

c. 1184 B.C.E.
Troy is destroyed

c. 1000 B.C.E.
Iron Age in Athens

776 B.C.E.
First Olympic Games held

Golden Age of Greece begins

c. 450 B.C.E.

10th–9th centuries B.C.E.
Stories of Trojan War circulate by bards

8th century B.C.E.
Homer compiles the *Iliad*

H O M E R

Hector and Andromache

Homer is well-known to any student of classical literature as the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; however, beyond that, little is known about his life. The information from Greek historians would place him anywhere from the thirteenth to the eighth century B.C.E., but studies of the language of the *Iliad* place him in the eighth century B.C.E. He wrote in the Ionian dialect, so we can place him on the mainland of Greece. His great accomplishment is the setting into poetry the stories of the Trojan War which had circulated orally for centuries.

The *Iliad*, which means a poem about Ilium (Troy), is actually a story about the anger of Achilles, the great Greek hero. The events begin when Paris, the son of the Trojan king, runs off with Helen, the wife of Menelaus of Sparta. The war which results is the Trojan War and it rages on for ten years. The characters in the poem are presented to help the Greeks learn about virtue, to see virtue and vice as they play out in the story, but most importantly, to teach them about *areté*, the Greek virtue of excellence. The following selection concerns Hector, the champion of the Trojans and son of the Trojan king Priam. He comes to see his wife, Andromache, and his son, Astyanax, before returning to the battle.

SO SPEAKING, Hector of the shining helm departed and in speed made his way to his own well-established dwelling, but failed to find in the house Andromache of the white arms; for she, with the child, and followed by one fair-robed attendant, had taken her place on the tower in lamentation, and tearful. When he saw no sign of his perfect wife within the house, Hector stopped in his way on the threshold and spoke among the handmaidens:

“Come then, tell me truthfully as you may, handmaidens: where has Andromache of the white arms gone?

Is she with any of the sisters of her lord or the wives of his brothers? Or has she gone to the house of Athene, where all the other lovely-haired women of Troy propitiate the grim goddess?”

Then in turn the hard-working housekeeper gave him an answer:

“Hector, since you have urged me to tell you the truth, she is not with any of the sisters of her lord or the wives of his brothers, nor has she gone to the house of Athene, where all the other lovely-haired women of Troy propitiate the grim goddess, but she has gone to the great bastion of Ilium,

because she heard that the Trojans were losing, and great grew the strength of the Achaians. Therefore she has gone in speed to the wall, like a woman gone mad, and a nurse attending her carries the baby."

So the housekeeper spoke, and Hector hastened from his home backward by the way he had come through the well-laid streets. So as he had come to the gates on his way through the great city, the Skaian gates, whereby he would issue into the plain, there at last his own generous wife came running to meet him, Andromache, the daughter of high-hearted Eëtion; Eëtion, who had dwelt underneath wooded Plakos, in Thebe below Plakos, lord over the Kilikian people. It was his daughter who was given to Hector of the bronze helm. She came to him her: there, and beside her went an attendant carrying the boy in the fold of her bosom, a little child, only a baby, Hector's son, the admired, beautiful as a star shining, whom Hector called Skamandrios, but all of the others Astyanax — lord of the city; since Hector alone saved Ilion. Hector smiled in silence as he looked on his son, but she, Andromache, stood close beside him, letting her tears fall, and clung to his hand and called him by name and spoke to him:

"Dearest, your own great strength will be your death, and you have no pity on your little son, nor on me, ill-starred, who soon must be your widow; for presently the Achaians, gathering together, will set upon you and kill you; and for me it would be far better to sink into the earth when I have lost you, for there is no other consolation for me after you have gone to your destiny-only grief; since I have no father, no honoured mother. It was brilliant Achilleus who slew my father, Eëtion, when he stormed the strong-founded citadel of the Kilikians, Thebe of the

towering gates. He killed Eëtion but did not strip his armour, for his heart respected the dead man, but burned the body in all its elaborate war-gear and piled a grave mound over it, and the nymphs of the mountains, daughters of Zeus of the aegis, planted elm trees about it. And they who were my seven brothers in the great house all went upon a single day down into the house of the death god, for swift-footed brilliant Achilleus slaughtered all of them as they were tending their white sheep and their lumbering oxen; and when he had led my mother, who was queen under wooded Plakos, here, along with all his other possessions, Achilleus released her again, accepting ransom beyond count, but Artemis of the showering arrows struck her down in the halls of her father. Hector, thus you are father to me, and my honoured mother, you are my brother, and you it is who are my young husband. Please take pity upon me then, stay here on the rampart, that you may not leave your child an orphan, your wife a widow, but draw your people up by the fig tree, there where the city is openest to attack, and where the wall may be mounted. Three times their bravest came that way, and fought there to storm it about the two Aiantes and renowned Idomeneus, about the two Atreidai and the fighting son of Tydeus. Either some man well skilled in prophetic arts had spoken, or the very spirit within themselves had stirred them to the onslaught."

Then tall Hector of the shining helm answered her:

"All these things are in my mind also, lady; yet I would feel deep shame before the Trojans, and the Trojan women with trailing garments, if like a coward I were to shrink aside from the fighting; and the spirit will not let me, since I have learned to be valiant and to fight always among the

foremost ranks of the Trojans, winning for my own self great glory, and for my father. For I know this thing well in my heart, and my mind knows it: there will come a day when sacred Ilion shall perish, and Priam, and the people of Priam of the strong ash spear.

But it is not so much the pain to come of the Trojans that troubles me, not even of Priam the king nor Hekabe, not the thought of my brothers who in their numbers and valour shall drop in the dust under the hands of men who hate them, as troubles me the thought of you, when some bronze-armoured Achaian leads you off, taking away your day of liberty, in tears; and in Argos you must work at the loom of another, and carry water from the spring Messeis or Hypereia, all unwilling, but strong will be the necessity upon you; and some day seeing you shedding tears a man will say of you: 'This is the wife of Hector, who was ever the bravest fighter of the Trojans, breakers of horses, in the days when they fought about Ilion.'

So will one speak of you; and for you it will be yet a fresh grief, to be widowed of such a man who could fight off the day of your slavery.

But may I be dead and the piled earth hide me under before I hear you crying and know by this that they drag you captive."

So speaking, glorious Hector held out his arms to his baby, who shrank back to his fair-girdled nurse's bosom screaming, and frightened at the aspect of his own father, terrified as he saw the bronze and the crest with its horse-hair, nodding dreadfully, as he thought, from the peak of the helmet. Then his beloved father laughed out, and his honoured mother, and at once glorious Hector lifted from his head the helmet and laid it in all its shining upon the ground. Then taking up his dear son

he tossed him about in his arms, and kissed him, and lifted his voice in prayer to Zeus and the other immortals:

"Zeus, and you other immortals, grant that this boy, who is my son, may be as I am, preeminent among the Trojans, great in strength, as am I, and rule strongly over Ilion; and some day let them say of him: 'He is better by far than his father,' as he comes in from the fighting; and let him kill his enemy and bring home the blooded spoils, and delight the heart of his mother."

So speaking he set his child again in the arms of his beloved wife, who took him back again to her fragrant bosom smiling in her tears; and her husband saw, and took pity upon her, and stroked her with his hand, and called her by name and spoke to her:

"Poor Andromache! Why does your heart sorrow so much for me? No man is going to hurl me to Hades, unless it is fated, but as for fate, I think that no man yet has escaped it once it has taken its first form, neither brave man nor coward. Go therefore back to our house, and take up your own work, the loom and the distaff, and see to it that your handmaidens ply their work also; but the men must see to the fighting, all men who are the people of Ilion, but I beyond others."

So glorious Hector spoke and again took up the helmet with its crest of horse-hair, while his beloved wife went homeward, turning to look back on the way, letting the live tears fall. And as she came in speed into the well-settled household of Hector the slayer of men, she found numbers of handmaidens within, and her coming stirred all of them into lamentation. So they mourned in his house over Hector while he was living still, for they thought he would never again come back from the fighting alive, escaping the Achaian hands and their violence.

THINK ABOUT IT

1. What pronoun best describes the relationship between Hector and Andromache?
2. The Greek epics were meant to instruct the reader about the important values in Greek society. What do we learn about their sense of family from this passage?

TALK ABOUT IT

3. Do you think Hector is right to leave his wife and child to fight? Are things different in today's world?
4. Has military life been a factor in your family? How does it make a difference in family relationships?

WRITE ABOUT IT

5. Write a story which describes how a family would prepare itself for someone going off to war.
6. Write a letter describing how you would feel if someone you love were going off to war.

READ MORE ABOUT IT

- Bespaloff, Rachel. *On the Iliad*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970.
- Griffin, Jasper. *Homer*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1980.
- Homer. *Iliad*. Trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Viking Penguin, 1990.

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