

Il. 24.552-620

‘Do not ask me to sit down, beloved of Zeus,’ replied the aged king, ‘while 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, frowning answered him; ‘I need no urging, old man. I have decided to return Hector’s body to you. My own mother, the daughter of the Old Man of the Sea, brought me a message from 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 and Alcimus, the dearest of his friends after dead Patroclus. They un-harnessed the mules and horses, brought in the old king’s herald, 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 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, do not be angered, if even in the House of 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 eventually thought to eat, though her twelve children had been slain, six daughters, six sons in their prime. 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 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, where men say the Nymphs that dance on the banks of Achelous 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.’