



TIKVAH
ONLINE
ACADEMY

The Tragic Heroism of Hector the Trojan

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Course Description:

Hector of Homer's *Iliad* was a hero, leader, and role model for his people, the Trojans. In Book VI of the *Iliad*, he delivers passionate speeches to his brother Paris and his wife Andromache. By looking into the depths of Hector's psyche, we will draw out Ancient Greek conceptions of heroes, leaders, and role models. How does the hero learn his heroic ways? Why does he feel so attached to his people and which forms do these attachments take? We will explore these questions in order to examine how we can be heroes and leaders in our own world, and how we can best choose our own role models to emulate.

Guiding Questions:

1. Who is Hector? Who is Paris? Who is Helen? Who is Andromache?
2. Why might *thumos* be important for a hero?
3. What is the connection between Paris's dominant passion of *grief* and his declaration that "victory shifts, you know, now one man, now another"? (392-407)
4. Does Helen believe she had control over her situation?
5. Does Hector feel pity for Andromache?

Book V of the *Iliad*

Background to the *Iliad*

The Trojan War, the subject of the *Iliad*, has its origins in when Eris, the Goddess of Discord, took a golden apple, inscribed the words “for the fairest” upon it and threw it among party guests at a wedding. There were three goddesses, each of whom believed that the apple was meant for her: Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite.

The goddesses took their dispute to Zeus, who wisely refused to judge the matter, knowing it would only cause trouble for him. Zeus decided that the handsomest man on earth should decide the contest, and the handsomest man on earth turned out to be Paris, a Trojan, brother of the great Trojan hero Hector and son of the Trojan king Priam.

So all three goddesses went to Troy (also known as Illium) and asked Paris to decide which one of them was the most beautiful and should be awarded the golden apple. Each goddess secretly promised a gift to Paris if he should pick her. Athena offered to make sure he was always victorious in battle, Hera promised to make him ruler of the world, and Aphrodite promised to give him the most beautiful woman in the world. Paris, who we shall see does not quite understand battle or glory, chose Aphrodite and therefore the world’s most beautiful woman. There was just one catch: the most beautiful woman in the world happened to be Helen of Sparta, and she was already married to Menelaus, the king of Sparta.



The Judgement of Paris by Peter Paul Rubens (1638-1639) in the Prado Museum in Madrid

Paris decided to take a trip to Sparta. Paris was accepted into the house of Menelaus, the king of Sparta. Because of the laws of guest-friendship Paris was invited to stay as long as he wished. Soon after Paris' arrival, Menelaus had to journey to Crete for his grandfather's funeral. He left his wife and household, instructing them to make sure Paris was treated well. Aphrodite took the opportunity to send Eros to shoot Helen with his arrow and Helen fell in love with Paris. Paris absconded with Helen (and quite a bit of Menelaus' treasure) and went home to Troy while Menelaus was still away.

When Menelaus found his wife and wealth gone, he was quite angry. In addition to his personal desire for vengeance, Menelaus knew that Paris had violated the laws of *xenia*, and that Zeus punished those who violated these laws. So Menelaus called upon his brother, Agamemnon, who was the king of Mycenae [see Argos on the map] and the richest and most powerful of all the Greek kings. Together, Menelaus and Agamemnon called on all the other Greek kings to join an expedition to Troy to bring Helen back to Sparta.

But why would the other kings want to join such a dangerous expedition? Before Helen and Menelaus married, nearly every eligible bachelor in Greece wanted to marry her, since she was the most beautiful woman in the world. Tyndareüs, Helen's earthly father, declared (at the advice of one of the suitors, Odysseus) that before he made his decision, all the suitors should swear an oath to come to the aid of the man he chose as Helen's husband if he should ever have a problem with Helen being abducted by someone else. The suitors all agreed and swore an oath. And now Menelaus invoked this oath and asked for their help to fight against Troy. Besides, Troy was the wealthiest city in the world, so all the Greek warriors would be sure to bring back a great deal of loot (assuming they won the war).

Not all the Greeks were easily persuaded to join the fight. Odysseus, the King of Ithaca, preferred to stay home with his wife and infant son. When Menelaus came to Ithaca to remind Odysseus of his oath, Odysseus decided to pretend to be crazy. Menelaus found him plowing his fields and sowing the fields with salt instead of seed (sowing salt prevents anything from growing). Menelaus knew this was exactly the sort of trick Odysseus would pull, so to test how crazy Odysseus really was, he placed Odysseus' son, Telemachus, in the path of Odysseus' plow. (Telemachus was about a year-and-a-half old at this time.) When Odysseus pulled the plow away so he didn't hurt the baby, he showed how sane he was. So Menelaus forced him to be true to his oath and join the expedition against Troy.

Odysseus was instrumental in recruiting Achilles for the Trojan War. Achilles' mother, Thetis, knew that if Achilles went to Troy he would not come back, so she did not want to let him go. Besides, Achilles was only about fifteen years old at this time. So Thetis dressed her son in girl's clothing and she hid him on the island of Scyrus among the daughters of King Lycomedes. But Odysseus knew how to find out which one was Achilles. Odysseus dressed as a merchant and traveled to Scyrus, where he displayed his wares for all the girls to see. He set out some lovely jewelry and clothing, but he also set out some handsome weapons. All the girls flocked to the jewelry except one, who was examining the weapons. Odysseus knew that this "girl" was Achilles in disguise, and he easily persuaded the young hero to join the expedition to Troy.

Introduction to *The Iliad*

Homer's *Iliad* is the most famous narrative of Achilles' deeds in the Trojan War. The epic only covers a few weeks of the decade-long war, beginning with Achilles' withdrawal from battle after being dishonored by Agamemnon, the commander of the Achaean forces.

Agamemnon has taken a woman named Chryseis as his slave. Her father Chryses, a priest of Apollo, begs Agamemnon to return her to him. Agamemnon refuses, and Apollo sends a plague amongst the Greeks. A prophet correctly determines the source of the troubles: Chryseis must be returned to her father.

Agamemnon consents, but then commands that Achilles' battle prize Briseis, the daughter of Briseus, be brought to him to replace Chryseis. Angry at the dishonor of having his plunder and glory taken away (and, as he says later, because he loves Briseis), with the urging of his mother Thetis, Achilles refuses to fight or lead his troops alongside the other Greek forces. At the same time, burning with rage over Agamemnon's theft, Achilles prays to Thetis to convince Zeus to help the Trojans gain ground in the war, so that he may regain his honor.

As the battle turns against the Greeks, thanks to the influence of Zeus, Nestor declares that the Trojans are winning because Agamemnon has angered Achilles, and urges the king to appease the warrior. Agamemnon agrees and sends Odysseus and two other chieftains, Ajax and Phoenix, to Achilles with the offer of the return of Briseis and other gifts. Achilles rejects all that Agamemnon offers him and simply urges the Greeks to sail home as he was planning to do.

The Trojans, led by Hector, subsequently push the Greek army back toward the beaches and assault the Greek ships. With the Greek forces on the verge of absolute destruction, Patroclus leads the Myrmidons (the soldiers ordinarily commanded by Achilles) into battle, wearing Achilles' armor, though Achilles remains at his camp. Patroclus succeeds in pushing the Trojans back from the beaches but is killed by Hector before he can lead a proper assault on the city of Troy.

After receiving the news of the death of Patroclus, Achilles ends his refusal to fight and takes the field, killing many men in his rage but always seeking out Hector. Achilles even engages in battle with the river god Scamander, who has become angry that Achilles is choking his waters with all the men he has killed. The god tries to drown Achilles but is stopped by Hera and Hephaestus. Zeus himself takes note of Achilles's rage and sends the gods to restrain him so that he will not go on to sack Troy itself before the time allotted for its destruction, seeming to show that the unhindered rage of Achilles can defy fate itself. Finally, Achilles finds his prey.

Achilles chases Hector around the wall of Troy three times before Athena, in the form of Hector's favorite and dearest brother, Deiphobus, persuades Hector to stop running and fight Achilles face to face. After Hector realizes the trick, he knows the battle is inevitable. Wanting to go down fighting, he charges at Achilles with his only weapon, his sword, but misses. Accepting his fate, Hector begs Achilles, not to spare his life, but to treat his body with respect after killing him. Achilles tells Hector it is hopeless to expect that of him, declaring that "my rage, my fury would drive me now to hack your flesh away and eat you raw – such agonies you have caused me". Achilles then kills Hector and drags his corpse by its heels behind his chariot. After having a dream where Patroclus begs Achilles to hold his funeral, Achilles hosts a series of funeral games in his honor.

With the assistance of the god Hermes, Hector's father Priam goes to Achilles's tent to plead with Achilles for the return of Hector's body so that he can be buried. Achilles relents and promises a truce for the duration of the funeral, lasting 9 days with a burial on the 10th. The poem ends with a description of Hector's funeral, with the doom of Troy and Achilles himself still to come.



Achilles cedes Briseis to Agamemnon, from the House of the Tragic Poet in Pompeii, fresco, 1st century AD (Naples National Archaeological Museum)



The Farewell of Hector to Andromache -
 Carl Friedrich Deckler (1918)

Homer's Iliad trans. Robert Fagels, adjusted by Daniel Wasserman

Seeing Paris. 382

Hector raked his brother with insults, stinging taunts: "What on earth are you doing? Oh how wrong it is, that you keep this *bitter bile* in your *thumos*! Look, your people dying around the city, the steep **walls**, dying in arms-and all for you, the battle cries

and the fighting flaring up around the citadel. You'd be the first to lash out at another-anywhere-- you saw hanging back from this, this hateful **war**.

Up with you!- before all Troy is torched to a cinder here and now!" 390

And Paris, magnificent as a god, replied, "Ah Hector, you criticize me fairly, yes, nothing unfair, beyond what I deserve. And so I will try to tell you something. Please bear with me. hear me out. It's not so much from *bitter bile* or outrage at our people that I keep to my rooms so long. I only wanted to plunge myself in grief. But just now my wife was bringing me round, her winning words urging me back to battle.

400

And it strikes me, even me, as the better way.
 Victory shifts. you know, now one man. now another. So
 come, wait while I get this war-gear on,
 or you go on ahead and I will follow- I
 think I can overtake you."

Hector, helmet flashing, answered
 nothing. And Helen spoke to him now,
 her soft voice welling up: "My dear brother, dear to
 me, bitch that I am, vicious, scheming- horror to
 freeze the heart! Oh how I wish

that first day my mother brought me into the light
 some black whirlwind had rushed me out to the mountains or into
 the surf where the roaring breakers crash and drag and the waves
 had swept me off before all this had happened! But since the gods
 ordained it all, these desperate years,

I wish I had been the wife of a better man, someone
 alive to his fellows' anger at him and their withering scorn. This one
 has no steadiness in his mind,

not now, he never will ...

and he's going to reap the fruits of his idiocy, I swear. But
 come in, rest on this seat with me, dear brother. You are
 the one hit hardest by the fighting, Hector, you more than
 all-and all for me, whore that I am, and this blind mad
 Paris. Oh the two of us!

Zeus planted a killing doom within us both, so
 even for generations still unborn
 we will live in song."

Turning to go, his
 helmet flashing, tall Hector answered,
 "Don't ask me to sit beside you here, Helen. Love me
 as you do, you can't persuade me now.
 No time for rest. My *thumos* races to help our Trojans- they
 long for me, sorely, whenever I am gone.

But rouse this fellow, won't you?

And let him hurry himself along as well,
 so he can overtake me before I leave the city. For I
 must go home to see my people first,
 to visit my own dear wife and my baby son.

Who knows if I will ever come back to them again?- or the deathless gods will strike me down at last at the hands of Argive fighters."

A flash of his helmet and off he strode and quickly reached his sturdy, well-built house. But white-armed Andromache-Hector could not find her in the halls. 440

She and the boy and a servant finely gowned were standing watch on the tower, sobbing, grieving. When Hector saw no sign of his loyal wife inside he went to the doorway, stopped and asked the servants, "Come, please, tell me the truth now, women. Where's Andromache gone? To my sisters' house? To my brothers' wives with their long flowing robes? Or Athena's shrine where the noble Trojan women gather to win the great grim goddess over?" 450

A busy, willing servant answered quickly, "Hector, seeing you want to know the truth, she hasn't gone to your sisters, brothers' wives or Athena's shrine where the noble Trojan women gather to win the great grim goddess over. Up to the huge gate-tower of Troy she's gone because she heard our men are so hard-pressed, the Achaean fighters coming on in so much force. She sped to the wall in panic, like a madwoman-- the nurse went with her, carrying your child." 460

At that, Hector spun and rushed from his house, back by the same way down the wide, well-paved streets throughout the city until he reached the Scaean Gates, the last point he would pass to gain the field of battle. There his warm, generous wife came running up to meet him, Andromache the daughter of gallant-beaned Eetion who had lived below Mount Placos rich with timber, in Thebe below the peaks, and ruled Cilicia's people. His daughter had married Hector helmed in bronze. She joined him now, and following in her steps 470

a servant holding the boy against her breast, in the first flush of life, only a baby, Hector's son, the darling of his eyes and radiant as a star . . .

Hector would always call the boy Scamandrius, townsmen called him Astyanax, Lord of the City, since Hector was the lone defense of Troy.

The great man of war breaking into a broad smile, his gaze fixed on his son, in silence. Andromache, pressing close beside him and weeping freely now, clung to his hand, urged him, called him: "Reckless one, my Hector-your own fiery courage will destroy you! Have you no pity for *him*, our helpless son? Or me, and the destiny that weighs me down, your widow, now so soon? Yes, soon they will kill you off, all the Achaean forces massed for assault, and then, bereft of you, better for me to sink beneath the earth. What other warmth, what comfort's left for me, once you have met your doom? Nothing but torment! I have lost my father. Mother's gone as well.

480

Father . . . the brilliant Achilles laid him low when he stormed Cilicia's city filled With people, Thebe with her towering gates. He killed Eetion, not that he stripped his gear-he'd some respect at least- for he burned his corpse in all his blazoned bronze, then heaped a grave-mound high above the ashes and nymphs of the mountain planted elms around it, daughters of Zeus whose shield is storm and thunder. And the seven brothers I had within our halls . . . all in the same day went down to the House of Death, the great godlike runner Achilles butchered them all, tending their shambling oxen, shining flocks.

490

And mother,

500

who ruled under the timberline of woody Placos once- he no sooner haled her here with his other plunder than he took a priceless ransom, set her free and home she went to her father's royal halls where Artemis, showering arrows, shot her down.

You, Hector-you are my father now, my noble mother, a
brother too, and you are my husband, young and wann
and strong! ,10

Pity me, please! Take your stand on the rampart here, before
you orphan your son and make your wife a widow. Draw your
armies up where the wild fig tree stands,
there, where the city lies most open to assault, the
walls lower, easily overrun. Three times
they have tried that point, hoping to storm Troy, their
best fighters led by the Great and Little Ajax, famous
I domeneus, Atreus' sons, valiant Diomedes. Perhaps a
skilled prophet revealed the spot-
or their own *thumos* whips them on to attack." 520

And tall Hector nodded, his helmet flashing: "All
this weighs on my mind too, dear woman. But I
would die of shame to face the men of Troy and the
Trojan women trailing their long robes
if I would shrink from battle now, a coward. Nor
does *thumos* urge me on that way.
I've learned it all too well. To stand up bravely,
always to fight in the front ranks of Trojan soldiers.
winning my father great glory, glory for myself. '30
For in my *thumos* and mind I also know this well: the
day will come when sacred Troy must die, Priam
must die and all his people with him,
Priam who hurls the strong ash spear . . .

Even so, it
is less the pain of the Trojans still to come
that weighs me down, not even of Hecuba herself
or King Priam, or the thought that my own brothers in all
their numbers, all their gallant courage,
may tumble in the dust, crushed by enemies- That
is nothing, nothing beside your agony when some
brazen Argive hales you off in tears, wrenching away
your day of light and freedom! Then far off in the
land of Argos you must live, 540
laboring at a loom, at another woman's beck and call,

fetching water at some spring, Messeis or Hyperia,
 resisting it all the way-
 the rough yoke of necessity at your neck.
 And a man may say, who sees you streaming tears, "There
 is the wife of Hector, the bravest fighter
 they could field, those stallion-breaking Trojans,
 long ago when the men fought for Troy.' So he will say and
 the fresh grief will swell your heart once more, widowed,
 robbed of the one man strong enough
 to fight off your day of slavery.

550

No, no,
 let the earth come piling over my dead body
 before I hear your cries, I hear you dragged away!"

In the same breath, shining Hector reached down for
 his son-but the boy recoiled,
 cringing against his nurse's full breast,
 screaming out at the sight of his own father,
 terrified by the flashing bronze, the horsehair crest,
 the great ridge of the helmet nodding, bristling terror- so it
 struck his eyes. And his loving father laughed,
 his mother laughed as well, and glorious Hector,
 quickly lifting the helmet from his head,
 set it down on the ground, fiery in the sunlight,
 and raising his son he kissed him, tossed him in his arms, lifting
 a prayer to Zeus and the other deathless gods: "Zeus, all you
 immortals! Grant this boy, my son,
 may be like me, first in glory among the Trojans,
 strong and brave like me, and rule all Troy in power
 and one day let them say, 'He is a better man than his father!'- when
 he comes home from battle bearing the bloody gear
 of the mortal enemy he has killed in war- a
 joy to his mother's heart."

560

570

So Hector prayed
 and placed his son in the arms of his loving wife.
 Andromache pressed the child to her scented breast,
 smiling through her tears. Her husband noticed, and
 filled with pity now, Hector stroked her gently,

trying to reassure her, repeating her name: "Andromache, dear one, why so desperate? Why so much grief for me? No man will hurl me down to Death, against my fate. And fate? No one alive has ever escaped it, neither brave man nor coward, I tell you- it's born with us the day that we are born. So please go home and tend to your own tasks, the distaff and the loom, and keep the women working hard as well. As for the fighting, men will see to that, all who were born in Troy but I most of all."

Hector aflash in arms
 took up his horsehair-crested helmet once again. And his loving wife went home, turning, glancing back again and again and weeping live warm tears. She quickly reached the sturdy house of Hector, man-killing Hector, and found her women gathered there inside and stirred them all to a high pitch of mourning. So in his house they raised the dirges for the dead, for Hector still alive, his people were so convinced that never again would he come home from battle, never escape the Argives' rage and bloody hands.