

## HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

**HECTOR**

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(in Homer's *Iliad*) conscientious

**Overview** Homer's *Iliad* is a tale of the Fall of a Great City, mercantile power, and trading center. To what extent this tale reflects historical reality—a setting in the 13th or 14th century Eastern Mediterranean—matters less than the splendid tale it generated, in which immemorial historical figures enshrined themes in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. One protagonist of the *Iliad*, which concerns the Greek conquest of Troy, is Hector, the son of the long time but now aged ruler of Troy, Priam. Hector and his wife Andromache offer us the closest glimpse of real life in the *Iliad*, the picture of a loving couple and their small child Astyanax.

**Character** Hector is a family man put in a dreadful situation, his city besieged, his own prowess—which is vast and displayed in constant heavy battles—on a headlong course toward the ferocious strengths, moral and physical, of the Greek hero Achilles, who will eventually subdue and humiliate him. Hector appears at many points in the epic, now triumphing in individual hand combat, now appearing with his wife and son, now lying as a corpse in the tent of Achilles. One vignette shows us Hector standing during a momentary battle respite, on the Walls that surround and protect Troy. Andromache and Astyanax are also there. Hector leans over to talk to his wife, and the plume from his helmet tickles –touches, frightens—the small boy between them. Hector, profiled as family man, draws back into the humor of the situation.

**Parallels** Oddly enough, a parallel to Hector the family man is Menelaos the family man, the cuckold whose gorgeous wife and her playboy suitor initiated the Trojan War. In the *Odyssey*, when Telemachos has set out to search for his lost dad, he comes to the palace of Menelaos, who has returned and is now in post war mode, comfortably settled with his little old beauty queen wife, who had set fire to the world. Hector gets butchered, while Menelaos—or another family man, Charles Bovary—doesn't ever quite get the point. Mention might be made of another family man type, Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone*, a born loser who can think no further than the status quo of the law of the moment.

**Illustrative moments**

**Critical** In the heart of battle (Book 3) Paris—the pretty boy who abducted Helen from Greece, to initiate the war—is confronted by Menelaos, the man he cuckolded. The furious Menelaos attacks, and Paris 'melts back into the crowd,' anxious to save himself. At this point Hector comes up to berate Paris for being a coward: 'Ill Paris, most fair in semblance, thou deceiver woman-mad, would thou hadst been unborn and died unwed.' He goes on to explain that Paris' behavior has been shameful for all the Trojans, putting them essentially to blame for the war.

**Prayerful** Addressed by his mother with words of praise, for his fighting skill, and urged to drink some wine and relax, in order to recharge his batteries, Hector rejects the lady soundly, 'lest thou cripple me of my courage.'" He begs his mother to depart immediately—with the elderly ladies of the city—to the Temple of Zeus, and there to beg Athena for mercy on Troy. 'So may she perhaps hold back Achilles from holy Ilion, the furious spearsman, the mighty deviser of rout.' He himself, he says, will return to Paris, to beg him to pitch in and help at this crucial moment in the struggle.

**Laughter** In the overview we mentioned the charming vignette of Hector's plume, and his frightened young son. 'Then his dear father laughed aloud, and his lady mother... then kissed he his dear son, and dandled him his dear arms.' He prayed to Zeus that his son might equal his prowess and exceed him in fame. He adds that he wishes his son might return from battle, 'and bring with him blood stained spoils from the foeman he hath slain.' The domestic scene merges into a scene of tribal protectiveness, which is perhaps still the merge we might expect in a bloodthirsty modern society today.

**Forecast** As Hector enters the battlefield, for his final encounter with Achilles, he is met by his wife Andromache, with a nursemaid carrying their son, Astyanax. She begs her husband not to go forward into

battle, where they both know he will be killed, and after which she will be carried away as war prey. **Hector refuses this appeal, with heavy heart because he knows he has been fated**, and especially because he knows the truth of her fear, and can fore sense the moment when, in some distant Greek village to which she has been taken, some stranger will see her hauling water, and say 'this is the wife of Hector.'

### **Discussion questions**

Does the scene in which Hector's plume tickles his son, and the boy's parents laugh, give us an insight into middle class archaic Greek life, as we might understand 'middle class' today?

Why is Hector fated to die at the hands of Achilles? Does this fatedness reduce the suspense of following the epic through to Achilles' brutal slaughter of the Trojan leader?

Is Hector in any noticeable way influenced by the attitudes or behavior of his wife? Is Hector sensitive to the plight of Helen, who is quite ready, by mid epic, to call herself a bitch, and to repent the war?