



ACHILLES AND PRIAM

GUIDE FOR READING

FOCUS As you read about the meeting of Achilles and Priam, pay attention to Achilles' reasons for taking pity on his enemy.

After Achilles kills Hector, the Greeks conduct funeral rites for Patroclus. In the following days, whenever Achilles is overcome by grief, he takes out his chariot and drags Hector's corpse around the grave of Patroclus. Apollo, still loyal to Hector, can do nothing to stop Achilles, but he does protect the corpse from all damage. Zeus, recognizing that Hector had always been faithful to the gods, sends a message to Achilles, telling him to give Hector's body to Priam in exchange for a ransom. Bowing to divine will, Achilles agrees. Zeus then sends a message to Priam, directing him to gather treasures and take them to Achilles. Aided by the god Hermes, Priam drives a wagonload of treasures to the enemy camp. Alone, he enters Achilles' hut to ask for the return of Hector's corpse.

- T**he majestic king of Troy slipped past the rest and kneeling down beside Achilles, clasped his knees and kissed his hands, those terrible, man-killing hands that had slaughtered Priam's many sons in battle.
- 5 Awesome—as when the grip of madness seizes one who murders a man in his own fatherland and flees abroad to foreign shores, to a wealthy, noble host, and a sense of marvel runs through all who see him—so Achilles marveled, beholding majestic Priam.
- 10 His men marveled too, trading startled glances. But Priam prayed his heart out to Achilles:
“Remember your own father, great godlike Achilles—
as old as *I* am, past the threshold of deadly old age!



HUMANITIES CONNECTION This detail from a Roman sarcophagus (stone coffin) sculpture shows the body of Hector tied to a chariot. Imagine how King Priam felt when he had to witness the dragging of his son's corpse.

No doubt the countrymen round about him plague him now,
15 with no one there to defend him, beat away disaster.
No one—but at least he hears you're still alive
and his old heart rejoices, hopes rising, day by day,
to see his beloved son come sailing home from Troy.
But I—dear god, my life so cursed by fate . . .
20 I fathered hero sons in the wide realm of Troy
and now not a single one is left, I tell you.
Fifty sons I had when the sons of Achaea came,
nineteen born to me from a single mother's womb
and the rest by other women in the palace. Many,
25 most of them violent Ares cut the knees from under.
But one, one was left me, to guard my walls, my people—
the one you killed the other day, defending his fatherland,
my Hector! It's all for him I've come to the ships now,
to win him back from you—I bring a priceless ransom.
30 Revere the gods, Achilles! Pity me in my own right,
remember your own father! I deserve more pity . . .

I have endured what no one on earth has ever done
before—
I put to my lips the hands of the man who killed my son.”

Those words stirred within Achilles a deep desire
35 to grieve for his own father. Taking the old man’s hand
he gently moved him back. And overpowered by memory
both men gave way to grief. Priam wept freely
for man-killing Hector, throbbing, crouching
before Achilles’ feet as Achilles wept himself,
40 now for his father, now for Patroclus once again,
and their sobbing rose and fell throughout the house.
Then, when brilliant Achilles had his fill of tears
and the longing for it had left his mind and body,
he rose from his seat, raised the old man by the hand
45 and filled with pity now for his gray head and gray beard,
he spoke out winging words, flying straight to the heart:
“Poor man, how much you’ve borne—pain to break the
spirit!
What daring brought you down to the ships, all alone,
to face the glance of the man who killed your sons,
50 so many fine brave boys? You have a heart of iron.
Come, please, sit down on this chair here . . .
Let us put our griefs to rest in our own hearts,
rake them up no more, raw as we are with mourning.
What good’s to be won from tears that chill the spirit?
55 So the immortals spun our lives that we, we wretched men
live on to bear such torments—the gods live free of sorrows.
There are two great jars that stand on the floor of Zeus’s
halls
and hold his gifts, our miseries one, the other blessings.
When Zeus who loves the lightning mixes gifts for a man,
60 now he meets with misfortune, now good times in turn.
When Zeus dispenses gifts from the jar of sorrows only,
he makes a man an outcast—brutal, ravenous hunger
drives him down the face of the shining earth,
stalking far and wide, cursed by gods and men.
65 So with my father, Peleus. What glittering gifts
the gods rained down from the day that he was born!
He excelled all men in wealth and pride of place,
he lorded the Myrmidons, and mortal that he was,
they gave the man an immortal goddess for a wife.
70 Yes, but even on him the Father piled hardships,

55 the immortals spun our lives:
the gods determined our fates.

62 ravenous (rāv’ə-nēs):
characterized by eager craving.

no powerful race of princes born in his royal halls,
only a single son he fathered, doomed at birth,
cut off in the spring of life—
and I, I give the man no care as he grows old
75 since here I sit in Troy, far from my fatherland,
a grief to you, a grief to all your children.
And you too, old man, we hear you prospered once:
as far as Lesbos, Macar's kingdom, bounds to seaward,
Phrygia east and upland, the Hellespont vast and north—
80 that entire realm, they say, you lorded over once,
you excelled all men, old king, in sons and wealth.
But then the gods of heaven brought this agony on you—
ceaseless battles round your walls, your armies slaughtered.
You must bear up now. Enough of endless tears,
85 the pain that breaks the spirit.
Grief for your son will do no good at all.
You will never bring him back to life—
sooner you must suffer something worse.”

But the old and noble Priam protested strongly:
90 “Don't make me sit on a chair, Achilles, Prince,
not while Hector lies uncared-for in your camp!
Give him back to me, now, no more delay—
I must see my son with my own eyes.
Accept the ransom I bring you, a king's ransom!
95 Enjoy it, all of it—return to your own native land,
safe and sound . . . since now you've spared my life.”

A dark glance—and the headstrong runner answered,
“No more, old man, don't tempt my wrath, not now!
My own mind's made up to give you back your son.
100 A messenger brought me word from Zeus—my mother,
Thetis who bore me, the Old Man of the Sea's daughter.
And what's more, I can see through you, Priam—
no hiding the fact from me: one of the gods
has led you down to Achaea's fast ships.
105 No man alive, not even a rugged young fighter,
would dare to venture into our camp. Never—
how could he slip past the sentries unchallenged?
Or shoot back the bolt of my gates with so much ease?

78 Lesbos (ləz'bȫs), **Macar's** (mäk'ärz') **kingdom**: an island off the coast of Asia Minor, south of Troy, whose first king was Macar.

79 Phrygia (frĭj'ē-ə): a region of northwestern Asia Minor;
Hellespont (həl'ĭ-spönt'): a strait just north of Troy.

101 Old Man of the Sea's **daughter**: daughter of the sea god Nereus.

So don't anger me now. Don't stir my raging heart still more.
110 Or under my own roof I may not spare your life, old man—
suppliant that you are—may break the laws of Zeus!”

PAUSE & REFLECT For what reasons does Achilles take pity on Priam?

111 suppliant: one who humbly begs.

FOCUS Though Achilles has agreed to release Hector's body, the Greek hero still struggles to control his anger. As you read, think about whether Achilles acts as a good host to his royal visitor.

The old man was terrified. He obeyed the order. But Achilles bounded out of doors like a lion— not alone but flanked by his two aides-in-arms,
115 veteran Automedon and Alcimus, steady comrades, Achilles' favorites next to the dead Patroclus. They loosed from harness the horses and the mules, they led the herald in, the old king's crier, and sat him down on a bench. From the polished wagon
120 they lifted the priceless ransom brought for Hector's corpse but they left behind two capes and a finely-woven shirt to shroud the body well when Priam bore him home. Then Achilles called the serving-women out:
“Bathe and anoint the body—
125 bear it aside first. Priam must not see his son.” He feared that, overwhelmed by the sight of Hector, wild with grief, Priam might let his anger flare and Achilles might fly into fresh rage himself, cut the old man down and break the laws of Zeus.
130 So when the maids had bathed and anointed the body sleek with olive oil and wrapped it round and round in a braided battle-shirt and handsome battle-cape, then Achilles lifted Hector up in his own arms and laid him down on a bier, and comrades helped him
135 raise the bier and body onto the sturdy wagon . . . Then with a groan he called his dear friend by name:
“Feel no anger at me, Patroclus, if you learn— even there in the House of Death—I let his father have Prince Hector back. He gave me worthy ransom
140 and you shall have your share from me, as always, your fitting, lordly share.”

114 flanked: accompanied on either side.

115 Automedon (ô-tôm'ê-dôn') . . . **Alcimus** (äl'sĭ-məs).

122 shroud: wrap.

134 bier (bēr): a platform for laying out a corpse.

So he vowed

and brilliant Achilles strode back to his shelter,
 sat down on the well-carved chair that he had left,
 at the far wall of the room, leaned toward Priam
 145 and firmly spoke the words the king had come to hear:
 “Your son is now set free, old man, as you requested.
 Hector lies in state. With the first light of day
 you will see for yourself as you convey him home.
 Now, at last, let us turn our thoughts to supper.
 150 Even Niobe with her lustrous hair remembered food,
 though she saw a dozen children killed in her own halls,
 six daughters and six sons in the pride and prime of youth.
 True, lord Apollo killed the sons with his silver bow
 and Artemis showering arrows killed the daughters.
 155 Both gods were enraged at Niobe. Time and again
 she placed herself on a par with their own mother,
 Leto in her immortal beauty—how she insulted Leto:
 ‘All you have borne is two, but I have borne so many!’
 So, two as they were, they slaughtered all her children.
 160 Nine days they lay in their blood, no one to bury them—
 Cronus’ son had turned the people into stone . . .
 then on the tenth the gods of heaven interred them.
 And Niobe, gaunt, worn to the bone with weeping,
 turned her thoughts to food. And now, somewhere,
 165 lost on the crags, on the lonely mountain slopes,
 on Sipylus where, they say, the nymphs who live forever,
 dancing along the Achelous River run to beds of rest—
 there, struck into stone, Niobe still broods
 on the spate of griefs the gods poured out to her.

150 Niobe (nī’ə-bē).

161 Cronus’ son: Zeus.

162 interred (ĭn-tŭrd’): buried.

166 Sipylus (sĭp’ə-ləs): a mountain in western Asia Minor.

167 Achelous (ăk’ə-lō’əs).

169 spate: flood.

170 So come—we too, old king, must think of food.
 Later you can mourn your beloved son once more,
 when you bear him home to Troy, and you’ll weep many
 tears.”

Never pausing, the swift runner sprang to his feet
 and slaughtered a white sheep as comrades moved in
 175 to skin the carcass quickly, dress the quarters well.
 Expertly they cut the meat in pieces, pierced them with spits,
 roasted them to a turn and pulled them off the fire.
 Automedon brought the bread, set it out on the board
 in ample wicker baskets. Achilles served the meat.

WORDS TO KNOW

gaunt (gônt) adj. thin and drawn



HUMANITIES CONNECTION

Here is another detail from a Roman sarcophagus sculpture, this one showing King Priam begging Achilles to return the body of his son, Hector.

- 180 They reached out for the good things that lay at hand
and when they had put aside desire for food and drink,
Priam the son of Dardanus gazed at Achilles, marveling
now at the man's beauty, his magnificent build—
face-to-face he seemed a deathless god . . .
- 185 and Achilles gazed and marveled at Dardan Priam,
beholding his noble looks, listening to his words.
But once they'd had their fill of gazing at each other,
the old majestic Priam broke the silence first:
“Put me to bed quickly, Achilles, Prince.
- 190 Time to rest, to enjoy the sweet relief of sleep.
Not once have my eyes closed shut beneath my lids
from the day my son went down beneath your hands . . .
day and night I groan, brooding over the countless griefs,
groveling in the dung that fills my walled-in court.
- 195 But now, at long last, I have tasted food again
and let some glistening wine go down my throat.
Before this hour I had tasted nothing.”
- He shook his head
- as Achilles briskly told his men and serving-women

to make beds in the porch's shelter, to lay down
200 some heavy purple throws for the beds themselves
and over them spread blankets and thick woolly robes,
a warm covering laid on top. Torches held in hand,
they went from the hall and fell to work at once
and in no time two good beds were spread and made.
205 Then Achilles nodded to Priam, leading the king on
with brusque advice: "Sleep outside, old friend,
in case some Achaean captain comes to visit.
They keep on coming now, huddling beside me,
making plans for battle—it's their duty.
210 But if one saw you here in the rushing dark night
he'd tell Agamemnon straightaway, our good commander.
Then you'd have real delay in ransoming the body.
One more point. Tell me, be precise about it—
how many days do you need to bury Prince Hector?
215 I will hold back myself
and keep the Argive armies back that long."

206 brusque: blunt; curt.

And the old and noble Priam answered slowly,
"If you truly want me to give Prince Hector burial,
full, royal honors, you'd show me a great kindness,
220 Achilles, if you would do exactly as I say.
You know how crammed we are inside our city,
how far it is to the hills to haul in timber,
and our Trojans are afraid to make the journey.
Well, nine days we should mourn him in our halls,
225 on the tenth we'd bury Hector, hold the public feast,
on the eleventh build the barrow high above his body—
on the twelfth we'd fight again . . . if fight we must."

226 barrow: a mound of stones or earth placed over a burial site.

The swift runner Achilles reassured him quickly:
"All will be done, old Priam, as you command.
230 I will hold our attack as long as you require."

With that he clasped the old king by the wrist,
by the right hand, to free his heart from fear.
Then Priam and herald, minds set on the journey home,
bedded down for the night within the porch's shelter.
235 And deep in his sturdy well-built lodge Achilles slept
with Briseis in all her beauty sleeping by his side.

232 by the right hand, to free his heart from fear: using his weapon hand, to show that he is not going to attack Priam.

233 herald: the aide who accompanied Priam to the Greek camp.

PAUSE & REFLECT Is Achilles a good host to Priam?
Give evidence from the text to support your evaluation.

FOCUS Read to find out what happens when Priam brings Hector's corpse to the gates of Troy.

Now the great array of gods and chariot-driving men
slept all night long, overcome by gentle sleep.
But sleep could never hold the running Escort—
240 Hermes kept on turning it over in his mind . . .
how could he convoy Priam clear of the ships,
unseen by devoted guards who held the gates?
Hovering at his head the Escort rose and spoke:
“Not a care in the world, old man? Look at you,
245 how you sleep in the midst of men who'd kill you—
and just because Achilles spared your life. Now, yes,
you've ransomed your dear son—for a king's ransom.
But wouldn't the sons you left behind be forced
to pay three times as much for *you* alive?
250 What if Atrides Agamemnon learns you're here—
what if the whole Achaean army learns you're here?”

The old king woke in terror, roused the herald.
Hermes harnessed the mules and team for both men,
drove them fast through the camp and no one saw them.

255 Once they reached the ford where the river runs clear,
the strong, whirling Xanthus sprung of immortal Zeus,
Hermes went his way to the steep heights of Olympus
as Dawn flung out her golden robe across the earth,
and the two men, weeping, groaning, drove the team
260 toward Troy and the mules brought on the body.
No one saw them at first, neither man nor woman,
none before Cassandra, golden as goddess Aphrodite.
She had climbed to Pergamus heights and from that point
she saw her beloved father swaying tall in the chariot,
265 flanked by the herald, whose cry could rouse the city.
And Cassandra saw *him* too . . .
drawn by the mules and stretched out on his bier.
She screamed and her scream rang out through all Troy:
“Come, look down, you men of Troy, you Trojan women!
270 Behold Hector now—if you ever once rejoiced
to see him striding home, home alive from battle!
He was the greatest joy of Troy and all our people!”

239 Escort: Hermes.

256 Xanthus (zăn'thəs): another name for the river Scamander.

262 Cassandra (kə-săn'drə): a daughter of Priam.

263 Pergamus (pŭr'gə-məs): the stronghold of Troy.

Her cries plunged Troy into uncontrollable grief
and not a man or woman was left inside the walls.
275 They streamed out at the gates to meet Priam
bringing in the body of the dead. Hector—
his loving wife and noble mother were first
to fling themselves on the wagon rolling on,
the first to tear their hair, embrace his head
280 and a wailing throng of people milled around them.
And now, all day long till the setting sun went down
they would have wept for Hector there before the gates
if the old man, steering the car, had not commanded,
“Let me through with the mules! Soon, in a moment,
285 you can have your fill of tears—once I’ve brought him home.”