

Grief Reconciliation and Heroic Transformation in Priam and Achilles

Posted on October 2, 2018

Introduction

Book 24 of Homer's *Iliad* brings the epic's central conflict to a temporary moral resolution through the meeting of Priam and Achilles. Priam enters the enemy camp to ransom Hector's body, while Achilles confronts a father whose grief mirrors the future grief of his own father, Peleus. The original response correctly identifies humility, sympathy, forgiveness, and a transformation in Achilles. Several details require refinement. Iris does not tell Priam that he will become a "guest-friend" or that he must abandon his kingship entirely; she communicates Zeus's command and assurance that Hermes will guide him. Priam remains Troy's king, but he approaches Achilles as a suppliant and grieving father. Achilles does not purify himself from "spiritual practices." His change is more specific: compassion interrupts his wrath, he recognizes shared mortality, returns Hector's body, and restores the social obligations that rage had suspended. The following close reading preserves the assignment's four questions while examining divine command, supplication, hospitality, grief, and heroic identity (Homer).

Question One: How Does Priam Respond to Hecuba and Iris After Learning the Gods' Decision?

Iris as the Voice of Zeus

Zeus sends Iris to Priam after the gods debate the treatment of Hector's body. Achilles has repeatedly dragged the corpse around Patroclus's tomb, yet Apollo preserves it from mutilation. Zeus decides that Priam should take a rich ransom to Achilles and retrieve his son. Iris enters the grieving household and delivers an instruction that is both dangerous and authoritative. Priam is to go alone except for an older herald, carry gifts, and trust that Hermes will guide him. He should not fear death because the gods intend the mission to succeed. Priam responds with readiness rather than debate. The message gives form to a desire he already possesses: to recover Hector and restore proper burial. His trust in Iris reflects reverence for Zeus, but it also reveals that grief has made remaining inactive intolerable.

Priam's Response to Hecuba's Fear

Hecuba reacts as a wife and mother who has already lost sons to Achilles. She regards the journey as nearly suicidal and calls Achilles savage and faithless. Her fear is not foolish pessimism. Priam proposes entering the shelter of the warrior who killed Hector and desecrated his corpse. Hecuba therefore urges him not to go and imagines the enemy consuming his blood. Priam answers firmly, telling her not to act as an ominous bird within the palace. His language is harsh because he believes the divine command has removed the decision from ordinary family debate. He declares that even if a mortal prophet had given the instruction, he might doubt it, but he personally heard and saw the goddess. His response combines patriarchal authority, religious certainty, and desperation.

Hecuba's Ritual Counsel

Although Priam rejects Hecuba's attempt to stop him, he accepts her recommendation that he pour a libation and pray for a favorable sign. Hecuba asks Zeus to send an eagle on the right so that Priam may know the journey has divine approval. Priam washes his hands, performs the libation, and prays. Zeus sends the eagle, and the household takes courage. The sequence complicates the idea that Priam simply dismisses his wife. He rejects her conclusion but incorporates her ritual wisdom. Hecuba's action gives the private family a means of confirming the public divine message. The prayer also marks Priam's passage from palace to enemy camp as a sacred and dangerous undertaking.

King and Father

Iris does not require Priam to cease being king; the ransom itself comes from royal wealth, and his authority organizes the expedition. Yet the mission depends on a different aspect of identity. Military kingship cannot command Hector's return because Troy has lost the battlefield. Priam must appeal through fatherhood, age, vulnerability, and sacred supplication. His response to Iris shows willingness to use royal resources, while his response to Hecuba shows the private cost of that public decision. He is simultaneously ruler responsible for burial rites, husband leaving a fearful wife, and father who cannot tolerate his son's degradation. Homer's power lies in keeping these roles together rather than replacing one with another.

Question Two: How Is Priam Greeted by Achilles?

Hermes and the Impossible Entrance

Priam's arrival is prepared by divine assistance. Disguised as a young follower of Achilles, Hermes guides the old king past the Achaean guards, puts sentries to sleep, opens the gates, and reveals his identity before Priam enters Achilles's shelter. The scene emphasizes that courage alone would not

have made the meeting possible. Priam crosses military boundaries through divine protection. He also enters without the ceremonial distance expected between kings. Achilles is eating with a small group of companions, and Priam suddenly appears before them. The extraordinary entrance suspends the normal order of war and creates a private moral space inside the enemy camp.

The Act of Supplication

Priam clasps Achilles's knees and kisses the hands that killed many of his sons. In Greek supplication, physical contact, humility, and appeal to divine and social obligation place the suppliant under protection. The gesture shocks everyone because Priam reverses ordinary expectations of rank and hostility. He does not arrive as a defeated negotiator offering a commercial exchange only. He makes himself vulnerable to the man he has greatest reason to hate. Kissing Achilles's "terrible, man-killing hands" does not erase violence; it forces Achilles to see that violence through the father who bears its consequences. Priam's bodily action communicates more powerfully than a royal demand could have done.

"Remember Your Father"

Priam's speech begins by directing Achilles toward Peleus: "Remember your own father." The appeal creates an analogy without claiming that the two fathers' situations are identical. Peleus still believes Achilles alive, though he is old and surrounded by potential enemies. Priam has lost Hector and many other sons. Achilles can imagine that Peleus sometimes receives news of his son and rejoices, while Priam's hope has ended. Priam then presents himself as someone who has endured what no other mortal father has endured—kissing the hands of his child's killer. The speech transforms the ransom from price into recognition. Achilles is asked to pity Priam by imagining his own father's grief.

Achilles's Initial Response

Achilles does not greet Priam with a formal royal welcome. He is overwhelmed into silence and grief. He takes Priam's hand and gently moves him away, acknowledging the supplication without leaving the old man permanently at his knees. The two men weep together but for different dead: Priam for Hector, Achilles for Patroclus and then Peleus. Their grief fills the shelter. This is the true greeting. Before food, ransom, or speech about burial, each recognizes the other as a mourner. The scene creates intimacy without pretending that they have become friends or that the war has ended.

Hospitality After Lament

Once grief has run its course, Achilles raises Priam, admires his courage, and invites him to sit. Priam initially refuses because he wants Hector returned immediately, but Achilles warns him not to provoke anger when he is trying to obey Zeus. The moment reveals that Achilles's transformation is

incomplete and emotionally unstable. He then orders servants to remove the ransom and prepare Hector's body out of Priam's sight, fearing that the father's reaction might reignite conflict. Achilles provides food and later a bed outside the shelter. These acts restore hospitality and practical care within a relationship still defined by war.

Question Three: What Does Achilles Learn From His Encounter With Priam?

The Universality of Grief

Achilles learns that grief crosses the boundary between enemy and friend. Until this meeting, Hector has functioned primarily as the killer of Patroclus and therefore the object of Achilles's revenge. Priam reintroduces Hector as a son, defender, husband, and member of a grieving city. Achilles does not renounce Patroclus or decide that Hector's killing was unimportant. He recognizes that his own suffering is not unique. Priam's lament reflects the same human vulnerability that has driven Achilles's rage. This recognition weakens the fantasy that inflicting further pain on Hector's family can satisfy grief.

Shared Mortality

Achilles tells the story of Zeus's two jars, one containing blessings and the other evils. Human beings receive mixed portions or, in some cases, suffering alone. He applies the story to Peleus and Priam. Peleus received prosperity and a goddess as wife, but he has only one son, and that son will die far from home. Priam once possessed wealth and many sons, but war has devastated his household. The speech expresses a tragic theology: suffering is not distributed according to simple moral desert. Achilles learns to place personal loss within the mortal condition. This does not solve grief, but it makes compassion possible.

The Limits of Revenge

Achilles's treatment of Hector's body has not revived Patroclus or ended sorrow. Priam's presence exposes the sterility of repeated desecration. The body has become a medium through which Achilles extends wrath beyond the battlefield, but Apollo's protection and Zeus's command demonstrate that heroic anger has crossed a sacred boundary. By returning Hector, Achilles learns that revenge has a limit set by gods, ritual, community, and shared humanity. The lesson is not modern pacifism. Achilles remains a warrior and the war will resume. He nevertheless accepts that an enemy's dead body belongs within funeral practice rather than endless personal punishment.

Reciprocity and Social Order

The ransom allows a lawful exchange, but Priam's supplication makes the exchange morally significant. Achilles accepts the gifts, returns the corpse, promises a period for burial, and offers protection during the truce. These actions reestablish reciprocity after rage had isolated him from the army and ordinary custom. He again gives orders that protect others rather than serving only personal fury. The meeting teaches that heroic honor is not preserved solely by domination. Restraint, recognition of a suppliant, obedience to Zeus, and respect for funeral rites are also forms of greatness.

Food and the Return to Life

Achilles urges Priam to eat and recounts Niobe, who mourned her children yet eventually took food. The example may sound severe, but within the epic food marks continued participation in mortal life. Achilles himself had refused food in the intensity of grief and battle. Sharing a meal does not cancel mourning. It acknowledges that bodies continue to require care and that lament must coexist with survival. Through hospitality to Priam, Achilles moves from the death-centered world of revenge toward a temporary acceptance of human necessity.

Question Four: What Does Achilles Learn About Himself?

He Sees Himself as a Son

Priam's appeal makes Achilles imagine himself from Peleus's perspective. The epic audience knows that Achilles will not return home, and Achilles knows that his life will be short if he remains at Troy. His identity has been dominated by honor, anger, and friendship with Patroclus. Priam reminds him that he is also an absent child whose death will destroy an old father. This perspective does not cause Achilles to leave the war, but it deepens self-knowledge. The heroic choice of glory has consequences borne by people who love the hero. Achilles recognizes that the pain before him is a preview of pain his own life will produce.

He Recognizes His Capacity for Pity

Achilles has appeared almost inhuman during the killing of Hector and the abuse of the corpse. Priam's courage awakens pity that Achilles may have believed extinguished. He can touch the enemy father gently, protect him, share food, and grant time for burial. This does not mean Achilles becomes a completely different person. He warns Priam about his temper and requires servants to hide the

body preparation. His capacity for compassion exists alongside volatility. Self-knowledge involves discovering both: he is capable of mercy, and he remains vulnerable to rage.

He Confronts the Difference Between Honor and Excess

Achilles's original conflict with Agamemnon concerned honor and public recognition. After Patroclus dies, honor becomes fused with limitless retaliation. The meeting with Priam helps separate heroic excellence from excess. Killing Hector in battle can be understood within the warrior code; denying burial and dragging the body repeatedly violate divine and human limits. Achilles learns that anger, though justified by loss, does not justify every action committed under its influence. His return of Hector is therefore not defeat. It is recovery of moral proportion.

He Accepts That Mourning Cannot Possess the Dead

Achilles has treated Patroclus's death as a demand that the world remain fixed around loss. He sleeps beside the body, pursues revenge, sacrifices captives, and attacks Hector's corpse. Priam demonstrates another form of mourning: he risks himself to recover the dead, perform rites, and release Hector into communal memory. Achilles learns that love for the dead cannot be expressed only by destroying the living. Funeral practice creates separation while honoring attachment. By permitting Hector's burial, Achilles also moves toward accepting that Patroclus cannot be restored.

Heroic Transformation Without Complete Conversion

The original response describes Achilles as becoming a "normal person" and abandoning past spiritual practice. Homer presents a subtler transformation. Achilles remains extraordinary, violent, doomed, and embedded in the heroic world. His achievement is not conversion into an ordinary civilian. It is the recovery of human responsiveness within heroic identity. He can recognize Priam, obey Zeus, control action long enough to perform justice, and negotiate an eleven-day period before fighting resumes. The transformation is temporary but real. Tragedy does not require permanent moral perfection; it reveals that even the most destructive hero can recognize another person's grief.

Priam's Transformation

The title also invites attention to Priam. He moves from immobilizing grief inside Troy to courageous action. As king, he has presided over a city nearing destruction; as father, he becomes willing to kneel before Hector's killer. His heroic act differs from battlefield combat. It requires vulnerability, self-command, trust in divine guidance, and willingness to see Achilles as a son as well as an enemy. Priam does not forgive the killing in a simple modern sense, nor does he abandon sorrow. He creates a path from desecration to burial. His courage makes Achilles's transformation possible, showing that

reconciliation often begins when one party risks addressing the humanity of the other without denying harm.

The Limits of Reconciliation

The encounter should not be romanticized as a permanent peace treaty. Achilles and Priam remain enemies, Hector remains dead, and Troy's destruction approaches. The temporary truce serves funeral rites rather than political settlement. Yet the limited nature of the reconciliation gives it significance. The men do not need to erase history, agree about the war, or become friends in order to stop one form of cruelty. They establish a narrow moral agreement: grief deserves recognition, the dead deserve burial, and the living require food and rest. Homer presents reconciliation as fragile action inside continuing conflict rather than as sentimental resolution.

Conclusion

Priam responds to Iris with trust in Zeus's command and to Hecuba with firm determination, although he accepts her ritual advice and seeks an omen before leaving. At Achilles's shelter, he is received first through stunned silence and shared lament, then through hospitality, ransom, and a promise of burial time. The meeting teaches Achilles that grief is shared, mortality is unavoidable, revenge cannot restore the dead, and heroic identity includes restraint as well as force. It also teaches him about himself: he is a son whose father will mourn, a warrior capable of pity, and a grieving friend whose anger has exceeded proper limits. Priam undergoes his own transformation by turning helpless sorrow into courageous supplication. Their reconciliation does not end the war, but it restores funeral order and human recognition. In the final movement of the *Iliad*, heroism is measured not only by the power to kill but by the power to stop desecrating, receive an enemy's grief, and return what love needs to bury (MacLeod; Wilson).

Works Cited

Homer. *The Iliad*. Translated by Robert Fagles, Penguin, 1990.

MacLeod, C. W. *Homer: Iliad, Book XXIV*. Cambridge UP, 1982.

Nagler, Michael N. *Spontaneity and Tradition: A Study in the Oral Art of Homer*. U of California P, 1974.

Redfield, James M. *Nature and Culture in the Iliad*. Duke UP, 1994.

Wilson, Donna F. *Ransom, Revenge, and Heroic Identity in the Iliad*. Cambridge UP, 2002.