

passes and subsumes the world in which the *Iliad*'s plot takes place.

Making use of what spotty evidence they have, scholars have attempted to reconstruct earlier versions of the stories or types of stories told in the *Iliad*, in order to show how they have been adapted to the *Iliad*'s distinctive purposes. Other versions of the Meleager story told by Phoenix in Book 9 allow us to see that there it has been reworked to provide a pointed parallel to the story of Achilles. Some critics have speculated that there may have been many traditional accounts of powerful heroes who felt dishonored and withdrew from their armies until their honor was restored, but that the surprising development of Achilles' continued withdrawal even after Agamemnon's embassy may have been unique to the *Iliad*. Our evidence suggests that other poems in the tradition out of which the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* emerged contained many more supernatural and miraculous elements, including the achievement of immortality by the most successful heroes. By contrast, the Homeric epics seem distinctive in their unremitting insistence on the constraints of mortal existence and the inescapability of death.

In making this translation, Stanley Lombardo has located Homer in the performer or performers through whom the *Iliad* existed primarily as a spoken work, even after it was written down. Lombardo's version highlights the living connection that the poet builds between himself and his audience and his evocation of the spontaneous and idiosyncratic accents of the individual speakers whom he impersonates. In doing so, Lombardo brings out yet another way in which the concerns of the poet intersect with those of his characters, for in his recreation of heroic warfare, Homer has made it a realm not only of forceful action, but also of powerful speaking. The characters of the *Iliad* use speech constantly, to further their competitions through insults, to confer honor on one another through praise, to reflect on what they are doing, to bring the traditions of the past to bear on their present dilemmas, to lament their dead. In this way they fulfill the vision of heroism that Phoenix instilled in Achilles on the instructions of his father, Peleus: "To be a speaker of words and a doer of deeds" (9.455).

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ILIAD 1

RAGE:

Sing, Goddess, Achilles' rage,
Black and murderous, that cost the Greeks
Incalculable pain, pitched countless souls
Of heroes into Hades' dark,
And left their bodies to rot as feasts
For dogs and birds, as Zeus' will was done.
Begin with the clash between Agamemnon—
The Greek warlord—and godlike Achilles.

Which of the immortals set these two
At each other's throats?

Apollo,
Zeus' son and Leto's, offended
By the warlord. Agamemnon had dishonored
Chryses, Apollo's priest, so the god
Struck the Greek camp with plague,
And the soldiers were dying of it.

Chryses
Had come to the Greek beachhead camp
Hauling a fortune for his daughter's ransom.
Displaying Apollo's sacral ribbons
On a golden staff, he made a formal plea
To the entire Greek army, but especially
The commanders, Atreus' two sons:

[1-16]

"Sons of Atreus and Greek heroes all:
May the gods on Olympus grant you plunder
Of Priam's city and a safe return home.
But give me my daughter back and accept
This ransom out of respect for Zeus' son,
Lord Apollo, who deals death from afar."

A murmur rippled through the ranks:
"Respect the priest and take the ransom."
But Agamemnon was not pleased
And dismissed Chryses with a rough speech:

"Don't let me ever catch you, old man, by these ships again,
Skulking around now or sneaking back later.
The god's staff and ribbons won't save you next time.
The girl is mine, and she'll be an old woman in Argos
Before I let her go, working the loom in my house
And coming to my bed, far from her homeland.
Now clear out of here before you make me angry!"

The old man was afraid and did as he was told.
He walked in silence along the whispering surf line,
And when he had gone some distance the priest
Prayed to Lord Apollo, son of silken-haired Leto:

"Hear me, Silverbow, Protector of Chryse,
Lord of Holy Cilla, Master of Tenedos,
And Sminthian God of Plague!
If ever I've built a temple that pleased you
Or burnt fat thighbones of bulls and goats—
Grant me this prayer:
Let the Danaans pay for my tears with your arrows!"

Apollo heard his prayer and descended Olympus' crags
Pulsing with fury, bow slung over one shoulder,
The arrows rattling in their case on his back
As the angry god moved like night down the mountain.

He settled near the ships and let loose an arrow.
Reverberation from his silver bow hung in the air.

He picked off the pack animals first, and the lean hounds,
But then aimed his needle-tipped arrows at the men
And shot until the death-fires crowded the beach.

Nine days the god's arrows rained death on the camp.
On the tenth day Achilles called an assembly.
Hera, the white-armed goddess, planted the thought in him
Because she cared for the Greeks and it pained her
To see them dying. When the troops had all mustered,
Up stood the great runner Achilles, and said:

"Well, Agamemnon, it looks as if we'd better give up
And sail home—assuming any of us are left alive—
If we have to fight both the war and this plague.
But why not consult some prophet or priest
Or a dream interpreter, since dreams too come from Zeus,
Who could tell us why Apollo is so angry,
If it's for a vow or a sacrifice he holds us at fault.
Maybe he'd be willing to lift this plague from us
If he savored the smoke from lambs and prime goats."

Achilles had his say and sat down. Then up rose
Calchas, son of Thestor, bird-reader supreme,
Who knew what is, what will be, and what has been.
He had guided the Greek ships to Troy
Through the prophetic power Apollo
Had given him, and he spoke out now:

"Achilles, beloved of Zeus, you want me to tell you
About the rage of Lord Apollo, the Arch-Destroyer.
And I will tell you. But you have to promise me and swear
You will support me and protect me in word and deed.
I have a feeling I might offend a person of some authority
Among the Greeks, and you know how it is when a king
Is angry with an underling. He might swallow his temper
For a day, but he holds it in his heart until later
And it all comes out. Will you guarantee my security?"

Achilles, the great runner, responded:

"Don't worry. Prophecy to the best of your knowledge. I swear by Apollo, to whom you pray when you reveal The gods' secrets to the Greeks, Calchas, that while I live And look upon this earth, no one will lay a hand On you here beside these hollow ships, no, not even Agamemnon, who boasts he is the best of the Achaeans."

And Calchas, the perfect prophet, taking courage:

"The god finds no fault with vow or sacrifice. It is for his priest, whom Agamemnon dishonored And would not allow to ransom his daughter, That Apollo deals and will deal death from afar. He will not lift this foul plague from the Greeks Until we return the dancing-eyed girl to her father Unransomed, unbought, and make formal sacrifice On Chryse. Only then might we appease the god."

He finished speaking and sat down. Then up rose Atrous' son, the warlord Agamemnon, Furious, anger like twin black thunderheads seething In his lungs, and his eyes flickered with fire As he looked Calchas up and down, and said:

"You damn soothsayer! You've never given me a good omen yet. You take some kind of perverse pleasure in prophesying Doom, don't you? Not a single favorable omen ever! Nothing good ever happens! And now you stand here Uttering oracles before the Greeks, telling us That your great ballistic god is giving us all this trouble Because I was unwilling to accept the ransom For Chryses' daughter but preferred instead to keep her In my tent! And why shouldn't I? I like her better than My wife Clytemnestra. She's no worse than her When it comes to looks, body, mind, or ability. Still, I'll give her back, if that's what's best. I don't want to see the army destroyed like this. But I want another prize ready for me right away."

I'm not going to be the only Greek without a prize, It wouldn't be right. And you all see where mine is going."

And Achilles, strong, swift, and godlike:

"And where do you think, son of Atrous, You greedy glory-hound, the magnanimous Greeks Are going to get another prize for you? Do you think we have some kind of stockpile in reserve? Every town in the area has been sacked and the stuff all divided. You want the men to count it all back and redistribute it? All right, you give the girl back to the god. The army Will repay you three and four times over—when and if Zeus allows us to rip Troy down to its foundations."

The warlord Agamemnon responded:

"You may be a good man in a fight, Achilles, And look like a god, but don't try to put one over on me— It won't work. So while you have your prize, You want me to sit tight and do without? Give the girl back, just like that? Now maybe If the army, in a generous spirit, voted me Some suitable prize of their own choice, something fair— But if it doesn't, I'll just go take something myself, Your prize perhaps, or Ajax's, or Odysseus', And whoever she belongs to, it'll stick in his throat."

But we can think about that later.

Right now we launch A black ship on the bright salt water, get a crew aboard, Load on a hundred bulls, and have Chryseis board her too, My girl with her lovely cheeks. And we'll want a good man For captain, Ajax or Idomeneus or godlike Odysseus— Or maybe you, son of Peleus, our most formidable hero— To offer sacrifice and appease the Arch-Destroyer for us."

Achilles looked him up and down and said:

"You sorry, profiteering excuse for a commander!

How are you going to get any Greek warrior
 To follow you into battle again? You know,
 I don't have any quarrel with the Trojans,
 They didn't do anything to *me* to make me
 Come over here and fight, didn't run off *my* cattle or horses
 Or ruin *my* farmland back home in Phthia, not with all
 The shadowy mountains and moaning seas between—
 It's for *you*, dogface, for your precious pleasure—
 And Menelaus' honor—that we came here,
 A fact you don't have the decency even to mention!
 And now you're threatening to take away the prize
 That I sweated for and the Greeks gave me.
 I never get a prize equal to yours when the army
 Captures one of the Trojan strongholds.
 No, I do all the dirty work with my own hands,
 And when the battle's over and we divide the loot
 You get the lion's share and I go back to the ships
 With some pitiful little thing, so worn out from fighting
 I don't have the strength left even to complain.
 Well, I'm going back to Phthia now. Far better
 To head home with my curved ships than stay here,
 Unhonored myself and piling up a fortune for you."

The warlord Agamemnon responded:

"Go ahead and desert, if that's what you want!
 I'm not going to beg you to stay. There are plenty of others
 Who will honor me, not least of all Zeus the Counselor.
 To me, you're the most hateful king under heaven,
 A born troublemaker. You actually *like* fighting and war.
 If you're all that strong, it's just a gift from some god.
 So why don't you go home with your ships and lord it over
 Your precious Myrmidons. I couldn't care less about you
 Or your famous temper. But I'll tell you this:
 Since Phoebus Apollo is taking away my Chryseis,
 Whom I'm sending back aboard ship with my friends,
 I'm coming to your hut and taking Briseis,
 Your own beautiful prize, so that you will see just how much
 Stronger I am than you, and the next person will wince
 At the thought of opposing me as an equal."

Achilles' chest was a rough knot of pain
 Twisting around his heart: should he
 Draw the sharp sword that hung by his thigh,
 Scatter the ranks and gut Agamemnon,
 Or control his temper, repress his rage?
 He was mulling it over, inching the great sword
 From its sheath, when out of the blue
 Athena came, sent by the white-armed goddess
 Hera, who loved and watched over both men.
 She stood behind Achilles and grabbed his sandy hair,
 Visible only to him: not another soul saw her.
 Awestruck, Achilles turned around, recognizing
 Pallas Athena at once—it was her eyes—
 And words flew from his mouth like winging birds:

"Daughter of Zeus! Why have you come here?
 To see Agamemnon's arrogance, no doubt.
 I'll tell you where I place my bets, Goddess:
 Sudden death for this outrageous behavior."

Athena's eyes glared through the sea's salt haze.

"I came to see if I could check this temper of yours,
 Sent from heaven by the white-armed goddess
 Hera, who loves and watches over both of you men.
 Now come on, drop this quarrel, don't draw your sword.
 Tell him off instead. And I'll tell you,
 Achilles, how things will be: You're going to get
 Three times as many magnificent gifts
 Because of his arrogance. Just listen to us and be patient."

Achilles, the great runner, responded:

"When you two speak, Goddess, a man has to listen
 No matter how angry. It's better that way.
 Obey the gods and they hear you when you pray."

With that he ground his heavy hand
 Onto the silver hilt and pushed the great sword
 Back into its sheath. Athena's speech

Had been well-timed. She was on her way
To Olympus by now, to the halls of Zeus
And the other immortals, while Achilles
Tore into Agamemnon again:

"You bloated drunk,
With a dog's eyes and a rabbit's heart!
You've never had the guts to buckle on armor in battle
Or come out with the best fighting Greeks
On any campaign! Afraid to look Death in the eye,
Agamemnon? It's far more profitable
To hang back in the army's rear—*isn't it?*—
Confiscating prizes from any Greek who talks back
And bleeding your people dry. There's not a real man
Under your command, or this latest atrocity
Would be your last, son of Atreus.
Now get this straight. I swear a formal oath:
By this scepter, which will never sprout leaf
Or branch again since it was cut from its stock
In the mountains, which will bloom no more
Now that bronze has pared off leaf and bark,
And which now the sons of the Greeks hold in their hands
At council, upholding Zeus' laws—

By this scepter I swear:
When every last Greek desperately misses Achilles,
Your remorse won't do any good then,
When Hector the man-killer swats you down like flies.
And you will eat your heart out
Because you failed to honor the best Greek of all."

Those were his words, and he slammed the scepter,
Studded with gold, to the ground and sat down.

Opposite him, Agamemnon fumed.

Then Nestor
Stood up, sweet-worded Nestor, the orator from Pylos
With a voice high-toned and liquid as honey.
He had seen two generations of men pass away
In sandy Pylos and was now king in the third.
He was full of good will in the speech he made:

"It's a sad day for Greece, a sad day.
Priam and Priam's sons would be happy indeed,
And the rest of the Trojans too, glad in their hearts,
If they learned all this about you two fighting,
Our two best men in council and in battle.
Now you listen to me, both of you. You are both
Younger than I am, and I've associated with men
Better than you, and they didn't treat me lightly.
I've never seen men like those, and never will,
The likes of Peirithous and Dryas, a shepherd to his people,
Caineus and Exadius and godlike Polyphemus,
And Aegeus' son, Theseus, who could have passed for a god, 280
The strongest men who ever lived on earth, the strongest,
And they fought with the strongest, with wild things
From the mountains, and beat the daylight out of them.
I was their companion, although I came from Pylos,
From the ends of the earth—they sent for me themselves.
And I held my own fighting with them. You couldn't find
A mortal on earth who could fight with them now.
And when I talked in council, they took my advice.
So should you two now: taking advice is a good thing.
Agamemnon, for all your nobility, do not take his girl. 290
Leave her be: the army originally gave her to him as a prize.
Nor should you, son of Peleus, want to lock horns with a king.
A scepter-holding king has honor beyond the rest of men,
Power and glory given by Zeus himself.
You are stronger, and it is a goddess who bore you.
But he is more powerful, since he rules over more.
Son of Atreus, cease your anger. And I appeal
Personally to Achilles to control his temper, since he is,
For all Greeks, a mighty bulwark in this evil war."

And Agamemnon, the warlord:

"Yes, old man, everything you've said is absolutely right.
But this man wants to be ahead of everyone else,
He wants to rule everyone, give orders to everyone,
Lord it over everyone, and he's not going to get away with it.
If the gods eternal made him a spearman, does that mean
They gave him permission to be insolent as well?"

And Achilles, breaking in on him:

"Ha, and think of the names people would call me
If I bowed and scraped every time you opened your mouth.
Try that on somebody else, but not on me. 310
I'll tell you this, and you can stick it in your gut:
I'm not going to put up a fight on account of the girl.
You, all of you, gave her to me and you can all take her back.
But anything else of mine in my black sailing ship
You keep your goddamn hands off, you hear?
Try it. Let everybody here see how fast
Your black blood boils up around my spear."

So it was a stand-off, their battle of words,
And the assembly beside the Greek ships dissolved.

Achilles went back to the huts by his ships 320
With Patroclus and his men. Agamemnon had a fast ship
Hauled down to the sea, picked twenty oarsmen,
Loaded on a hundred bulls due to the god, and had Chryses'
daughter,

His fair-cheeked girl, go aboard also. Odysseus captained,
And when they were all on board, the ship headed out to sea.

Onshore, Agamemnon ordered a purification.
The troops scrubbed down and poured the filth
Into the sea. Then they sacrificed to Apollo
Oxen and goats by the hundreds on the barren shore.
The smoky savor swirled up to the sky. 330

That was the order of the day. But Agamemnon
Did not forget his spiteful threat against Achilles.
He summoned Talthibius and Eurybates,
Faithful retainers who served as his heralds:

"Go to the hut of Achilles, son of Peleus;
Bring back the girl, fair-cheeked Briseis.
If he won't give her up, I'll come myself
With my men and take her—and freeze his heart cold."

It was not the sort of mission a herald would relish.

The pair trailed along the barren seashore 340
Until they came to the Myrmidons' ships and encampment.
They found Achilles sitting outside his hut
Beside his black ship. He was not glad to see them.
They stood respectfully silent, in awe of this king,
And it was Achilles who was moved to address them first:

"Welcome, heralds, the gods' messengers and men's.
Come closer. You're not to blame, Agamemnon is,
Who sent you here for the girl, Briseis.

Patroclus, 350
Bring the girl out and give her to these gentlemen.
You two are witnesses before the blessed gods,
Before mortal men and that hard-hearted king,
If ever I'm needed to protect the others
From being hacked to bits. His mind is murky with anger,
And he doesn't have the sense to look ahead and behind
To see how the Greeks might defend their ships."

Thus Achilles.

Patroclus obeyed his beloved friend
And brought Briseis, cheeks flushed, out of the tent
And gave her to the heralds, who led her away. 360
She went unwillingly.

Then Achilles, in tears,
Withdrew from his friends and sat down far away
On the foaming white seashore, staring out
At the endless sea. Stretching out his hands,
He prayed over and over to his beloved mother:

"Mother, since you bore me for a short life only,
Olympian Zeus was supposed to grant me honor.
Well, he hasn't given me any at all. Agamemnon
Has taken away my prize and dishonored me."

His voice, choked with tears, was heard by his mother
As she sat in the sea-depths beside her old father.
She rose up from the white-capped sea like a mist,
And settling herself beside her weeping child
She stroked him with her hand and talked to him:

"Why are you crying, son? What's wrong?
Don't keep it inside. Tell me so we'll both know."

And Achilles, with a deep groan:

"You already know. Why do I have to tell you?
We went after Thebes, Eëtion's sacred town,
Sacked it and brought the plunder back here.
The army divided everything up and chose
For Agamemnon fair-cheeked Chryseis.
Then her father, Chryses, a priest of Apollo,
Came to our army's ships on the beachhead,
Hauling a fortune for his daughter's ransom.
He displayed Apollo's sacral ribbons
On a golden staff and made a formal plea
To the entire Greek army, but especially
The commanders, Atreus' two sons.
You could hear the troops murmuring,
'Respect the priest and take the ransom.'
But Agamemnon wouldn't hear of it

And dismissed Chryses with a rough speech.

The old man went back angry, and Apollo
Heard his beloved priest's prayer.

He hit the Greeks hard, and the troops
Were falling over dead, the god's arrows
Raining down all through the Greek camp.
A prophet told us the Arch-Destroyer's will,
And I demanded the god be appeased.

Agamemnon got angry, stood up
And threatened me, and made good his threat.
The high command sent the girl on a fast ship
Back to Chryse with gifts for Apollo,
And heralds led away my girl, Briseis,
Whom the army had given to me.
Now you have to help me, if you can.

Go to Olympus

And call in the debt that Zeus owes you.

I remember often hearing you tell

In my father's house how you alone managed,

Of all the immortals, to save Zeus' neck
When the other Olympians wanted to bind him—
Hera and Poseidon and Pallas Athena.

You came and loosened him from his chains,
And you lured to Olympus' summit the giant
With a hundred hands whom the gods call
Briareus but men call Aegaeon, stronger
Even than his own father Uranus, and he
Sat hulking in front of cloud-black Zeus,
Proud of his prowess, and scared all the gods
Who were trying to put the son of Cronus in chains.

Remind Zeus of this, sit holding his knees,
See if he is willing to help the Trojans

Hem the Greeks in between the fleet and the sea.

Once they start being killed, the Greeks may
Appreciate Agamemnon for what he is,

And the wide-ruling son of Atreus will see

What a fool he's been because he did not honor

The best of all the fighting Achaeans."

And Thetis, now weeping herself:

"O my poor child. I bore you for sorrow,
Nursed you for grief. Why? You should be
Spending your time here by your ships
Happily and untroubled by tears,
Since life is short for you, all too brief.

Now you're destined for both an early death

And misery beyond compare. It was for this

I gave birth to you in your father's palace

Under an evil star.

I'll go to snow-bound Olympus
And tell all this to the Lord of Lightning.

I hope he listens. You stay here, though,

Beside your ships and let the Greeks feel

Your spite; withdraw completely from the war.

Zeus left yesterday for the River Ocean

On his way to a feast with the Ethiopians.

All the gods went with him. He'll return

To Olympus twelve days from now,
And I'll go then to his bronze threshold
And plead with him. I think I'll persuade him."

And she left him there, angry and heartsick
At being forced to give up the silken-waisted girl.

Meanwhile, Odysseus was putting in
At Chryse with his sacred cargo on board.
When they were well within the deepwater harbor
They furled the sail and stowed it in the ship's hold,
Slackened the forestays and lowered the mast,
Working quickly, then rowed her to a mooring, where
They dropped anchor and made the stern cables fast.
The crew disembarked on the seabeach
And unloaded the bulls for Apollo the Archer.
Then Chryses' daughter stepped off the seagoing vessel,
And Odysseus led her to an altar
And placed her in her father's hands, saying:

"Chryses, King Agamemnon has sent me here
To return your child and offer to Phoebus
Formal sacrifice on behalf of the Greeks.
So may we appease Lord Apollo, and may he
Lift the afflictions he has sent upon us."

Chryses received his daughter tenderly.

Moving quickly, they lined the hundred oxen
Around the massive altar, a glorious offering,
Washed their hands and sprinkled on the victims
Sacrificial barley. On behalf of the Greeks
Chryses lifted his hands and prayed aloud:

"Hear me, Silverbow, Protector of Chryse,
Lord of Holy Cilla, Master of Tenedos,
As once before you heard my prayer,
Did me honor, and smote the Greeks mightily,
So now also grant me this prayer:

Lift the plague

From the Greeks and save them from death."
Thus the old priest, and Apollo heard him.

After the prayers and the strewing of barley
They slaughtered and flayed the oxen,
Jointed the thighbones and wrapped them
In a layer of fat with cuts of meat on top.
The old man roasted them over charcoal
And doused them with wine. Younger men
Stood by with five-tined forks in their hands.
When the thigh pieces were charred and they had
Tasted the tripe, they cut the rest into strips,
Skewered it on spits and roasted it skillfully.
When they were done and the feast was ready,
Feast they did, and no one lacked an equal share.
When they had all had enough to eat and drink,
The young men topped off mixing bowls with wine
And served it in goblets to all the guests.

All day long these young Greeks propitiated
The god with dancing, singing to Apollo
A paean as they danced, and the god was pleased.
When the sun went down and darkness came on,
They went to sleep by the ship's stern-cables.

Dawn came early, a palmetto of rose,
Time to make sail for the wide beachhead camp.
They set up mast and spread the white canvas,
And the following wind, sent by Apollo,
Boomed in the mainsail. An indigo wave
Hissed off the bow as the ship surged on,
Leaving a wake as she held on course through the billows.

When they reached the beachhead they hauled the black ship
High on the sand and jammed in the long chocks;
Then the crew scattered to their own huts and ships.

All this time Achilles, the son of Peleus in the line of Zeus,
Nursed his anger, the great runner idle by his fleet's fast hulls.
He was not to be seen in council, that arena for glory,

Nor in combat. He sat tight in camp consumed with grief,
His great heart yearning for the battle cry and war.

Twelve days went by. Dawn.
The gods returned to Olympus,
Zeus at their head.

Thetis did not forget
Her son's requests. She rose from the sea
And up through the air to the great sky
And found Cronus' wide-seeing son
Sitting in isolation on the highest peak
Of the rugged Olympic massif.
She settled beside him, and touched his knees
With her left hand, his beard with her right,
And made her plea to the Lord of Sky:

"Father Zeus, if I have ever helped you
In word or deed among the immortals,

Grant me this prayer:

Honor my son, doomed to die young
And yet dishonored by King Agamemnon,
Who stole his prize, a personal affront.
Do justice by him, Lord of Olympus.
Give the Trojans the upper hand until the Greeks
Grant my son the honor he deserves."

540

Zeus made no reply but sat a long time
In silence, clouds scudding around him.
Thetis held fast to his knees and asked again:

"Give me a clear yes or no. Either nod in assent
Or refuse me. Why should you care if I know
How negligible a goddess I am in your eyes."

This provoked a troubled, gloomy response:

"This is disastrous. You're going to force me
Into conflict with Hera. I can just hear her now,
Cursing me and bawling me out. As it is,
She already accuses me of favoring the Trojans.

550

Please go back the way you came. Maybe
Hera won't notice. I'll take care of this.

And so you can have some peace of mind,
I'll say yes to you by nodding my head,
The ultimate pledge. Unambiguous,
Irreversible, and absolutely fulfilled,
Whatever I say yes to with a nod of my head."

And the Son of Cronus nodded. Black brows
Lowered, a glory of hair cascaded down from the Lord's
Immortal head, and the holy mountain trembled.

560

Their conference over, the two parted. The goddess
Dove into the deep sea from Olympus' snow-glare
And Zeus went to his home. The gods all
Rose from their seats at their father's entrance. Not one
Dared watch him enter without standing to greet him.
And so God entered and took his high seat.

But Hera
Had noticed his private conversation with Thetis,
The silver-footed daughter of the Old Man of the Sea,
And flew at him with cutting words:

570

"Who was that you were scheming with just now?
You just love devising secret plots behind my back,
Don't you? You can't bear to tell me what you're thinking,
Or you don't dare. Never have and never will."

The Father of Gods and Men answered:

"Hera, don't hope to know all my secret thoughts.
It would strain your mind even though you are my wife.
What it is proper to hear, no one, human or divine,
Will hear before you. But what I wish to conceive
Apart from the other gods, don't pry into that."

580

And Lady Hera, with her oxen eyes wide:

"Oh my. The awesome son of Cronus has spoken.
Pry? You know that I never pry. And you always

Cheerfully volunteer—whatever information you please.
It's just that I have this feeling that somehow
The silver-footed daughter of the Old Man of the Sea
May have won you over. She *was* sitting beside you
Up there in the mist, and she did touch your knees.
And I'm pretty sure that you agreed to honor Achilles
And destroy Greeks by the thousands beside their ships."

And Zeus, the master of cloud and storm:

"You witch! Your intuitions are always right.
But what does it get you? Nothing, except that
I like you less than ever. And so you're worse off.
If it's as you think it is, it's my business, not yours.
So sit down and shut up and do as I say.
You see these hands? All the gods on Olympus
Won't be able to help you if I ever lay them on you."

Hera lost her nerve when she heard this.
She sat down in silence, fear cramping her heart,
And gloom settled over the gods in Zeus' hall.
Hephaestus, the master artisan, broke the silence,
Out of concern for his ivory-armed mother:

"This is terrible; it's going to ruin us all.
If you two quarrel like this over mortals
It's bound to affect us gods. There'll be no more
Pleasure in our feasts if we let things turn ugly.
Mother, please, I don't have to tell you,
You have to be pleasant to our father Zeus.
So he won't be angry and ruin our feast.
If the Lord of Lightning wants to blast us from our seats,
He can—that's how much stronger he is.
So apologize to him with silken-soft words,
And the Olympian in turn will be gracious to us."

He whisked up a two-handled cup, offered it
To his dear mother, and said to her:

"I know it's hard, mother, but you have to endure it.

I don't want to see you getting beat up, and me
Unable to help you. The Olympian can be rough.
Once before when I tried to rescue you
He flipped me by my foot off our balcony.
I fell all day and came down when the sun did
On the island of Lemnos, scarcely alive.
The Sintians had to nurse me back to health."

By the time he finished, the ivory-armed goddess
Was smiling at her son. She accepted the cup from him.
Then the lame god turned serving boy, siphoning nectar
From the mixing bowl and pouring the sweet liquor
For all of the gods, who couldn't stop laughing
At the sight of Hephaestus hustling through the halls.

And so all day long until the sun went down
They feasted to their hearts' content,
Apollo playing beautiful melodies on the lyre,
The Muses singing responsively in lovely voices.
And when the last gleams of sunset had faded,
They turned in for the night, each to a house
Built by Hephaestus, the renowned master craftsman,
The burly blacksmith with the soul of an artist.

And the Lord of Lightning, Olympian Zeus, went to his bed,
The bed he always slept in when sweet sleep overcame him.
He climbed in and slept, next to golden-throned Hera.