But the path from the first anger to the final grief was longer and more winding than a simple summary suggests. Between Achilles's withdrawal and his return, the Iliad gives us the full texture of human experience in wartime. We have seen Briseis (BRYE-sis), whose few words spoken over Patroclus's body reminded us that captive women have their own stories of loss. We have seen the Embassy, when three of Greece's greatest men offered Achilles everything he had demanded and he refused them still, his pride hardened into something that no gift could soften.

We have seen Hector with his family, knowing he would die and choosing to fight anyway, not for glory but for love. Homer did not rush to the moral climax. He earned it, scene by scene, grief by grief, until the weight of all that suffering made the final moment of mercy feel not like a plot twist, but like a necessity.

The death of Patroclus did not simply deepen Achilles's rage. It changed its quality entirely. The clean, focused anger at Agamemnon became something wild and indiscriminate: a rage against the whole world, against Troy, against the river itself, against the very fact of death. Achilles became death's apprentice, slaughtering until the Scamander (skuh-MAN-der) ran red, dragging a corpse through the dust, sacrificing prisoners on a funeral pyre. He had chosen long life without glory over short life with honour, and now, with Patroclus gone, he had nothing left to lose. He would be glorious, yes, but at the cost of everything that made glory worth having.

And then - Priam.

An old man, kneeling. Kissing the hands that killed his son. Speaking of Peleus, Achilles's own father, growing old across the sea. In that moment, Achilles did not stop being angry. He did not forget Patroclus. He did not forgive Hector, exactly. Forgiveness is too simple a word for what passes between them. What happened was something rarer and more human. Achilles recognised himself in his enemy's father. He saw that Priam's grief was his grief, that the old man's love for Hector was the same love he bore for Patroclus, that suffering does not respect the boundaries we draw between friend and foe.

He wept. And in weeping, he became whole again.

This is what the Iliad is about. Not the Trojan War. The war is merely the setting, the vast stage on which human beings play out their small, tremendous dramas. The poem is about wrath, yes, but it is about what wrath costs, and what can replace it. It is about honour, but it asks us whether honour without compassion is anything more than vanity. It is about mortality. Every character in the poem lives under the shadow of death, from the lowliest spearman to Hector (HEK-tor), from Andromache to Achilles himself, and it asks what we ought to do with the brief, precious time we are given.

Consider Achilles's choice again. Thetis offered him two fates: a long, obscure life, or a short, brilliant one. He chose brilliance. And for most of the poem, that choice looks like a trap: the

choice of a young man who does not yet understand that glory is empty without love. But by the end, something has changed. Achilles has not renounced his choice. He still knows he will die at Troy, that his doom follows hard on Hector's. What he has discovered is that glory and compassion are not opposites. The greatest thing a human being can do is not to kill brilliantly, but to feel deeply, and to let that feeling move them towards mercy.

When Achilles returns Hector's body, he is not being a good sport. He is not doing the decent thing. He is acting from a recognition so profound that it redefines everything he has been. The man who began the poem by withdrawing from humanity because his pride was wounded ends it by embracing his enemy's father because their shared grief is more important than their shared war.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

Why Does the Iliad End Here?

The Iliad covers roughly fifty-one days out of a ten-year war, and it ends not with the fall of Troy, not with Achilles's death, but with the funeral of Hector. Why?

Homer is telling a story about wrath and its transformation. The poem's first word is *menis*, wrath, and everything that follows is the working-out of that wrath through rage, grief, and finally mercy. Once Achilles returns Hector's body, the arc is complete. The anger that began the poem has been tamed. To continue would be to tell a different story: the story of Achilles's death and the fall of Troy, which belongs to other poems in the Epic Cycle.

There is a deeper reason too. Ending with Hector's funeral gives the poem a moral symmetry. The greatest Greek warrior and the greatest Trojan warrior are bound together not by mutual admiration but by shared suffering. Hector dies because Achilles loved Patroclus. Achilles weeps because Priam loved Hector. The chain of grief and compassion links them across the gulf of enmity, and the poem chooses to honour that connection rather than pursue the war to its violent conclusion. In choosing to end here, Homer tells us that human connection matters more than conquest, and that the transformation of a single soul is worth more than the fall of a city.

What, then, does it mean to be a hero? The Bronze Age answer was simple: a hero is the strongest, the fastest, the bravest. A hero kills his enemies and wins treasure and makes his name immortal in song. Achilles was raised on this code. He believed it with his whole heart, which is why Agamemnon's insult wounded him so deeply. It threatened not just his status but his very identity.

But the Iliad quietly dismantles this code and rebuilds it. By the end, we have seen that Hector: steady, loving, duty-bound Hector, is as much a hero as Achilles, perhaps more so, because he fights not for glory but for love of his city and his family. We have seen that Odysseus's cunning, Diomedes (dye-oh-MEE-deez)'s courage, Ajax (AY-jaks)'s strength, all

are forms of heroism, but none is complete without the quality Achilles discovers in his tent that night: the courage to be vulnerable, to weep, to recognise the enemy's humanity as equal to one's own.

The ancient Greeks had a word for this: *sophrosyne*, often translated as moderation or self-control, but meaning something closer to wisdom of the heart. It is the quality of knowing oneself, of understanding one's place in the larger human story, of recognising that the sufferings of others are as real and as important as one's own. Achilles does not arrive at this wisdom easily. He arrives at it through the most painful experience a human being can endure: the death of the person he loved most, and even then, it takes an old man's kiss on his murderer's hands to break through the wall he has built around his heart.

But he does arrive. And that arrival is the point.

The story ends where it began, and yet everything is different. Achilles still sits by the sea, still waits for his own death, still knows that the war will grind on without Hector to protect Troy. But

the rage that consumed him, the menis that drove the first line of the poem, has been answered by something stronger. Not love, exactly. Not peace. Something harder-won and more durable: understanding.

He understands now what it costs to be human. He understands that every death on the battlefield represents a father weeping, a wife widowed, a child orphaned. He understands that honour without compassion is barbarism, that glory without love is hollow, and that the only answer to the terrible unfairness of mortality is to treat each other with mercy while we still can.

The Iliad does not promise that this understanding will save Troy, or save Achilles, or save any of us. The city will still fall. Achilles will still die young. The unfairness of the world will continue unabated. But for a moment, one luminous moment in an old king's tent, over bread and wine, while enemies wept together, rage became grief, and grief became compassion, and a man who had lost everything found something worth keeping.

The rage is over. Achilles is whole again. And the story - his story - is complete.

FOOTNOTES

The Iliad and the Epic Cycle: The Iliad is only one poem about the Trojan War, though it is by far the greatest. In antiquity, it was part of a larger collection called the Epic Cycle, which included the Cypria (the war's origins), the Aethiopis (Achilles's death and the arrival of the Amazons), the Little Iliad (the wooden horse), and the Sack of Troy (the city's fall). These other poems survive only in fragments and summaries, but they tell us that ancient audiences knew the full story: Achilles would die at the Scaean Gates, struck by Paris's arrow guided by Apollo. Troy would fall to the wooden horse. Andromache would become Neoptolemus's slave. The Greeks would scatter across the seas on their journeys home. Homer knew all of this too. He chose to end where he ended because the story he

wanted to tell was not about the destruction of Troy. It was about the transformation of a single human heart, and that story was finished the moment Achilles lifted Priam's hand and said, "Let us eat."

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

The Iliad opens with wrath and closes with compassion. Has Achilles truly changed, or has he simply exhausted his capacity for rage? What evidence from the text supports your view?

The poem ends not with the fall of Troy or Achilles's death, but with Hector's funeral. Do you agree with Homer's choice? Why might the funeral of an enemy soldier be a more fitting ending than the triumph of the Greek army?

Achilles discovers that compassion, not strength, is the highest form of heroism. Is this a message that still resonates today? Can you think of a moment in your own life, or in recent history, when showing compassion required more courage than using force?

CHAPTER 28: THE TROJAN WAR IN CONTEXT

The Iliad is vast, but it is also narrow. In twenty-four books of poetry, Homer covers roughly fifty-one days out of a ten-year war. He does not tell us how the war began. He does not tell us how it ended. He gives us the quarrel of two proud men, the death of one noble warrior, and the grief that follows. In doing so, he gives us everything that matters.

But you deserve to know the rest of the story.

Because the Greeks who first listened to this poem around a winter fire already knew it. They knew what came before and what came after, and that knowledge shaped how they heard every line. When Homer describes Achilles (ah-KILL-eez) weeping with Priam, his audience knew that Achilles himself would soon be dead, that his divine armour would spark a bitter feud between Odysseus and Ajax, and that the greatest warrior of the age would leave behind nothing but a name and a handful of songs. When Andromache speaks of her fears for Astyanax (ah-STY-ah-naks), the listeners already knew her son would not survive the fall of Troy. Homer counted on that knowledge. It is what makes his silences so powerful.

So let us step back and see the whole canvas: the events that led to the war, the years the Iliad skips over, and the catastrophe that followed after Homer fell silent.

It began with a wedding, as so many disasters do.

Peleus (PEL-ee-us), a mortal king, married Thetis (THET-is), an immortal sea-goddess. All the gods were invited. All except one. Eris (AIR-is), the goddess of discord, took her

revenge by rolling a golden apple into the banquet hall. Inscribed upon it were the words: For the fairest.

Three goddesses claimed it: Hera (HEER-ah), queen of Olympus; Athena (ah-THEE-nah), goddess of wisdom; and Aphrodite (af-roh-DY-tee), goddess of love. They asked Zeus to judge between them, but Zeus was nobody's fool. He knew that choosing any one of them would earn him two enemies for life. Instead, he directed them to a young Trojan prince named Paris (PA-ris), also called Alexandros (ah-leks-AN-dros), who was tending sheep on the slopes of Mount Ida. Paris was handsome but not wise, and the goddesses knew it. Each offered him a bribe.

Hera offered him power: the rule of all Asia. Athena offered him wisdom, the mind of a great strategist. Aphrodite offered him the most beautiful woman in the world.

Paris chose the woman. That was the judgment of Paris, and it would cost Troy everything.

The most beautiful woman in the world was Helen (HEL-en), daughter of Zeus and a mortal woman named Leda. She was married to Menelaus (men-eh-LAY-us), king of Sparta, and theirs was not some political arrangement. He genuinely loved her, and she had made her peace with a life of comfort and respect.

But Aphrodite kept her promise. When Paris visited Sparta as a guest, Helen looked at this handsome young prince from the east, and something in her stirred. Perhaps it was love. Perhaps it was boredom. Perhaps it was the goddess working through her, as gods so often did. However it happened, Helen sailed away with Paris, taking with her a fortune in treasure and leaving behind a husband who would burn the world to get her back.

Menelaus was not merely a wronged husband. He was a king with powerful allies, and those allies were bound by the most sacred oath in Greek mythology.

Years earlier, when Helen had been a girl of marriageable age, every prince in Greece had wanted her. Her mortal father, Tyndareus (tin-DAY-rus), had faced a problem: how do you choose one suitor without making enemies of the other forty? The solution was brilliant and terrible. He made them all swear a solemn oath, the oath of Tyndareus, binding them to defend the chosen husband's rights should anyone ever try to steal Helen away. Every man who had competed for her hand was now honour-bound to help Menelaus reclaim her.

This is why the Trojan War was not a simple family feud. It was a coalition of the entire Greek world, the greatest army ever assembled in the ancient world.

Gathering that army took time. Menelaus and his brother Agamemnon (ag-ah-MEM-non) sent messengers to every corner of Greece. Some heroes came eagerly. Others had to be

tricked or coaxed. Odysseus (oh-DIS-ee-us), king of Ithaca, tried to pretend he was mad, ploughing a field with an ox and an ass yoked together, sowing salt instead of seed. But the wily recruiter Palamedes placed Odysseus's infant son in the plough's path, and Odysseus swerved to avoid him, proving his sanity. He went to Troy against his better judgment, and he would not return home for twenty years.

Achilles was even harder to find. His mother Thetis knew he was fated to die young at Troy, so she disguised him as a girl and hid him among the daughters of King Lycomedes, on the island of Scyros. Odysseus found him by laying out gifts among the women: jeweller and fine cloth mixed with a shield and spear. When a trumpet sounded its war-call, Achilles reached for the weapons without thinking. His disguise fell away. He could not hide what he was, any more than a wolf can hide among sheep.

A thousand ships. That was the number the poets gave, and whether it was exact or merely poetic, it captured the imagination of the ancient world. From Mycenae and Pylos, from Ithaca and Salamis, from Crete and Rhodes and the scattered islands of the Aegean, the warriors came. They left behind farms, wives, children, and ageing parents. Some would never see Greek soil again. Most did not know why they were really going, or what it would cost them. They knew only that honour demanded it, and in the Bronze Age, honour was everything.

The war lasted ten years.

The Iliad concentrates on a few weeks near the end, but those final days were built on nearly a decade of grinding stalemate. The Greeks raided nearby towns for supplies and plunder. Troops sickened and died. Heroes grew old in their armour. The Trojans, safe behind their massive walls, endured siege after siege, sortie after sortie. Both sides buried their dead and waited for something to break.

During those ten years, deeds were done that never made it into Homer's poem. Achilles led raids that ravaged the Trojan countryside. He captured Briseis at Lynessus and Chryseis at Thebe. He fought the Amazon queen Penthesilea when she came to aid the Trojans, and the legend says he wept when he killed her, seeing her beauty in the moment of death. He killed the Ethiopian prince

Memnon, who fought with divine armour forged by Hephaestus. Paris was wounded and healed. Helen repented and stayed. Hector grew from a promising prince into the city's indispensable defender.

The Greeks offered to end the war if the Trojans would return Helen and her treasure. The Trojans, dominated by Paris's faction, refused. Helen's own position grew more complicated with every passing year. She was not a prisoner. She was a queen in Troy, treated with respect by Priam and Hecuba, and she had grown fond of her Trojan family. But she also knew that the war was her fault, and that knowledge poisoned every meal and every night's sleep.

The Iliad ends with Hector's funeral, but the war continued for several more weeks or months. What happened next was told in poems now lost to us: the Aethiopis, the Little Iliad, and the Sack of Ilium, fragments and summaries that scholars have painstakingly reconstructed.

Achilles did not survive the war. Paris, still a capable archer despite his many flaws, shot him in his one vulnerable spot, the heel, where Thetis had held him when she dipped him in the River Styx as an infant, trying to make him immortal. Some versions say Apollo guided the arrow. Some say Paris could never have made the shot alone. However it happened, the greatest warrior of the age fell, and the Greeks mourned him with an intensity that suggests they knew they had lost more than a soldier. They had lost the best part of themselves.

His divine armour was awarded to Odysseus, not to Ajax (AY-jaks) the Great, who had been Achilles's closest rival in bravery. Ajax went mad with grief and rage, slaughtered a flock of sheep in a hallucinatory frenzy, and fell on his own sword. The man who had been the Greeks' strongest defender died alone in a field of blood and wool, killed not by an enemy but by the cruelty of a contest he should have won.

Odysseus, meanwhile, had been thinking.

Troy's walls were impregnable. The Greeks could not breach them, and the Trojans would not come out and fight fairly. After ten years, the army was homesick, exhausted, and running out of options. So Odysseus proposed a trick. He had the Greeks build a giant wooden horse, hollow inside, large enough to hide a squad of warriors within its belly. The Greeks then burned their camp and sailed away, or seemed to. They hid their fleet behind a nearby island.

One man, Sinon (SY-non), stayed behind. He pretended to be a deserter and told the Trojans that the horse was an offering to Athena, meant to ensure the Greeks' safe voyage home. He advised them to bring it inside the city to gain the goddess's favour. One Trojan priest, Laocoön, saw through the ruse. "I fear Greeks even when they bring gifts," he cried, and hurled a spear at the horse's flank. But Athena, or Poseidon depending on the version, sent sea serpents to strangle Laocoön and his sons. The Trojans took this as a sign that the priest had offended the gods. They dragged the horse through their gates and celebrated. They believed themselves delivered.

That night, while Troy slept, Sinon released the warriors from the horse's belly. They opened the city gates. The Greek army, which had sailed back under cover of darkness, poured into the city.

The fall of Troy was not a battle. It was a massacre.

What followed was the night of fire and slaughter that every Trojan had feared for ten years. Priam was killed at his own altar by Neoptolemus, Achilles's son, in an act of shocking sacrilege. Hecuba was enslaved. Andromache became Neoptolemus's prize, her son Astyanax thrown from the walls to ensure that no male heir of Hector survived. The men were killed. The women

were divided among the victors as slaves. The city burned until its famous walls were nothing but blackened stubs above a plain of ash.

Helen survived. Menelaus, it is said, raised his sword to kill her and could not bring himself to strike. Her beauty, or his memory of who she had been, or simply the exhaustion of ten years of war. Something stayed his hand. They reconciled, after a fashion, and made their way back to Sparta together. Whether Helen was a victim of divine manipulation or a willing agent of destruction, whether Menelaus was a fool or a man who understood that love and blame cannot always be separated. These are questions the Greeks debated for centuries, and they debate them still.

The returns were perhaps the hardest part.

Not all the Greeks made it home. Agamemnon sailed back to Mycenae with Cassandra, the Trojan princess he had taken as a slave, only to be murdered in his bathtub by his wife Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus. The war that had begun with the theft of one man's wife ended, for the Greek commander, with the vengeance of his own. His son Orestes would later kill his mother to avenge the murder, setting off one of the most famous blood-feuds in all of literature.

Menelaus and Helen wandered for years before reaching Sparta. Their voyage took them to Egypt and Cyprus, through storms sent by an angry Poseidon, through divine interventions and mortal mistakes. By the time they returned, the world they had known was gone.

Odysseus fared worst of all. His journey home to Ithaca lasted another ten years: encounters with Cyclopes and sorceresses, shipwrecks and divine curses, tests of wit and endurance that became the subject of Homer's second great poem, the *Odyssey*. He returned to find his house overrun by suitors demanding his wife Penelope's hand, his son grown to manhood without a father. He slew the suitors, reclaimed his kingdom, and lived (if living is the word) into a weary old age.

The Trojan War, from first gathering to last return, consumed roughly thirty years of Greek life. An entire generation grew up, fought, and died on the plains of Troy, and those who survived often wished they had not. The gold they won turned to ash in their hands. The glory they sought proved hollow. The city they destroyed became, in memory, something almost sacred, a warning of what happens when pride, desire, and the will of gods collide with human lives.

MYTHOLOGY NOTE

The Epic Cycle

The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are the only two complete epic poems about the Trojan War that survive from antiquity. But in the archaic period, they were part of a larger collection called the Epic Cycle - a series of narrative poems that covered the entire war from

beginning to end. The Cypria told of the war's origins and the gathering of the fleet. The Aethiopis described Penthesilea's arrival, Memnon's battle, and Achilles's death. The Little Iliad covered the contest for Achilles's armour, Ajax's madness, and the building of the wooden horse. The Sack of Ilium narrated the fall of Troy itself. The Nostoi told of the heroes' returns. Only fragments survive - quotations and summaries preserved by later writers. But these lost poems shaped Greek culture profoundly. The tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides drew heavily on them. Roman poets like Virgil retold their stories. The fact that only Homer's two poems survive is partly a quirk of literary history, partly a testament to their overwhelming quality: later generations simply preferred them.

Year	Event	Source Epic
~5 years before the war	The Judgment of Paris	Cypria
~2 years before the war	Paris abducts Helen from Sparta	Cypria
Year 1	Greek fleet gathers at Aulis;	Cypria

sacrifice of Iphigenia; departure for

Troy

Year 1	Achilles raids Mysia (mistaken for	Cypria
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Troy); Telephus wounded and

healed

Year 2	Fleet re-gathers; Philoctetes	Cypria
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abandoned on Lemnos

Years 2 - 9	Siege of Troy; raids on Trojan allies;	Iliad references
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deaths of Greek and Trojan heroes

Year 10, Weeks 1 - 49	The events of the Iliad: quarrel,	Iliad
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battle, Patroclus's death, Hector's

death, return of body

Year 10, after the Iliad	Penthesilea and Memnon killed;	Aethiopis
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Achilles dies at the Scaean Gates

Year 10, after Achilles's death	Contest for the armour; Ajax's	Little Iliad
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madness and suicide

Year 10, final days	The wooden horse; the fall of Troy;	Little Iliad, Sack of Ilium
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night of fire and slaughter

Immediately after	Division of spoils; sacrifice of	Sack of Ilium
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Polyxena at Achilles's grave

Years 10 - 20	The returns: Agamemnon	Nostoi, Odyssey
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murdered; Menelaus wanders;

Odysseus lost at sea

FOOTNOTES

The sacrifice of Iphigenia: Before the fleet could sail, the Greeks were becalmed at Aulis by the wrath of Artemis. Calchas prophesied that only the sacrifice of Agamemnon's daughter Iphigenia would appease the goddess. Agamemnon consented, and the winds blew again. This act of filial murder would haunt him forever, giving Clytemnestra her justification for the murder that awaited him at Mycenae. The story became one of the most powerful in Greek tragedy, a chilling reminder that the Trojan War began with the blood of an innocent girl.

Philoctetes: The greatest archer in the Greek army was abandoned on the island of Lemnos after a snake bite left him with a festering, foul-smelling wound. He spent ten years alone in a cave, nourished by birds he shot with his divine bow. According to the Little Iliad, Troy could not fall without Philoctetes and his bow - a prophecy that forced the Greeks to return and retrieve him. His story of abandonment and reluctant return is one of the most moving in the cycle, and Sophocles made it the subject of one of his greatest plays.

The oath of Tyndareus: This oath was a brilliant political solution to a dangerous problem, but it also had devastating consequences. Every man who swore it was bound by the most sacred obligation in Greek culture - an oath witnessed by the gods. To break it meant exile and divine punishment. To keep it meant leaving home and family for a war fought over another man's marriage. The oath trapped an entire generation, and its coercive power raises uncomfortable questions about honour, obligation, and the way societies push individuals towards destruction in the name of shared values.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

The Trojan War lasted ten years, yet the Iliad focuses on just a few weeks near the end. Why do you think Homer chose this narrow window? What does concentrating on a small slice of the war allow him to explore that a broader narrative might miss?

Many heroes in the Epic Cycle - Ajax, Agamemnon, Achilles - die not in glorious battle but through betrayal, madness, or ambush. What does this pattern suggest about the Greeks' attitude towards war and its supposed glory?

The oath of Tyndareus bound dozens of men to defend Helen's marriage, leading to a decade of war. When does a promise become a trap? Are there promises or obligations in your own life that

have caused more harm than good?

CHAPTER 29: AFTERWORD

We come to the end. Twenty-nine chapters, roughly sixty thousand words, and a poem nearly three thousand years old. I hope you have found in these pages what I have always found in Homer: not a dusty classic to be admired from a distance, but a living, breathing story that speaks to us across the millennia with an urgency that feels almost uncomfortable.

Because the Iliad should not still work this well. It was composed in a language nobody speaks, in a culture that practiced slavery and human sacrifice. Poets believed the gods intervened personally in human affairs. Its values are not our values. Its world is not our world. And yet, and yet, when Achilles weeps with Priam, when Andromache begs Hector to stay, when Patroclus goes into battle knowing he will not return, something inside us recognises these people. They are us. They have always been us.

That is the mystery of great art: it transcends every barrier of time and culture and lands in the human heart with the force of recognition.

The Iliad matters today for reasons Homer could never have imagined and surely never intended. We live in an age that has seen more war than any other, measured by the number of conflicts if not always by their scale. We have weapons that could reduce Troy to radioactive glass in half an hour. We have built institutions to prevent war and failed, again and again, to use them wisely. And in the middle of all this, Homer's ancient poem asks a question that has only grown more pressing: What does it actually mean to be a hero?

The Bronze Age answer was simple enough. A hero was strong. A hero was brave. A hero won glory in battle and made his name immortal in song. Achilles believed this with his whole heart, and for most of the poem, so do we. He is magnificent in battle. He is terrifying. He is everything a warrior society admires.

But Homer is too honest a storyteller to leave it there. He shows us what that kind of heroism costs, not abstractly, in the faces of the people left behind. He shows us Briseis mourning Patroclus, a man who had shown her kindness in a world that offered her none. He shows us Hector holding his son, knowing he will never watch the boy grow up. He shows us Priam, an old man reduced to begging for a corpse, and Achilles, the greatest killer of his age, weeping with him over bread and wine. The poem does not condemn warfare - it is too deeply embedded in a warrior culture for that - but it forces us to see it whole, to count the cost as well as the glory, and to wonder whether the cost is ever truly worth it.

If the Iliad has a message for our times, it is this: compassion is not weakness. Mercy is not surrender. The strongest thing a human being can do is not to kill an enemy but to recognise the enemy's humanity and act accordingly. Achilles does not learn this from a god or a philosopher. He learns it from grief, from the hardest experience a person can endure, and from an old man's courage in kissing the hands that killed his son. That this lesson should come from a Bronze Age war poem is one of the ironies that make literature worth reading.

You have probably encountered the Iliad before now, even if you did not realise it. Brad Pitt played Achilles in Wolfgang Petersen's 2004 film *Troy*, which took considerable liberties with the plot but captured something essential about the character's charisma and fatalism. The Coen Brothers' *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is a loose retelling of the *Odyssey*. Madeline Miller's novel *The Song of Achilles*, which focuses on the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus, has introduced a new generation of readers to Homer's world. Video games like *Hades* and *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* draw heavily on Greek myth. The Marvel superhero tradition, with its flawed heroes and cosmic conflicts, owes more to Homer than most comic book writers would admit.

This is not accidental. The Iliad invented so many of the storytelling techniques we now take for granted - the *in medias res* opening, the flashback, the extended simile, the divine machinery that comments on human action, the hero whose greatest battle is with himself. Every epic story you have ever read or watched, from *Star Wars* to *The Lord of the Rings* to *Game of Thrones*, carries Homer's DNA. You cannot escape him. You would not want to.

If this retelling has made you curious about the original, I am delighted. Reading Homer in translation is one of the great experiences available to any reader, and the good news is that you have excellent options.

Robert Fagles's translation, published in 1990, is vigorous, contemporary, and thrilling to read aloud. His Achilles sounds like a real person, not a marble statue, and his verse captures the speed and muscular energy of Homer's Greek better than almost any competitor.

Caroline Alexander's 2015 translation is the first by a woman to be published in English, and it brings a fresh perspective to the poem's emotional dynamics. Her rendering of the battle scenes is crisp and clear, and her treatment of the poem's women - Briseis, Andromache, Helen - feels particularly nuanced.

Robert Fitzgerald's 1974 translation remains a classic for good reason: its language is elevated without being stiff, musical without being ornate. If you want to feel like you are reading something timeless, Fitzgerald delivers.

Emily Wilson, whose translation of the *Odyssey* made history as the first English version by a woman, is currently working on an Iliad. When it appears, it will almost certainly become the standard against which all others are measured. Wilson has a gift for making ancient Greek feel urgently contemporary without sacrificing its strangeness.

If you want to explore Greek mythology more broadly, I recommend Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*, first published in 1942 and still the best introduction available. Her prose is clear, her enthusiasm infectious, and her knowledge encyclopedic. Stephen Fry's *Mythos and Heroes* retell the myths with wit and warmth, making them accessible without dumbing them down. Natalie Haynes, particularly in *A Thousand Ships* and *The Children of Jocasta*, offers brilliant feminist retellings that centre the women Homer pushes to the margins.

Writing this retelling has been one of the great joys of my life as a storyteller. I have lived with these characters for months - their quarrels and triumphs, their griefs and transformations - and I find I do not want to leave them. That is the effect Homer has. He makes you care about people

who lived and died in imagination three millennia ago as if they were your own friends and family.

I owe thanks to the long line of scholars, translators, and teachers who kept this poem alive across thirty centuries. Without them, there would be no text to retell. I owe thanks to the

archaeologists who excavated Troy and Mycenae and proved that these stories were grounded in real history - Heinrich Schliemann with all his flaws, and the generations of careful scientists who followed him. I owe thanks to every teacher who ever stood in front of a classroom of sceptical students and convinced them that a poem in ancient Greek about a long-forgotten war might actually have something to say to them.

Most of all, I owe thanks to you, the reader. You have come with me from the plague-arrows of Apollo to the weeping of two enemies over a shared meal. You watched Achilles transform from a proud young man into something harder and stranger and finally - at the last - into someone capable of mercy. You have seen Hector fall, and Troy mourn, and a body returned to its father because grief proved stronger than rage.

The Iliad will outlast us all. It will be read when every nation represented in this book has changed beyond recognition, when new wars have come and gone, when the concerns that preoccupy us now seem as distant as the Bronze Age seems to us. It will survive because it tells the truth about what it means to be human: our capacity for destruction, our need for connection, and our stubborn, inexhaustible ability to find moments of grace in the middle of catastrophe.

Go now and read the original. Or don't. Simply carry these stories with you. When you face a choice between hardness and compassion, remember Priam kneeling. When you lose someone you love, remember Achilles by the sea. When you watch the news and wonder what heroism looks like in a world without bronze armour and chariots, remember Hector removing his helmet so his son would not be afraid.

The war at Troy ended long ago. The story never does.

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