

H O M E R

The
Iliad

TRANSLATED BY
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INTRODUCTION AND
NOTES BY
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The Embassy to Achilles

So the Trojans held their watch that night but not the Achaeans—
godsent Panic seized them, comrade of bloodcurdling Rout:
all their best were struck by grief too much to bear.
As crosswinds chop the sea where the fish swarm,
the North Wind and the West Wind blasting out of Thrace
in sudden, lightning attack, wave on blacker wave, cresting,
heaving a tangled mass of seaweed out along the surf—
so the Achaeans' hearts were torn inside their chests.

Distraught with the rising anguish, Atreus' son
went ranging back and forth, commanding heralds
to sound out loud and clear and call the men to muster,
each by name, but no loud outcry now. The king himself
pitched in with the lead heralds, summoning troops.
They grouped on the meeting grounds, morale broken.

10

Lord marshal Agamemnon rose up in their midst,
 streaming tears like a dark spring running down
 some desolate rock face, its shaded currents flowing.
 So, with a deep groan, the king addressed his armies:
 "Friends . . . lords of the Argives, all my captains!
 Cronus' son has entangled me in madness, blinding ruin— 20
 Zeus is a harsh, cruel god. He vowed to me long ago,
 he bowed his head that I should never embark for home
 till I had brought the walls of Ilium crashing down.
 But now, I see, he only plotted brutal treachery:
 now he commands me back to Argos in disgrace,
 whole regiments of my men destroyed in battle.
 So it must please his overweening heart, who knows?
 Father Zeus has lopped the crowns of a thousand cities,
 true, and Zeus will lop still more—his power is too great.
 So come, follow my orders. Obey me, all you Argives. 30
 Cut and run! Sail home to the fatherland we love!
 We'll never take the broad streets of Troy."

Silence held them all, struck dumb by his orders.
 A long while they said nothing, spirits dashed.
 Finally Diomedes lord of the war cry broke forth:
 "Atrides—I will be first to oppose you in your folly,
 here in assembly, King, where it's the custom.
 Spare me your anger. My courage—
 mine was the first you mocked among the Argives,
 branding me a coward, a poor soldier. Yes, well, 40
 they know all about that, the Argives young and old.
 But you—the son of Cronus with Cronus' twisting ways
 gave you gifts by halves: with that royal scepter
 the Father gave you honor beyond all other men alive
 but he never gave you courage, the greatest power of all.
 Desperate man! So certain, are you, the sons of Achaea
 are cowards, poor soldiers, just because you say so?
Desert—if your spirit drives you to sail home,
 then sail away, my King! The sea-lanes are clear,
 there are your ships of war, crowded down the surf, 50
 those that followed you from Mycenae, your own proud armada.

But the rest of the long-haired Achaeans will hold out,
 right here, until we've plundered Troy. And they,
 if they go running home to the land they love,
 then the two of us, I and Sthenelus here
 will fight our way to the fixed doom of Troy.
 Never forget—we all sailed here with god."

And all the Achaeans shouted their assent,
 stirred by the stallion-breaking Diomedes' challenge.

But Nestor the old driver rose and spoke at once:

60

"Few can match your power in battle, Diomedes,
 and in council you excel all men your age.

So no one could make light of your proposals,
 not the whole army—who could contradict you?

But you don't press on and reach a useful end.

How young you are . . . why, you could be my son,
 my youngest-born at that, though you urge our kings
 with cool clear sense: what you've said is right.

But it's my turn now, Diomedes.

I think I can claim to have some years on you.

70

So I *must* speak up and drive the matter home.

And no one will heap contempt on what I say,
 not even mighty Agamemnon. Lost to the clan,
 lost to the hearth, lost to the old ways, that one
 who lusts for all the horrors of war with his own people.

But now, I say, let us give way to the dark night,
 set out the evening meal. Sentries take up posts,
 squads fronting the trench we dug outside the rampart.

That's the command I give the younger fighters.

Then,

Atrides, lead the way—you are the greatest king—
 spread out a feast for all your senior chiefs.

80

That is your duty, a service that becomes you.

Your shelters overflow with the wine Achaean ships
 bring in from Thrace, daily, down the sea's broad back.

Grand hospitality is yours, you rule so many men.

Come, gather us all and we will heed that man
 who gives the best advice. That's what they need,

I tell you—all the Achaeans—good sound advice,
 now our enemies, camping hard against the ships,
 kindle their watchfires round us by the thousands. 90
 What soldier could warm to that? Tonight's the night
 that rips our ranks to shreds or pulls us through."

The troops hung on his words and took his orders.
 Out they rushed, the sentries in armor, forming
 under the son of Nestor, captain Thrasymedes,
 under Ascalaphus, Ialmenus, sons of Ares,
 under Meriones, Aphareus and Deipyrus,
 under the son of Creon, trusty Lycomedes.
 Seven chiefs of the guard, a hundred under each,
 fighters marching, grasping long spears in their hands, 100
 took up new positions between the trench and rampart.
 There they lit their fires, each man made his meal.

Meanwhile marshal Agamemnon led his commanders,
 a file of senior chiefs, toward his own lodge
 and set before them a feast to please their hearts.
 They reached out for the good things that lay at hand
 but when they had put aside desire for food and drink
 the old man began to weave his counsel among them:
 Nestor was first to speak—from the early days
 his plans and tactics always seemed the best. 110
 With good will to the chiefs he rose and spoke,
 "Great marshal Atrides, lord of men Agamemnon . . .
 with you I will end, my King, with you I will begin,
 since you hold sway over many warriors, vast armies,
 and Zeus has placed in your hands the royal scepter
 and time-honored laws, so you will advise them well.
 So you above all must speak your mind, and listen,
 and carry out the next man's counsel too,
 whenever his spirit leads him on to speak
 for the public good. Credit will go to you 120
 for whatever he proposes.
 Now I will tell you what seems best to me.
 No one will offer a better plan than this . . .

the plan I still retain, and I've been forming,
 well, for a good long while now, from the very day
 that you, my illustrious King, infuriated Achilles—
 you went and took from his tents the girl Briseis,
 and not with any applause from us, far from it:
 I for one, I urged you against it, strenuously.
 But you, you gave way to your overbearing anger,
 disgraced a great man the gods themselves esteem—
 you seized his gift of honor and keep her still.
 But even so, late as it is, let us contrive
 to set all this to rights, to bring him round
 with gifts of friendship and warm, winning words."

130

And Agamemnon the lord of men consented quickly:
 "That's no lie, old man—a full account you give
 of all my acts of madness. Mad, blind I was!
 Not even I would deny it.
 Why look, that man is worth an entire army,
 the fighter Zeus holds dear with all his heart—
 how he exalts him now and mauls Achaea's forces!
 But since I *was* blinded, lost in my own inhuman rage,
 now, at last, I am bent on setting things to rights:
 I'll give a priceless ransom paid for friendship.

140

Here,
 before you all, I'll name in full the splendid gifts I offer.
 Seven tripods never touched by fire, ten bars of gold,
 twenty burnished cauldrons, a dozen massive stallions,
 racers who earned me trophies with their speed.
 He is no poor man who owns what they have won,
 not strapped for goods with all that lovely gold—
 what trophies those high-strung horses carried off for me!
 Seven women I'll give him, flawless, skilled in crafts,
 women of Lesbos—the ones I chose, my privilege,
 that day he captured the Lesbos citadel himself:
 they outclassed the tribes of women in their beauty.
 These I will give, and along with them will go
 the one I took away at first, Briseus' daughter,
 and I will swear a solemn, binding oath in the bargain:

150

I never mounted her bed, never once made love with her— 160
the natural thing for mankind, men and women joined.

Now all these gifts will be handed him at once.

But if, later, the gods allow us to plunder
the great city of Priam, let him enter in
when we share the spoils, load the holds of his ship
with gold and bronze—as much as his heart desires—
and choose for his pleasure twenty Trojan women
second only to Argive Helen in their glory.

And then, if we can journey home to Achaean Argos,
pride of the breasting earth, he'll be my son-by-marriage! 170

I will even honor him on a par with my Orestes,
full-grown by now, reared in the lap of luxury.

Three daughters are mine in my well-built halls—

Chrysothemis and Laodice and Iphianassa—
and he may lead away whichever one he likes,
with no bride-price asked, home to Peleus' house.

And I will add a dowry, yes, a magnificent treasure
the likes of which no man has ever offered with his daughter!

Seven citadels I will give him, filled with people,
Cardamyle, Enope, and the grassy slopes of Hire, 180
Pherae the sacrosanct, Anthea deep in meadows,
rolling Aepea and Pedasus green with vineyards.

All face the sea at the far edge of sandy Pylos
and the men who live within them, rich in sheep-flocks,
rich in shambling cattle, will honor him like a god
with hoards of gifts and beneath his scepter's sway
live out his laws in sleek and shining peace.

All this—

I would extend to him if he will end his anger.

Let him submit to me! Only the god of death
is so relentless, Death submits to no one— 190
so mortals hate him most of all the gods.

Let him bow down to me! I am the greater king,
I am the elder-born, I claim—the greater man."

Nestor the noble charioteer embraced his offer:
"Generous marshal Atrides, lord of men Agamemnon!

No one could underrate these gifts of yours, not now,
 the treasure trove you offer Prince Achilles.
 Come—we'll send a detail of picked men.
 They'll go to Achilles' tent with all good speed.
 Quick, whomever my eye will light on in review,
 the mission's theirs. And old Phoenix first—
 Zeus loves the man, so let him lead the way.
 Then giant Ajax and tactful royal Odysseus.
 Heralds? Odius and Eurybates, you escort them.
 Water for their hands! A reverent silence now . . .
 a prayer to Zeus. Perhaps he'll show us mercy."

200

The brisk commands he issued pleased them all.
 Heralds brought the water at once and rinsed their hands,
 and the young men brimmed the mixing bowls with wine
 and tipping first drops for the god in every cup
 they poured full rounds for all. Libations finished,
 each envoy having drunk to his heart's content,
 the party moved out from Atrides' shelters.
 Nestor the old driver gave them marching orders—
 a sharp glance at each, Odysseus most of all:
 "Try hard now, bring him round—invincible Achilles!"

210

So Ajax and Odysseus made their way at once
 where the battle lines of breakers crash and drag,
 praying hard to the god who moves and shakes the earth
 that they might bring the proud heart of Achilles
 round with speed and ease.

220

Reaching the Myrmidon shelters and their ships,
 they found him there, delighting his heart now,
 plucking strong and clear on the fine lyre—
 beautifully carved, its silver bridge set firm—
 he won from the spoils when he razed Eetion's city.
 Achilles was lifting his spirits with it now,
 singing the famous deeds of fighting heroes . . .
 Across from him Patroclus sat alone, in silence,
 waiting for Aeacus' son to finish with his song.
 And on they came, with good Odysseus in the lead,

230

and the envoys stood before him. Achilles, startled,
 sprang to his feet, the lyre still in his hands,
 leaving the seat where he had sat in peace.
 And seeing the men, Patroclus rose up too
 as the famous runner called and waved them on:
 "Welcome! Look, dear friends have come our way—
 I must be sorely needed now—my dearest friends
 in all the Achaean armies, even in my anger."

So Prince Achilles hailed and led them in, 240
 sat them down on settles with purple carpets
 and quickly told Patroclus standing by, "Come,
 a bigger winebowl, son of Menoetius, set it here.
 Mix stronger wine. A cup for the hands of each guest—
 here beneath my roof are the men I love the most."

He paused. Patroclus obeyed his great friend,
 who put down a heavy chopping block in the firelight
 and across it laid a sheep's chine, a fat goat's
 and the long back cut of a full-grown pig,
 marbled with lard. Automedon held the meats 250
 while lordly Achilles carved them into quarters,
 cut them well into pieces, pierced them with spits
 and Patroclus raked the hearth, a man like a god
 making the fire blaze. Once it had burned down
 and the flames died away, he scattered the coals
 and stretching the spitted meats across the embers,
 raised them onto supports and sprinkled clean pure salt.
 As soon as the roasts were done and spread on platters,
 Patroclus brought the bread, set it out on the board
 in ample wicker baskets. Achilles served the meat. 260
 Then face-to-face with his noble guest Odysseus
 he took his seat along the farther wall,
 he told his friend to sacrifice to the gods
 and Patroclus threw the first cuts in the fire.
 They reached out for the good things that lay at hand
 and when they had put aside desire for food and drink,
 Ajax nodded to Phoenix. Odysseus caught the signal,

filled his cup and lifted it toward Achilles,
 opening with this toast: “Your health, Achilles!
 We have no lack of a handsome feast, I see that,
 either in Agamemnon’s tents, the son of Atreus,
 or here and now, in yours. We can all banquet here
 to our heart’s content.

270

But it’s not the flowing feast
 that is on our minds now—no, a stark disaster,
 too much to bear, Achilles bred by the gods,
 that is what we are staring in the face
 and we are afraid. All hangs in the balance now:
 whether we save our benched ships or they’re destroyed,
 unless, of course, you put your fighting power in harness.
 They have pitched camp right at our ships and rampart,
 those brazen Trojans, they and their far-famed allies,
 thousands of fires blaze throughout their armies . . .
 Nothing can stop them now—that’s their boast—
 they’ll hurl themselves against our blackened hulls.
 And the son of Cronus sends them signs on the right,
 Zeus’s firebolts flashing. And headlong Hector,
 delirious with his strength, rages uncontrollably,
 trusting to Zeus—no fear of man or god, nothing—
 a powerful rabid frenzy has him in its grip!
 Hector prays for the sacred Dawn to break at once,
 he threatens to lop the high horns of our sterns
 and gut our ships with fire, and all our comrades
 pinned against the hulls, panicked by thick smoke,
 he’ll rout and kill in blood!
 A nightmare—I fear it, with all my heart—
 I fear the gods will carry out his threats
 and then it will be our fate to die in Troy,
 far from the stallion-land of Argos . . .

280

290

Up with you—
 now, late as it is, if you *want* to pull our Argives,
 our hard-hit armies, clear of the Trojan onslaught.
 Fail us now? What a grief it will be to you
 through all the years to come. No remedy,
 no way to cure the damage once it’s done.

300

Come, while there's still time, think hard:
 how can you fight off the Argives' fatal day?
 Oh old friend, surely your father Peleus urged you,
 that day he sent you out of Phthia to Agamemnon,
 'My son, victory is what Athena and Hera will give,
 if they so choose. But you, you hold in check
 that proud, fiery spirit of yours inside your chest! 310
 Friendship is much better. Vicious quarrels are deadly—
 put an end to them, at once. Your Achaean comrades,
 young and old, will exalt you all the more.'
 That was your aged father's parting advice.
 It must have slipped your mind.

But now at last,
 stop, Achilles—let your heart-devouring anger go!
 The king will hand you gifts to match his insults
 if only you'll relent and end your anger . . .
 So come then, listen, as I count out the gifts,
 the troves in his tents that Agamemnon vows to give you. 320
 Seven tripods never touched by fire, ten bars of gold,
 twenty burnished cauldrons, a dozen massive stallions,
 racers who earned him trophies with their speed.
 He is no poor man who owns what they have won,
 not strapped for goods with all that lovely gold—
 what trophies those high-strung horses carried off for him!
 Seven women he'll give you, flawless, skilled in crafts,
 women of Lesbos—the ones he chose, his privilege,
 that day you captured the Lesbos citadel yourself:
 they outclassed the tribes of women in their beauty. 330
 These he will give, and along with them will go
 the one he took away at first, Briseus' daughter,
 and he will swear a solemn, binding oath in the bargain:
 he never mounted her bed, never once made love with her . . .
 the natural thing, my lord, men and women joined.
 Now all these gifts will be handed you at once.
 But if, later, the gods allow us to plunder
 the great city of Priam, you shall enter in
 when we share the spoils, load the holds of your ship
 with gold and bronze—as much as your heart desires— 340

and choose for your pleasure twenty Trojan women
second only to Argive Helen in their glory.

And then, if we can journey home to Achaean Argos,
pride of the breasting earth, you'll be his son-by-marriage . . .

He will even honor you on a par with his Orestes,
full-grown by now, reared in the lap of luxury.

Three daughters are his in his well-built halls,
Chrysothemis and Laodice and Iphianassa—

and you may lead away whichever one you like,
with no bride-price asked, home to Peleus' house. 350

And he will add a dowry, yes, a magnificent treasure
the likes of which no man has ever offered with his daughter . . .

Seven citadels he will give you, filled with people,
Cardamyle, Enope, and the grassy slopes of Hire,
Pherae the sacrosanct, Anthea deep in meadows,
rolling Aepea and Pegasus green with vineyards.

All face the sea at the far edge of sandy Pylos
and the men who live within them, rich in sheep-flocks,
rich in shambling cattle, will honor you like a god
with hoards of gifts and beneath your scepter's sway 360
live out your laws in sleek and shining peace.

All this . . .

he would extend to you if you will end your anger.

But if you hate the son of Atreus all the more,
him and his troves of gifts, at least take pity
on all our united forces mauled in battle here—
they will honor you, honor you like a god.

Think of the glory you will gather in their eyes!
Now you can kill Hector—seized with murderous frenzy,
certain there's not a single fighter his equal,
no Achaean brought to Troy in the ships— 370
now, for once, you can meet the man head-on!"

The famous runner Achilles rose to his challenge:
"Royal son of Laertes, Odysseus, great tactician . . .
I must say what I have to say straight out,
must tell you how I feel and how all this will end—
so you won't crowd around me, one after another,

coaxing like a murmuring clutch of doves.
 I hate that man like the very Gates of Death
 who says one thing but hides another in his heart.
 I will say it outright. That seems best to me. 380
 Will Agamemnon win me over? Not for all the world,
 nor will all the rest of Achaea's armies.
 No, what lasting thanks in the long run
 for warring with our enemies, on and on, no end?
 One and the same lot for the man who hangs back
 and the man who battles hard. The same honor waits
 for the coward and the brave. They both go down to Death,
 the fighter who shirks, the one who works to exhaustion.
 And what's laid up for me, what pittance? Nothing—
 and after suffering hardships, year in, year out, 390
 staking my life on the mortal risks of war.

Like a mother bird hurrying morsels back
 to her unfledged young—whatever she can catch—
 but it's all starvation wages for herself.

So for me.

Many a sleepless night I've bivouacked in harness,
 day after bloody day I've hacked my passage through,
 fighting other soldiers to win their wives as prizes.
 Twelve cities of men I've stormed and sacked from shipboard,
 eleven I claim by land, on the fertile earth of Troy.
 And from all I dragged off piles of splendid plunder, 400
 hauled it away and always gave the lot to Agamemnon,
 that son of Atreus—always skulking behind the lines,
 safe in his fast ships—and he would take it all,
 he'd parcel out some scraps but keep the lion's share.
 Some he'd hand to the lords and kings—prizes of honor—
 and they, they hold them still. From me alone, Achilles
 of all Achaeans, he seizes, he keeps the bride I love . . .
 Well *let* him bed her now—
 enjoy her to the hilt!

Why must we battle Trojans,
 men of Argos? Why did he muster an army, lead us here, 410
 that son of Atreus? Why, why in the world if not

for Helen with her loose and lustrous hair?
 Are *they* the only men alive who love their wives,
 those sons of Atreus? Never! Any decent man,
 a man with sense, loves his own, cares for his own
 as deeply as I, I loved that woman with all my heart,
 though I won her like a trophy with my spear . . .
 But now that he's torn my honor from my hands,
 robbed me, lied to me—don't let him try me now.
 I know *him* too well—he'll never win me over!

No, Odysseus, 420

let him rack his brains with you and the other captains
 how to fight the raging fire off the ships. Look—
 what a mighty piece of work he's done without *me*!
 Why, he's erected a rampart, driven a trench around it,
 broad, enormous, and planted stakes to guard it. No use!
 He still can't block the power of man-killing Hector!
 No, though as long as *I* fought on Achaea's lines
 Hector had little lust to charge beyond his walls,
 never ventured beyond the Scaean Gates and oak tree.
 There he stood up to me alone one day—
 and barely escaped my onslaught.

430

Ah but now,
 since I have no desire to battle glorious Hector,
 tomorrow at daybreak, once I have sacrificed
 to Zeus and all the gods and loaded up my holds
 and launched out on the breakers—watch, my friend,
 if you'll take the time and care to see me off,
 and you will see my squadrons sail at dawn,
 fanning out on the Hellespont that swarms with fish,
 my crews manning the oarlocks, rowing out with a will,
 and if the famed god of the earthquake grants us safe passage,
 the third day out we raise the dark rich soil of Phthia.
 There lies my wealth, hoards of it, all I left behind
 when I sailed to Troy on this, this insane voyage—
 and still more hoards from here: gold, ruddy bronze,
 women sashed and lovely, and gleaming gray iron,
 and I will haul it home, all I won as plunder.
 All but my prize of honor . . .

440

he who gave that prize has snatched it back again—
 what outrage! That high and mighty King Agamemnon,
 that son of Atreus!

Go back and tell him all, 450

all I say—out in the open too—so other Achaeans
 can wheel on him in anger if he still hopes—
 who knows?—to deceive some other comrade.

Shameless,

inveterate—armored in shamelessness! Dog that he is,
 he'd never dare to look me straight in the eyes again.
 No, I'll never set heads together with that man—
 no planning in common, no taking common action.
 He cheated me, did me damage, wrong! But never again,
 he'll never rob me blind with his twisting words again!
 Once is enough for him. Die and be damned for all I care! 460
 Zeus who rules the world has ripped his wits away.

His gifts, I loathe his gifts . . .
 I wouldn't give you a splinter for that man!
 Not if he gave me ten times as much, twenty times over, all
 he possesses now, and all that could pour in from the world's end—
 not all the wealth that's freighted into Orchomenos, even into Thebes,
 Egyptian Thebes where the houses overflow with the greatest troves
 of treasure,
 Thebes with the hundred gates and through each gate battalions,
 two hundred fighters surge to war with teams and chariots—
 no, not if his gifts outnumbered all the grains of sand 470
 and dust in the earth—no, not even then could Agamemnon
 bring my fighting spirit round until he pays me back,
 pays full measure for all his heartbreaking outrage!

His daughter . . . I will marry no daughter of Agamemnon.
 Not if she rivaled Aphrodite in all her golden glory,
 not if she matched the crafts of clear-eyed Athena,
 not even then would I make *her* my wife! No,
 let her father pitch on some other Argive—
 one who can please *him*, a greater king than I.
 If the gods pull me through and I reach home alive, 480
 Peleus needs no help to fetch a bride for me himself.

Plenty of Argive women wait in Hellas and in Phthia,
 daughters of lords who rule their citadels in power.
 Whomever I want I'll make my cherished wife—at home.
 Time and again my fiery spirit drove me to win a wife,
 a fine partner to please my heart, to enjoy with her
 the treasures my old father Peleus piled high.
 I say no wealth is worth my life! Not all they claim
 was stored in the depths of Troy, that city built on riches,
 in the old days of peace before the sons of Achaea came—
 not all the gold held fast in the Archer's rocky vaults,
 in Phoebus Apollo's house on Pytho's sheer cliffs!
 Cattle and fat sheep can all be had for the raiding,
 tripods all for the trading, and tawny-headed stallions.
 But a man's life breath cannot come back again—
 no raiders in force, no trading brings it back,
 once it slips through a man's clenched teeth.

490

Mother tells me,

the immortal goddess Thetis with her glistening feet,
 that two fates bear me on to the day of death.
 If I hold out here and I lay siege to Troy,
 my journey home is gone, but my glory never dies.
 If I voyage back to the fatherland I love,
 my pride, my glory dies . . .
 true, but the life that's left me will be long,
 the stroke of death will not come on me quickly.

500

One thing more. To the rest I'd pass on this advice:
 sail home now! You will never set your eyes
 on the day of doom that topples looming Troy.
 Thundering Zeus has spread his hands above her—
 her armies have taken heart!

So you go back

510

to the great men of Achaea. You report my message—
 since this is the privilege of senior chiefs—
 let *them* work out a better plan of action,
 use their imaginations now to save the ships
 and Achaea's armies pressed to their hollow hulls.
 This maneuver will never work for them, this scheme

they hatched for the moment as I raged on and on.
 But Phoenix can stay and rest the night with us,
 so he can voyage home, home in the ships with me
 to the fatherland we love. Tomorrow at dawn. 520
 But only if Phoenix wishes.
 I will never force the man to go."

He stopped.

A stunned silence seized them all, struck dumb—
 Achilles' ringing denials overwhelmed them so.
 At last Phoenix the old charioteer spoke out,
 he burst into tears, terrified for Achaea's fleet:
 "Sail home? *Is that* what you're turning over in your mind,
 my glorious one, Achilles? Have you no heart at all
 to fight the gutting fire from the fast trim ships?
 The spirit inside you overpowered by anger! 530
 How could I be severed from you, dear boy,
 left behind on the beachhead here—alone?
 The old horseman Peleus had me escort you,
 that day he sent you out of Phthia to Agamemnon,
 a youngster still untrained for the great leveler, war,
 still green at debate where men can make their mark.
 So he dispatched me, to teach you all these things,
 to make you a man of words and a man of action too.
 Cut off from you with a charge like that, dear boy?
 I have no heart to be left behind, not even 540
 if Zeus himself would swear to scrape away
 the scurf of age and make me young again . . .
 As fresh as I was that time I first set out
 from Hellas where the women are a wonder,
 fleeing a blood feud with my father, Amyntor,
 Ormenus' son. How furious father was with me,
 over his mistress with her dark, glistening hair.
 How he would dote on *her* and spurn his wedded wife,
 my own mother! And time and again she begged me,
 hugging my knees, to bed my father's mistress down 550
 and kill the young girl's taste for an old man.
 Mother—I did your bidding, did my work . . .
 But father, suspecting at once, cursed me roundly,

he screamed out to the cruel Furies—'Never,
 never let me bounce on my knees a son of his,
 sprung of his loins!'—and the gods drove home that curse,
 mighty Zeus of the Underworld and grim Persephone.
 So I, I took it into my head to lay him low
 with sharp bronze! But a god checked my anger,
 he warned me of what the whole realm would say, 560
 the loose talk of the people, rough slurs of men—
 they must not call me a father-killer, our Achaeans!
 Then nothing could keep me there, my blood so fired up.
 No more strolling about the halls with father raging.
 But there was a crowd of kin and cousins round me,
 holding me in the house, begging me to stay . . .
 they butchered plenty of fat sheep, banquet fare,
 and shambling crook-horned cattle, droves of pigs,
 succulent, rich with fat—they singed the bristles,
 splaying the porkers out across Hephaestus' fire, 570
 then wine from the old man's jars, all we could drink.
 Nine nights they passed the hours, hovering over me,
 keeping the watch by rounds. The fires never died,
 one ablaze in the colonnade of the walled court,
 one in the porch outside my bedroom doors.

But then,

when the tenth night came on me, black as pitch,
 I burst the doors of the chamber bolted tight
 and out I rushed, I leapt the walls at a bound,
 giving the slip to guards and women servants.
 And away I fled through the whole expanse of Hellas 580
 and gaining the good dark soil of Phthia, mother of flocks,
 I reached the king, and Peleus gave me a royal welcome.
 Peleus loved me as a father loves a son, I tell you,
 his only child, the heir to his boundless wealth,
 he made me a rich man, he gave me throngs of subjects,
 I ruled the Dolopes, settling down on Phthia's west frontier.
 And I made you what you are—strong as the gods, Achilles—
 I loved you from the heart. You'd never go with another
 to banquet on the town or feast in your own halls.
 Never, until I'd sat you down on my knees 590

and cut you the first bits of meat, remember?
 You'd eat your fill, I'd hold the cup to your lips
 and all too often you soaked the shirt on my chest,
 spitting up some wine, a baby's way . . . a misery.
 Oh I had my share of troubles for you, Achilles,
 did my share of labor. Brooding, never forgetting
 the gods would bring no son of mine to birth,
 not from my own loins.

So you, Achilles—

great godlike Achilles—I made you my son, I tried,
 so someday *you* might fight disaster off my back. 600
 But now, Achilles, beat down your mounting fury!
 It's wrong to have such an iron, ruthless heart.
 Even the gods themselves can bend and change,
 and theirs is the greater power, honor, strength.
 Even the gods, I say, with incense, soothing vows,
 with full cups poured and the deep smoky savor
 men can bring them round, begging for pardon
 when one oversteps the mark, does something wrong.
 We do have Prayers, you know, Prayers for forgiveness,
 daughters of mighty Zeus . . . and they limp and halt, 610
 they're all wrinkled, drawn, they squint to the side,
 can't look you in the eyes, and always bent on duty,
 trudging after Ruin, maddening, blinding Ruin.
 But Ruin is strong and swift—
 She outstrips them all by far, stealing a march,
 leaping over the whole wide earth to bring mankind to grief.
 And the Prayers trail after, trying to heal the wounds.
 And then, if a man reveres these daughters of Zeus
 as they draw near him, they will help him greatly
 and listen to his appeals. But if one denies them, 620
 turns them away, stiff-necked and harsh—off they go
 to the son of Cronus, Zeus, and pray that Ruin
 will strike the man down, crazed and blinded
 until he's paid the price.

Relent, Achilles—you too!
 See that honor attend these good daughters of Zeus,
 honor that sways the minds of others, even heroes.

If Agamemnon were not holding out such gifts,
with talk of more to come, that son of Atreus,
if the warlord kept on blustering in his anger, why,
I'd be the last to tell you, 'Cast your rage to the winds!
630 Defend your friends!'—despite their desperate straits.
But now, look, he gives you a trove of treasures
right away, and vows there are more to follow.
He sends the bravest captains to implore you,
leaders picked from the whole Achaean army,
comrades-in-arms that you love most yourself.
Don't dismiss their appeal, their expedition here—
though no one could blame your anger, not before.
So it was in the old days too. So we've heard
640 in the famous deeds of fighting men, of heroes,
when seething anger would overcome the great ones.
Still you could bring them round with gifts and winning words.
There's an old tale I remember, an ancient exploit,
nothing recent, but this is how it went . . .
We are all friends here—let me tell it now.

The Curetes were fighting the combat-hard Aetolians,
armies ringing Calydon, slaughtering each other,
Aetolians defending their city's handsome walls
and Curetes primed to lay them waste in battle.
It all began when Artemis throned in gold
650 loosed a disaster on them, incensed that Oeneus
offered her no first fruits, his orchard's crowning glory.
The rest of the gods had feasted full on oxen, true,
but the Huntress alone, almighty Zeus's daughter—
Oeneus gave her nothing. It slipped his mind
or he failed to care, but what a fatal error!
How she fumed, Zeus's child who showers arrows,
she loosed a bristling wild boar, his tusks gleaming,
crashing his savage, monstrous way through Oeneus' orchard,
660 ripping up whole trunks from the earth to pitch them headlong,
rows of them, roots and all, appleblossoms and all!
But the son of Oeneus, Meleager, cut him down—
mustered hunters out of a dozen cities,

packs of hounds as well. No slim band of men
 could ever finish him off, that rippling killer,
 he stacked so many men atop the tear-soaked pyre.
 But over his body the goddess raised a terrific din,
 a war for the prize, the huge beast's head and shaggy hide—
 Curetes locked to the death with brave Aetolians.

Now,

so long as the battle-hungry Meleager fought, 670
 it was deadly going for the Curetes. No hope
 of holding their ground outside their *own* city walls,
 despite superior numbers. But then, when the wrath
 came sweeping over the man, the same anger that swells
 the chests of others, for all their care and self-control—
 then, heart enraged at his own dear mother Althaea,
 Meleager kept to his bed beside his wedded wife,
 Cleopatra . . . that great beauty. Remember her?
 The daughter of trim-heeled Marpessa, Euenus' child,
 and her husband Idas, strongest man of the men 680
 who once walked the earth—he even braved Apollo,
 he drew his bow at the Archer, all for Marpessa
 the girl with lovely ankles. There in the halls
 her father and mother always called Cleopatra Halcyon,
 after the seabird's name . . . grieving once for her own fate
 her mother had raised the halcyon's thin, painful cry,
 wailing that lord Apollo the distant deadly Archer
 had whisked her far from Idas.

Meleager's Cleopatra—

she was the one he lay beside those days,
 brooding over his heartbreaking anger. 690
 He was enraged by the curses of his mother,
 volleys of curses she called down from the gods.
 So racked with grief for her brother he had killed
 she kept pounding fists on the earth that feeds us all,
 kept crying out to the god of death and grim Persephone,
 flung herself on the ground, tears streaking her robes
 and she screamed out, 'Kill Meleager, kill my son!'
 And out of the world of darkness a Fury heard her cries,

stalking the night with a Fury's brutal heart, and suddenly—
thunder breaking around the gates, the roar of enemies, 700
towers battered under assault. And Aetolia's elders
begged Meleager, sent high priests of the gods,
pleading, 'Come out now! defend your people now!'—
and they vowed a princely gift.

Wherever the richest land of green Calydon lay,
there they urged him to choose a grand estate,
full fifty acres, half of it turned to vineyards,
half to open plowland, and carve it from the plain.
And over and over the old horseman Oeneus begged him,
he took a stand at the vaulted chamber's threshold, 710
shaking the bolted doors, begging his own son!

Over and over his brothers and noble mother
implored him—he refused them all the more—
and troops of comrades, devoted, dearest friends.
Not even they could bring his fighting spirit round
until, at last, rocks were raining down on the chamber,
Curetes about to mount the towers and torch the great city!
And then, finally, Meleager's bride, beautiful Cleopatra
begged him, streaming tears, recounting all the griefs 720
that fall to people whose city's seized and plundered—
the men slaughtered, citadel burned to rubble, enemies
dragging the children, raping the sashed and lovely women.
How his spirit leapt when he heard those horrors—
and buckling his gleaming armor round his body,
out he rushed to war. And so he saved them all
from the fatal day, he gave way to his own feelings,
but too late. No longer would they make good the gifts,
those troves of gifts to warm his heart, and even so
he beat off that disaster . . . empty-handed.

But you, you wipe such thoughts from your mind. 730
Don't let your spirit turn you down that path, dear boy.
Harder to save the warships once they're up in flames.
Now—while the gifts still wait—go out and fight!
Go—the Achaeans all will honor you like a god!

But enter this man-killing war without the gifts—
your fame will flag, no longer the same honor,
even though you hurl the Trojans home!”

But the swift runner Achilles answered firmly,
“Phoenix, old father, bred and loyed by the gods,
what do I need with honor such as that? 740
I say my honor lies in the great decree of Zeus.
That gift will hold me here by the beaked ships
as long as the life breath remains inside my chest
and my springing knees will lift me. Another thing—
take it to heart, I urge you. Stop confusing
my fixed resolve with this, this weeping and wailing
just to serve his pleasure, Atreus’ mighty son.
It degrades you to curry favor with that man,
and I will hate you for it, I who love you.
It does you proud to stand by me, my friend, 750
to attack the man who attacks me—
be king on a par with me, take half my honors!
These men will carry their message back, but you,
you stay here and spend the night in a soft bed.
Then, tomorrow at first light, we will decide
whether we sail home or hold out here.”

With that,

he gave Patroclus a sharp glance, a quiet nod
to pile the bedding deep for Phoenix now,
a sign to the rest to think of leaving quickly.
Giant Ajax rose to his feet, the son of Telamon, 760
tall as a god, turned and broke his silence:
“Ready, Odysseus? Royal son of Laertes,
great tactician—come, home we go now.
There’s no achieving our mission here, I see,
not with this approach. Best to return at once,
give the Achaeans a full report, defeating as it is.
They must be sitting there, waiting for us now.

Achilles—

he’s made his own proud spirit so wild in his chest,
so savage, not a thought for his comrades’ love—

we honored him past all others by the ships. 770
 Hard, ruthless man . . .

Why, any man will accept the blood-price paid
 for a brother murdered, a child done to death.
 And the murderer lives on in his own country—
 the man has paid enough, and the injured kinsman
 curbs his pride, his smoldering, vengeful spirit,
 once he takes the price.

You—the gods have planted
 a cruel, relentless fury in your chest! All for a girl,
 just one, and here we offer you seven—outstanding beauties—
 that, and a treasure trove besides. Achilles, 780
 put some human kindness in your heart.
 Show respect for your own house. Here we are,
 under your roof, sent from the whole Achaean force!
 Past all other men, all other Achaean comrades,
 we long to be your closest, dearest friends.”

And the swift runner Achilles answered warmly,
 “Ajax, royal son of Telamon, captain of armies,
 all well said, after my own heart, or mostly so.
 But my heart still heaves with rage
 whenever I call to mind that arrogance of his— 790
 how he mortified me, right in front of the Argives—
 that son of Atreus treating me like some vagabond,
 like some outcast stripped of all my rights!
 You go back to him and declare my message:
 I will not think of arming for bloody war again,
 not till the son of wise King Priam, dazzling Hector
 batters all the way to the Myrmidon ships and shelters,
 slaughtering Argives, gutting the hulls with fire.
 But round my own black ship and camp this Hector
 blazing for battle will be stopped, I trust— 800
 stopped dead in his tracks!”

So he finished.
 Then each man, lifting his own two-handed cup,
 poured it out to the gods, and back they went
 along the ships, Odysseus in the lead.

Patroclus told his friends and serving-women
 to pile a deep warm bed for Phoenix, quickly.
 They obeyed and spread the bed as he ordered,
 with fleeces, woolen throws and soft linen sheets.
 There the old man lay, awaiting shining Dawn.
 And deep in his well-built lodge Achilles slept 810
 with the woman he brought from Lesbos, Phorbas' daughter,
 Diomedes in all her beauty sleeping by his side.
 And over across from him Patroclus slept
 with the sashed and lovely Iphis by his side,
 whom Prince Achilles gave him the day he took
 the heights of Scyros, Enyeus' rocky stronghold.

But once the envoys reached Atrides' shelters,
 comrades leapt to their feet, welcomed them back
 and clustering round them, lifted golden cups.
 One after another pressed them with questions, 820
 King Agamemnon most urgent of all: "Come—
 tell me, famous Odysseus, Achaea's pride and glory—
 will he fight the fire off the ships? Or does he refuse,
 does rage still grip his proud, mighty spirit?"

And the steady, long-enduring Odysseus replied,
 "Great marshal Atrides, lord of men Agamemnon,
 that man has no intention of quenching his rage.
 He's still bursting with anger, more than ever—
 he spurns you, spurns all your gifts. Work out
 your own defense, he says, you and your captains 830
 save the Argive armies and the ships. Himself?
 Achilles threatens, tomorrow at first light,
 to haul his well-benched warships out to sea.
 And what's more, he advises all the rest,
 'Sail home now. You will never set your eyes
 on the day of doom that topples looming Troy.
 Thundering Zeus has spread his hands above her . . .
 her armies have taken heart.'

That's his answer.

And here are men to confirm it, fellow envoys.

Ajax and two heralds, both clear-headed men.
 But old Phoenix passes the night in camp
 as Achilles bids him, so he can voyage home,
 home in the ships with him to the fatherland they love.
 Tomorrow at dawn. But only if Phoenix wishes.
 He will never force the man to go."

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So he reported.

Silence held them all, struck dumb by his story,
 Odysseus' words still ringing in their ears.
 A long while they said nothing, spirits dashed.
 Finally Diomedes lord of the war cry broke forth:
 "Great marshal Atrides, lord of men Agamemnon—
 if only you'd never begged the dauntless son of Peleus,
 holding out to Achilles trove on trove of gifts!
 He's a proud man at the best of times, and now
 you've only plunged him deeper in his pride.
 I say have done with the man—
 whether he sails for home or stays on here.
 He'll fight again—in his own good time—whenever
 the courage in him flares and a god fires his blood.
 So come, follow my orders. And all of us unite.
 Go to sleep now, full to your heart's content
 with food and wine, a soldier's strength and nerve.
 Then when the Dawn's red fingers shine in all their glory,
 quickly deploy your chariots and battalions, Agamemnon,
 out in front of the ships—you spur them on
 and you yourself, you fight in the front ranks!"

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And Achaea's kings all shouted their assent,
 stirred by the stallion-breaking Diomedes' challenge.
 Pouring cups to the gods, each warlord sought his shelter.
 There they spent the night and took the gift of sleep.