Homer, *Iliad*

Hector was a Trojan prince and the greatest warrior of that kingdom. He was married to Andromache and they had an infant son Astyanax. In this part of the poem, Andromache asks Hector to give up being a warrior so that she may avoid dying on the battlefield. Achilles had already killed her father and all her brothers; her husband and son are the only family she has left. But Hector tells her he cannot do as she asks because nothing is worse for a Greek hero than to be deemed a coward.

What makes this passage so tragic is that the reader, who already knows the outcome of the story, is aware that Hector will die soon at the hand of Achilles; that at the end of the war his young son will be killed by the Greeks, who fear he will avenge his father’s death when he is grown man; and Andromache will be taken away to be a slave and concubine.

---

**Book 6, lines 390-608**

Hector left the house by the same route he’d come, through the well-built streets, across the mighty city, and reached the Scaean Gates, beyond which he’d go out onto the plain. There his wife ran up to meet him, … With her came the nurse, holding at her breast their happy infant child, well-loved son of Hector, like a beautiful star. Hector had named him Scamandrius, but others called him Astyanax, lord of the city, because Hector was Troy’s only guardian. Hector looked at his son in silence, with a smile. Andromache stood close to him, weeping.

Taking Hector by the hand, she spoke to him.  
“My dear husband, your warlike spirit will be your death. You’ve no compassion for your infant child, for me, your sad wife, who before long will be your widow. For soon the Achaeans will attack you, all together, and cut you down. As for me, it would be better, if I’m to lose you, to be buried in the ground. For then I’ll have no other comfort, once you meet your death, except my sorrow. I have no father, no dear mother. For lord Achilles killed my father, when he wiped out Thebes,

---

1 The term “Achaean” refers to the Greeks.
city with high gates, slaying Eëtion. But he didn’t strip his corpse—his heart felt too much shame for that. So he burned him in his finely decorated armour and raised a burial mound above the ashes. Mountain nymphs, daughters of aegis-bearing Zeus, planted elm trees all around his body. I had seven brothers in my home. All went down to Hades in a single day, for swift-footed lord Achilles killed them all, while they were guarding their shambling oxen and their white shining sheep. As for my mother, who ruled wooded Thebe-under-Placus, he brought her here with all his other spoils. Then he released her for a massive ransom. But archer goddess Artemis then killed her in her father’s house. So, Hector, you are now my father, noble mother, brother, and my protecting husband. So pity me. Stay here in this tower. Don’t orphan your child and make me a widow. ….

Great Hector of the shining helmet answered her:

“Wife, all this concerns me, too. But I’d be disgraced, dreadfully shamed among Trojan men and Trojan women in their trailing gowns, if I should, like a coward, slink away from war. My heart will never prompt me to do that, for I have learned always to be brave, to fight alongside Trojans at the front, striving to win fame for father and myself. My heart and mind know well the day is coming when sacred Ilion will be destroyed, along with Priam of the fine ash spear and Priam’s people. But what pains me most about these future sorrows is not so much the Trojans, Hecuba, or king Priam, ….

---

2 Eëtion was Andromache’s father and the king of Thebes, a city that the Greeks had previously attacked and sacked.

3 Ilion is another name for Troy (and from where the title of the Poem comes).

4 Priam was the king of Troy and Hector’s father.

5 Hecuba was Priam’s wife and Hector’s mother.
or even my many noble brothers,
who'll fall down in the dust, slaughtered
by their enemies. My pain focuses on you,
when one of those bronze-clad Achaeans
leads you off in tears, ends your days of freedom.
If then you come to Argos as a slave,
working the loom for some other woman,
fetching water from Hypereia or Messeis,
against your will, forced by powerful Fate,
then someone seeing you as you weep
may well say:
‘That woman is Hector’s wife.
He was the finest warrior in battle of all horse-taming
Trojans in that war when they fought for Troy.’
Someone will say that,
and it will bring still more grief to you,
to be without a man like that to save you
from days of servitude. May I lie dead,
hidden deep under a burial mound,
before I hear about your screaming,
as you are dragged away.’

With these words,
glorious Hector stretched his hands out for his son.
The boy immediately shrank back against the breast
of the finely girdled nurse, crying out in terror
to see his own dear father, scared at the sight of bronze,
the horse-hair plume nodding fearfully from his helmet top.
The child’s loving father laughed, his noble mother, too.
Glorious Hector pulled the glittering helmet off
and set it on the ground. Then he kissed his dear son
and held him in his arms. He prayed aloud to Zeus
and the rest of the immortals.

“Zeus, all you other gods,
grant that this child, my son, may become,
like me, pre-eminent among the Trojans,
as strong and brave as me. Grant that he may rule
Troy with strength. May people someday say,
as he returns from war, ‘This man is far better
than his father.’ May he carry back
bloody spoils from his slaughtered enemy,
making his mother’s heart rejoice.”

He placed his son in the hands of his dear wife.
She embraced the child on her sweet breast, smiling
through her tears. Observing her, Hector felt compassion.
He took her hand, then spoke to her.

“My dearest wife,
don’t let your heart be sad on my account.
No man will throw me down to Hades
before my destined time. I tell you this—
no one escapes his fate, not the coward,
not the brave man, from the moment of his birth.
So you should go into the house, keep busy
with your proper work, with your loom and wool,
telling your servants to set about their tasks.
War will be every man’s concern, especially mine,
of all those who live in Troy.”

Having said these words,
glorious Hector took his plumed helmet in his hands.
His beloved wife went home, often looking back,
as she went, crying bitterly.