The Death of Hector

Achilles, now like inhuman fire raging on through the mountains gorges that are splinter-dry, setting ablaze big stands of timber, the wind swirling the huge fireball left and right — chaos of fire — Achilles storming on with brandished spear like a frenzied god of battle, trampling all he killed, and the earth ran black with blood. Thundering on — on like an oxen broad in the brow some field hand yokes to crush white barley heaped on a well-laid threshing floor and the grain is husked out fast by the oxen’s hoofs — so as the great Achilles rampaged on, his sharp-hoofed stallions trampled shields and corpses, axle under his chariot splashed with blood — blood on the handrails sweeping round the car, sprays of blood shooting up from the stallions hoofs and churning whirling rims — and the son of Peleus charioteering on to seize his glory, bloody filth splattering both strong arms, Achilles invincible arms!

But once they reached the ford where the river runs clear, the strong whirling Xanthus sprung of immortal Zeus, Achilles split the Trojan rout, driving one half back toward the city, scattering up the plain where Achaeans themselves stampeded off in terror just the day before, when Hector raged unchecked.

But Achilles slaughtered on and on, never pausing — killing Trojans and skittish battle teams at once. But there on the god-built heights of Troy, stood aged Priam. He saw the monstrous Achilles, and racing on before him, Trojans whipped in headlong flight, all rescue gone

The great king cried out:

“Spread the gates wide — all hands now — till our routed troops can straggle back to Troy. Achilles swarms over them! They’re stampeding! A terrible mauling’s coming. I can see it now.

All the while, the rest of the Trojans fled en masse, thrilled to reach the ramparts — crowding, swarming in, no daring left to remain outside the city walls
So all through Troy, the men who had fled like panicked fawns were wiping off their sweat, drinking away their thirst, leaning along the city’s massive ramparts now, while Achaean troops, sloping shields to shoulders, closed against the walls. But there stood Hector, shackled fast by his deadly fate, holding his ground.

And old king Priam was first to see him. The old man cried pitifully, hands reaching out to him:

“Oh Hector! Don’t just stand there, don’t, dear child, waiting that man’s attack — alone, cut off from friends! You’ll meet your doom at once, beaten down by Achilles, so much stronger than you—that hard, headlong man.

So the old man groaned, and seizing his gray hair, tore it out by the roots, but he could not shake the fixed resolve of Hector.

And his mother wailed now, standing beside Priam, weeping freely, loosing her robes with one hand and holding out her bare breast with the other, her words pouring forth in a flight of grief and tears:

‘Hector, my child! Look, have some respect for this! Pity your mother too. If I ever gave you the breast to soothe your troubles, remember it now, dear boy — beat back that savage man from safe inside the walls!

But they could not shake the fixed resolve of Hector. No. He waited for Achilles, coming on, gigantic in power. As a snake in the hills, guarding his hole, awaits a man-bloated with poison, deadly hatred seething inside him, glances flashing fire as he coils round his lair, so Hector, nursing his quenchless fury, gave no ground.

And now, at last, as the two came closing for the kill, it was tall Hector, helmet flashing, who led off:

“No more running from you in fear, Achilles! Now my spirit stirs me to meet you face-to-face. Now kill or be killed! Come, we’ll swear to the gods, the highest witness — the gods will oversee our binding pacts. I swear I will never mutilate you — merciless as you are — if Zeus allows me to last it out and tear your life away. But once I’ve stripped your glorious armor, Achilles, I will give your body back to your loyal comrades. Swear you’ll do
the same.”

A swift dark glance, and the headstrong runner answered:

”Hector, stop! You unforgivable, you . . . Don’t talk to me of pacts. There are no binding oaths between men and lions — wolves and lambs can enjoy no meeting of the minds — they are all bent on hating each other to the death. So with you and me. No love between us. No truce till one or the other falls and gluts with blood Ares who hacks at men from behind his rawhide shield. Come, call up whatever courage you can muster. Life or death — now prove yourself spearman, a daring man of war! No more escape for you — Athena will kill you with my spear in just a moment. Now you’ll pay at a stroke for all my comrades’ grief, all you killed in the fury of your spear!”

With that, shaft poised, he hurled, and his spear’s long shadow flew but seeing it coming, glorious Hector ducked away, crouching down, watching the bronze tip fly past and stab the earth — but Athena snatched it up and passed it back to Achilles, and Hector the gallant captain never saw her.

He sounded out a challenge to Peleus’ princely son:

“You missed — look — the great godlike Achilles! So you knew nothing at all from Zeus about my death. And yet how sure you were! All bluff! Cunning with words, that’s all you are — trying to make me fear you, lose my nerve, forget my fighting strength. Well, you’ll never plant your lance in my back as I flee you in fear. Plunge it through my chest as I come charging in, if a god gives you the chance! But now it’s for you to dodge my brazen spear. I wish you’d bury it in your body to the hilt. How much lighter the war would be for the Trojans then if you, their greatest scourge, were dead and gone!”

Shaft poised, he hurled, and his spear’s long shadow flew and it struck Achilles’ shield — a dead-center hit — but off and away it glanced, and Hector seethed, his hurling spear, his whole arm’s power poured in a wasted shot. He stood there, cast down. He had no spear in reserve.

Yes! And Hector knew the truth in his heart, and the fighter cried aloud:
“My time has come! At last the gods have called me down to death. And now death — grim death — is looming up beside me, no longer far away. No way to escape it now. This ... this was their pleasure after all, sealed long ago — Zeus and the son of Zeus, the distant deadly Archer — though often before now they rushed to my defense. So now I meet my Doom. Well let me die. But not without struggle, not without glory — no—in some great clash of arms that even men to come will hear of down the years!”

And on that resolve he drew the whetted sword that hung at his side, tempered, massive, and gathering all his force he swooped like a soaring eagle launching down from the dark clouds to earth to snatch some helpless lamb or trembling hare. So Hector swooped now, swinging his whetted sword. And Achilles charged too, bursting with rage, barbaric, guarding his chest with the well-wrought blazoned shield, head tossing his gleaming helmet, four horns strong and the golden plumes shook that the god of fire drove in, bristling thick along its ridge. Bright as that star amid the stars in the night sky, star of the evening, brightest star that rides the heavens, so fire flared from the sharp point of the spear Achilles brandished high in his right hand, bent on Hector’s death, scanning his splendid body — where to pierce it best?

The rest of his flesh seemed all encased in armor, burnished, brazen — Achilles’ armor that Hector stripped from strong Patroclus when he killed him — true; but one spot lay exposed, where collarbones lift the neckbone off the shoulders, the open throat, where the end of life comes quickest— there as Hector charged in fury brilliant Achilles drove his spear and the point went stabbing clean through the tender neck. But the heavy bronze weapon failed to slash the windpipe — Hector could still gasp out some words, some last reply. He crashed in the dust.

Godlike Achilles gloried over him:

“Hector, surely you thought when you stripped Patroclus’ armor that you, you would be safe! Never a fear of me — far from the fighting as I was. You fool! Left behind there, down by the beaked ships his great avenger waited, a greater man by far. That man was I, and I smashed your strength! And you — the dogs and birds will maul you, shame your corpse while Achaeans bury my dear friend in glory!”
Struggling for breath, Hector, his helmet flashing, said:

“I beg you, beg you by your life, your parents — don’t let the dogs devour me by the Argive ships! Wait, take the princely ransom of bronze and gold, the gifts my father and noble mother will give you, but give my body to friends to carry me home again, so Trojan men and Trojan women can do me honor with fitting rites of fire once I am dead.”

Staring grimly, the proud runner Achilles answered:

“Beg no more, you fawning dog — begging me by my parents! Would to god my rage, my fury, would drive me now to hack your flesh away and eat you raw — such agonies you have caused me! Ransom? No man alive could keep the dog-packs off you, not if they haul in ten, twenty times that ransom? No man alive could keep the dog-packs off you, not if they haul in ten, twenty times that ransom and pile it here before me and promise fortunes more — no, not even if Dardan Priam should offer to weigh out you bulk in gold! Not even then will your noble mother lay you on your deathbed, mourn the son she bore. The dogs and birds will rend you blood and bone!”

At the point of death, Hector, his helmet flashing, said:

“I know you well. I see my fate before me. Never a chance that I could win you over. Iron inside your chest — that heart of yours. But now beware, or my curse will draw god’s wrath upon your head, that day when Paris and lord Apollo — for all your fighting heart — destroy you at the Scaean Gates!”

Death cut him short. The end closed in around him. Flying free of his limbs, his soul went winging down to the house of death, wailing his fate, leaving his manhood far behind, his young and supple strength.

But Brilliant Achilles taunted Hector’s body, dead as he was:

“Die! Die! For my own death — I’ll meet it freely, whenever Zeus and the deathless gods would like to bring it on!”

With that, he wrenched his bronze spear from the corpse, laid it aside
and ripped the bloody armor off the back. And the other sons of Achaea, running up around him, crowded closer, all of them gazing wonder-struck at the build and marvelous lithe beauty of Hector.

And not a man came forward who did not stab his body, glancing toward a comrade, laughing:

“Ah, look here. How much softer he is to handle now, this Hector, than when he gutted our ships with roaring fire!”

Standing over him, so they’d gloat and stab his body.

But once he had stripped the corpse, the proud runner Achilles took his stand in the midst of all the Argive troops and urged them on with a flight of winging orders:

“Friends — lords of the Argives, O my captains! Now that the gods have let me kill this man who caused us agonies, loss on crushing loss — more than the rest of all their men combined — come, let us ring their walls in armor, test them, see what recourse the Trojan still may have in mind. Will they abandon the city heights with this man fallen? Or brace for a last, dying stand, though Hector’s gone? But wait—what am I saying? Why this deep debate? Down by the ships a body lies unwept, unburied. Patroclus. I will never forget him, not as long as I’m still among the living and my springing knees will lift and dive me on. Though the dead forget their dead in the house of death, I will remember, even there, my dear companion.

Now, come, you sons of Achaea, raise a song of triumph! Down to the ships we march and bear this corpse on high. We have won ourselves great glory. We have brought magnificent Hector down — that man the Trojans glorified in their city like a god!”

So he triumphed, and now he was bent on outrage, on shaming noble Hector. Piercing the tendons, ankle to heel behind both feet, he knotted straps of rawhide through them both, lashed them to his chariot, left the head to drag. And mounting the car, hoisting the famous arms aboard, he whipped his team to a run and breakneck on they flew, holding nothing back. And a thick cloud of dust rose up from the man they dragged, his dark hair swirling round — that head so handsome once — all tumbled low in the dust, since Zeus had given him over to his enemies now to be defiled in the land of his
own fathers. So his whole head was dragged down in the dust.

And now his mother began to tear her hair. She flung her shining veil to the ground and raised a high, shattering scream, looking down at her son. Pitifully his loving father groaned, and round the king his people cried with grief and wailing seized the city, for all the world as if all Troy were torched and smoldering down from the looming brows of the citadel to her roots.

Priam’s people could hardly hold the old man back, frantic, mad to go rushing out the Dardan Gates. He begged them all, groveling in the filth, crying out to them —

— calling each man by name:

“Let go, my friends! Much as you care for me, let me hurry out of the city, make my way, all on my own, to Achaea’s waiting ships! I must implore that terrible, violent man…Perhaps…who knows? He may respect my age, may pity an old man. He has a father too, as old as I am. Peleus sired him once, Peleus reared him to be the scourge of Troy. But most of all to me. He made my life hell. So many sons he slaughtered, just coming into bloom. But grieving for all the rest, one breaks my heart the most, and stabbing grief for him will take me down to death. My Hector! Would to god he had perished in my arms! Then his mother who bore him — oh so doomed — she and I could glut ourselves with grief.”

So the voice of the king rang out in tears; the citizens wailed in answer —

— and noble Hecuba led the wives of Troy in a throbbing chant of sorrow:

“O my child. My desolation! How can I go on living? What agonies must I suffer now, now you are dead and gone? You were my pride throughout the city night and day — a blessing to us all, the men and women of Troy. Throughout the city they saluted you like a god. You, you were their greatest glory while you lived. Now death and fate have seized you, dragged you down!”

Her voice rang out tears, but the wife of Hector had not heard a thing. No messenger brought the truth of how her husband made his stand outside
the gates. She was weaving at her loom, deep in the high halls, working flowered braiding into a dark red folding robe. And she called her well-kempt women through the house to set a large three-legged cauldron over the fire, so Hector could have his steaming hot bath when he came home from battle. Poor woman, she never dreamed how far he was from bathing, struck down at Achilles’ hands by blazing-eyed Athena.

But she heard the groans and wails of grief from the rampart now, and her body shook; her shuttle dropped to the ground —

— and she called out to her lovely waiting woman:

“Quickly — two of you follow me — I must see what’s happened. That cry — that was Hector’s honored mother I heard! My heart’s pounding, leaping up in my throat, the knees beneath me paralyzed. Oh I know it! Something terrible’s coming down on Priam’s children. Pray to god the news will never reach my ears! Yes but I dread it so. What if great Achilles has cut down my Hector off from the city, daring Hector, and driven him out across the plain, and all alone? He may have put an end to that fatal headstrong pride that always seized my Hector — never hanging back with the main force of men, always charging ahead, giving ground to no man in his fury!”

So she cried, dashing of of the royal halls like a madwoman, her heart racing hard, her women close behind her. But once she reached the tower where soldiers massed she stopped on the rampart, looked down and saw it all — saw him dragged before the city, stallions galloping, dragging Hector back to Achaea’s beaked warships — ruthless work.

The world went black as night before her eyes, she fainted, falling backward, gasping away her life breath . . . She flung to the winds her glittering headdress, the cap and the coronet, braided band and veil, all the regalia golden Aphrodite gave her once, the day that Hector, helmet aflash in sunlight, led her home to Troy from her father’s house with countless wedding gifts to win her heart. But crowding round her, now her husband’s sisters and brothers’ wives supported her in their midst —

— and she, terrified, stunned to the point of death, struggling for breath now and coming back to life, burst out in grief among the Trojan women:
“O Hector! I am destroyed! Both born to the fate after all! You, you at Troy in the halls of King Priam, I at Thebes, under the timberline of Placos, Eetion’s house. He raised me as a child, that man of doom, his daughter just as doomed. Would to god he’d never fathered me!

“Now down you go to the house of Death, the dark depths of the earth, and leave me here to waste away in grief, a widow lost in the royal halls. And the boy, only a baby, the son we bore together, you and I so doomed. Hector, what help are you to him, now that you are dead? What help is he to you?

Think! Even if he escapes the wrenching horrors of war against the Argives, pain and labor will plague him all his days to come. Strangers will mark his lands off, stealing his estates. The day that orphans a youngster cuts him off from friends. And he hangs his head low, humiliated in every way. His cheeks stained with tears, and pressed by hunger the boy goes up to his father’s old companions, tugging at one man’s cloak, another’s tunic. And some will pity him, true, and one will give him a little cup to drink, enough to wet his lips, not quench his thirst. But then some bully with both his parents living beats him from banquet, fists and abuses flying: ‘You, get out. You’ve got no father feasting with us here!’ And the boy, sobbing, trails home to his widowed mother. Astyanax!

“And years ago, propped on his father’s knee, he would only eat the marrow, the richest cuts of lamb. And when sleep came on him and he had quit his play, cradled warm in his nurse’s arms, he’d drowse off, snug in a soft bed, his heart brimmed with joy. Now what suffering, now he’s lost his father. Astyanax!

“The lord of the city — so the Trojans called him — because it was you, Hector, you and you alone who shielded the gates and the long walls of Troy. But now by the beaked ships, far from your parents, glistening worms will wriggle through your flesh, once the dogs have had their fill of your naked corpse glistening worms will wriggle through your flesh, once the dogs have had their feel of your naked corpse though we have such stores of clothing laid up in the halls, fine things, a joy to the eye, the work of women’s hands. Now, by god, I’ll burn them all, blazing to the skies! No use to you now, they’ll never shroud your body—but they will be your glory, burned by the Trojan men and women in your honor!”
Her voice rang out in tears and the women wailed in answer.