

The issue of the situation pervasive to the universal human condition seen in the simile that comes before Priam's speech to Achilles in Book 24 is the culmination of the *Iliad*, the epic poem written by Homer. "As when dense disaster closes on one who has murdered a man in his own land, and he comes to the country of others, to a man of substance, and wonder seizes on those who behold him, so Achilles wondered as he looked on Priam, a godlike man" (24.480-3). This shows the position of Achilles strangely. "Manslaughtering" is how Achilles's hands had just been described (24.479). Priam's arrival at Achilles's tent likens him to the murderer. Homer's implication that Achilles is the man of substance is the opposite of Priam being likened to the murderer. The reader is confused by Homer's inversion, and "godlike" also confuses the comparison. But discovering of compassion requiring the identification with another and with sin and vulnerability is what is discovered when seen in the context of the poem's action.

Just before Homer shows us Priam begging Achilles to give back Hektor's body, the poet includes a very strange simile that reverses what we might expect. He likens rich King Priam to a murderer and man-killing Achilles to a rich man who can provide peace. The poet writes, "As when dense disaster closes on one who has murdered a man in his own land, and he comes to the country of others, to a man of substance, and wonder seizes on those who behold him, so Achilles wondered as he looked on Priam, a godlike man" (24.480-3). In other words, Priam has arrived at Achilles's camp just as the murderer has arrived at "the country of others," and Achilles looks at Priam in "wonder" just as the rich man's court looks in wonder at the murderer. But the real "murderer" here, the one with "manslaughtering hands," is surely Achilles, while the literal "man of substance" is surely Priam, king of all the gold in Troy. Why would Homer include a simile that inverts these characters? This inversion is compounded by calling Priam "godlike": why liken a godlike man to a murderer? Yet this simile—which in effect turns each man into the other one—prepares us for what will happen next: an act of pity and compassion that requires a man not only to get outside of himself, but to feel the disorienting pain of guilt and loss that is at the heart of our shared humanity.