

Lecture Series on Homer's *Iliad*: Lecture 3

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Book 6

The gods are absent, and the Achaean forces are again successful in overwhelming the Trojans. The Trojans move back in the direction of the city. Menelaus thinks about taking a ransom in return for Adrestus's life. Adrestus is a Trojan he has successfully subdued. However, Agamemnon pushes him to kill the man right away. Nestor realizes that the Trojans are becoming weaker and encourages the Achaeans not to spend any time stripping the weapons off their fallen enemies. He thinks that they should make their focus killing as many of the enemy as possible while they're still able to do so. The Trojans believe that they will experience downfall, and Helenus, the soothsayer, encourages Hector to go back to Troy to ask Queen Hecuba, his mother, in addition to her noblewomen, to pray at the temple of Athena for mercy. Hector follows this advice, and he gives his mother and the noblewomen what they must do. He subsequently visits Paris, his brother, who is now withdrawn from battle, claiming that grief will now allow him to participate.

Hector and Helen are contemptuous of Paris for not fighting and they show their scorn. Paris eventually decides to return to battle. Hector also gets ready to return to the fighting but he decides to first visit his wife, Andromache. He finds Andromache nursing Astyanax, their son, by the city's walls. As Andromache holds the child, she shows her anxiety as she sees the occurrences on the plains located below. Andromache pleads with Hector not go return to the battle. He insists, however, that he is unable to escape his fate. Astyanax is at first scared of the crest on Hector's helmet, but he is happy to see his father. Hector kisses his son. Hector subsequently departs. As she is certain that Hector will soon die, Andromache starts to mourn his death. As he is leaving the city, Hector sees Paris. The brothers get ready to again take part in battle.

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The battle escalates with the return of Paris and Hector. However, Athena and Apollo soon opt to end the battle for that day. They decide to have a duel to stop the current bout of conflict. Hector moves to the Achaean line, offering himself to any man who will fight him. Menelaus is the only one who is brave enough to step forward, but Agamemnon dissuades him. He knows that Menelaus is not able to effectively fight Hector. Nestor is too old to fight Hector, but he encourages his comrades to take up the challenge. Nine Achaean men step forward. After a lottery, Great Ajax is selected.

The duel between Hector and Ajax begins with the tossing of spears. Neither is successful in this. After that, lances are used. Ajax is able to draw Hector's blood. The two men are just about to fight with their swords when they are stopped by heralds sent by Zeus. They are to cancel the fight because night has fallen. The two men give one another gifts and their duel is ended with a pact of friendship.

That evening, Nestor delivers a speech recommending that the Achaeans request a day to bury their dead. He also says that they should build fortifications for their camp. In the Trojan camp, King Priam proposes something similar with regard to the Trojan dead. Additionally, Antenor, his advisor, requests that Paris give up Helen and end the war.

Paris refuses to do this, but he offers to give back all the loot he seized from Sparta. However, when this offer is presented to the Achaeans by the Trojans the next day, the Achaeans refuse to accept the compromise when they sense desperation. It is agreed by both sides, though, to set aside a day of respite during which they may bury their dead. Poseidon and Zeus observe as the Achaeans build their fortifications. They plan to destroy them when the men leave.

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After he has forbidden the other gods from any interference in the war, Zeus makes his way to Mount Ida, which overlooks the Trojan plain. It is there that he weighs in his scale the fates of Achaea and Troy. The Achaean side sinks downward. Zeus puts the battle in the Trojans' favor, unleashing a shower of lightning on the Achaean army. The Greeks retreat, terrified. Encouraged by the Trojans' sudden success, Hector looks for Nestor. Nestor is in the middle of the battlefield. He is scooped up by Diomedes into a chariot just in time. Hector goes after both men, trying to push them towards Greek fortifications. He plans to set fire to their ships while they are there. When he sees the Achaean army begin to collapse, Hera inspires Agamemnon to gather his troops. He tries to strengthen their pride, encourages them to have heart, and prays to Zeus for relief. Zeus finally gives them a sign. It is an eagle with a fawn in its talons. This divine symbol inspires retaliation from the Achaeans.

The Achaeans continue working to regain their power, and many Trojans are killed by the archer Teucer. Hector is finally able to wound this archer, however, thereby changing the tide of the battle again. Hector pushes the Greeks behind their fortifications, for the entire way to their ships. Hera and Athena feel unable to endure any additional suffering on the part of the Greeks, and they get ready to enter the fray. However, Zeus sends Iris, a goddess, to tell them what the consequences of interfering could be. Aware that they are unable to compete with Zeus, Hera and Athena give up and go back to Mount Olympus. After Zeus returns, he informs them that the following morning will hold their final chance to save the Achaeans. He points out that only Achilles will be able to prevent the destruction of the Greeks.

The Trojans feel confident that they are still dominant. That night, they camp outside the walls of the city. Hector tells his men to set up hundreds of campfires so that the Greeks will be unable to escape without being seen. The Greeks have been rescued by nightfall for now, but Hector plans to deal with them the next day.