

BOOK ONE



THE QUARREL BY THE SHIPS

The invocation to the Muse; Agamemnon insults Apollo; Apollo sends the plague onto the army; the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon; Calchas indicates what must be done to appease Apollo; Agamemnon takes Briseis from Achilles; Achilles prays to Thetis for revenge; Achilles meets Thetis; Chryseis is returned to her father; Thetis visits Zeus; the gods converse about the matter on Olympus; the banquet of the gods.

Sing, Goddess, sing the rage of Achilles, son of Peleus—
that murderous anger which condemned Achaeans
to countless agonies and threw many warrior souls
deep into Hades, leaving their dead bodies
carriage food for dogs and birds—
all in fulfilment of the will of Zeus.

Start at the point where Agamemnon, son of Atreus,
that king of men, quarrelled with noble Achilles.
Which of the gods incited these two men to fight?

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That god was Apollo, son of Zeus and Leto. 10
Angry with Agamemnon, he cast plague down [10]
onto the troops—a deadly infectious evil.
For Agamemnon had dishonoured the god’s priest,
Chryses, who’d come to the ships to find his daughter,
Chryseis, bringing with him a huge ransom.
In his hand he held up on a golden staff
the scarf sacred to archer god Apollo.
He begged Achaeans, above all the army’s leaders:

“Menelaus, Agamemnon, sons of Atreus, 20
all you well-armed Achaeans, may the gods
on Olympus grant you wipe out Priam’s city,
and then return home safe and sound.
Release my dear child to me. Take this ransom. [20]
Honour Apollo, far-shooting son of Zeus.”

All the Achaeans roared out their support:

“Respect the priest. Take the generous ransom.”

Displeased, Agamemnon dismissed Chryses roughly:

“Old man,
don’t let me catch you by our hollow ships,
sneaking back here today or later on. 30
Who cares about Apollo’s scarf and staff?
I’ll not release the girl to you, no, not before
she’s grown old with me in Argos, far from home, [30]
working the loom, sharing my bed. Go away.
If you want to get home safely, don’t anger me.”

The old man, afraid, obeyed and walked off in silence,
along the shore by the tumbling, crashing surf.

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Some distance off, he prayed to lord Apollo,
Leto's fair-haired child:

“God with the silver bow,
protector of Chryse, sacred Cilla, 40
mighty lord of Tenedos, Smithean Apollo,
hear my prayer: If I've ever pleased you
with a holy shrine, or burned bones for you— [40]
bulls and goats well wrapped in fat—
grant me my prayer.* Force the Danaans
to pay full price for my tears with your arrows.”

So Chryses prayed. Phoebus Apollo heard him.
He came down from Olympus top enraged,
carrying on his shoulders bow and covered quiver,
his arrows rattling in anger against his arm. 50
So the god swooped down, descending like the night.
He sat some distance from the ships, shot off an arrow—
the silver bow reverberating ominously.

First, the god massacred mules and swift-running dogs, [50]
then loosed sharp arrows in among the troops themselves.
Thick fires burned the corpses ceaselessly.
For nine days Apollo rained death down upon the troops.
On the tenth, Achilles summoned an assembly.
White-armed Hera put that thought into his mind,
concerned for the Danaans, seeing them die. 60
The men gathered. The meeting came to order.
Swift-footed Achilles rose to speak:

“Son of Atreus,

* Smithean is a special epithet given to Apollo. It seems to mean something like “killer of field mice.” Chryse is a small coastal town near Troy, where Chryses, the father of Chryseis, is a priest of Apollo.

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I fear we're being beaten back, forced home,
if we aren't all going to be destroyed right here, [60]
with war and plague killing off Achaeans.
Come now, let's ask some prophet, priest,
interpreter of dreams—for dreams, too, come from Zeus—
a man who might say why Apollo is so angry,
whether he faults our prayers and offerings,
whether somehow he'll welcome sacrificial smoke 70
from perfect lambs and goats, then rouse himself
and release us from this plague."

Achilles spoke and took his seat.
Then Calchas, Thestor's son, stood up before them all,
the most astute interpreter of birds, who understood
present, future, past. His skill in prophecy, [70]
Apollo's gift, had led Achaean ships to Troy.
He addressed the troops, thinking of their common good:

"Achilles, friend of Zeus, you ask me to explain
Apollo's anger, the god who shoots from far.
And I will speak. But first you listen to me. 80
Swear an oath that you will freely help me
in word and deed. I think I may provoke
someone who wields great power over Argives,
a man who is obeyed by everyone.
An angry king overpowers lesser men. [80]
Even if that day his anger is suppressed,
resentment lingers in his chest, until one day
he acts on it. So speak. Will you protect me?"

In response to Calchas, swift-footed Achilles said:

"Take courage. State what your powers tell you. 90
By Apollo, whom Zeus loves, to whom you, Calchas,

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pray in prophesy to the Danaans, I swear this—
while I live to look upon the light of day,
no Achaean will raise violent hands against you,
no, not even if you name Agamemnon, [90]
who claims he's by far the best Achaean."

Encouraged, the wise prophet then declared:

"Apollo does not fault us for prayers or offerings,
but for his priest, disgraced by Agamemnon,
who did not free his daughter and take ransom. 100
That's why the archer god has brought disaster,
and will bring still more. He will not remove
this wretched plague from the Danaans,
until we hand back bright-eyed Chryseis,
give her to her beloved father freely,
without ransom, and offer holy sacrifice
at Chryse. If we will carry out all that,
we may change Apollo's mind, appease him." [100]

So he spoke and sat back down. Then, Atreus's son,
wide-ruling, mighty Agamemnon, stood up before them, 110
incensed, his spirit filled with immense black rage.
Eyes blazing fire, he rounded first on Calchas:

"Prophet of evil, when have you ever said
good things to me? You love to predict the worst,
always the worst! You never show good news.
Now, in prophecy to the Danaans,
you say archer Apollo brings us pain [110]
because I was unwilling to accept
fine ransom for Chryses' daughter, Chryseis.

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But I have a great desire to take her home. 120
In fact, I want her more than Clytaemnestra,
the wife I married. Chryseis is just as good
in her shape, physique, intelligence, or work.
Still, I'm prepared to give her back, if that's best.
I want the people safe, not all killed off.
But then you will owe me another prize.
I won't be the only Argive left without a gift.
That would be entirely unfair to me.
You all can see my spoils are going elsewhere." [120]

At that point, swift-footed Achilles answered the king: 130

"Noble son of Atreus, most acquisitive of men,
how can brave Achaeans give you a prize now?
There are none left for us to pass around.
We've divided up what we allotted,
loot from captured towns we devastated.
For men to make a common pile again
would be most unfair. Send the girl back now,
as the god demands. Should Zeus ever grant
we pillage Troy, a city rich in goods,
we'll offer you three or four times as much." 140

Mighty Agamemnon then said in reply: [130]

"Achilles, you're a fine man, like a god.
But don't conceal what's hidden in your heart.
You'll not deceive me or win me with your words.
You intend to keep your prizes for yourself,
while the army takes my trophy from me.
That's why you tell me to give Chryseis back.
Let Achaeans give me another prize,

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equal in value, something I'll enjoy.
If not, then I'll take a prize myself by force, 150
something from you or Ajax or Odysseus.
The man I visit is going to be enraged.
But let's postpone discussion of all this. [140]
Let's drag a black ship to the sacred sea,
select a crew, load oxen on for sacrifice,
and Chryseis, that fair-complexioned girl.
Let's have as leader some wise counsellor—
Idomeneus, Ajax, godlike Odysseus,
or you, Peleus's son, most eminent of all,
so with an offering we may appease 160
the god who shoots from far away."
Scowling grimly, swift-footed Achilles interposed:

"You insatiable creature, quite shameless.
How can any Achaean obey you willingly— [150]
join a raiding party or keep fighting
with full force against an enemy?
I did not come to battle over here
because of Trojans. I have no fight with them.
They never stole my bulls or horses
or destroyed my crops in fertile Phthia, 170
where heroes grow. Many shady mountains
and the roaring sea stand there between us.
But you, great shameless man, we came with you,
to please you, to win honour from the Trojans—
for you, dog face, and for Menelaus.
You don't consider this, don't think at all. [160]
You threaten now to confiscate the prize
I worked so hard for, gift from Achaea's sons.
When we Achaeans loot some well-built Trojan town,
my prizes never match the ones you get. 180

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The major share of war's fury rests on me.
But when we hand around the battle spoils,
you get much larger trophies. Worn out in war,
I reach my ships with something fine but small.
So I'll return home now to Phthia.
It's far better to sail back in my curved ships. [170]
I don't fancy staying here unvalued,
to pile up riches, treasures just for you."

To that, Agamemnon, king of men, shot back:

"Fly off home then, if that's your heart's desire. 190
I'll not beg you to stay on my account.
I have others around to honour me,
especially all-wise Zeus himself.
Of all the kings Zeus cherishes, it's you
I hate the most. You love constant strife—
war and combat. So what if you're strong?
Some god gave you that. So scurry off home.
Take ships and friends. Go rule your Myrmidons. [180]
I don't like you or care about your rage.
But I'll make this threat: I'll take your prize, 200
fair-cheeked Briseis. I'll fetch her in person.
You'll see just how much I'm the better man.
And others will hate to speak to me as peers,
in public claiming full equality with me."

As Agamemnon spoke, Peleus's son, Achilles,
was overwhelmed with anguish, heart torn two ways,
debating in his shaggy chest what he should do:
Should he draw out the sharp sword on his thigh, [190]
incite the crowd, kill Atreus's son, or suppress his rage,
control his fury? As he argued in his mind and heart, 210
he slid his huge sword part way from its sheath.

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At that moment, Athena came down from heaven.
White-armed Hera sent her. She cherished both men,
cared for them equally. Athena stood behind Achilles,
grabbed him by his golden hair, invisible to all
except Achilles. In astonishment he turned.
At once he recognized Pallas Athena,
the dreadful glitter in her eyes. Achilles spoke—
his words had wings.

[200]

“Child of aegis-bearing Zeus,
why have you come now? Do you wish to see
how overbearing Agamemnon is?*

I’ll tell you where all this is going to lead—
that arrogance will soon cost him his life.”

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Glittery-eyed Athena then spoke in reply:

“I came down from heaven to curb your passion,
if you obey. White-armed Hera sent me.
She loves you both alike, cares equally.
Give up this quarrel. Don’t draw your sword.
Fight him with words, so he becomes disgraced.
For I say to you, and this will happen,
because of Agamemnon’s arrogance
some day gifts three times greater than this girl
will be set down before you. Control yourself.
Obey.”

[210]

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Swift-footed Achilles answered Athena:

* The aegis is a special divine shield, the sight of which has the power to terrify men and make them run away. Later in the poem Apollo uses it to terrify the Achaean soldiers.

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“Goddess, men should follow your instructions,
though angry in their hearts. It’s better so.
The person who’s obedient to the gods,
the gods attend to all the more.”

Obeying Athena’s words,
Achilles relaxed his huge fist on the silver hilt
and pushed the massive sword back in its scabbard. 240 [220]
Athena then returned to heaven, home of Zeus,
who bears the aegis, and the other gods.

Achilles turned again on Agamemnon, Atreus’s son,
with harsh abuse, his anger still unabated:

“You drunken sot, dog-eyed, deer-timid coward,
you’re never strong enough within yourself
to arm for war alongside other comrades,
or venture with Achaea’s bravest on a raid.
To you that smells too much like death.
No. You’d much prefer to stroll around 250
throughout the wide Achaeian army,
to grab gifts from a man who speaks against you. [230]
A king who gorges on his own people!
You lord it over worthless men. If not,
son of Atreus, this would be your last offence.
I’ll tell you, swear a great oath on this point,
by this sceptre, which will never sprout
leaves and shoots again, since first ripped away
from its mountain stump, nor bloom any more,
now that bronze has sliced off leaf and bark. 260
This sceptre Achaea’s sons take in hand
whenever they do justice in Zeus’s name.
An oath on this has power. On this I swear—

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the time will come when Achaea's sons
all miss Achilles, a time when, in distress, [240]
you'll lack my help, a time when Hector,
that man killer, destroys many warriors.
Then grief will tear your hearts apart,
because you shamed Achaea's finest man."

So the son of Peleus spoke, throwing to the ground 270
the sceptre with the golden studs. Then he sat down,
directly facing furious Agamemnon.

Then Nestor stood up, clear, sweet orator from Pylos.
Sweeter than honey the words flowed from his tongue.
In his own lifetime two generations of mortal men [250]
had come and passed away, all those born and raised
with him so long ago in sacred Pylos.
Now he ruled a third generation of his people.
Concerned about their common good, he said:

"Alas, this is great sorrow for Achaeans. 280
Priam and Priam's children will be glad,
the hearts of other Trojans swell with joy,
should they find out about such quarrelling,
a fight between you two, among Danaans
the very best for counsel or combat.
But listen. You are both younger men than I.
And I've been colleague of better men than you, [260]
men who never showed me any disrespect,
men whose like I have not seen again,
and never will—like Peirithous, Dryas, 290
a shepherd to his people, Caeneus,
Exadios, god-like Polyphemus,
Theseus, son of Aegeus, all god-like men—

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the mightiest earthborn men, the strongest.
And the enemies they fought against were strong,
the most powerful of mountain centaurs.
But they destroyed those creatures totally.
Associate of theirs, I came from Pylos,
a long way from that land, summoned personally. [270]
I fought on my own behalf, by myself. 300
No man alive on earth could now fight them.
Yet they heard me and followed my advice.
So listen, both of you. That's what's best now.
Agamemnon, you're an excellent man,
but do not take Briseis from Achilles.
Let that pass. Achaea's sons gave her to him first.
And you, Peleus's son, don't seek to fight the king,
not as your enemy. The sceptre-bearing king,
whose powerful authority comes from Zeus,
never shares honours equally. Achilles, 310
you may be stronger, since your mother was divine, [280]
but he's more powerful, for he rules more men.
But you, son of Atreus, check your anger.
Set aside, I urge you, your rage against Achilles,
who provides, in the middle of war's evils,
a powerful defence for all Achaeans."

Mighty Agamemnon then replied to Nestor:

"Old man, everything you say is true enough.
But this man wants to put the rest to shame,
rule all of us, lord it over everyone. 320
But some, I think, will not obey him.
So what if the gods, who live forever, [290]
made him a spearman? Is that some reason
we should let him say such shameful things?"

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Achilles, interrupting Agamemnon, shouted:

“I’d be called a coward, a nobody,
if I held back from any action
because of something you might say.
Order other men about. Don’t tell me
what I should do. I’ll not obey you anymore. 330
But I will tell you this—remember it well—
I’ll not raise my hand to fight about that girl,
no, not against you or any other man.
You Achaeans gave her to me, and now,
you seize her back again. But you’ll not take
another thing from my swift black ship— [300]
you’ll get nothing else with my consent.
If you’d like to see what happens, just try.
My spear will quickly drip with your dark blood.”

Thus the pair of them continued arguing. 340
Then they stood up, dissolving the assembly by the ships.
Peleus’s son went back to his well-balanced ships and huts,
along with Patroclus, Menoetius’ son, and friends.

Agamemnon dragged a swift ship down the shore,
chose twenty sailors, loaded on the oxen,
offerings for the god, and led on fair-cheeked Chryseis. [310]
Shrewd Odysseus shipped on as leader. All aboard,
they set off, carving a pathway through the sea.

Atreus’s son ordered troops to cleanse themselves.
The men bathed in the sea, washed off impurities. 350
They then made sacrificial offerings to Apollo—
hundreds of perfect bulls and goats—beside the restless sea.
Savoury smells curled up amid the smoke high into heaven.

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The men thus occupied, Agamemnon did not forget
the challenge he made earlier to Achilles.

He called his heralds, Talthymbius and Eurybates: [320]

“Go to Achilles’ tent, Peleus’s son,
take fair-complexioned Briseis by the hand.
Bring her to me. If he won’t surrender her,
I’ll come myself in force and take her. 360
For him that will be a worse disaster.”

With these firm orders, he dismissed the men, who moved off,
heavy hearted, along the shore of the restless sea.
They reached the huts and ships of the Myrmidons.
There they found Achilles seated by his hut
and his black ship. As he saw them approach,
Achilles felt no joy. The two heralds, afraid, [330]
just stood in silence, out of deference to the king.
In his heart Achilles sensed their purpose. He called them:

“Cheer up, heralds, messengers for gods and men. 370
Come here. I don’t blame you, but Agamemnon.
He sends you both here for the girl Briseis.
Come, Patroclus, born from Zeus, fetch the girl.
Give her to these two to take away.
Let them both witness, before blessed gods,
mortal men, and that unfeeling king, [340]
if ever there’s a need for me again
to defend others from a shameful death.
That man’s wits are foolish, disastrously so—
he’s not thinking about past or future, 380
how Achaeans may fight safely by their ships.”

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Patroclus did as his dear comrade had requested.
He led out fair-cheeked Briseis from the hut
and gave her up to be led off. The heralds left,
returning to Achaean ships, Briseis with them,
but against her will.

Achilles then, in tears,
withdrew from his companions, sat by the shore,
staring at the wide grey seas. Stretching out his hands, [350]
he cried aloud, praying repeatedly to Thetis,
his beloved mother:*

“Mother, since you gave me life— 390
if only for a while—Olympian Zeus,
high thunderer, should give me due honour.
But he does not grant me even slight respect.
For wide-ruling Agamemnon, Atreus’s son,
has shamed me, has taken away my prize,
appropriated it for his own use.”

As he said this, he wept.

His noble mother heard him from deep within the sea,
where she sat by her old father. Quickly she rose up,
moving above grey waters, like an ocean mist,
and settled down before him, as he wept. She stroked
him, 400 [360]
then said:

“My child, why these tears? What sorrows

* Achilles’s mother, Thetis, is a minor sea goddess who married the mortal Peleus.

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weigh down your heart? Tell me, so we'll both know.
Don't hide from me what's on your mind."

With a deep groan, swift-footed Achilles then replied.

"You know. Why should I tell you what you know?

We came to Thebe, Eëtion's sacred city,
sacked it, taking everything the city had.

Achaea's sons apportioned it all fairly
amongst themselves. Agamemnon's share
was fair-skinned Chryseis. Then Chryses arrived
at the swift ships of bronze-armed Achaeans.

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Archer god Apollo's priest sought out his daughter.
He brought with him an enormous ransom,
carried in his hands the sacred golden staff
with the shawl of archer god Apollo.

He begged Achaeans, above all Atreus' two sons,
the people's leaders. All Achaeans called on them
to respect the priest, accept the splendid ransom.
But that didn't please Agamemnon in his heart.

He sent him roughly off with harsh abusive orders
The old man went away again, enraged.

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[380]

He prayed to Apollo, who loved him well.
The god heard him and sent his deadly arrows
against the Argives. The troops kept dying,
one by one, as the god rained arrows down
throughout the wide Achaean army.

The prophet Calchas, understanding all,
told us Apollo's will. At once I was the first
to recommend we all appease the god.

But anger got control of Agamemnon.

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He stood up on the spot and made that threat
which he's just carried out. So quick-eyed Achaeans

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are sending Chryseis in fast ships back to Chryse, [390]
transporting gifts for lord Apollo, and heralds came
to take away Briseis from my huts,
the girl who is my gift from Achaea's sons.
So now, if you can, protect your son.
Go to Mount Olympus, and implore Zeus,
if ever you in word or deed have pleased him.
For often I have heard you boast in father's house 440
that you alone of all the deathless gods
saved Zeus of the dark clouds from disgraceful ruin,
when other Olympians came to tie him up,
Hera, Pallas Athena, and Poseidon. [400]
But you, goddess, came and set him free,
by quickly calling up to high Olympus
that hundred-handed monster gods call Briareos,
and men all name Aigaion, a creature
whose strength was greater than his father's.*
He sat down beside the son of Cronos, 450
exulting in his glory. The sacred gods, afraid,
stopped tying up Zeus. So sit down right by Zeus,
clasp his knee, remind him of all that,
so he'll want to help the Trojans somehow,
corner Achaeans by the sea, by their ships' prows,
have them destroyed, so they all enjoy their king, [410]
so the son of Atreus, wide-ruling Agamemnon,
himself may see his foolishness, dishonouring
Achilles, the best of the Achaeans."

Thetis, shedding tears, answered her son, Achilles: 460

* The reference here is to an attempt by the Olympian gods to topple Zeus. Thetis brought the powerful monster Briareos, one of the children of Gaia and Ouranos, to Zeus's aid.

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“O my child, why did I nurture you,
since I brought you up to so much pain?
Would you were safely by your ships dry-eyed.
Your life is fated to be short—you’ll not live long.
Now, faced with a quick doom, you’re in distress,
more so than any other man. At home,
I gave you life marked by an evil fate.
But I’ll tell these things to thunder-loving Zeus.
I’ll go myself to snow-topped Mount Olympus, [420]
to see if he will undertake all this. 470
Meanwhile, you should sit by your swift ships,
angry at Achaeans. Take no part in war.
For yesterday Zeus went to Oceanus,
to banquet with the worthy Ethiopians.
The gods all journeyed with him. In twelve days,
when he returns and comes home to Olympus,
I’ll go to Zeus’s bronze-floored house, clasp his knee.
I think I’ll get him to consent.”

Thetis spoke.

Then she went away, leaving Achilles there,
angry at heart for lovely girdled Briseis, 480
taken from him by force against his will.

Odysseus sailed to Chryse, bringing with him
the sacrificial animals as sacred offerings.
When they had sailed into deep anchorage,
they took in the sails and stowed them in the ship.
With forestays they soon set the mast down in its notch,
then rowed the ship in to its mooring place.
They threw out anchor stones, lashed stern cables,
and clambered out into the ocean surf.
They brought off the offerings to archer god Apollo. 490

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Then Chryseis disembarked from the ocean ship.

Resourceful Odysseus led her to the altar, [440]
placed her in her beloved father's hands, then said:

“Chryses, I have been sent by Agamemnon,
ruler of men, to bring your daughter to you,
and then, on behalf of the Danaans,
to make an offering to lord Apollo—
all these sacrificial beasts—to placate the god,
who now inflicts such dismal evil on us.”

After saying this, he handed the girl over. 500
Chryses gave his daughter a joyful welcome back.
And then around the well-built altar, they arranged
the splendid sacrifice. They washed their hands,
and picked up the barley grain for sprinkling.
Raising his arms, Chryses prayed out loud on their behalf: [450]

“Hear me, god of the silver bow, protector
of Chryse, mighty lord of holy Cilla,
sacred Tenedos. You heard me earlier,
when I prayed to you. Just as you honoured me,
striking hard against Achaeans then, so now, 510
grant me what I pray for—remove disaster,
this wretched evil, from the Danaans.”

So Chryses spoke. Phoebus Apollo heard him.
Once they had prayed and scattered barley grain,
they pulled back the heads of sacrificial beasts,
slit their throats, flayed them, sliced the thigh bones out,
and hid them in twin layers of fat, with raw meat on top. [460]
Old Chryses burned them on split wood, poured wine on them.

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Young men beside him held out five-pronged forks.
Once the thighs were well burned, they sampled entrails, 520
then sliced up all the rest, skewered the meat on spits,
roasted it carefully, and drew off every piece.
That work complete, they then prepared a meal and ate.
No heart was left unsatisfied. All feasted equally.
And when the men had had their fill of food and drink,
young boys filled the mixing bowl with wine up to the brim, [470]
and served it, pouring libations into every cup.

Then all day long young Achaean lads played music,
singing to the god a lovely hymn of praise,
honouring in dance and song the god who shoots from far. 530
Hearing them, Apollo felt joy fill his heart. At sunset,
as dusk came on, by the ship's stern they went to sleep.
But when early born, rose-fingered Dawn appeared,
they set off, once more back to the wide Achaean camp.
Far-shooting Apollo sent them favourable winds.
They raised the mast and then the sails. The wind blew, [480]
filling out the body of the sail—on both sides of the prow
the purple waves hissed loudly as the ship sped on its way,
its motion carving a path through the ocean swell.
When they reached the broad Achaean army, 540
they hauled the black ship high up on the sand,
pushed long props tight beneath it, then dispersed,
each man returning to his own huts and ships.

Meanwhile, Achilles, divinely born son of Peleus,
sat down in anger alongside his swift ships. Not once
did he attend assembly where men win glory [490]
or go out to fight. But he pined away at heart,
remaining idle by his ships, yearning
for the hue and cry and clash of battle.

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Twelve days later, the company of gods came back together to Olympus, with Zeus in the lead. 550

Thetis did not forget the promise to her son.

She rose up through the ocean waves at daybreak, then moved high up to great Olympus. She found Zeus, wide-seeing son of Cronos, some distance from the rest, seated on the highest peak of many-ridged Olympus.

She sat down right in front of him. With her left hand, [500] she clutched his knees, with her right she cupped his chin, in supplication to lord Zeus, son of Cronos:

“Father Zeus, if, among the deathless gods, 560 I’ve ever served you well in word or deed, then grant my prayer will be fulfilled.

Bring honour to my son, who, of all men will be fate’s quickest victim. For just now, Agamemnon, king of men, has shamed him.

He seized his prize, robbing him in person, and kept it for himself. But honour him, Zeus, all-wise Olympian. Give the Trojans the upper hand, until Achaeans respect my son, until they multiply his honours.” 570 [510]

Thetis finished. Cloud gatherer Zeus did not respond. He sat a long time silent. Thetis held his knees, clinging close, repeating her request once more:

“Promise me truly, nod your head, or deny me— since there’s nothing here for you to fear— so I’ll clearly see how among the gods I enjoy the least respect of all.”

Cloud gatherer Zeus, greatly troubled, said:

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“A nasty business.

What you say will set Hera against me.

She provokes me so with her abuse. Even now, 590

in the assembly of immortal gods,

she’s always insulting me, accusing me [520]

of favouring the Trojans in the war.

But go away for now, in case Hera catches on.

I’ll take care of this, make sure it comes to pass.

Come, to convince you, I’ll nod my head.

Among gods that’s the strongest pledge I make.

Once I nod my assent, nothing I say

can be revoked, denied, or unfulfilled.”

Zeus, son of Cronos, nodded his dark brows. 590

The divine hair on the king of gods fell forward,

down over his immortal head, shaking Olympus [530]

to its very base. The conference over, the two parted.

Thetis plunged from bright Olympus back into the sea.

Zeus went inside his house. Their father present,

all the gods at once stood up from their seats.

No one dared stay put as he came in—all rose together.

Zeus seated himself upon his throne. Looking at him,

Hera sensed he had made some deal with Thetis,

silver-footed daughter of the Old Man of the Sea. 600

At once she spoke up accusingly:

“Which god

has been scheming with you, you crafty one? [540]

You always love to work on things in secret,

without involving me. You never want

to tell me openly what you intend.”

BOOK ONE

The father of gods and men replied:

“Hera,
don’t hope to understand my every plan.
Even for my own wife that’s dangerous.
What’s appropriate for you to hear about,
no one, god or man, will know before you. 610
But when I wish to hide my thoughts from gods,
don’t you go digging after them,
or pestering me for every detail.” [550]

Ox-eyed queen Hera then replied to Zeus:

“Most dread son of Cronos, what are you saying?
I have not been overzealous before now,
in questioning you or seeking answers.
Surely you’re quite at liberty to plan
anything you wish. But now, in my mind,
I’ve got this dreadful fear that Thetis, 620
silver-footed daughter of the Old Man of the Sea,
has won you over, for this morning early,
she sat down beside you, held your knees.
I think you surely nodded your agreement
to honour Achilles, killing many soldiers,
slaughtering them by the Achaean ships.”
Zeus, the cloud gatherer, spoke out in response: [560]

“My dear lady, you’re always fancying things.
Your attention picks up every detail.
But you can’t do anything about it, 630
except push yourself still further from my heart,
making matters so much worse for you.
If things are as they are, then that’s the way

 THE QUARREL BY THE SHIPS

I want them. So sit down quietly.
Do as I say. If not, then all the gods
here on Olympus won't be any help,
when I reach out to set my hands on you,
for they're invincible."

Zeus finished speaking.

Ox-eyed queen Hera was afraid—so she sat down,
silently suppressing what her heart desired. 640
In Zeus's home the Olympian gods began to quarrel. [570]
Then that famous artisan, Hephaestus, concerned
about his mother, white-armed Hera, spoke to them:

"A troublesome matter this will prove—
unendurable—if you two start fighting
over mortal men like this, inciting gods to quarrel.
If we start bickering, we can't enjoy the meal,
our excellent banquet. So I'm urging mother,
though she's more than willing, to humour Zeus,
our dear father, so he won't get angry once again, 650
disturb the feast for us. For if Zeus,
the Olympian lord of lightning, was of a mind [580]
to hurl us from our seats, his strength's too great.
But if you talk to him with soothing words,
at once Olympian Zeus will treat us well."

Hephaestus spoke, then stood up, passed a double goblet
across to his dear mother, saying to her:

"Stay calm, mother, even though you are upset.
If not, then, as beloved as you are,
I may see you beaten up before my eyes, 660
with me incapable of helping out,

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though the sight would make me most unhappy.

It's hard to take a stand opposing Zeus.

Once, when I was eager to assist you, [590]

Zeus seized me by the feet and threw me out,

down from heaven's heights. The entire day

I fell and then, right at sunset, dropped

on Lemnos, almost dead. After that fall,

men of Sintes helped me to recover."

As he spoke, the white-armed goddess Hera smiled. 670

She reached for her son's goblet. He poured the drink,

going from right to left, for all the other gods,

drawing off sweet nectar from the mixing bowl.

Then their laughter broke out irrepressibly,

as the sacred gods saw Hephaestus bustling around, [600]

concerned about the feast. All that day they dined,

until sunset. No one's heart went unsatisfied.

All feasted equally. They heard exquisite music,

from Apollo's lyre and the Muses' beautiful song

and counter-song. When the sun's bright light had set, 680

the gods all went to their own homes. Hephaestus,

the famous lame god, with his resourceful skill,

had made each god a place to live. Olympian Zeus,

god of lightning, went home to his own bed,

where he usually reclined whenever sweet sleep [610]

came over him. He went inside and lay down there,

with Hera of the golden throne stretched out beside him.

