



The burning of Troy

Ashes of Ilium!

Flames that consumed my people! Here I swear
That in your downfall I did not avoid
One weapon, one exchange with the Danaans,
165 And if it had been fated, my own hand
Had earned my death. But we were torn away
From that place—Iphitus and Pelias too,
One slow with age, one wounded by Ulysses,
Called by a clamor at the hall of Priam.
170 Truly we found here a prodigious fight,
As though there were none elsewhere, not a death

167 Iphitus (ī'fī-təs) and Pelias
(pēl'ē-es): Trojan soldiers.

WORDS TO KNOW

prodigious (prə-dī'j'əs) *adj.* impressively great; stupendous

In the whole city: Mars gone berserk, Danaans
 In a rush to scale the roof; the gate besieged
 By a tortoise shell of overlapping shields.

175 Ladders clung to the wall, and men strove upward
 Before the very doorposts, on the rungs,
 Left hand putting the shield up, and the right
 Reaching for the cornice. The defenders
 Wrenched out upperworks and rooftiles: these

180 For missiles, as they saw the end, preparing
 To fight back even on the edge of death.
 And gilded beams, ancestral ornaments,
 They rolled down on the heads below. In hall
 Others with swords drawn held the entrance way,

185 Packed there, waiting. Now we plucked up heart
 To help the royal house, to give our men
 A respite, and to add our strength to theirs,
 Though all were beaten. And we had for entrance
 A rear door, secret, giving on a passage

190 Between the palace halls; in other days
 Andromachē, poor lady, often used it,
 Going alone to see her husband's parents
 Or taking Astyanax to his grandfather.
 I climbed high on the roof, where hopeless men

195 Were picking up and throwing futile missiles.
 Here was a tower like a promontory
 Rising toward the stars above the roof:
 All Troy, the Danaan ships, the Achaean camp,
 Were visible from this. Now close beside it

200 With crowbars, where the flooring made loose joints,
 We pried it from its bed and pushed it over.
 Down with a rending crash in sudden ruin
 Wide over the Danaan lines it fell;
 But fresh troops moved up, and the rain of stones

205 With every kind of missile never ceased.

PAUSE & REFLECT What details helped you imagine the fighting outside Priam's palace?

172 berserk: recklessly violent.

178 cornice (kôr'nĭs): a molding at the top of a wall.

191 Andromachē (ăn-drŏm'ə-kə), **poor lady:** Andromachē's husband, the Trojan prince Hector, had been killed by Achilles earlier in the war.

193 Astyanax (ə-stĭ'ə-năks'): the son of Hector and Andromachē.

196 promontory (prŏm'en-tŏr'ē): a ridge of land extending into a body of water.

WORDS TO KNOW

FOCUS What do you predict will happen when the Greek soldiers break into the palace?

Just at the outer doors of the vestibule
Sprang Pyrrhus, all in bronze and glittering,
As a serpent, hidden swollen underground
By a cold winter, writhes into the light,
210 On vile grass fed, his old skin cast away,
Renewed and glossy, rolling slippery coils,
With lifted underbelly rearing sunward
And triple tongue a-flicker. Close beside him
Giant Periphas and Automedon,
215 His armor-bearer, once Achilles' driver,
Besieged the place with all the young of Scyros,
Hurling their torches at the palace roof.
Pyrrhus shouldering forward with an axe
Broke down the stony threshold, forced apart
220 Hinges and brazen door-jambs, and chopped through
One panel of the door, splitting the oak,
To make a window, a great breach. And there
Before their eyes the inner halls lay open,
The courts of Priam and the ancient kings,
225 With men-at-arms ranked in the vestibule.
From the interior came sounds of weeping,
Pitiful commotion, wails of women
High-pitched, rising in the formal chambers
To ring against the silent golden stars;
230 And, through the palace, mothers wild with fright
Ran to and fro or clung to doors and kissed them.
Pyrrhus with his father's brawn stormed on,
No bolts or bars or men availed to stop him:
Under his battering the double doors
235 Were torn out of their sockets and fell inward.
Sheer force cleared the way: the Greeks broke through
Into the vestibule, cut down the guards,
And made the wide hall seethe with men-at-arms—
A tumult greater than when dikes are burst
240 And a foaming river, swirling out in flood,
Whelms every parapet and races on
Through fields and over all the lowland plains,
Bearing off pens and cattle. I myself
Saw Neoptolemus furious with blood

206 vestibule (vēs'tə-byōōl'): entrance hall.

214 Periphas (pə-rī'fəs) . . .
Automedon (ō-tōm'ə-dōn').

216 the young of Scyros (skī'rəs): the followers of Pyrrhus, who lived on the island of Scyros.

238 seethe: boil; surge.

241 whelms every parapet: overflows every protective wall.

WORDS TO KNOW

writh (rīth) v. to twist about; squirm

245 In the entrance way, and saw the two Atridae;
Hecuba I saw, and her hundred daughters,
Priam before the altars, with his blood
Drenching the fires that he himself had blessed.
Those fifty bridal chambers, hope of a line
250 So flourishing; those doorways high and proud,
Adorned with takings of barbaric gold,
Were all brought low: fire had them, or the Greeks.

What was the fate of Priam, you may ask.
Seeing his city captive, seeing his own
255 Royal portals rent apart, his enemies
In the inner rooms, the old man uselessly
Put on his shoulders, shaking with old age,
Armor unused for years, belted a sword on,
And made for the massed enemy to die.
260 Under the open sky in a central court
Stood a big altar; near it, a laurel tree
Of great age, leaning over, in deep shade
Embowered the Penatēs. At this altar
Hecuba and her daughters, like white doves
265 Blown down in a black storm, clung together,
Enfolding holy images in their arms.
Now, seeing Priam in a young man's gear,
She called out:

‘My poor husband, what mad thought
Drove you to buckle on these weapons?
270 Where are you trying to go? The time is past
For help like this, for this kind of defending,
Even if my own Hector could be here.
Come to me now: the altar will protect us,
Or else you'll die with us.’

She drew him close,
275 Heavy with years, and made a place for him
To rest on the consecrated stone.

Now see
Politēs, one of Priam's sons, escaped
From Pyrrhus' butchery and on the run
Through enemies and spears, down colonnades,
280 Through empty courtyards, wounded. Close behind
Comes Pyrrhus burning for the death-stroke: has him,
Catches him now, and lunges with the spear.

245 the two Atridae (ā-trī'dē):
Menelaus and his brother
Agamemnon.

263 embowered the Penatēs
(pə-nā'tēz): sheltered the images
of the household gods.

279 colonnades (kōl'e-nādz'): rows
of columns.

The boy has reached his parents, and before them
Goes down, pouring out his life with blood.

285 Now Priam, in the very midst of death,
Would neither hold his peace nor spare his anger.

For what you've done, for what you've dared,' he said,
'If there is care in heaven for atrocity,

288 **atrocity** (ə-trōs'ĭ-tē): horrible
cruelty.

290 May the gods render fitting thanks, reward you
As you deserve. You forced me to look on
At the destruction of my son: defiled
A father's eyes with death. That great Achilles
You claim to be the son of—and you lie—
Was not like you to Priam, his enemy;
295 To me who threw myself upon his mercy
He showed compunction, gave me back for burial
The bloodless corpse of Hector, and returned me
To my own realm.'

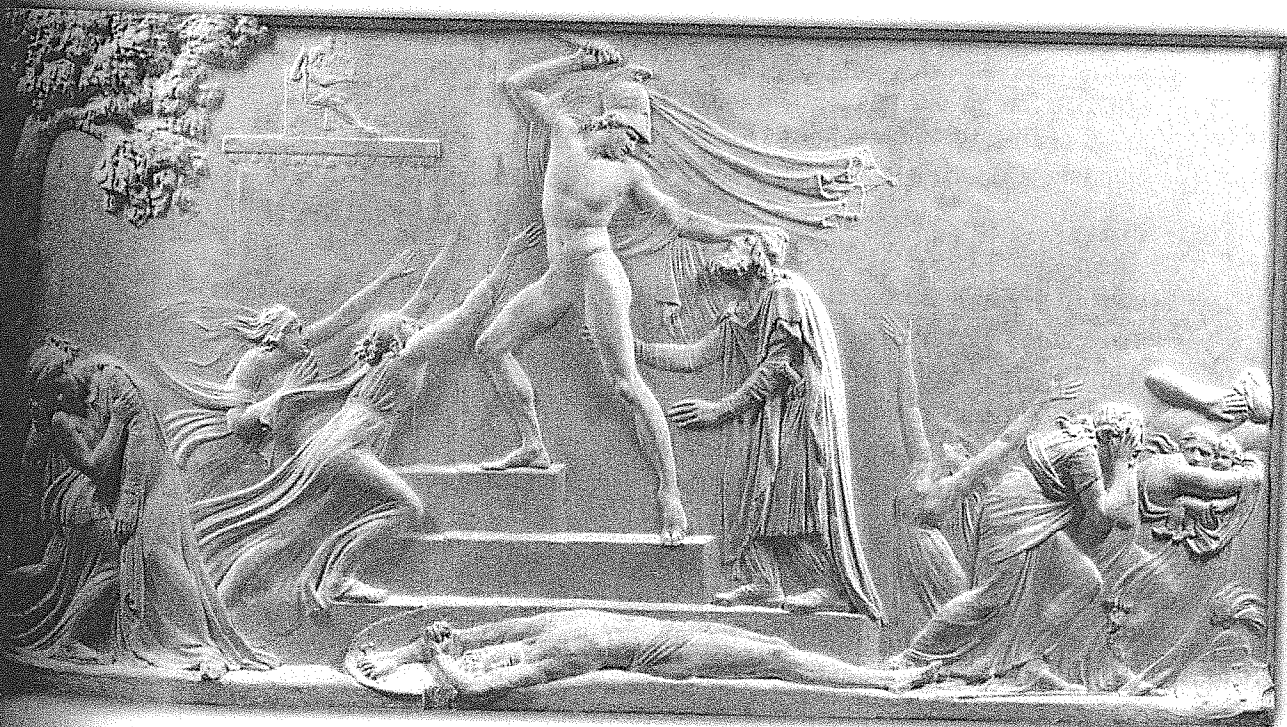
291 **defiled**: stained; polluted.

296 **compunction**: pity.

The old man threw his spear
With feeble impact; blocked by the ringing bronze,
300 It hung there harmless from the jutting boss.

299 **feeble**: weak.

300 **jutting boss**: the raised center
of a shield.



HUMANITIES CONNECTION In this bas-relief sculpture, Pyrrhus prepares to kill Priam as his wife and daughters look on in horror.

The Death of Priam (1787–1792),
Antonio Canova. Museo Correr,
Venice, Italy.

Then Pyrrhus answered:

‘You’ll report the news
To Pelidēs, my father; don’t forget
My sad behavior, the degeneracy
Of Neoptolemus. Now die.’

305 With this,
To the altar step itself he dragged him trembling,
Slipping in the pooled blood of his son,
And took him by the hair with his left hand.
The sword flashed in his right; up to the hilt
He thrust it in his body.

310 That was the end
Of Priam’s age, the doom that took him off,
With Troy in flames before his eyes, his towers
Headlong fallen—he that in other days
Had ruled in pride so many lands and peoples,
The power of Asia.

315 On the distant shore
The vast trunk headless lies without a name.

PAUSE & REFLECT What does Pyrrhus do to Priam, the king of Troy?

FOCUS Deeply moved by Priam’s death, Aeneas notices Helen of Troy. He regards her as the cause of all the bloodshed. What do you predict he will do to Helen?

For the first time that night, inhuman shuddering
Took me, head to foot. I stood unmanned,
And my dear father’s image came to mind
As our king, just his age, mortally wounded,
320 Gaspd his life away before my eyes.
Creusa came to mind, too, left alone;
The house plundered; danger to little Iulus.
I looked around to take stock of my men,
But all had left me, utterly played out,
325 Giving their beaten bodies to the fire
Or plunging from the roof.

It came to this,
That I stood there alone. And then I saw
Lurking behind the doorsill of the Vesta,

302 **Pelidēs** (pē-lī’dēz’): “son of Peleus”—that is, Achilles, who was killed earlier in the war.

303 **degeneracy**: decline into wickedness.

315 **the vast trunk**: Priam’s huge body.

328 **the Vesta**: the temple of Vesta, goddess of the hearth.

330 In hiding, silent, in that place reserved,
The daughter of Tyndareus. Glare of fires
Lighted my steps this way and that, my eyes
Glancing over the whole scene, everywhere.
That woman, terrified of the Trojans' hate
For the city overthrown, terrified too
335 Of Danaan vengeance, her abandoned husband's
Anger after years—Helen, that Fury
Both to her own homeland and Troy, had gone
To earth, a hated thing, before the altars.
Now fires blazed up in my own spirit—
340 A passion to avenge my fallen town
And punish Helen's whorishness.

‘Shall this one

Look untouched on Sparta and Mycenae
After her triumph, going like a queen,
And see her home and husband, kin and children,
345 With Trojan girls for escort, Phrygian slaves?
Must Priam perish by the sword for this?
Troy burn, for this? Dardania's littoral
Be soaked in blood, so many times, for this?
Not by my leave. I know
350 No glory comes of punishing a woman,
The feat can bring no honor. Still, I'll be
Approved for snuffing out a monstrous life,
For a just sentence carried out. My heart
Will teem with joy in this avenging fire,
355 And the ashes of my kin will be appeased.’

So ran my thoughts. I turned wildly upon her,
But at that moment, clear, before my eyes—
Never before so clear—in a pure light
Stepping before me, radiant through the night,
360 My loving mother came: immortal, tall,
And lovely as the lords of heaven know her.
Catching me by the hand, she held me back,
Then with her rose-red mouth reproved me:

‘Son,

365 Why let such suffering goad you on to fury
Past control? Where is your thoughtfulness
For me, for us? Will you not first revisit
The place you left your father, worn and old,

WORDS TO KNOW

reprove (rĭ-prōv') v. to scold

330 the daughter of Tyndareus (tĭn-dăr'ē-as): Helen. (Tyndareus, although not actually Helen's father, was the husband of her mother, Leda.)

335–336 her abandoned husband's anger: the anger of Menelaus, the husband Helen deserted to run off with Paris.

342 Sparta (spăr'tə): the city ruled by Menelaus.

345 Phrygian (frĭj'ē-ən): Trojan.

347 littoral (lĭt'ər-əl): seashore.

360 my loving mother: Venus.

364 goad: drive; urge.

Or find out if your wife, Creusa, lives,
 And the young boy, Ascanius—all these
 370 Cut off by Greek troops foraging everywhere?
 Had I not cared for them, fire would by now
 Have taken them, their blood glutted the sword.
 You must not hold the woman of Laconia,
 That hated face, the cause of this, nor Paris.
 375 The harsh will of the gods it is, the gods,
 That overthrows the splendor of this place
 And brings Troy from her height into the dust.
 Look over there: I'll tear away the cloud
 That curtains you, and films your mortal sight,
 380 The fog around you.—Have no fear of doing
 Your mother's will, or balk at obeying her.—
 Look: where you see high masonry thrown down,
 Stone torn from stone, with billowing smoke and dust,
 Neptune is shaking from their beds the walls
 385 That his great trident pried up, undermining,
 Toppling the whole city down. And look:
 Juno in all her savagery holds
 The Scaean Gates, and raging in steel armor
 Calls her allied army from the ships.
 390 Up on the citadel—turn, look—Pallas Tritonia
 Couched in a stormcloud, lightning, with her Gorgon!
 The Father himself empowers the Danaans,
 Urges assaulting gods on the defenders.
 Away, child; put an end to toiling so.
 395 I shall be near, to see you safely home.'

370 foraging: plundering

373 the woman of Laconia
(læ-kō'nē-ə): Helen.

385 undermining: digging
the foundations.

390 Tritonia (trī-tō'nē-ə):
Pallas.

391 Gorgon: the monster
Medusa, whose head Pallas
on her shield.

She hid herself in the deep gloom of night,
 And now the dire forms appeared to me
 Of great immortals, enemies of Troy.
 I knew the end then: Ilium was going down
 400 In fire, the Troy of Neptune going down,
 As in high mountains when the countrymen
 Have notched an ancient ash, then make their axes
 Ring with might and main, chopping away
 To fell the tree—ever on the point of falling,
 405 Shaken through all its foliage, and the treetop
 Nodding; bit by bit the strokes prevail
 Until it gives a final groan at last
 And crashes down in ruin from the height.

Now I descended where the goddess guided,
410 Clear of the flames, and clear of enemies,
For both retired; so gained my father's door,
My ancient home. I looked for him at once,
My first wish being to help him to the mountains;
But with Troy gone he set his face against it,
415 Not to prolong his life, or suffer exile.

PAUSE & REFLECT Why does Aeneas decide to spare Helen's life?



FOCUS Aeneas will try to lead his father, his wife, and his son through the burning city. Read to find out what happens to Aeneas' wife.

Unmoved by the protests of his family, Aeneas' father refuses to leave his home. However, he is finally persuaded by two divine signs. First, a small flame appears on the head of Iulus, Aeneas' son, touching the boy but not burning him. After Aeneas and his wife put out the flame, there comes the second sign—a crack of thunder outside, followed by a falling star.

Now indeed
My father, overcome, addressed the gods,
And rose in worship of the blessed star.