



Erotic Love Poems of
GREECE and ROME

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A Collection of New Translations by
STEPHEN BERTMAN


Second Edition

Erotic Love Poems *of*
Greece and Rome

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With love
to Elaine
(Proverbs 31:10-31)

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Love and Poetry

Erotic desire is as old as the human race, and erotic literature as old as civilization. Painted on fragile papyri disinterred from Egypt's sands and imprinted on clay tablets unearthed from Mesopotamia's wastes are the world's oldest love poems, dating back 3,500 years and more. These records testify not only to erotic passion, but also to the impulse to articulate that passion in written form.

I am your first love, I am your garden,
scented with spices, fragrant with flowers.
Deep runs my channel, smoothed by your tillage,
cooled by the North Wind, filled by the Nile.*

So wrote an Egyptian scribe in ancient days, even as a Mesopotamian poet wrote the words that follow:

Squeeze yourself into me
as the hand presses flour
into an open cup.
Pound yourself into me
as the fist rams flour into
a cup craving to be filled**

Such poems teach us that erotic passion has been an intrinsic component of human nature from civilization's beginnings.

Yet while love is spontaneous and free, poetry is, by definition, formal and structurally disciplined. While passion is personal and

* Translated by Stephen Bertman. From Stephen Bertman, *Doorways through Time: The Romance of Archaeology* (Los Angeles and New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1986).

** Translated by Stephen Bertman. From Stephen Bertman, *Handbook to Life in Ancient Mesopotamia* (New York: Facts On File, 2003).

individualistic, literature is bound by tradition and convention. Love and passion are natural and driven by emotion; literature and poetry, artificial and constrained by reason. How then can we account for the paradoxical marriage of love and poetry, for this age-old wedding of opposites?

First and foremost, love poems are expressions of feelings, but feelings can be chaotic unless they are given form. Such form endows feelings with a structure and compression they would otherwise lack. Their structure makes them more intelligible; their compression lends them power.

If a poem, then, is like a well-wrapped package, to whom is it sent? Surely, to the person the poet loves (or has come to hate); to other sympathetic listeners if the object of the poet's desire will not accept delivery; or even to the poet himself to make life more livable by externalizing frustration and the pain of rejection through the vehicle of the written word. Indeed, through the very act of literary composition, the poet can compose emotions, and in the process gain rational perspective and a renewed sense of erotic direction. The writing of poetry can thus help make a poet's world make more sense, or at least make it bearable.

As a thing of beauty, a poem may also celebrate erotic pleasure found, lost, or longed for. Here, form becomes the servant of art, transmuting otherwise ordinary words into noble statements and bestowing the possibility of permanence on what might otherwise be only transitory and forgotten. It is sculpted form, not inchoate feeling, that gives ultimate satisfaction to poets, and it is form as much as content that has enabled their ancient poems to transcend the millennia and reach our own day, granting them an immortality that life itself withheld. As the Biblical *Song of Songs* declares: "Love is as strong as death"—or at least, we may add, as long as love is enshrined in verse.

Yet, if love poetry took root at civilization's inception, it did not flower until many centuries later. This is in large part due to the evolution of literacy itself. Though writing was invented in the ancient Near East, the types of writing that developed there—hieroglyphic and cuneiform—were highly complex systems consisting of hundreds upon hundreds of separate characters. Com-

munication through writing thus became the prerogative of the learned few, and the written word was largely reserved for the formal prayers and archives of temple and palace, propagandistic inscriptions, and the calculating records of merchants. Composing love poetry, and reading it, would have been a leisure activity limited to a highly educated and numerically small elite. Indeed, even the political structure of Egyptian and Mesopotamian society conspired against the popularity of love poetry, since the individual and the aspirations of the individual were regarded subservient to the theocratic state. For erotic poetry to flower, what was needed was the democratization of love: an ideological environment that celebrated the individual and a simplified writing system that enabled such individuals to transcribe and read the personal messages of the human heart. This very environment arose for the first time not in the Near East, but in Greece in the seventh century BCE, and its instrument was the alphabet, a Phoenician invention that the Greeks imported and adapted to their own humanistic, rather than theocratic, purposes. In Greek history the period is called the Archaic, but it is a misnomer, for the period was anything but old-fashioned as the name implies. The Archaic period (about 750–490 BCE) was an era of spiritual awakening as Greece emerged from four centuries of dark-age chaos that had followed the fall of the Heroic Age. The Archaic period was a vibrant era of commercial expansionism, political revolution, and geographical exploration that witnessed the growth of independent city-states, the creation of the first life-size statues of Greek men and women, and the birth of personal poetry.

While Homeric epic had looked backward to glorious bygone days, Greek personal poetry focused on the promise of the present. While Homeric bards had suppressed their own personalities in commemorating the dead, the poets of the Archaic period proclaimed the vivid uniqueness of their own identities. Epic poems might employ thousands of verses to convey scope and grandeur, but a personal poem could use ten or twenty lines and capture the essence of a moment. And while epic verse advanced with stately regularity like wave after mighty wave rolling onto a

sea's shore, personal poets invented variegated rhythms that glistened like crests on the breeze-tossed surface of a sunlit lake. To be sure, erotic motivation had always been interwoven with martial themes in Greek epic, but now eroticism came into its own as poetry's subject par excellence. At first came elegiac poetry, written conservatively in couplets and accompanied in performance by the flute; soon after came lyric poetry, more inventive in form and accompanied by the lyre.

The composition of personal poems, however, was eventually eclipsed by the rise of Greek patriotism. By the early fifth century BCE, after the Greeks had repelled two foreign invasions, Athens arose to become the country's richest and most powerful city-state and the home of a "Golden Age." The success of Athenian democracy in turn inspired celebratory literary genres that were communal rather than individualistic: history, oratory, and choral drama.

The rise of Athens, however, was followed within decades by its fall, as its imperialistic ambitions within Greece provoked a disastrous twenty-five-year-long war with Sparta that ended in 404 BCE with Athens's defeat. In the political and moral vacuum that followed, communalism withered and was replaced by a new emphasis on the individual. The failure of political idealism led, moreover, to a new stress on sensualism as the basis for personal happiness. The combined influence of individualism and sensualism, in turn, resulted in a renewed interest in erotic poetry, a trend that continued into the alternately exhilarating and confusing era known as the Hellenistic, initiated by the worldwide conquests of Alexander the Great.

With Alexander's death in 323 BCE, his empire fragmented. By the second century BCE, a new power arose, the power of Rome, an imperialistically ambitious state that by 146 BCE became the political and military master of the Mediterranean world, including Greece. Though powerful, the Romans were, by Greek standards, crude and uneducated, a deficit the Romans had to make up if they were to command the cultural respect of the peoples they now ruled. Ever the pragmatists, the Romans set about reinventing themselves by schooling themselves in all things Greek—

all things, that is, that could be adapted to Roman taste and bent to Roman political purposes. Greek architecture (to express the bigness of Roman dreams), Greek sculpture (to express, through portraiture and historical relief, the bigness of the Roman ego), and Greek literature (especially history, epic, and oratory to glorify Roman achievements) fit the bill very nicely.

About erotic poetry the macho Romans were a bit ambivalent. To some, it seemed too soft and unmanly to go on and on about love; indeed to many, writing poetry that was not overtly nationalistic or moralistic smacked of subversive effeminacy. But to talented others, the appeal was irresistible: match the Greeks, or even outplay them, at their own literary game, and what a game it was! Power had always enticed the Romans, and the battle of the sexes was the ultimate arena, far more intoxicating and pleasurable than fighting the barbarians. If the Greek poet had fixated on the evanescence of life and the fragileness of beauty, the Roman poet would extol the mastery (albeit temporary) of man over woman. Of course, who was the slave and who was the master would remain the eternal question. Thanks to the written word, some Roman poets even immortalized their mistresses, though it could be argued that it was their mistresses that in the end immortalized them!

The great age of Roman erotic poetry was the late Republic and nascent Empire, especially the age of Augustus Caesar (27 BCE–14 CE), the so-called “Golden Age of Rome,” a time of imperialistic affluence enjoyed by a sensually liberated class of rich and leisured patricians. Though later decades became more corrupt—the so-called days of “bread and circuses”—for some reason the writing and reading of erotic poetry was to wane, perhaps because the Romans became more interested in “doing” it than describing it, or perhaps because moral corruption so debases the possibilities of heart-felt art that it ceases to be created.

Ironically though, erotic poetry *did* continue to be written, not in the western but in the eastern Mediterranean, and not in Latin but in Greek, well into the Byzantine period. The embers of love do not so readily die, nor the capacity of love to inspire passionate poetry.

The Challenge of Translation

It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs.

With these words, Victor Frankenstein described with trembling recollection the birth of his creature. The words are recorded in Mary Shelley's 1818 novel, *Frankenstein*. Yet in the memorable film adaptation of 1931, he utters words even more dramatic, crying out as the creature opens its eyes, "It's alive! It's alive!"

They are words that every prospective translator, especially a translator of ancient poetry, should take to heart, for unless the poem in its new linguistic incarnation lives and breathes as an organic whole, it is no more than a mechanical assemblage of bodily parts "collected ... from charnel houses; and disturbed, with profane fingers. ..."

Of course, it is no easy task to take something long dead and give it life. To do so, the prospective translator must first rationally assess, as well as one can, the literal meaning of the dead poet's words through diligent recourse to dictionaries, grammars, and scholarly commentaries. But having once established that literal meaning, he or she must then attempt to spiritually "inhabit" the poem, repeatedly reflecting on that meaning, reading the poem again and again in its original language, and persistently searching for an emotional key by which the world of the poem can be unlocked. In the end, that key will prove a personal one, as personal for the translator as it was for the original poet. And while it might seem useful in such an enterprise to familiarize oneself with the poet's life—and surely it is—we must, at the same, time humbly acknowledge that most of what we will know about an ancient poet's life will paradoxically derive from our understanding of the poems themselves.

Yet, assuming the translator has emotionally entered an erotic poem, how does he or she then effectively exit? For if we are to be more successful than mythical Orpheus, we must not only venture into the land of the dead but, to validate our efforts, return from it with a Eurydice we can hold in our arms. Our “Eurydice” will need to be not a bloodless avatar but, as nearly as is possible, a spiritually authentic equivalent of the original work, warm and pulsing with life.

That is no simple matter, however. Words in one language, though they may be equivalent in meaning to words in another, may be dissimilar in color or cadence; at other times, more words may be needed in one language to communicate what can be said in another with fewer. Furthermore, the versification of both ancient Greek and Latin poetry depends on abstract rhythms, or meters, based on intricate combinations of short and long syllables (short = one beat; long = two), a characteristic almost impossible to replicate for long stretches in English. Indeed, it is these formal patterns that give classical poems their artistic structure that make them “poems.” Traditional English poetry, on the other hand, is marked by end-rhyme (“... moon”/“... June”), a feature virtually absent from classical verse. Lastly, ancient Greek, a musical language, used rising-and-falling tonal accents (like Chinese), not softer-or-louder stress accents like English (or, for that matter, like Latin).

Literal meaning aside, how then do we convert a Greek or Latin poem into an English one when there are so many structural differences? The honest answer is with great difficulty. The art of translation can be compared to a process of negotiation, one in which trade-offs are grudgingly made by labor or management to save an endangered company’s life. Only in this case, it is not a company’s life but a poet’s, a poet who is counting on us to do him or her justice. Such trade-offs may require the translator to use rhyme where rhythm alone will not impress, or substitute one rhythm for another that works better in English, or at times update an archaic image to ensure the poem will retain the impact the author intended. Or, sometimes, painfully, to leave something out because its inclusion in English would interrupt the

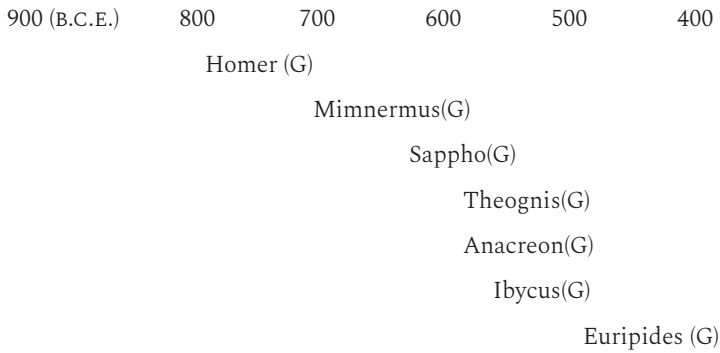
flow of language. Close at hand, the translator must also have a trusty thesaurus (to help him or her find just the right word) and, at times, a rhyming dictionary.

Inevitably, as Victor Frankenstein found out, the stitches may show. But if the translator has done his work honestly and well, and has shown his creature both love and compassion (as the creator in the novel did not), then that creature will *not* turn out to be a monster. And when the translator proclaims “It’s alive! It’s alive!” he will be able to do so with justifiable pride and share his victory with others.

Timeline

TIME-LINE

(G) = Greek poet (R) = Roman poet



Historical Periods and Events

Heroic Age of Greece: 15th–13th Centuries B.C.E.

Fall of Troy: 13th Century B.C.E.

Dark Ages of Greece: 12/11th–8th Centuries B.C.E.

Archaic Period: 8th–6th Centuries B.C.E.

Golden Age of Athens: 5th Century B.C.E.

Beginning of the Hellenistic Age: 4th Century B.C.E.

Roman Republic: 509–27 B.C.E.

Roman Empire: 27 B.C.E.–476 C.E. (Fall of Rome)

Golden Age of Rome (Augustan Age): 27 B.C.E.–14 C.E.

TIME-LINE (cont.)

400(B.C.E.)	300	200	100	1/1(C.E.)	100
	Asclepiades (G)				
	Apollonius (G)				
	Theocritus (G)				
		Moschus (G)			
		Bion (G) and “The Alexandrian Erotic Fragment”(G)			
		Meleager (G)			
		Philodemus (G)			
		Antipater of Thessalonica (G)			
		Marcus Argentarius (G)			
					Strato(G)
				Catullus (R)	
				Vergil (R)	
				Horace(R)	
				Tibullus(R)	
				Sulpicia(R)	
				Propertius(R)	
				Ovid(R)	
					Martial(R)

TIME-LINE (cont.)

200 (C.E.)	300	400	500	600
		Rufinus (G)		
		Paulus Silentarius (G)		
		<i>The Pervigilium Veneris</i> (R)		

P A R T 1

**Erotic Love Poems
of Greece**

Homer

(EIGHTH CENTURY BCE)

Among the names of Western Civilization's authors, Homer's is the oldest we possess, though the poet's exact identity is a matter of scholarly conjecture. What is beyond debate, however, is that Homer was a master storyteller who gave consummate poetic expression to traditional heroic tales and cast them in a dramatic form they would forever retain. Homer's inspiration was the Trojan War (thirteenth century BCE), an epic conflict that left an everlasting impression on Greek memory and imagination. Homer's poems, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, recounted the story of that war and its aftermath.

Yet, the world of Homeric epic is not purely martial, for love pervades it. The Trojan War was itself instigated by an act of sexual passion: the abduction of Helen, whose face "launched a thousand ships," a femme fatale who would later live on in romantic memory as Helen "of Troy." And, despite the allure of divine enchantresses and the savagery of blood-thirsty monsters, it was the image of faithful and beloved Penelope that guided Odysseus as he struggled for years against wind and wave to return home.

In addition to *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, we also possess other poems composed in the same epic style: hymns to the gods and brief epigrams that are attributed to Homer and his fellow bards.

APHRODITE DIRECTS A LOVE-SCENE

(*The Iliad*, 3:380–447)*

The most famous war in Greek memory, the Trojan War, was provoked by an act of seduction and adultery. With the collusion of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of sex, Alexander (also known as Paris) ran off with a married woman named Helen. Alexander was a dashing handsome bachelor prince from the royal house of Troy, a city on the coast of present-day Turkey; Helen, renowned as the most beautiful woman of her day, was married to Menelaus, king of the Greek city of Sparta. To retrieve Helen, the Greeks laid siege to Troy, waging war for a decade until Troy finally fell. During the long conflict, Helen became filled with self-loathing: Out of momentary passion she had renounced her homeland, her husband, and her child only to become an object of whispered derision among foreigners upon whom she had brought the curse of war. Yet she and her lover Alexander were still drawn toward each other and were still Aphrodite's play-things. As our scene opens, Aphrodite rescues Alexander from the plain before Troy where he was engaged in a duel with Menelaus, a duel that Helen had been watching from Troy's battlements.

... Aphrodite rescued Alexander—no hard job
for a goddess—by wrapping him in thick mist.
She set him down in a bedroom fragrant with incense,
and then went off to summon Helen.
She found her standing on the city wall, surrounded by the women
of Troy.
Taking hold of Helen's scented robe with her hand, the goddess
tugged at it,
and spoke to her disguised as an old crone,
a woman who used to card fine wool for Helen
when they lived in Sparta, a servant Helen used to like.

* Note: The titles of the selections in this anthology were created by the translator.

Disguised in this way, divine Aphrodite spoke to her and said:
“Come along now. Alexander is calling for you to come home.
The man’s in his bedroom lying on that ornate bed,
so handsome and handsomely dressed you wouldn’t think
he’d just come from a battlefield, but instead was going
to a dance, or was just sitting down after dancing.”
So she spoke, and stirred up desire in Helen’s heart.
But when Helen recognized the goddess’s lovely neck,
the beautiful breasts, and sparkling eyes,
she was taken aback and addressed her:
“Goddess, why do you want to deceive me this way?
Is it your plan now to lure me to some big city
—in Phrygia perhaps or scenic Maionia—
assuming there’s a male there you fancy—
now that Menelaus has beaten Alexander
and intends to drag me back home?
Is that why you’re standing here scheming?
Go sit by him yourself then. Give up your godly ways
and forget the road back to Olympus.
Why don’t you watch over and cry over him
until he makes you his wife or, maybe, his slave?
Don’t count on me to go and shamefully
share that man’s bed. All the women of Troy
would chastise me if I did, and I have enough trouble already!”
Incensed, divine Aphrodite spoke out:
“Don’t provoke me, bitch, or I’ll get even and desert you,
and hate you as much as I’ve loved you up until now.
I’ll put you right in the middle and make both sides despise you,
Trojans and Greeks alike, so you’ll meet an awful end.”
So she spoke, and Helen, child of Zeus, trembled.
Covering herself up in a radiant wrap, she went on her way
in silence, evading the Trojan women’s notice, the goddess leading
the way.
Now when they arrived at Alexander’s splendid residence,
the serving-women quickly busied themselves with their tasks,
while godlike Helen made her way to his high-ceilinged chamber.
Laughter-loving Aphrodite took hold of a bench

and, carrying it, set it in front of Alexander.
Helen, daughter of aegis-bearing Zeus, sat down on it
and, turning her eyes away from her lover, reproached him:
“So you’ve returned then from battle. Perhaps you should have
died there,
vanquished by the valiant man who used to be my husband.
Once you boasted you were a better man than Ares’s darling,
Menelaus,
whether fighting with your bare hands or your spear.
So why don’t you now challenge Ares’s darling, Menelaus,
and fight once again face to face? If I could only have my way
I’d beg you to stop, and forget fair-haired Menelaus
and all this warfare and foolish fighting
for fear you’ll someday soon fall to his spear.”
Paris then responded to her, saying:
“Don’t criticize me, woman, with such harsh words.
Menelaus may have just beaten me with Athena’s help,
but I’ll beat him someday. After all, I have gods on my side too!
But come on, let’s go to bed and enjoy ourselves by making love.
Never before have I felt passion like this sweep over my senses,
not even when I sailed away from lovely Lacedaemon,
after taking you on board my sea-going ship,
and on the island of Cranae first made love to you in bed.
I long for you now the same way, and am overwhelmed by sweet desire.”
He spoke, and led the way to bed, and his lover followed along.

Though desire, as Paris states, can be sweet, this excerpt from *The Iliad* shows it can also be cruel. Mythology makes Aphrodite the mother of Eros, or Cupid, but to the Greeks she was not a manufacturer of lacy Valentine’s Day cards. In Greek, her name meant “foam-born” because of the story that she had arisen from the seminal foam that had floated on the sea after the primal god Kronos castrated his father Uranus and threw his severed genitals into the waves. Born of such an act of sexual violence, Aphrodite could herself be savage, bestowing her sensual blessings on humans while at the same time bending them mercilessly to her implacable will. As Helen learns, she is no deity to be

trifled with. The poet invokes Aphrodite's nature by playing on our senses (a fragrant bedroom, a scented robe, a lovely neck), while at the same time costuming the goddess as a post-menopausal crone for contrast. Of course, Aphrodite still lives today in the hormones that surge through our blood-streams, inciting in us a desire for erotic gratification that can be—as it was for Helen—mindless of all consequence.

ANDROMACHE BEGS HER HUSBAND TO “MAKE LOVE NOT WAR”

(*The Iliad*, 6:392–496)

Hector was the bravest warrior the Trojans had. Governing his life was a heroic code that demanded he defend his people even at the price of his own life. To do less would be to suffer shame and dishonor in the eyes of his countrymen. The war has raged on now for nine years and Hector knows Troy’s cause is lost, yet his conduct is still bound by the same mortal rules. In the following passage, his wife Andromache pleads with him not to go out and fight again.

As he crossed the great city and came to the gate,
the Scaean Gate, through which he meant to exit to the plain,
his treasured wife came running up to him,
Andromache, daughter of proud-hearted Eëtion,
Eëtion, who lived beneath woody Mount Placus,
in Placan Thebe, as lord of the Cilicians.

It was his daughter that now clung to helmeted Hector.
She had gone to meet him there along with her maidservant
who in her bosom was holding an innocent child, just an infant,
Hector’s beloved son, bright as a star,
a boy he had named Scamandrius (after the city’s river), but others
called Astyanax (“Lord of the City”), because Hector was its chief
defense.

Casting a silent glance at the child, he smiled,
but, standing beside her husband, Andromache began to cry,
and, taking his hand in hers, spoke to him and said:
“Husband, your courage will kill you. Have you no pity
for your infant son or your poor wife who is to become
your widow? The Achaeans are going to kill you soon
when they all attack. As for me, I’d rather
go to my grave if it means losing you, because I won’t have
any comfort when you meet your fate,
just grief. I don’t have a father or a queenly mother,
for godlike Achilles slew my father

when he destroyed the populous city of the Cilicians,
Thebe of the lofty gates. He took Eëtion's life
yet didn't strip the armor from his body, for he had scruples,
and instead burned him together with his well-wrought gear,
piling a mound over him around which elm-trees were planted
by the mountain nymphs, daughters of aegis-bearing Zeus.
I had seven brothers in the palace
and all went to Hades on the self-same day,
for swift-footed, godlike Achilles slaughtered them
within sight of their ambling cattle and white-fleeced sheep.
As for my mother, who ruled as queen beneath woody Placus,
when Achilles brought her here with everything she owned,
he set her free in exchange for a rich ransom,
but later she died in her father's palace, struck by Artemis's arrow.
For all these reasons, Hector, you are my father and my mother
and my brother too, besides being the lover who shares my bed.
Take pity and stay here behind the wall.
Don't make your son an orphan and your wife a widow.
Station the army at the wild fig-tree, where the city is most
vulnerable and the wall can be most readily scaled.
Three times already the Greeks have tried to enter there
—the two Ajaxes and illustrious Idomeneus
along with the sons of Atreus and Tydeus' mighty son—
either because some shrewd seer gave them advice
or their own instincts showed them the way and led them on.”
Then Hector of the shimmering helmet answered her:
“These things, wife, prey on my mind too, but I worry over
what the Trojan men and their long-robed women might think
if I showed myself a coward and refrained from war.
My character likewise resists, for I was always taught to be brave
and fight in the front line beside my comrades
to gain glory for my father and myself.
I well realize in my heart and soul
that the day is coming when holy Troy will fall
together with Priam of the ashen spear and Priam's people.
But the anguish I feel is mostly not for what lies ahead for Troy,
or for Queen Hecuba or King Priam themselves,

or for my brothers, many and brave,
who will fall in the dust at the hands of the enemy,
but for you, when some of the bronze-clad Achaeans
lead you away weeping after they rob you of your freedom;
when, in Argos, you ply someone else's loom
and fetch water from Messeis or Hypereia
against your will when harsh necessity compels;
or when someone says, seeing you shed a tear,
'That's the wife of Hector over there, who of all the horse-taming
Trojans
shone when our warriors fought around Troy.'
So someone may say. And fresh sorrow will consume you,
knowing you lack such a man to bring your slavery to an end.
May my corpse be buried beneath the earth
before I hear you cry as they carry you away."
Having said these words, glorious Hector stretched out his arms to
hold his son,
but the child pulled back and, bawling, buried his head in his
nurse's bosom,
frightened at his father's appearance:
the bronze face, and the horse-hair crest
that shook from his helmet's top.
At this, his beloved father and mother both broke into laughter,
and Hector immediately removed the helmet from his head
and set it down on the ground where it shimmered in the light.
Kissing his dear son and lifting him up in his arms,
he raised a prayer to Zeus and the other gods:
"Zeus and you other gods, grant that this son of mine
may be, like his father, a man of distinction in Troy,
valiant and brave, a mighty ruler of the Trojans.
And one day may someone say, as my son returns from battle,
'There goes a man even better than his father!' And as he carries
home the armor
of the enemy he has slain, may his mother's heart be glad."
Having so spoken, he put his son in his dear wife's arms,
and she pressed him into her fragrant bosom,
smiling through tears. Noticing this, her husband took pity on her,

and touched her face with his hand and said:
“Wife, don’t trouble your heart over me too much.
No one can send me to Hades unless it’s my destiny,
and no mortal can escape his fate,
coward or hero, once he is born.
But go home now and take care of your housework,
the loom and the distaff, and tell the maidservants
to go about their tasks. Let war be the business of men,
of all men, especially me, who live in Troy.”

In this poignant intermission from combat, the poet Homer allows us to view war through the eyes of a soldier’s helpless wife. Yet her emotional arguments in the name of love and emotional commitment inevitably fail, and she is impotent to stop her husband from returning to a war in which he will soon die. Tragically, Hector is as impotent as she: Trained in a heroic code that will allow no breach, and constrained by communal pressure, he must fight to the death in a losing cause with grim fatalism as his only consolation. To Homer’s audience, the irony ran deeper. Besides knowing that Hector would later die and that Andromache would be made an enemy’s concubine, they knew Hector’s prayer would be in vain: In the end when Troy fell, the infant Astyanax would be hurled to his death from Troy’s battlements by the savage victors. It is that baby—humorously brought to tears by the sight of a helmet—that most humanizes the scene while prefiguring its tragic outcome.