Book 24

Bk XXIV:1-76 **The gods argue over the treatment of Hector’s body**

After the funeral games, the men left the assembly and scattered each to their own ship, ready for supper and then their fill of sweet sleep. But [Achilles](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Achilles) wept in remembrance of his friend, and sleep that conquers all refused to come. He tossed this way and that, regretting [Patroclus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexOP.htm#Patroclus)’ bravery and strength, remembering all they had done together and the hardships they had shared, embroiled in war or on the cruel sea. He shed great tears, thinking of these things, lying now on his side, his back, or on his face. Each night he would stagger to his feet, at last, and wander grieving along the sand.

          Dawn would find him there, as she lit the sea and shore. Then he would harness his swift team to his chariot, and rope [Hector](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Hector)’s corpse to the rear, and when he had dragged him three times round Patroclus’ mound, return to rest in his hut, leaving Hector’s body stretched out on its face in the dust. Yet Apollo kept the flesh from being spoiled, pitying the warrior even in death, and he covered the body with his golden aegis so that Achilles could not damage the skin as he dragged the corpse along.

          Though Achilles in his anger tried to disfigure Hector, the blessed immortals felt pity as they watched, and urged the sharp-eyed [Hermes](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Hermes) to steal the corpse. Though this thought pleased most of them, [Hera](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Hera), [Poseidon](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexOP.htm#Poseidon) and bright-eyed [Athene](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Athene) were opposed. They still hated sacred Ilium, [Priam](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexOP.htm#Priam) and his whole race, because of [Paris](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexOP.htm#Paris) and his foolish error, in humiliating the two goddesses, at the parade by his shepherd’s hut, when he showed his preference for [Aphrodite](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Aphrodite), praising her for furthering his sad lust.

          After eleven days of this, on the twelfth dawn Phoebus [Apollo](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Apollo) addressed them all: ‘Harsh and cruel you are, you immortals! Did Hector not burn the thighs of unblemished bulls and goats for you, and yet you have not the decency, now he is dead, to rescue his corpse for his wife, his mother, his child to watch over, nor for his father Priam and his friends, who might then swiftly give him to the fires, and enact his funeral rites. You would rather help this brute, Achilles, whose mind is warped, his will of adamant. The man’s heart is like a lion’s, wild and powerful is that creature’s in its urge to slaughter the shepherds’ flocks for meat. Achilles is as devoid of pity, and of the shame that benefits men, urging restraint. Many a man loses someone closer to him than this, a brother born of the one mother, or a son, yet when he has finished weeping and wailing he has done, since the Fates grant men patient endurance. But this man, having robbed Hector of life, ties him to his chariot and drags him round his dead friend’s mound, as if that brought him honour or profit. Great as he is, let him be wary of our wrath; not disfigure the mute clay in his fury.’

          But white-armed Hera took exception to all this: ‘That might make sense, Lord of the Silver Bow, if the gods valued Hector as highly as Achilles. But Hector was a mere mortal, suckled at a woman’s breast, while Achilles is child to a goddess. I nurtured her and reared her myself, and gave her in marriage to [Peleus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexOP.htm#Peleus), a warrior dear to us immortals. All of you, all you gods, came to the wedding, and you Apollo were there yourself, sitting down to feast, lyre in hand, you faithless friend of wrongdoers.’

          [Zeus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexRSTUWXZ.htm#Zeus), the Cloud-Gatherer now replied: ‘Hera, curb your anger against us. These men will not be honoured equally. Yet of all the mortals in Ilium, Hector was dearest to the gods. At least he was so to me, never failing in his gifts towards me. My altar never lacked for sacrifice, for a share of all his meat and drink, the offerings that are our privilege. But, no talk now of stealing brave Hector’s corpse, for Achilles would hear of it from his mother who visits him night and day. Better for one of you to summon [Thetis](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexRSTUWXZ.htm#Thetis) to me, so I may advise her wisely, to have Achilles accept a ransom, and give Hector’s body back to Priam.

Bk XXIV:77-140 **Thetis persuades Achilles to ransom the corpse**

[Iris](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Iris) it was, swift as the storm-wind, who sped off to carry the message, and half-way between [Samothrace](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexRSTUWXZ.htm#Samothrace) and rugged [Imbros](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Imbros) plunged into the dark echoing waters. Down she sank like the fisherman’s lead weight set in a piece of ox-horn that lures the greedy fish to their death. In a hollow cave she found [Thetis](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexRSTUWXZ.htm#Thetis), surrounded by the nymphs of the sea, bemoaning the destiny of her peerless son, doomed to die in the fertile land of Troy, far from his native soil. Fleet-footed Iris approached and spoke: ‘Come, Thetis, [Zeus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexRSTUWXZ.htm#Zeus) of deathless wisdom summons you.’ ‘Why does the great god ask for me?’ the silver-footed goddess replied, ‘I’m possessed by such deep sorrow, I’d be ashamed to join the immortals, yet I will go, for anything he says must carry weight.’

          With that, the lovely goddess donned a dark veil, blacker than black, and followed Iris, swift as the wind. The deep sea parted for them, and when they reached the shore they soared to the heavens, and found far-echoing Zeus surrounded by all the blessed immortals. [Athene](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Athene) gave up her place next to the son of Cronos, and [Hera](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Hera) handed her a fine golden cup, and welcomed her sweetly, and Thetis drank and gave her back the cup. Then the Father of gods and men addressed her: ‘Lady Thetis you come, I know, bearing the burden of sorrowful thought, yet I must tell you why I summoned you. The immortals have been quarrelling these nine days about how [Hector](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Hector)’s corpse is treated by [Achilles](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Achilles), sacker of cities. They would like Hermes to spirit the body away, but I would rather honour Achilles, and keep your love and respect in time to come. So dart down to his camp and tell him what I say, that he has angered the gods, and I above all am filled with wrath, because he holds Hector’s corpse by the beaked ships, instead of restoring it to Troy. Hopefully, in fear of me, he will return the body, but I will send Iris to brave [Priam](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexOP.htm#Priam), and tell him to go to the Greek ships and offer a ransom for his son, gifts that will thaw the heart of Achilles.’

          The goddess, silver-footed Thetis, instantly obeyed, darting down from the heights of Olympus to her son’s hut. There she found him still grieving, while his friends prepared their morning meal. The carcase of a great shaggy ram lay there, awaiting their attention, in the hut. His regal mother sat down beside him and stroking him with her hand said: ‘Child, how long must you consume your heart with tears and sorrow, forgetting your food and bed? Why not find comfort with some woman, since you have but a brief time left to live, and the shadows of Death and remorseless Fate are already close upon you. Obey me swiftly now.’ And she gave him Zeus’ message, to release Hector’s corpse and take a ransom in exchange.

          Fleet-footed Achilles gazed at her and answered: ‘If such be the Olympian’s firm wish, then let it be so. Let whoever brings fit ransom take away the dead.’

Bk XXIV:468-551 **Priam moves Achilles’ heart**

With that, [Hermes](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Hermes) left for high Olympus, while [Priam](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexOP.htm#Priam) climbed down from his chariot, leaving [Idaeus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#IdaeusHerald) to handle the horses and mules. The old king went straight to the hut frequented by Zeus-beloved [Achilles](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Achilles). He found him there, with only the warrior [Automedon](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Automedon) and warlike [Alcimus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Alcimus) of all his friends. They were busy attending to his meal. The table stood at his side but he had finished eating and drinking. Great Priam slipped in unobserved, and reaching Achilles, clasped his knees, and kissed his hands, the fearful, man-killing hands that had slaughtered so many of his sons. Achilles was astonished at the sight of godlike Priam, as were his friends. They stared at each other, astounded, as men do in the hall of a wealthy nobleman, when a stranger, who has murdered a man in a moment of frenzy in his own country, seeking refuge abroad, bursts in on them.

          But Priam was already entreating Achilles: ‘Godlike Achilles, think of your own father, who is of my generation, and so is likewise on the sad threshold of old age. Perhaps his neighbours are troubling him, and there is no one to protect him from harm, or ward off ruin. But he at least can rejoice in the knowledge that you live, and each day brings the hope of seeing you return from Troy. While I, I am a victim of sad fate. Of the best of my sons, the best in all of Troy, not one is left. Fifty sons I had, when you Achaeans landed, nineteen by the one wife, and the rest by other ladies of my court. Most of them have fallen in furious battle, and the defender of the city and its people, my prime recourse, Hector, you have killed, as he fought for his country. I come now to the ships to beg his corpse from you, bringing a princely ransom. Respect the gods, Achilles, and show mercy towards me, remembering your own father, for I am more to be pitied than he, since I have brought myself to do what no other man on earth would do, I have lifted to my lips the hand of the man who killed my sons.’

          His words had moved Achilles to tears at the thought of his own father, and taking the old man’s hands he set him gently from him, while both were lost in memory. Priam remembered man-killing [Hector](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Hector), and wept aloud, at Achilles’ feet, while Achilles wept for his father [Peleus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexOP.htm#Peleus) and for [Patroclus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexOP.htm#Patroclus) once more, and the sound of their lament filled the hut.

          But when Achilles was sated with weeping, and the force of grief was spent, he rose instantly from his chair, and raising the old king by his arm, he took pity on his grey beard and hair, and spoke eloquently to him: ‘You are indeed unfortunate, and your heart has endured much sorrow. Surely, though, there is iron in your spirit, daring to come alone to our ships, and face the man who slew so many of your noble sons? Come, sit here, and we will shut away our sorrows, despite our grief, since there is but cold comfort in lament. The gods have spun the thread of fate for wretched mortals: we live in sorrow, while they are free from care. Two urns stand in [Zeus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexRSTUWXZ.htm#Zeus)’ palace containing the experiences he grants mortals, one holds blessings, the other ills.  Those who receive a mixture of the two meet with good and ill, but those whom the Thunderer only serves from the jar of ills becomes an outcast, driven over the face of the earth by despair, a wanderer honoured neither by gods nor men. See how the gods showered glorious gifts on my father Peleus, from the moment of his birth, wealth and possessions beyond other men, kingship of the [Myrmidons](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Myrmidons), and though but a mortal man, a goddess for a wife. Yet some god brought evil even to him, no crowd of princes, but an only son doomed to an untimely end. He receives no care from me, since I sit here in the land of Troy, far from my own country, bringing harm to you and your children. And you, my aged lord, they say you once were happy, renowned for your wealth and your sons, in all the lands, from the isle of [Lesbos](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Lesbos), where [Macar](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Macar) reigned, through upper [Phrygia](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexOP.htm#Phrygia) to the boundless [Hellespont](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Hellespont). But from the moment that the heavenly gods brought this wretched war upon you, all has turned to battle and slaughter. Endure, let your heart not grieve forever, Sorrowing for your son will achieve nothing, you’ll not bring him back to life, though life will bring you other sorrows.’

Bk XXIV:552-620 **Achilles releases Hector’s corpse to Priam**

‘Do not ask me to sit down, beloved of Zeus,’ replied the aged king, ‘while [Hector](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Hector)’s corpse lies neglected by the huts, but give him back to me swiftly so my eyes can gaze on him, and accept the ransom, the princely ransom, I bring. May you have joy of it, and return to your native land, since you have shown me mercy from the first.’

          Fleet-footed [Achilles](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Achilles), frowning answered him; ‘I need no urging, old man. I have decided to return Hector’s body to you. My own [mother](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexRSTUWXZ.htm#Thetis), the daughter of the [Old Man](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Nereus) of the Sea, brought me a message from [Zeus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexRSTUWXZ.htm#Zeus). And I know in my heart, such things don’t escape me, that some god led you to our swift ships. No mortal man, not even a strong young warrior, would dare to venture into this camp, nor having done so elude the guards, nor shift the bar across the gate. So don’t try to move my heart further, lest I defy Zeus’ command and choose, suppliant though you are, not to spare even you.’

          The old king, gripped by fear, was silent. Then the son of Peleus ran from the hut, followed by his two companions, [Automedon](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Automedon) and [Alcimus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Alcimus), the dearest of his friends after dead Patroclus. They un-harnessed the mules and horses, brought in the old king’s [herald](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#IdaeusHerald), his crier, and offered him a chair. Then from the well-made cart they lifted down the princely ransom for Hector’s body. They left there two white cloaks and a fine tunic, so that the corpse could be wrapped in them, before he gave it back to [Priam](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexOP.htm#Priam) to take home. Achilles then summoned two servant-girls and ordered them to wash and anoint the body, first carrying it to a place where Priam could not see his son, lest his grief at the sight provoke his anger and Achilles be angered in reply, and kill him in defiance of Zeus’ command. When the servant-girls had done washing the body and anointing it with oil, and had dressed it in the fine tunic and wrapped it in a cloak, Achilles himself placed it on a bier, and he and his comrades lifted it into the wooden cart. Then he sighed and called his dead friend by name: ‘[Patroclus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexOP.htm#Patroclus), do not be angered, if even in the House of [Hades](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Hades) you learn that I have returned noble Hector to his dear father, who has given a princely ransom. Even of that you shall have your rightful share.’

          With this, noble Achilles returned to the hut and sat down again on his richly inlaid chair opposite Priam, saying: ‘Venerable lord, your son’s body has been placed on a bier and I shall release it to you as you wished. At dawn you may look on him, and carry him back, but now let us eat. Even long-haired [Niobe](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Niobe) eventually thought to eat, though her twelve children had been slain, six daughters, six sons in their prime. [Apollo](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Apollo) angry that Niobe had boasted of bearing so many children compared with Leto who had borne but two, killed the sons with arrows from his silver bow, while his sister [Artemis](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Artemis) killed the daughters. The pair slew them all, and left them lying in their blood, for nine days, since Zeus had turned the people to stone and there was no one to bury the corpses. On the tenth day the heavenly gods gave them burial, and only then did Niobe, exhausted by her grief, take sustenance. Now, turned to stone herself, she stands among the crags on the desolate slopes of [Sipylus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexRSTUWXZ.htm#Sipylus), where men say the [Nymphs](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Nymphs) that dance on the banks of [Achelous](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#AchelousPhrygian) take their rest, and broods on the sorrows the gods sent her. Come let us too take sustenance, venerable lord:  in Ilium you can lament your son once more, and grieve for him with a flood of tears.’

Bk XXIV:621-676 **Achilles agrees a truce for Hector’s funeral**

Swift [Achilles](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Achilles) sprang to his feet, and went and slaughtered a white-fleeced sheep, which his men flayed and prepared. They chopped it deftly, spitted the pieces, roasted them carefully, and then drew them from the spits. [Automedon](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Automedon) set out bread in neat baskets, while Achilles served the meat, and they helped themselves to the good things placed before them.

          When they had sated their hunger and thirst, Dardanian [Priam](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexOP.htm#Priam) contemplated Achilles and how marvellously tall and handsome he was, the very image of a god. Achilles too marvelled, at Priam’s nobility and eloquence. When they had gazed at each other to their heart’s content, godlike king Priam said: ‘Beloved of Zeus, show me to my bed now, so that, lulled by sweet sleep, we may find ease in rest. My eyes have not closed since my son lost his life at your hands. Then I lamented and brooded over my endless sorrows, and grovelled in the dirt in my courtyard. Now I have tasted food and wetted my throat with red wine, who until now tasted nothing.’

          Now Achilles ordered his friends and the servant-girls to set up bedsteads in the portico, cover them with fine purple blankets, and spread sheets above, and fleecy mantles on top to keep the guests warm. Torch in hand, the girls left the room and swiftly busied themselves at the task. Then fleet-footed Achilles spoke to Priam in a cooler tone: ‘You must sleep outside, venerable lord, in case one of the countless counsellors of the Achaeans comes to sit and talk with me, as is right. If he saw you, in the swift passage of darkness, he might hasten to King [Agamemnon](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Agamemnon), and then the return of the corpse to you would be delayed. Now, tell me truly, how long do you need for noble [Hector](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Hector)’s funeral. I will keep truce myself for that length of time, and restrain the army.’

          The godlike old king answered him: ‘You would be doing me a great kindness Achilles, if you indeed allow me time to bury Hector. You know the city is surrounded, and the Trojans would fear to fetch wood from the far hills, otherwise. We will lament him nine days in the palace, and carry out the rites on the tenth. Then on the eleventh day we will raise his barrow, and the people feast. If we must, we will fight again on the twelfth.’

          Fleet-footed Achilles replied: ‘It shall be as you say, aged Priam, and I will restrain the army for that length of time.’

          With that, he clasped the old man’s right wrist, to reassure him. Then Priam and [Idaeus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#IdaeusHerald) the herald lay down to sleep in the portico, their minds still full of thoughts, while Achilles slept in the inner recess of his well-built hut, with the lovely [Briseis](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexBCDE.htm#Briseis) by his side.

Bk XXIV:776-804 **Hector’s funeral**

So [Helen](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Helen) lamented, and the whole crowd wept. But the old king, [Priam](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexOP.htm#Priam), gave his orders: ‘Gather wood now, men of Troy, and bring it to the city, and have no fear of some crafty ambush by the Greeks. [Achilles](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Achilles) promised me, before I left the black ships, that he would restrain their army till the twelfth dawn comes.’

          So they harnessed oxen and mules to the wagons, and assembled outside the city. For nine days they gathered huge piles of logs, and when the tenth dawn brought light to mortals they carried brave [Hector](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Hector), and, in tears, laid his body on the summit of the pyre and set the wood ablaze.

          Next day, when rosy-fingered [Dawn](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexBCDE.htm#Eos) appeared, the people gathered at glorious Hector’s pyre. Then when all had assembled they worked together, quenching the embers with red wine, wherever the fire had reached. Then Hector’s brothers and his friends collected his ashes, still mourning him, their cheeks wet with tears. They placed the ashes, wrapped in a purple robe, inside a golden urn, and laid the urn in a hollow grave, covering it with large close-set stones. Then over it they piled the barrow, posting sentinels on every side, lest the bronze-greaved Greeks attacked them before the promised time. When they had heaped the mound, they returned to Troy, and gathered in Zeus-beloved Priam’s palace for the glorious funeral feast appointed.

          And such were the funeral rites of Hector, tamer of horses.