

# The *Iliad* of Homer

## Book 3

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## Book 3

### The Battle for Helen

#### Alexander (Paris), Menelaus & the Chief Achaeans

**W**HEN THEY CAME close to one another, Alexander (Paris) stepped forward to serve as champion on the Trojan side. He wore the skin of a panther over his shoulders, had his bow and sword, and brandished two spears topped with bronze. With these deadly weapons he challenged the best of the Argives to meet him [20] face to face in grim battle.

Now when Menelaus, dear to Ares, observed Alexander like this going out before the throng of men with long strides, he was as glad as a lion that comes upon the fallen carcass of some goat or horned stag and devours it at once, even though a pack of dogs and shepherd boys attack him to drive him off. In this way, Menelaus was glad when he saw Alexander with his own eyes. Now he would take revenge! Now he would make the offending man pay! Clad in armor, he at once jumped down from his chariot.

[30] But when godlike Alexander noticed Menelaus appear among the men fighting out front, his dear heart was panic-stricken. He therefore fell back to his comrades among the larger body of men and avoided death. As one who leaps back—startled,

trembling, and pale—when he suddenly comes upon a deadly snake on a winding mountain trail, even so did Alexander disappear into the throng of Trojan warriors, terror-stricken at the sight of the son of Atreus.

Seeing this, Hector schooled his brother with words meant to shame him. "Unhappy Paris, your form is the finest, you who are crazy for women, but you're a cheat, a deceiver! [40] I wish that you had never been born or that you had at least died unwed. That would have been far better than for you to be an outrage and for others to look at us from beneath raised brows. Will the longhaired Achaeans not laugh aloud at us? Won't they say and make known that we have a champion who is fine looking but not strong or courageous?

"Did you not, strong as you are, get your comrades together and sail across the sea to a land of strangers? There you carried off a beautiful woman who was already married to a warrior and the daughter-in-law of warriors. [50] Don't you see all the misery this has caused? Look at your father, your city,

and all the people! It's a source of shame and dejection to you, but to your enemies, a source of delight! And how can you now turn away from Menelaus, dear to Ares? Shouldn't you fight him to learn what kind of warrior he is—the man whose wife you have stolen? Where will your lyre and music making be then? And your good looks and love making? Where will all the fine things be when you're lying face down in the dust? Let me tell you this. The Trojans are very fearful people. Otherwise, they would have stoned you for all the evil you've done them!"

Godlike Alexander answered him, "Hector, you upbraid me as you should and not beyond what is right—[60] though your heart is always as hard as the axe a shipwright uses to cut wood for his ship, just like the mind in your breast is fearless. Still, do not reproach me for the lovely gifts of golden Aphrodite. The glorious gifts of the gods are not to be thrown away, whatever they give, even though no man would readily choose these.

"Now, if you wish for me to battle and fight Menelaus, then have the Trojans and Achaeans sit down. [70] I will join with Menelaus, dear to Ares, in the middle, and I will fight him for Helen and all her wealth. And the victorious man, the stronger one, will seize the woman and all her possessions and carry them off to his house. But let the rest swear oaths of friendship and trust according to which the Trojans will remain where they are while the others will go home to Argos, the land of grazing horses, and Achaea, the land of beautiful women."

*76-153 They carry out this plan. The Achaeans and the Trojans swear to oaths of friendship and trust with each other. Everyone is pleased with this move because, for now at least, the fighting has stopped. Otherwise, Homer transitions to Helen's loom where she is weaving a great purple tapestry embroidered with scenes of war. The messenger goddess Iris appears to her in the form of her sister-in-law Laodice and calls her to watch Paris and Menelaus' fight from atop the walls. She explains the agreement—how Helen will go with the man who wins. Finally, the goddess puts "sweet longing" in Helen's heart for Menelaus, her former husband. As a result of Iris'*

*visit, Helen goes with two handmaidens to the top of the wall at the Scaean gates. There she encounters Priam and other aged men, who are too old to fight but still speak influentially in the Trojan assembly.*

154-202 When the elders saw Helen coming toward the tower on the wall, they whispered quietly to one another, "No one can blame or resent the Trojans or the well-greaved Achaeans for suffering so many pains for so long for the sake of this woman, who appears like an immortal goddess. Nevertheless, as beautiful as she is, let them take her and sail home on the ships, [160] or she will cause misery for us and our children after us."

That's what the old men said. But Priam called Helen to him and said, "Dear child, take your seat in front of me so that you may see your former husband, your kinsmen by marriage, and all those men who are dear to you. To me, you are not responsible for all this. Rather, it is the gods who are to blame, not you. The gods have brought about this terrible war with the Achaeans, a war that is responsible for much crying and many tears. Anyway, tell me the name of the huge man there—the Achaean man who is noble and great. I've seen men taller by a head, but not one so fine looking [170] and majestic. He looks like one of the chief men."

And Helen, a goddess among women, exchanged these words with him. "Father of my husband, dear and respected in my eyes, I wish that I had chosen death rather than coming here with your son—far from my bridal chamber, my friends, my darling daughter, and all my childhood companions. But it was not to be, and so I melt within lamenting over what has happened.

"Still, I will tell you what you wish to know. The hero you ask about is wide-ruling Agamemnon, the son of Atreus, both a good and noble king and a strong and mighty spearman. [180] He was a brother-in-law to me—I who am a dog-eyed, shameless bitch."

That's what Helen said. And the old man marveled at him and said, "Blessed son of Atreus, offspring of Fate and prosperous-by-god! I see that

many Achaeans are subject to you. When I was in Phrygia, I saw many horsemen, the people of Otreus and Mygdon, who were camping upon the banks of the Sangrius. I was their ally with them when the Amazons, peers of men, came up against them. [190] But even they were not so many in number as the Achaeans.”

Next the old man looked down at Odysseus and asked, “Tell me, who is that other man, shorter by a head than Agamemnon but broader across the chest and shoulders? There’s his battle gear and armor set down on the ground, the much-nourishing earth, and there he is going through the lines of men as if he were some great woolly ram ordering his ewes.”

And Zeus-born Helen answered, [200] “He is Odysseus, the son of Laertes and a man of many counsels. He was born in rugged Ithaca and excels in all manner of tricks, stratagems, and subtle cunning.”

203-224 *Wise Antenor confirms Odysseus’ traits with a story relating the time Menelaus and Odysseus came on an embassy to Troy. Odysseus pretended to be a dumb fool, but when he spoke, he was a marvel to hear and behold.*

225-233 The old man Priam next spotted Ajax and inquired, “Who is that other Achaean man, good, noble, and huge, the one with the broad shoulders who is standing out above the Argives by a head?”

And Helen with the flowing robes answered him, “That’s huge Ajax, the wall of the Achaeans—their bulwark. [230] And the man on the other side of him standing among the Cretans is Idomeneus—the one that looks like a god. The leaders of the Cretans are gathered around him. I know him because Menelaus, dear to Ares, would often receive him as a guest in our house whenever he came visiting from Crete.”

234-345 *Helen tells Priam that she can see many others. But among all the men, she cannot see her two brothers, Castor and Polydeuces. And so, she speculates about why they are not present. Homer explains that it is because they are already dead.*

*Eventually Priam goes down to the battlefield with Antenor by his side. In the meantime, the Achaeans and*

*Trojans are preparing for the great sacrifice and oath-taking. Finally, with Agamemnon acting as the chief spokesman offering the prayers, and Priam standing nearby, they sacrifice and swear oaths to abide by the outcome of the single combat between Menelaus and Paris. Whoever wins will keep Helen. If Menelaus triumphs, the Trojans will furthermore pay a penalty. If not, the Achaeans will stay and force them to pay. After cutting the lambs’ throats and pouring out wine in libation, Agamemnon prays that whoever breaks the oath will have his brain likewise poured out and dashed upon the ground—along with his children’s brains.*

*At this, and just before the beginning of the battle, Priam explains he cannot bear to witness his son fighting Menelaus. So he returns to the city.*

*Menelaus and Paris step forward. Odysseus and Hector cast lots to see who will first throw his spear. Paris will. The men sit down in ranks while Paris arms. Finally, Menelaus and Paris step between the two armies to fight.*

346-354 Alexander threw first and struck the round shield of the son of Atreus, but the spear did not pierce it, for the shield turned its point.

[350] The son of Atreus Menelaus made the next move, praying to father Zeus as he did so. “Lord Zeus, grant that this man who first did me harm would pay the penalty. May I overpower and subdue godlike Alexander with my hands so that among men to come a man may shrink from doing harm to his host, to the man who shows a guest affection and offers him friendship.”

355-454 *Menelaus throws. But even though the spear finds his enemy’s shield and breastplate, Paris dodges aside at the last moment to avoid death. Observing this and blaming Zeus for the missed opportunity to get revenge, Menelaus dashes at Paris and grabs him by the helmet that is fastened by a strap around his neck. He drags Paris away toward the Achaeans.*

*Homer tells us that Menelaus would have won much glory except for Aphrodite’s saving action: she frees Paris and transports him home to Troy.*

*After this, Aphrodite beckons Helen to Paris’ house from atop the wall. Not wanting to go because she feels ashamed, Helen nevertheless walks off to meet him for fear*

### BOOK 3 ▪ THE BATTLE FOR HELEN

*of Aphrodite's anger. There, she upbraids Paris, commanding him to go out and challenge Menelaus again—like a real man, she says. Paris refuses, declaring that Menelaus beat him with the help of Athena. Instead, burning with sweet desire, greater even than the desire he felt for her when he first made love to her on the isle of Cranae just after taking her from Menelaus, he calls Helen to bed.*

*Meanwhile, like a wild beast of prey, Menelaus is searching for Paris. But no one can find him, not even his own men who have come to hate him like black death.*

455-461 Then standing among all the men, the lord of men Agamemnon spoke to them, saying, "Hear me you Trojans, Dardanians, and all your allies. The result is obvious—Menelaus has clearly won. He's the victor. Therefore, give back Helen with all her property, and make up for Menelaus' lost honor as is appropriate, [460] so that men to come will know about it."

That's what the son of Atreus said, and the Achaeans applauded him.

So ends Book 3. **See you in Book 4, "The Gods in Council."**

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