ΑΧΙΛΛΕΥΣ ΜΗΝΙΝ ΑΠΟΕΙΠΩΝ

ACHILLES: THE END OF HIS WRATH

Scene 1

Patroclus

Book 16

HOMER. While they fought round the ship, Patroclus came weeping to Achilles, his tears like dark water falling from a cliff.

Achilles felt pity at the sight and spoke winged words:

ACHILLES. Why do you weep, Patroclus, like a baby girl crying and pulling at her mother’s gown till she is picked up? That’s how you’re weeping, Patroclus.

Have you something to tell the Myrmidons or me? Or some news from Phthia? They say Menoetius is still alive, and Peleus, your father and mine.

We should grieve if they were dead. Or is it about the Greeks, killed beside the ships because of their own rashness? Tell me, so that we both know.

PATROCLUS. Mighty Achilles, do not be angry. Great grief has come upon the Greeks.

The best of them lie among the ships, wounded by arrows or spear-thrusts. The healers are working to treat their wounds. But you can’t be moved, Achilles.

May I never feel anger like yours, anger you cherish, you with such power to harm! What good will you do to anyone, even those unborn, if you do not defend the Greeks from disaster?

But if you are avoiding some oracle, or your goddess mother has given you a word from Zeus, at least let me go out and lead the Myrmidons to help the Greeks.

Give me your armour to wear: the Trojans may think I am you,
and stop fighting, giving the Greeks a breathing space in the battle.

And we who are still fresh can easily drive battle-weary men back from the ships.

HOMER. This was his prayer, the fool! For he was praying for his own death.

ACHILLES. Patroclus what are you saying? I know of no oracle that alarms me; my mother has given no warning from Zeus.

But grief seizes the heart when a man robs his equal, and takes his prize, because he has the power to do it. I have suffered this, and it galls me.

The girl the Greeks gave me as my prize, won by my spear for sacking a city, was taken from me by Agamemnon as though I were an outcast with no rights.

But let it be. My anger could not last. I said it would last until the war-cry and the battle reached my own ships.

Defend our ships, Patroclus! Strike the Trojans hard, before they burn the ships and rob us of any chance of going home.

Do as I say, and win renown for me among the Greeks, so that they return the girl and give me great gifts besides.

But, when you've driven them from the ships, come back, and if Zeus allows you to win glory, don't fight on without me: that would diminish my honour.

And in the fury of the battle, do not press on into Troy, lest you provoke the intervention of a god: Apollo loves the Trojans dearly.

Come back, when you have freed the ships, and let them go on fighting on the plain.

Father Zeus, Athene and Apollo, I wish that all Trojans might die, and Greeks too, but that the pair of us might live, and together conquer Troy.
HOMER. Fighting went on, like blazing fire, but Antilochus came to Achilles. He found him by the ships, brooding on what had happened, and spoke to him:

The son of Nestor wept as he spoke and gave him the grim news.

ANTILOCHUS. Alas, son of Peleus, I bring unhappy news. I wish I did not have to tell you.

Patroclus lies dead. They are fighting round his naked corpse. Hector has his armour.

HOMER. Black grief enveloped Achilles. He poured dust over his head and face.

The black dust fell on his tunic. The mighty man lay in the dust and with his own hands tore at his hair.

Then he groaned terribly, and his mother heard it where she sat beneath the sea beside her father. She cried out and goddesses thronged round her, all the Nereids in the depths of the sea.

They filled the bright cave, and beat their breasts, and Thetis led the lamentation.

THETIS. Listen, sisters, and know my sorrow.

Wretched me, I bore a son, the best of men, outstanding among warriors;

I raised him up like a tree in a rich orchard, and then I sent him to Troy to fight the Trojans.

And I shall never see him come back to the house of Peleus. And while he lives, grief overwhelms him and I cannot help.

But I shall go to him, see my dear child, and hear what grief has struck him, while he yet holds back from the war.

HOMER. With this she left the cave, the nymphs with her, weeping, and the sea parted round them.
They came to Troy and stepped on to the beach
where the Myrmidons’ ships were drawn up,
round where Achilles was.

As he groaned, his mother came to him.
With a cry she clasped his head
and weeping she spoke to him.

THETIS. Child, why this weeping? What grief afflicts you?
Speak it out. Zeus has granted your wish:
you prayed the Greeks should cower in their ships,
needing you, and suffering cruelly.

ACHILLES. Mother, that prayer was granted by Zeus.
But what good is that to me? Patroclus,
my dear friend, is dead. I honoured him
above all others, as my equal.

I have lost him and Hector has his armour —
that wondrous armour that the gods
gave to Peleus when they placed you
in the bed of a mortal man.

I wish you had stayed among the sea-nymphs
and Peleus had taken a mortal bride.

But now you will have endless grief
for your dead son, whom you will never see
return to his home. For my heart tells me
not to live on, or remain among men

unless I first kill Hector
and make him pay for despoiling
Patroclus, son of Menoetius.

THETIS. You are doomed, my child, to speedy death
as your words make clear: for your own death
must follow soon after Hector’s.

ACHILLES. Let me die now, since I could not
protect my friend when he was killed.
Far from home he fell, in need of me
to ward off his destruction.

Now, since I shall never go home
and did not save Patroclus
or any other comrades slain by Hector

but sit here by the ships, a useless burden —
I who am the greatest Greek fighter,
though others are better with words...
May strife vanish from among gods and men
and anger, too; anger that can set
even a prudent man on fire,
sweeter than dripping honey,
spreading like smoke in the heart.

Such anger Agamemnon provoked
within me. But enough, let it be.
For all our pain, we will stifle
our feelings, because we must.

Now I shall go out and find Hector,
who killed my friend. My death I accept
whenever it shall please Zeus, or other gods.

I shall die if fate intends it
but now let me win glory, and make
the Trojan and Greek women weep
and lament, so that they’ll know that I
held off from fighting for a long time.

Do not try to stop me fighting:
though you love me, you will not persuade me.

THETIS. You speak the truth, child; it is not evil
to protect your hard-pressed comrades.

But the Trojans have your armour,
your gleaming bronze armour. Hector wears it
and rejoices, but not for long:
his own death is close.

So do not go back to the battle
until you see me here again.
I shall come at sunrise with armour
forged by Hephaestus.

Scene 3

Agamemnon
Book 19

HOMER. When all the Greeks were assembled,
swift-footed Achilles rose and spoke:

ACHILLES. Atreus’ son, was it good that you and I
should rage in bitter, soul-devouring strife
for the sake of a girl?

I wish that Artemis had killed her
with an arrow, the day I chose her,
after I sacked Lyrnessus. Fewer Greeks
would have died because of my anger.
It was good — for the Trojans! And Greeks will long remember our quarrel. But now we’ll let things lie, and tame our hearts because we must.

Now I must end my anger.
I must not rage for ever, unrelenting.

HOMER. He spoke, and the Greeks rejoiced to hear Peleus’ son renounce his anger.

Then King Agamemnon spoke from his seat, not moving to the centre.

AGAMEMNON. Friends, Greek warriors, followers of Ares, I’ll speak my mind to Peleus’ son. Give heed, you other Greeks, and each mark well my words.

Greeks have often reproached me for all this, but I am not to blame.

Blame rather Zeus and Fate and Erinys, the Fury who walks in darkness, for they blinded my judgement in the assembly, the day I seized Achilles’ prize. Then what could I do? The gods decide.

Because I was blinded, and Zeus stole my wits, I mean to make amends with countless gifts. Rise up for battle and call up your men.

I am ready with the gifts promised by Odysseus when he came to your hut.

ACHILLES. Great Agamemnon, lord of men, give gifts, as is right, or withhold them, as you please. But now let us think about the battle.

It is not right to waste time talking, for a great work is still to be done.

ODYSSEUS. As for the gifts, let Agamemnon bring them out for all the Greeks to see, so that you, Achilles, may be content.

Let him also stand among us and swear that he has not slept with this woman. Accept this graciously, and let him give you a feast; then you’ll have your due.

Atreus’ son, you will be more just in future. No shame for a king to make amends, when the king was the first to be angry.
HOMER. Then they went to Agamemnon’s hut and the promise was fulfilled at once. They brought seven tripods from the hut, twenty cauldrons, and twelve horses.

Next they led out seven women, skilled at weaving; and an eighth: Briseïs.

Then Atreus’ son drew out his knife, cut some hairs from the sacrificial boar, and with raised hands prayed to Zeus; and the Greeks heard the king in silence.

He looked up at the sky as he prayed.

AGAMEMNON. Zeus be my witness, and Earth and Sun and Furies, that I never touched Briseïs, as a lover or in any other way; she remained untouched in my huts.

If I lie in this oath, may the gods send me many woes, as they do to those who are forsworn.

HOMER. He spoke, and cut the boar’s throat with the knife and Talthybius swung the body round and flung it into the sea for fishes to feed on.

Then Achilles stood and spoke to the war-loving Greeks.

ACHILLES. Father Zeus! With what blindness you strike men! Atreus’ son would never have angered me so, nor forcibly taken the girl from me if Zeus had not intended that many Greeks should die. But now go and eat, so that we may join battle.

HOMER. He spoke, and broke up the assembly. The rest scattered to their ships. Meanwhile the Myrmidons took the gifts to the ships of Achilles. They put them in his huts and left the women there.

When Briseïs, golden as Aphrodite, saw Patroclus’ body and its wounds, she flung herself upon him with a cry, and tore her breast and neck and lovely face.

Lamenting, the woman spoke:
BRISEIS. Patroclus, dearest to me in my sorrow!
You were alive when I left this hut,
now on my return I find you dead.
So, for me, evil always follows evil.

I saw my husband killed by the sword
outside our city, and my three dear brothers,
these all met their fateful day.

But when Achilles killed my husband
and sacked the city Mynes ruled,
you always comforted me;
you said you’d make me Achilles’ bride.
He’d take me to Phthia, you said, and make
a marriage feast among the Myrmidons.

I mourn your death, for you were always kind.

HOMER. So she spoke, weeping, and the women
wept too, seemingly for Patroclus,
but each was weeping for her own sorrows.

Scene 4

Xanthus
Book 19

HOMER. Automedon and Alcinous
yoked the horses; Automedon
grapsed the whip in his right hand
and leapt on to the chariot.

Behind him came Achilles, armed,
gleaming like bright Hyperion.
He called to his father’s horses:

ACHILLES. Xanthus, Balius, famous offspring
of Podarge, find another way
to bring your charioteer back safely,
not leave him dead like Patroclus.

HOMER. Then Xanthus of the swift feet spoke;
he bowed his head, his mane streamed down
to the ground, and the goddess,
white-armed Hera, gave him speech.

XANTHUS. We shall save you this time, Achilles,
though your doom is near, caused not by us
but by a god and by Fate. Not we
but Apollo caused Patroclus’ death.
We run like the west wind, but you are fated to be defeated in fight by a god and a mortal.

HOMER. He spoke, and the Fates stopped his speech. Then swift Achilles spoke to him:

ACHILLES. Xanthus, why do you foretell my death? You need not. I know I must die here, far from my father and mother.

But still I shall go on until the Trojans have had enough of war.

HOMER. He spoke, and with a cry he drove his horses on among the foremost.

Scene 5

Hector
Book 22

When they drew near one another great Hector spoke first to Achilles:

HECTOR. I shall flee from you no more, Peleus’ son, as when I ran thrice round Priam’s city, to avoid your attack. Now I shall face you, whether I kill or am killed.

But let us call the gods to witness, for they will watch and guard our covenants.

I will not mistreat you if Zeus grants me strength and I kill you. I’ll strip off that glorious armour, but then return your body to the Greeks. Treat me likewise.

ACHILLES. Hector, don’t talk to me of covenants.

As lions and men do not swear loyalty, nor wolves and lambs agree, but plot evil against each other, so we two cannot be friends, nor swear oaths to each other, till one or other falls and Ares is sated with his blood.

Summon any courage you may have: now you must wield a spear and fight boldly.

You cannot escape. Pallas Athene will soon overcome you with my spear.
You’ll pay the price for my comrades,
slaughtered by your killing spear.

HOMER. He spoke, balanced his spear, and threw. But Hector, watching him, avoided it. He saw it in time, crouched, and the bronze spear flew over him and fixed itself in the ground.

But, unseen by Hector, Pallas Athene snatched it up and gave it back to Achilles. And Hector spoke to the matchless son of Peleus:

HECTOR. You missed: perhaps you were wrong to think you know my fate from Zeus. You have proved a good talker, thinking to frighten me into forgetting my strength and courage.

Your spear will not strike my back as I flee but full in the chest as I charge at you, if a god grants you that. And now beware my spear. I pray it will land in your flesh.

The war would be easier for the Trojans if you died. You are their greatest threat.

HOMER. He spoke, balanced his spear, and threw, and struck Achilles’ shield squarely, but the spear rebounded far from the shield.

Hector was angry at the failed shot, and had no second spear.

He called to Deiphobus and asked for a spear: but he was nowhere near. Hector realised his plight and said:

HECTOR. So! The gods call me to my death. I thought Deiphobus was at my side, but he’s inside the walls. Athene tricked me.

Evil death is close now, and there is no escape. So this was their pleasure — Zeus and Apollo, who sometimes came to my defence — but now my fate is here.

Let me not die without a struggle, without glory, but doing some great deed that men yet unborn will hear of.

HOMER. As the evening star shines out at night among the other stars, so a gleam shone
from Achilles’ spear as he planned
Hector’s death, looking for where to strike.

He was covered by the armour he stripped
from Patroclus when he killed him.

But there was a gap at the throat,
the most vulnerable spot.
There Achilles aimed as Hector charged,
and the point went right through the neck.

The spear did not pierce the windpipe
and he could still speak. He fell in the dust
and Achilles gloried over him.

ACHILLES. Hector, when you stripped Patroclus
you thought you were safe, and forgot me,
you fool. He had a stronger avenger,
left behind by the ships. That was I,
who have brought you down.

Dogs and birds will maul your body,
but the Greeks will give Patroclus burial.

HECTOR. I beg you, by your life and your parents,
don’t let the dogs devour me by the ships.

Accept the bronze and gold that my parents
will offer you, let my body return home
so that Trojans and their wives may give me
a funeral pyre.

ACHILLES. Don’t implore me, dog. I wish that,
driven by anger, I might eat your flesh
myself — and eat it raw — for what you did.

No man alive will keep dogs from your head,
not though they bring ten or twenty ransoms
and promise still more.

Not though Priam orders them to pay
your weight in gold. Even then your mother
will not place you on a bier to mourn you,
her own son: but dogs and birds will eat you.

HECTOR. I know you and I see how it will be:
I could not sway you, your heart is iron.

Bear in mind the gods may be angry
with you for my sake, when Paris
and Apollo slay you, brave as you are,
beside the Scaean gates.
HOMER. As he spoke, death wrapped him, 
and his soul, fleeing his limbs, was gone to Hades, 
mourning its fate, leaving its vigour and youth.

He was dead, but still Achilles spoke:

ACHILLES. Lie dead! I’ll accept my fate when Zeus 
makes it happen, he and the other gods.

HOMER. He spoke, and drew his spear from the corpse, 
and began to strip off the bloody armour.

Other Greeks ran up and gazed 
at the stature and beauty of Hector.

When Achilles had stripped off the armour 
he stood up and spoke winged words:

ACHILLES. Friends, chiefs of the Greeks in field and council, 
there lies a dead man by the ships 
unwept, unburied — Patroclus.

I shall not forget him as long 
as I live and move. Perhaps in Hades 
men forget their dead, but even there 
I shall remember my dear companion.

Come, Greeks, back to the ships, 
singing victory songs, and carrying him.
We have won great glory, we have killed 
great Hector whom Troy prayed to as a god.

Scene 6
Priam
Book 24

HOMER. Hermes opened the gate for the old man 
and brought in the gifts for Achilles. 
Then he stepped down from the chariot and spoke:

HERMES. Old man, I who have come to you 
am a god, Hermes. My father 
sent me to guide you. But now I shall leave 
and not let Achilles see me. A god 
must not openly be received by men.

Go in and clasp Achilles’ knees. 
beg him by his father, his mother 
and his child, so as to touch his heart.

HOMER. Hermes spoke, and returned to high Olympus. 
Priam leapt from the chariot, leaving Idaeus 
to hold the horses and mules.
The old man went straight to the hut where Achilles, beloved of Zeus, was accustomed to sit.

Only Automedon and Alcimus attended him: he had just finished eating and drinking, and the table was still beside him.

Great Priam entered unseen, and approached Achilles, clasped his knees and kissed his hands, those lethal hands that had killed his sons.

And as a man who has killed someone flees to a strange land, enters a rich man’s house and amazes those who see him, so Achilles and the others were struck with wonder at the sight of godlike Priam.

Then Priam spoke to him, entreating:

PRIAM. Remember your father, Achilles, who is like me, growing old. He too may be badly treated, with no protector.

At least while he hears you are still alive he is glad, and daily hopes to see his dear son return from Troy. But I am ill-fated: I fathered the best sons in Troy, but not one is left.

I had fifty when the Greeks came nineteen from one mother, the others from women of the palace.

Ares has killed them, many as they were, and the last one, only protector of the city, you slew — Hector. I have come here now to recover him and I bring a ransom too great to count.

Respect the gods, Achilles, pity me, thinking of your own father; I am more pitiable than he, and suffer what no man ever suffered before: to kiss the hands of him who killed my sons.

HOMER. He spoke, and Achilles longed to weep for his father. He took Priam’s hand and gently pushed him away.

Both men remembered: one recalled Hector and wept, crouching at Achilles’ feet;
Achilles for his father and Patroclus,
and the sound of their weeping filled the hut.

When Achilles had wept his fill he sprang up
and raised the old man, pitying him,
and spoke winged words to him:

ACHILLES. Unhappy man, you have suffered much.
How could you come alone to the Greek ships
to meet the man who killed your sons?
You must have a heart as strong as iron.

Sit down, let us lay our griefs to rest,
no good comes of bleak lamenting.
The gods make men live among sorrows
while they themselves are free of care.

Two jars stand in Zeus's halls,
full of the gifts he gives, bad or good.
If he gives from both, a man
will meet both good and evil.

The man to whom he gives only evil
becomes degraded, mad, an outcast,
wandering over the earth, not honoured
by gods or mortals.

Peleus was richly endowed from birth,
king of the Myrmidons; and the gods
gave him a goddess for his wife.

But a god brought sorrow even to him:
no race of princely sons in his house,
but one son only, fated to die young.

I am not there to tend his old age:
I sit here far away in Troy,
bringing pain to you and your children.

And you, old man, I hear you were happy,
set above everyone, from Lesbos
and the sea, to Phrygia in the east,
and north to the boundless Hellespont,
famed for your wealth and your sons.

But ever since the gods brought you grief,
battles and slaughter surround your city.

Be strong now. Do not weep for ever.
You gain nothing by mourning your son
and cannot bring him back to life; sooner
than that, some other evil would strike.
PRIAM. Do not ask me to sit while Hector
lies uncared-for among the huts,
but give him back now, let me see him.
Accept the great ransom;
return home safely, since you have spared me.

ACHILLES. Do not provoke me, old man! I do intend
to give you Hector back: Zeus
sent my mother as a messenger.

I know, Priam, that a god led you
to the Greek ships. No man would dare,
even if young and strong, to come alone
through the army; nor could he open our doors.

So stir me no more in my grief,
lest I turn on you, suppliant
though you are, and though it would be
defying Zeus to harm you.

HOMER. Fearfully, the old man obeyed.
But like a lion Achilles sprang outside;
with him went Automedon and Alcimus,
whom he honoured above all his comrades,
except dead Patroclus.

They loosed the horses and mules,
and led in the old king's herald,
and seated him.

From the wagon they brought the ransom
but they left two robes and a tunic
for Achilles to wrap the dead man in
and return him to be taken home.

Achilles called maids to wash and oil him
out of Priam's sight lest the old man grow angry,
and he himself be stirred to rage
and kill Priam, so defying Zeus.

When the body was washed and oiled
and covered in a cloak and tunic,
Achilles set it on a bier, and he
and his comrades lifted it on to the wagon.

Then he groaned, and spoke to his dear friend:

ACHILLES. Don't be angry, Patroclus, if you hear in Hades
that I gave Hector back to his father,
for he has paid an ample ransom,
and you shall have your share of it.
HOMER. So he spoke, and went back into the hut and sat on his chair by the wall and spoke to Priam:

ACHILLES. Your son is released to you now: he lies on a bier: you shall see him at daybreak when you carry him away.

Now let us take thought of food, noble sir, and then you can mourn your dear son. When you have brought him to Troy then you will shed many tears for him.

HOMER. With that, Achilles sprang up and killed a sheep, and his comrades prepared it and roasted it.

Automedon set out bread in baskets and Achilles served the meat. So they set to on the good food before them.

When they had eaten and drunk enough Priam began to marvel at Achilles, how tall and handsome he was, how godlike.

And Achilles admired Priam, his noble aspect, the words he spoke. When they had looked their fill, Priam spoke first:

PRIAM. Show me my bed now, so that lulled by sleep we may find comfort.

I have not closed my eyes since you killed my son but have lamented, crouching in the dirt of the courtyard.

But now I have eaten and drunk some wine: before that I had taken nothing.

HOMER. Achilles ordered comrades and maids to set beds on the porch and put purple blankets on them, and coverlets, with fleecy cloaks on top.

So the maids went out with torches and quickly made two beds ready. Then Achilles spoke to Priam:

ACHILLES. Lie here, outside, dear old man, in case one of the Greek counsellors comes to take counsel as they often do.
If one of them saw you through the darkness
he might tell Agamemnon, and then
the return of the body would be delayed.

But tell me truly: for how many days
do you wish Hector’s funeral to last,
so that I can wait, and hold back the army?

PRIAM. If you let me have time for the burial
of Hector, that will be generous.
You know we are trapped in the city,
it is a long way to go for wood,
and the Trojans are afraid.

We shall mourn him in our halls for nine days
and hold his funeral feast on the tenth,
build a burial mound on the eleventh,
and do battle on the twelfth, if we must.

ACHILLES. It shall be as you say, old Priam.
I shall hold back the battle
for as long as you command.

HOMER. With that, he clasped the old man’s right hand,
to reassure him.

Then they lay down to sleep on the porch,
Priam and his herald, full of deep thoughts.

But Achilles slept inside the hut,
and fair-cheeked Briseis lay at his side.

ΤΕΛΟΣ