



The Rage of Achilles

Rage—Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles,
murderous, doomed, that cost the Achaeans countless losses,
hurling down to the House of Death so many sturdy souls,
great fighters' souls, but made their bodies carrion,
feasts for the dogs and birds,
and the will of Zeus was moving toward its end.
Begin, Muse, when the two first broke and clashed,
Agamemnon lord of men and brilliant Achilles.

What god drove them to fight with such a fury?
Apollo the son of Zeus and Leto. Incensed at the king
he swept a fatal plague through the army—men were dying
and all because Agamemnon spurned Apollo's priest.
Yes, Chryses approached the Achaeans' fast ships
to win his daughter back, bringing a priceless ransom

10

and bearing high in hand, wound on a golden staff,
 the wreaths of the god, the distant deadly Archer.
 He begged the whole Achaean army but most of all
 the two supreme commanders, Atreus' two sons,
 "Agamemnon, Menelaus—all Argives geared for war!
 May the gods who hold the halls of Olympus give you 20
 Priam's city to plunder, then safe passage home.
 Just set my daughter free, my dear one . . . here,
 accept these gifts, this ransom. Honor the god
 who strikes from worlds away—the son of Zeus, Apollo!"

And all ranks of Achaeans cried out their assent:
 "Respect the priest, accept the shining ransom!"
 But it brought no joy to the heart of Agamemnon.
 The king dismissed the priest with a brutal order
 ringing in his ears: "Never again, old man,
 let me catch sight of you by the hollow ships! 30
 Not loitering now, not slinking back tomorrow.
 The staff and the wreaths of god will never save you then.
 The girl—I won't give up the girl. Long before that,
 old age will overtake her in *my* house, in Argos,
 far from her fatherland, slaving back and forth
 at the loom, forced to share my bed!

Now go,

don't tempt my wrath—and you may depart alive."

The old man was terrified. He obeyed the order,
 turning, trailing away in silence down the shore
 where the battle lines of breakers crash and drag. 40
 And moving off to a safe distance, over and over
 the old priest prayed to the son of sleek-haired Leto,
 lord Apollo, "Hear me, Apollo! God of the silver bow
 who strides the walls of Chryse and Cilla sacrosanct—
 lord in power of Tenedos—Smintheus, god of the plague!
 If I ever roofed a shrine to please your heart,
 ever burned the long rich bones of bulls and goats
 on your holy altar, now, now bring my prayer to pass.
 Pay the Danaans back—your arrows for my tears!"

His prayer went up and Phoebus Apollo heard him. 50
Down he strode from Olympus' peaks, storming at heart
with his bow and hooded quiver slung across his shoulders.
The arrows clanged at his back as the god quaked with rage,
the god himself on the march and down he came like night.
Over against the ships he dropped to a knee, let fly a shaft
and a terrifying clash rang out from the great silver bow.
First he went for the mules and circling dogs but then,
launching a piercing shaft at the men themselves,
he cut them down in droves—
and the corpse-fires burned on, night and day, no end in sight. 60

Nine days the arrows of god swept through the army.
On the tenth Achilles called all ranks to muster—
the impulse seized him, sent by white-armed Hera
grieving to see Achaean fighters drop and die.
Once they'd gathered, crowding the meeting grounds,
the swift runner Achilles rose and spoke among them:
"Son of Atreus, now we are beaten back, I fear,
the long campaign is lost. So home we sail . . .
if we can escape our death—if war and plague
are joining forces now to crush the Argives. 70
But wait: let us question a holy man,
a prophet, even a man skilled with dreams—
dreams as well can come our way from Zeus—
come, someone to tell us why Apollo rages so,
whether he blames us for a vow we failed, or sacrifice.
If only the god would share the smoky savor of lambs
and full-grown goats, Apollo might be willing, still,
somehow, to save us from this plague."

So he proposed
and down he sat again as Calchas rose among them,
Thestor's son, the clearest by far of all the seers 80
who scan the flight of birds. He knew all things that are,
all things that are past and all that are to come,
the seer who had led the Argive ships to Troy
with the second sight that god Apollo gave him.
For the armies' good the seer began to speak:

“Achilles, dear to Zeus . . .
 you order me to explain Apollo’s anger,
 the distant deadly Archer? I will tell it all.
 But strike a pact with me, swear you will defend me
 with all your heart, with words and strength of hand. 90
 For there is a man I will enrage—I see it now—
 a powerful man who lords it over all the Argives,
 one the Achaeans must obey . . . A mighty king,
 raging against an inferior, is too strong.
 Even if he can swallow down his wrath today,
 still he will nurse the burning in his chest
 until, sooner or later, he sends it bursting forth.
 Consider it closely, Achilles. Will you save me?”

And the matchless runner reassured him: “Courage!
 Out with it now, Calchas. Reveal the will of god, 100
 whatever you may know. And I swear by Apollo
 dear to Zeus, the power you pray to, Calchas,
 when you reveal god’s will to the Argives—no one,
 not while I am alive and see the light on earth, no one
 will lay his heavy hands on you by the hollow ships.
 None among all the armies. Not even if you mean
 Agamemnon here who now claims to be, by far,
 the best of the Achaeans.”

The seer took heart
 and this time he spoke out, bravely: “Beware—
 he casts no blame for a vow we failed, a sacrifice. 110
 The god’s enraged because Agamemnon spurned his priest,
 he refused to free his daughter, he refused the ransom.
 That’s why the Archer sends us pains and he will send us more
 and never drive this shameful destruction from the Argives,
 not till we give back the girl with sparkling eyes
 to her loving father—no price, no ransom paid—
 and carry a sacred hundred bulls to Chryse town.
 Then we can calm the god, and only then appease him.”

So he declared and sat down. But among them rose
 the fighting son of Atreus, lord of the far-flung kingdoms, 120

Agamemnon—furious, his dark heart filled to the brim,
 blazing with anger now, his eyes like searing fire.
 With a sudden, killing look he wheeled on Calchas first:
 “Seer of misery! Never a word that works to my advantage!
 Always misery warms your heart, your prophecies—
 never a word of profit said or brought to pass.
 Now, again, you divine god’s will for the armies,
 bruit it about, as fact, why the deadly Archer
 multiplies our pains: because I, I refused
 that glittering prize for the young girl Chryseis. 130
 Indeed, I prefer *her* by far, the girl herself,
 I want her mine in my own house! I rank her higher
 than Clytemnestra, my wedded wife—she’s nothing less
 in build or breeding, in mind or works of hand.
 But I am willing to give her back, even so,
 if that is best for all. What I really want
 is to keep my people safe, not see them dying.
 But fetch me another prize, and straight off too,
 else I alone of the Argives go without my honor.
 That would be a disgrace. You are all witness, 140
 look—*my* prize is snatched away!”

But the swift runner

Achilles answered him at once, “Just how, Agamemnon,
 great field marshal . . . most grasping man alive,
 how can the generous Argives give you prizes now?
 I know of no troves of treasure, piled, lying idle,
 anywhere. Whatever we dragged from towns we plundered,
 all’s been portioned out. But collect it, call it back
 from the rank and file? *That* would be the disgrace.
 So return the girl to the god, at least for now.
 We Achaeans will pay you back, three, four times over, 150
 if Zeus will grant us the gift, somehow, someday,
 to raze Troy’s massive ramparts to the ground.”

But King Agamemnon countered, “Not so quickly,
 brave as you are, godlike Achilles—trying to cheat *me*.
 Oh no, you won’t get past me, take me in that way!
 What do you want? To cling to your own prize

while I sit calmly by—empty-handed here?
 Is that why you order me to give her back?
 No—if our generous Argives *will* give me a prize,
 a match for my desires, equal to what I've lost, 160
 well and good. But if they give me nothing
 I will take a prize myself—your own, or Ajax'
 or Odysseus' prize—I'll commandeer her myself
 and let that man I go to visit choke with rage!
 Enough. We'll deal with all this later, in due time.
 Now come, we haul a black ship down to the bright sea,
 gather a decent number of oarsmen along her locks
 and put aboard a sacrifice, and Chryseis herself,
 in all her beauty . . . we embark her too.
 Let one of the leading captains take command. 170
 Ajax, Idomeneus, trusty Odysseus or you, Achilles,
 you—the most violent man alive—so you can perform
 the rites for us and calm the god yourself."

A dark glance

and the headstrong runner answered him in kind: "Shameless—
 armored in shamelessness—always shrewd with greed!
 How could any Argive soldier obey your orders,
 freely and gladly do your sailing for you
 or fight your enemies, full force? Not I, no.
 It wasn't Trojan spearmen who brought me here to fight.
 The Trojans never did *me* damage, not in the least, 180
 they never stole my cattle or my horses, never
 in Phthia where the rich soil breeds strong men
 did they lay waste my crops. How could they?
 Look at the endless miles that lie between us . . .
 shadowy mountain ranges, seas that surge and thunder.
 No, you colossal, shameless—we all followed you,
 to please you, to fight for you, to win your honor
 back from the Trojans—Menelaus and you, you dog-face!
 What do *you* care? Nothing. You don't look right or left.
 And now you threaten to strip me of my prize in person— 190
 the one I fought for long and hard, and sons of Achaea
 handed her to me.

My honors never equal yours,
 whenever we sack some wealthy Trojan stronghold—
 my arms bear the brunt of the raw, savage fighting,
 true, but when it comes to dividing up the plunder
 the lion's share is yours, and back I go to my ships,
 clutching some scrap, some pittance that I love,
 when I have fought to exhaustion.

No more now—

back I go to Phthia. Better that way by far,
 to journey home in the beaked ships of war. 200
 I have no mind to linger here disgraced,
 brimming your cup and piling up your plunder."

But the lord of men Agamemnon shot back,
 "Desert, by all means—if the spirit drives you home!
 I will never beg you to stay, not on *my* account.
 Never—others will take my side and do me honor,
 Zeus above all, whose wisdom rules the world.
 You—I hate you most of all the warlords
 loved by the gods. Always dear to your heart,
 strife, yes, and battles, the bloody grind of war. 210
 What if you are a great soldier? That's just a gift of god.
 Go home with your ships and comrades, lord it over
 your Myrmidons!
 You *are* nothing to me—you and your overweening anger!
 But let this be my warning on your way:
 since Apollo insists on taking my Chryseis,
 I'll send her back in my own ships with *my* crew.
 But I, I will be there in person at your tents
 to take Briseis in all her beauty, your own prize—
 so you can learn just how much greater I am than you
 and the next man up may shrink from matching words with me, 220
 from hoping to rival Agamemnon strength for strength!"

He broke off and anguish gripped Achilles.
 The heart in his rugged chest was pounding, torn . . .
 Should he draw the long sharp sword slung at his hip,

thrust through the ranks and kill Agamemnon now?—
or check his rage and beat his fury down?
As his racing spirit veered back and forth,
just as he drew his huge blade from its sheath,
down from the vaulting heavens swept Athena,
the white-armed goddess Hera sped her down: 230
Hera loved both men and cared for both alike.
Rearing behind him Pallas seized his fiery hair—
only Achilles saw her, none of the other fighters—
struck with wonder he spun around, he knew her at once,
Pallas Athena! the terrible blazing of those eyes,
and his winged words went flying: “Why, why now?
Child of Zeus with the shield of thunder, why come now?
To witness the outrage Agamemnon just committed?
I tell you this, and so help me it’s the truth—
he’ll soon pay for his arrogance with his life!” 240

Her gray eyes clear, the goddess Athena answered,
“Down from the skies I come to check your rage
if only you will yield.
The white-armed goddess Hera sped me down:
she loves you both, she cares for you both alike.
Stop this fighting, now. Don’t lay hand to sword.
Lash him with threats of the price that he will face.
And I tell you this—and I *know* it is the truth—
one day glittering gifts will lie before you,
three times over to pay for all his outrage. 250
Hold back now. Obey us both.”

So she urged
and the swift runner complied at once: “I must—
when the two of you hand down commands, Goddess,
a man submits though his heart breaks with fury.
Better for him by far. If a man obeys the gods
they’re quick to hear his prayers.”

And with that
Achilles stayed his burly hand on the silver hilt
and slid the huge blade back in its sheath.
He would not fight the orders of Athena.

Soaring home to Olympus, she rejoined the gods 260
aloft in the halls of Zeus whose shield is thunder.

But Achilles rounded on Agamemnon once again,
lashing out at him, not relaxing his anger for a moment:
“Staggering drunk, with your dog’s eyes, your fawn’s heart!
Never once did you arm with the troops and go to battle
or risk an ambush packed with Achaea’s picked men—
you lack the courage, you can see death coming.
Safer by far, you find, to foray all through camp,
commandeering the prize of any man who speaks against you.
King who devours his people! Worthless husks, the men you rule— 270
if not, Atrides, this outrage would have been your last.
I tell you this, and I swear a mighty oath upon it . . .
by this, this scepter, look,
that never again will put forth crown and branches,
now it’s left its stump on the mountain ridge forever,
nor will it sprout new green again, now the brazen ax
has stripped its bark and leaves, and now the sons of Achaea
pass it back and forth as they hand their judgments down,
upholding the honored customs whenever Zeus commands—
This scepter will be the mighty force behind my oath: 280
someday, I swear, a yearning for Achilles will strike
Achaea’s sons and all your armies! But then, Atrides,
harrowed as you will be, *nothing* you do can save you—
not when your hordes of fighters drop and die,
cut down by the hands of man-killing Hector! Then—
then you will tear your heart out, desperate, raging
that you disgraced the best of the Achaeans!”

Down on the ground

he dashed the scepter studded bright with golden nails,
then took his seat again. The son of Atreus smoldered,
glaring across at him, but Nestor rose between them, 290
the man of winning words, the clear speaker of Pylos . . .
Sweeter than honey from his tongue the voice flowed on and on.
Two generations of mortal men he had seen go down by now,
those who were born and bred with him in the old days,
in Pylos’ holy realm, and now he ruled the third.

He pleaded with both kings, with clear good will,
 “No more—or enormous sorrow comes to all Achaea!
 How they would exult, Priam and Priam’s sons
 and all the Trojans. Oh they’d leap for joy
 to hear the two of you battling on this way, 300
 you who excel us all, first in Achaean councils,
 first in the ways of war.

Stop. Please.

Listen to Nestor. You are both younger than I,
 and in my time I struck up with better men than you,
 even you, but never once did they make light of me.
 I’ve never seen such men, I never will again . . .
 men like Pirithous, Dryas, that fine captain,
 Caeneus and Exadius, and Polyphemus, royal prince,
 and Theseus, Aegeus’ boy, a match for the immortals.
 They were the strongest mortals ever bred on earth, 310
 the strongest, and they fought against the strongest too,
 shaggy Centaurs, wild brutes of the mountains—
 they hacked them down, terrible, deadly work.
 And I was in their ranks, fresh out of Pylos,
 far away from home—they enlisted me themselves
 and I fought on my own, a free lance, single-handed.
 And none of the men who walk the earth these days
 could battle with those fighters, none, but they,
 they took to heart my counsels, marked my words.
 So now you listen too. Yielding is far better . . . 320
 Don’t seize the girl, Agamemnon, powerful as you are—
 leave her, just as the sons of Achaea gave her,
 his prize from the very first.
 And you, Achilles, never hope to fight it out
 with your king, pitting force against his force:
 no one can match the honors dealt a king, you know,
 a sceptered king to whom great Zeus gives glory.
 Strong as you are—a goddess was your mother—
 he has more power because he rules more men.
 Atrides, end your anger—look, it’s Nestor! 330
 I beg you, cool your fury against Achilles.

Here the man stands over all Achaea's armies,
our rugged bulwark braced for shocks of war."

But King Agamemnon answered him in haste,
"True, old man—all you say is fit and proper—
but this soldier wants to tower over the armies,
he wants to rule over all, to lord it over all,
give out orders to every man in sight. Well,
there's one, I trust, who will never yield to *him*!
What if the everlasting gods have made a spearman of him? 340
Have they entitled him to hurl abuse at *me*?"

"Yes!"—blazing Achilles broke in quickly—
"What a worthless, burnt-out coward I'd be called
if I would submit to you and all your orders,
whatever you blurt out. Fling them at others,
don't give me commands!
Never again, *I* trust, will Achilles yield to *you*.
And I tell you this—take it to heart, I warn you—
my hands will never do battle for that girl,
neither with you, King, nor any man alive. 350
You Achaeans gave her, now you've snatched her back.
But all the rest I possess beside my fast black ship—
not one bit of it can you seize against my will, Atrides.
Come, try it! So the men can see, that instant,
your black blood gush and spurt around my spear!"

Once the two had fought it out with words,
battling face-to-face, both sprang to their feet
and broke up the muster beside the Argive squadrons.
Achilles strode off to his trim ships and shelters,
back to his friend Patroclus and their comrades. 360
Agamemnon had a vessel hauled down to the sea,
he picked out twenty oarsmen to man her locks,
put aboard the cattle for sacrifice to the god
and led Chryseis in all her beauty amidships.

Versatile Odysseus took the helm as captain.

All embarked,

the party launched out on the sea's foaming lanes
while the son of Atreus told his troops to wash,
to purify themselves from the filth of plague.
They scoured it off, threw scourings in the surf
and sacrificed to Apollo full-grown bulls and goats
along the beaten shore of the fallow barren sea
and savory smoke went swirling up the skies.

370

So the men were engaged throughout the camp.
But King Agamemnon would not stop the quarrel,
the first threat he hurled against Achilles.
He called Talthybius and Eurybates briskly,
his two heralds, ready, willing aides:
"Go to Achilles' lodge. Take Briseis at once,
his beauty Briseis by the hand and bring her here.
But if he will not surrender her, I'll go myself,
I'll seize her myself, with an army at my back—
and all the worse for him!"

380

He sent them off
with the strict order ringing in their ears.
Against their will the two men made their way
along the breaking surf of the barren salt sea
and reached the Myrmidon shelters and their ships.
They found him beside his lodge and black hull,
seated grimly—and Achilles took no joy
when he saw the two approaching.
They were afraid, they held the king in awe
and stood there, silent. Not a word to Achilles,
not a question. But he sensed it all in his heart,
their fear, their charge, and broke the silence for them:
"Welcome, couriers! Good heralds of Zeus and men,
here, come closer. You have done nothing to me.
You are not to blame. No one but Agamemnon—
he is the one who sent you for Briseis.
Go, Patroclus, Prince, bring out the girl
and hand her to them so they can take her back.

390

But let them both bear witness to my loss . . . 400
 in the face of blissful gods and mortal men,
 in the face of that unbending, ruthless king—
 if the day should come when the armies need *me*
 to save their ranks from ignominious, stark defeat.
 The man is raving—with all the murderous fury in his heart.
 He lacks the sense to see a day behind, a day ahead,
 and safeguard the Achaeans battling by the ships.”

Patroclus obeyed his great friend’s command.
 He led Briseis in all her beauty from the lodge
 and handed her over to the men to take away. 410
 And the two walked back along the Argive ships
 while she trailed on behind, reluctant, every step.
 But Achilles wept, and slipping away from his companions,
 far apart, sat down on the beach of the heaving gray sea
 and scanned the endless ocean. Reaching out his arms,
 again and again he prayed to his dear mother: “Mother!
 You gave me life, short as that life will be,
 so at least Olympian Zeus, thundering up on high,
 should give me honor—but now he gives me nothing.
 Atreus’ son Agamemnon, for all his far-flung kingdoms— 420
 the man disgraces me, seizes and keeps my prize,
 he tears her away himself!”

So he wept and prayed
 and his noble mother heard him, seated near her father,
 the Old Man of the Sea in the salt green depths.
 Suddenly up she rose from the churning surf
 like mist and settling down beside him as he wept,
 stroked Achilles gently, whispering his name, “My child—
 why in tears? What sorrow has touched your heart?
 Tell me, please. Don’t harbor it deep inside you.
 We must share it all.”

And now from his depths 430
 the proud runner groaned: “You know, you know,
 why labor through it all? You know it all so well . . .
 We raided Thebe once, Eetion’s sacred citadel,
 we ravaged the place, hauled all the plunder here

and the armies passed it round, share and share alike,
and they chose the beauty Chryseis for Agamemnon.
But soon her father, the holy priest of Apollo
the distant deadly Archer, Chryses approached
the fast trim ships of the Argives armed in bronze
to win his daughter back, bringing a priceless ransom 440
and bearing high in hand, wound on a golden staff,
the wreaths of the god who strikes from worlds away.
He begged the whole Achaean army but most of all
the two supreme commanders, Atreus' two sons,
and all ranks of Achaeans cried out their assent,
'Respect the priest, accept the shining ransom!'
But it brought no joy to the heart of Agamemnon,
our high and mighty king dismissed the priest
with a brutal order ringing in his ears.
And shattered with anger, the old man withdrew 450
but Apollo heard his prayer—he loved him, deeply—
he loosed his shaft at the Argives, withering plague,
and now the troops began to drop and die in droves,
the arrows of god went showering left and right,
whipping through the Achaeans' vast encampment.
But the old seer who knew the cause full well
revealed the will of the archer god Apollo.
And I was the first, mother, I urged them all,
'Appease the god at once!' That's when the fury
gripped the son of Atreus. Agamemnon leapt to his feet 460
and hurled his threat—his threat's been driven home.
One girl, Chryseis, the fiery-eyed Achaeans
ferry out in a fast trim ship to Chryse Island,
laden with presents for the god. The other girl,
just now, the heralds came and led her away from camp,
Briseus' daughter, the prize the armies gave me.
But you, mother, if you have any power at all,
protect your son! Go to Olympus, plead with Zeus,
if you ever warmed his heart with a word or any action . . .

Time and again I heard your claims in father's halls, 470
boasting how you and you alone of all the immortals

rescued Zeus, the lord of the dark storm cloud,
from ignominious, stark defeat . . .

That day the Olympians tried to chain him down,
Hera, Poseidon lord of the sea, and Pallas Athena—
you rushed to Zeus, dear Goddess, broke those chains,
quickly ordered the hundred-hander to steep Olympus,
that monster whom the immortals call Briareus
but every mortal calls the Sea-god's son, Aegaeon,
though he's stronger than his father. Down he sat,
flanking Cronus' son, gargantuan in the glory of it all,
and the blessed gods were struck with terror then,
they stopped shackling Zeus.

480

Remind him of that,
now, go and sit beside him, grasp his knees . . .
persuade him, somehow, to help the Trojan cause,
to pin the Achaeans back against their ships,
trap them round the bay and mow them down.
So all can reap the benefits of their king—
so even mighty Atrides can see how mad he was
to disgrace Achilles, the best of the Achaeans!"

490

And Thetis answered, bursting into tears,
"O my son, my sorrow, why did I ever bear you?
All I bore was doom . . .
Would to god you could linger by your ships
without a grief in the world, without a torment!
Doomed to a short life, you have so little time.
And not only short, now, but filled with heartbreak too,
more than all other men alive—doomed twice over.
Ah to a cruel fate I bore you in our halls!
Still, I shall go to Olympus crowned with snow
and repeat your prayer to Zeus who loves the lightning.
Perhaps he will be persuaded.

500

But you, my child,
stay here by the fast ships, rage on at the Achaeans,
just keep clear of every foray in the fighting.
Only yesterday Zeus went off to the Ocean River
to feast with the Aethiopians, loyal, lordly men,

and all the gods went with him. But in twelve days
the Father returns to Olympus. Then, for your sake,
up I go to the bronze floor, the royal house of Zeus—
I'll grasp his knees, I think I'll win him over."

With that vow 510

his mother went away and left him there, alone,
his heart inflamed for the sashed and lovely girl
they'd wrenched away from him against his will.
Meanwhile Odysseus drew in close to Chryse Island,
bearing the splendid sacrifice in the vessel's hold.
And once they had entered the harbor deep in bays
they furled and stowed the sail in the black ship,
they lowered the mast by the forestays, smoothly,
quickly let it down on the forked mast-crutch
and rowed her into a mooring under oars. 520
Out went the bow-stones—cables fast astern—
and the crew themselves swung out in the breaking surf,
leading out the sacrifice for the archer god Apollo,
and out of the deep-sea ship Chryseis stepped too.
Then tactful Odysseus led her up to the altar,
placing her in her loving father's arms, and said,
"Chryses, the lord of men Agamemnon sent me here
to bring your daughter back and perform a sacrifice,
a grand sacrifice to Apollo—for all Achaea's sake—
so we can appease the god 530
who's loosed such grief and torment on the Argives."

With those words he left her in Chryses' arms
and the priest embraced the child he loved, exultant.
At once the men arranged the sacrifice for Apollo,
making the cattle ring his well-built altar,
then they rinsed their hands and took up barley.
Rising among them Chryses stretched his arms to the sky
and prayed in a high resounding voice, "Hear me, Apollo!
God of the silver bow who strides the walls of Chryse
and Cilla sacrosanct—lord in power of Tenedos! 540
If you honored me last time and heard my prayer
and rained destruction down on all Achaea's ranks,

now bring my prayer to pass once more. Now, at last,
drive this killing plague from the armies of Achaea!”

His prayer went up and Phoebus Apollo heard him.
And soon as the men had prayed and flung the barley,
first they lifted back the heads of the victims,
slit their throats, skinned them and carved away
the meat from the thighbones and wrapped them in fat,
a double fold sliced clean and topped with strips of flesh. 550
And the old man burned these over dried split wood
and over the quarters poured out glistening wine
while young men at his side held five-pronged forks.
Once they had burned the bones and tasted the organs
they cut the rest into pieces, pierced them with spits,
roasted them to a turn and pulled them off the fire.
The work done, the feast laid out, they ate well
and no man’s hunger lacked a share of the banquet.
When they had put aside desire for food and drink,
the young men brimmed the mixing bowls with wine 560
and tipping first drops for the god in every cup
they poured full rounds for all. And all day long
they appeased the god with song, raising a ringing hymn
to the distant archer god who drives away the plague,
those young Achaean warriors singing out his power,
and Apollo listened, his great heart warm with joy.

Then when the sun went down and night came on
they made their beds and slept by the stern-cables . . .
When young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more,
they set sail for the main encampment of Achaea. 570
The Archer sent them a bracing following wind,
they stepped the mast, spread white sails wide,
the wind hit full and the canvas bellied out
and a dark blue wave, foaming up at the bow,
sang out loud and strong as the ship made way,
skimming the whitecaps, cutting toward her goal.
And once offshore of Achaea’s vast encampment
they eased her in and hauled the black ship high,

far up on the sand, and shored her up with timbers.
Then they scattered, each to his own ship and shelter. 580

But *he* raged on, grimly camped by his fast fleet,
the royal son of Peleus, the swift runner Achilles.
Now he no longer haunted the meeting grounds
where men win glory, now he no longer went to war
but day after day he ground his heart out, waiting there,
yearning, always yearning for battle cries and combat.

But now as the twelfth dawn after this shone clear
the gods who live forever marched home to Olympus,
all in a long cortege, and Zeus led them on.
And Thetis did not forget her son's appeals. 590
She broke from a cresting wave at first light
and soaring up to the broad sky and Mount Olympus,
found the son of Cronus gazing down on the world,
peaks apart from the other gods and seated high
on the topmost crown of rugged ridged Olympus.
And crouching down at his feet,
quickly grasping his knees with her left hand,
her right hand holding him underneath the chin,
she prayed to the lord god Zeus, the son of Cronus:
"Zeus, Father Zeus! If I ever served you well 600
among the deathless gods with a word or action,
bring this prayer to pass: honor my son Achilles!—
doomed to the shortest life of any man on earth.
And now the lord of men Agamemnon has disgraced him,
seizes and keeps his prize, tears her away himself. But you—
exalt him, Olympian Zeus: your urgings rule the world!
Come, grant the Trojans victory after victory
till the Achaean armies pay my dear son back,
building higher the honor he deserves!"

She paused
but Zeus who commands the storm clouds answered nothing. 610
The Father sat there, silent. It seemed an eternity . . .
But Thetis, clasping his knees, held on, clinging,
pressing her question once again: "Grant my prayer,

once and for all, Father, bow your head in assent!
 Or deny me outright. What have *you* to fear?
 So I may know, too well, just how cruelly
I am the most dishonored goddess of them all.”

Filled with anger

Zeus who marshals the storm clouds answered her at last:
 “Disaster. You will drive me into war with Hera.
 She will provoke me, she with her shrill abuse. 620
 Even now in the face of all the immortal gods
 she harries me perpetually, Hera charges *me*
 that I always go to battle for the Trojans.
 Away with you now. Hera might catch us here.
 I will see to this. I will bring it all to pass.
 Look, I will bow my head if that will satisfy you.
 That, I remind you, that among the immortal gods
 is the strongest, truest sign that I can give.
 No word or work of mine—nothing can be revoked,
 there is no treachery, nothing left unfinished 630
 once I bow my head to say it shall be done.”

So he decreed. And Zeus the son of Cronus bowed
 his craggy dark brows and the deathless locks came pouring
 down from the thunderhead of the great immortal king
 and giant shock waves spread through all Olympus.

So the two of them made their pact and parted.
 Deep in the sea she dove from radiant Mount Olympus.
 Zeus went back to his own halls, and all the gods
 in full assembly rose from their seats at once
 to meet the Father striding toward them now. 640
 None dared remain at rest as Zeus advanced,
 they all sprang up to greet him face-to-face
 as he took his place before them on his throne.
 But Hera knew it all. She had seen how Thetis,
 the Old Man of the Sea’s daughter, Thetis quick
 on her glistening feet was hatching plans with Zeus.
 And suddenly Hera taunted the Father, son of Cronus:
 “So, who of the gods this time, my treacherous one,

was hatching plans with you?
Always your pleasure, whenever my back is turned, 650
to settle things in your grand clandestine way.
You never deign, do you, freely and frankly,
to share your plots with me—never, not a word!”

The father of men and gods replied sharply,
“Hera—stop hoping to fathom all my thoughts.
You will find them a trial, though you are my wife.
Whatever is right for you to hear, no one, trust me,
will know of it before you, neither god nor man.
Whatever I choose to plan apart from all the gods—
no more of your everlasting questions, probe and pry no more.” 660

And Hera the Queen, her dark eyes wide, exclaimed,
“Dread majesty, son of Cronus, what are you saying?
Now surely I’ve never probed or pried in the past.
Why, you can scheme to your heart’s content
without a qualm in the world for me. But now
I have a terrible fear that she has won you over,
Thetis, the Old Man of the Sea’s daughter, Thetis
with her glistening feet. I know it. Just at dawn
she knelt down beside you and grasped your knees
and I suspect you bowed your head in assent to her— 670
you granted once and for all to exalt Achilles now
and slaughter hordes of Achaeans pinned against their ships.”

And Zeus who marshals the thunderheads returned,
“Maddening one . . . you and your eternal suspicions—
I can never escape you. Ah but tell me, Hera,
just what can you *do* about all this? Nothing.
Only estrange yourself from me a little more—
and all the worse for you.
If what you say is true, that must be my pleasure.
Now go sit down. Be quiet now. Obey my orders, 680
for fear the gods, however many Olympus holds,

are powerless to protect you when I come
to throttle you with my irresistible hands.”

He subsided

but Hera the Queen, her eyes wider, was terrified.
She sat in silence. She wrenched her will to his.
And throughout the halls of Zeus the gods of heaven
quaked with fear. Hephaestus the Master Craftsman
rose up first to harangue them all, trying now
to bring his loving mother a little comfort,
the white-armed goddess Hera: “Oh disaster . . . 690
that’s what it is, and it will be unbearable
if the two of you must come to blows this way,
flinging the gods in chaos just for mortal men.
No more joy for us in the sumptuous feast
when riot rules the day.
I urge you, mother—you know that I am right—
work back into his good graces, so the Father,
our beloved Father will never wheel on us again,
send our banquets crashing! The Olympian lord of lightning—
what if he would like to blast us from our seats? 700
He is far too strong. Go back to him, mother,
stroke the Father with soft, winning words—
at once the Olympian will turn kind to us again.”

Pleading, springing up with a two-handled cup,
he reached it toward his loving mother’s hands
with his own winning words: “Patience, mother!
Grieved as you are, bear up, or dear as you are,
I have to see you beaten right before my eyes.
I would be shattered—what could I do to save you?
It’s hard to fight the Olympian strength for strength. 710
You remember the last time I rushed to your defense?
He seized my foot, he hurled me off the tremendous threshold
and all day long I dropped, I was dead weight and then,
when the sun went down, down I plunged on Lemnos,
little breath left in me. But the mortals there
soon nursed a fallen immortal back to life.”

At that the white-armed goddess Hera smiled
and smiling, took the cup from her child's hands.
Then dipping sweet nectar up from the mixing bowl
he poured it round to all the immortals, left to right. 720
And uncontrollable laughter broke from the happy gods
as they watched the god of fire breathing hard
and bustling through the halls.

That hour then
and all day long till the sun went down they feasted
and no god's hunger lacked a share of the handsome banquet
or the gorgeous lyre Apollo struck or the Muses singing
voice to voice in choirs, their vibrant music rising.

At last, when the sun's fiery light had set,
each immortal went to rest in his own house,
the splendid high halls Hephaestus built for each 730
with all his craft and cunning, the famous crippled Smith.
And Olympian Zeus the lord of lightning went to his own bed
where he had always lain when welcome sleep came on him.
There he climbed and there he slept and by his side
lay Hera the Queen, the goddess of the golden throne.