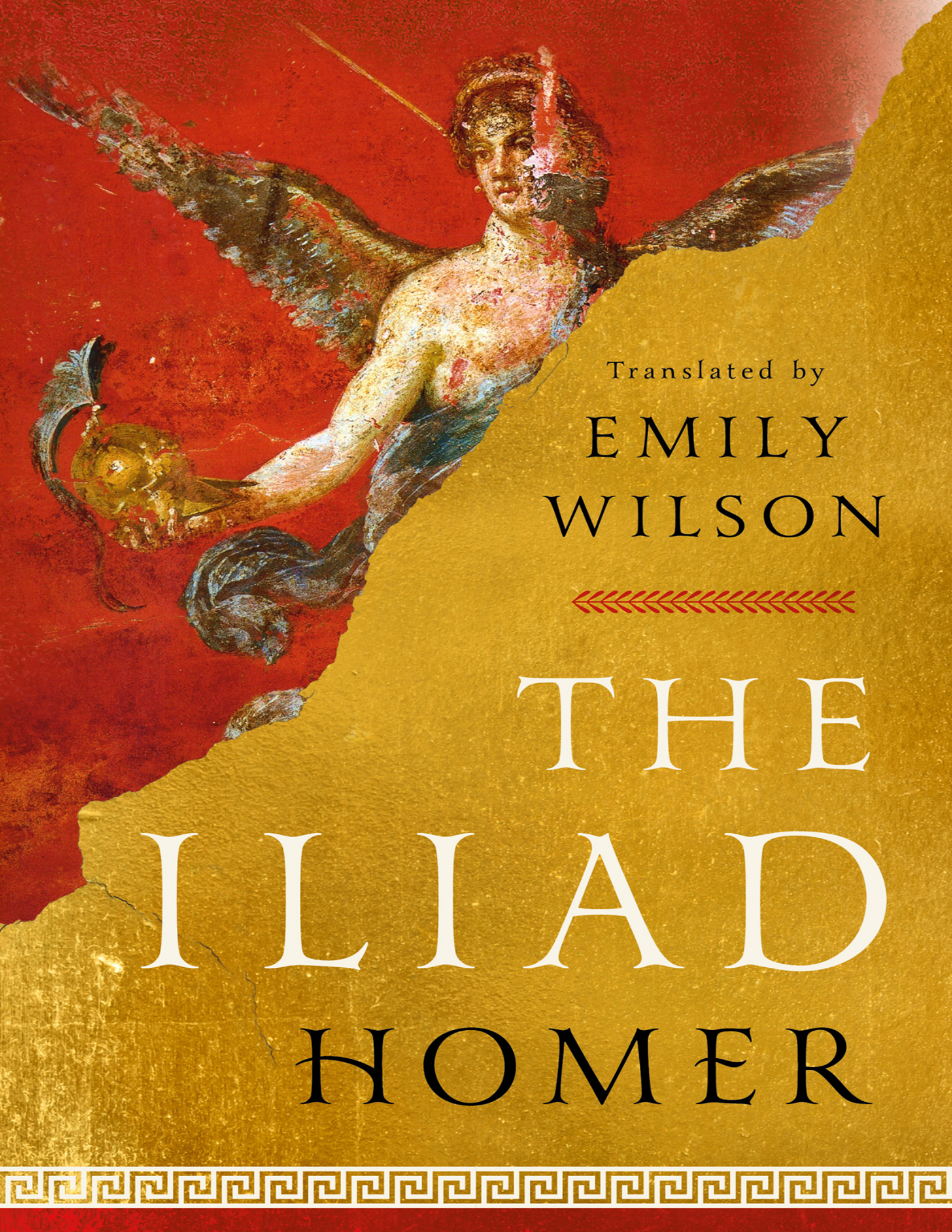

Translated by

EMILY WILSON

THE ILIAD

HOMER

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Adjusting type size may change line breaks. Landscape mode may help to preserve line breaks.

To the memory of my mother,
Katherine Duncan-Jones (1941–2022),
who first taught me to love poetry.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The Iliad, a long epic poem set in the mythical Trojan War, tells two interwoven stories across its twenty-four books. The first describes the overwhelming anger of a Greek warrior, Achilles, and its catastrophic consequences. The second tells how a brave Trojan warrior, Hector, leaves his city and family to attack the Greek invaders—and returns home only after death. The two stories are closely braided together. Achilles' rage, and his consequent absence from battle, enables Hector's successful advance toward the Greek camp. Hector kills Achilles' dearest friend, Patroclus, and the rage of Achilles turns against Hector. The two story lines are resolved together, when Achilles allows the dead Hector to be brought back to his people to be mourned. The struggles of many others—men, women, goddesses, and gods—are woven into the same grand tapestry.

The poem evokes human greatness and human vulnerability. People are "godlike" in their courage and skill, but even the greatest mortals fall and clutch the dust between their bloody fingers. The beautiful word *minunthadios*, "short-lived," is used of both Achilles and Hector, and applies to all of us. We die too soon, and there is no adequate recompense for the terrible, inevitable loss of life. Yet through poetry, the words, actions, and feelings of some long-ago brief lives may be remembered even three thousand years later.

Loss and Compensation

Two epic poems are ascribed to Homer: *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. *The Odyssey*, set when the Trojan War is over, describes how one extraordinary man, the Greek warrior Odysseus, recovers everything he had lost: his home, his family, and his status as head of his household and lord of Ithaca. *The Iliad,* set in the final year of the Trojan War, immerses us in the world of war, and shows us what happens to all the warriors who never come home alive.

Like Odysseus, Achilles and Hector are warriors separated from their people. Like him, each eventually finds his way back to his community. But unlike Odysseus, the great warriors of *The Iliad* never fully reclaim what they have lost. The attempt to

repair one loss leads only to further losses. Hector's homecoming happens after death. Achilles mourns his beloved friend, Patroclus, and eventually shares his grief with the grief of others. But his friend is still dead, and always will be. So are countless others, including those who are forgotten and unnamed. The past cannot be undone. The dead never come back to life.

The Iliad is framed by scenes of loss and restitution. At the beginning of the poem, a priest named Chryses loses his daughter, but recovers her alive, thanks to the intervention of the god Apollo. In the final book, another father recovers another lost child—but this son, Hector, comes home as a corpse.

When people are captured alive, they may be bought back by their families. If the captors refuse to relinquish the captive, kinsmen may fight to recover them—as they do, on a grand scale, for Helen, the daughter of Zeus and wife of the Greek warrior Menelaus, whose abduction by the Trojan Paris is the premise for the Trojan War. But recovery of a living captive is rare in *The Iliad*. The priest's daughter, Chryseis, is exceptional because she is guarded by Apollo. Without divine protection, mortal women captured in war are usually enslaved for the rest of their lives. On the battlefield, men are usually not captured alive, but killed.

When a man is slain in times of peace, families can gain partial compensation for their loss by exacting a blood-price from the killer. Killers may also be forced to leave the community and take refuge elsewhere, as Patroclus did as a boy after he accidentally killed another boy in an argument over a game; he was adopted by his cousin Peleus and raised beside Achilles, like an older brother. In such cases, the killer's loss of his original home comforts the family in their need for vengeance. But in war, killers recognize no binding obligation to compensate the families of their victims. The only way the bereaved can recoup their losses is to kill the killer—whose comrades will demand vengeance in their turn. Killing begets killing, death begets death, and every loss of life generates further loss of life.

Yet even in wartime, people can get partial, inadequate compensation for the loss of a loved one. When it is too late to save a warrior's life, friends and kinsmen may be able at least to save his weapons and his armor. If those have been stripped, the companions of the dead man may at least save his body. Long and bitter battles are fought in the attempt to rescue the dead—including the dead Sarpedon, the dead Patroclus, and the dead Hector—from desecration at the hands of the enemy. If the body is recovered, friends and family can at least provide their loved one with the honors due the dead. A funeral cannot compensate the bereaved for their loss. It cannot bring the dead back to life. But it is often the only recompense we have. In accepting such inadequate forms of compensation, we also accept our own limitations and our mortality.

The extraordinary wrath of Achilles entails an insistent, deadly refusal to accept any of the traditional forms of compensation for the various losses he experiences. In the first stage, Agamemnon insults Achilles by robbing him of a female captive,

Briseis. Agamemnon later realizes his mistake and offers to give the woman back untouched, along with a lavish set of gifts as compensation for the affront. But Achilles adamantly rejects the offer, insisting that even an infinite number of gifts—as many as the sands of the sea—could never be adequate compensation for his original humiliation.

> *"Not even if his gifts to me could match*
> *the grains of dust and sand—not even then*
> *would Agamemnon ever sway my heart. . . ."* (9.495–97)

Achilles associates his social losses—of status, trust, and goodwill among comrades—with something else that he will soon lose, if he stays to fight in the war: his own brief life. He insists that the traditional warrior code, whereby fighters receive honor as compensation for risking their lives, has been violated:

> *"Cowards and heroes have the same reward.*
> *Do everything or nothing—death still comes."* (9.409–10)

Moreover, perhaps the trade was never worth it in the first place. Material wealth—such as treasure or animals—can be traded and recovered, but this loss can never be recouped:

> *You can raid fine cattle*
> *or well-fed sheep, and you can trade to get*
> *tripods and horses with fine golden manes.*
> *But human life does not come back again*
> *after it passes through the fence of teeth.*
> *No trade or rustling can recover it.* (9.524–29)

The almost childlike simplicity and truth of the observation is overwhelmingly powerful. Teeth are a fence between the interior and exterior of the body, like a barrier that keeps animals inside their pen. But this little fence is too frail to keep human life locked inside. Achilles, an experienced looter and cattle thief, knows how easily animals can be filched from their original owners, and how hard it may be to track down a stolen horse or herd. To recover a lost life is not hard, but impossible.

After the death of Patroclus, Achilles' wrath changes. He accepts Agamemnon's gifts, along with the return of Briseis. But he does so halfheartedly: his mind is elsewhere. Achilles' original losses—of the woman, of dignity, and of trust in Agamemnon—have become irrelevant compared to his far greater loss of his dearest

friend, Patroclus. Death makes every other loss seem small. In this second phase, the object of his wrath shifts from Agamemnon to Hector, the killer of Patroclus, on whom he wants to inflict infinite pain and humiliation.

In this second phase, Achilles again refuses to accept any form of compensation. No amount of slaughter, no amount of humiliation, can ever or could ever make up for the loss of this beloved friend and companion, who is gone forever. Achilles dams up the River Xanthus with the corpses of Trojans, but it is not enough. He slays Hector, but killing the killer is not enough. Achilles then pierces Hector's ankles—a vicious reminder that the Trojan's legs were not fast enough to outrun the Greek's swift feet—threading strips of oxhide through them, and drags the naked body behind his chariot round and round the walls of Troy, again and again, day after day. The dead man's parents, wife, and people are made to watch the desecration of his corpse. Still it is not enough for Achilles. It will never be enough. He could humiliate Hector for all eternity, and Patroclus would still be dead.

It is only in the final two books, with the help of divine advice and human rituals of mourning, that Achilles begins to relent in his obstinate wrath. He recognizes at last that loss cannot be avoided or eliminated, and sometimes there is no possibility of adequate compensation. When we accept inadequate forms of compensation, knowing that they are not enough and that they are all there is, we can at least share in the universal experience of loss. Achilles shares his grief with his comrades in Book 23, through funeral rites and games to honor the dead man. In Book 24, he shares his grief even with his enemy: Priam, the old man whose son he has killed. Achilles welcomes Priam into his tent, sits and weeps with him, and says,

> *Two jars are set upon the floor of Zeus—*
> *from one, he gives good things, the other, bad.*
> *When thundering Zeus gives somebody a mixture,*
> *their life is sometimes bad and sometimes good.*
> *But those he serves with unmixed suffering*
> *are wretched. Terrible starvation drives them*
> *across the shining world. They have no honor*
> *from gods or mortals.* (24.653–60)

Wine was generally mixed with water in antiquity and served from large mixing jars into cups. In Achilles' parable, one of the cosmic jars contains unmixed suffering, like a wine-jar with nothing but water. The other contains a mixture of a blessings and pain, like wine mixed with water. It is a drink for those who have experienced great honor and wealth, as well as terrible loss. Achilles now understands that he, like Priam, has been fortunate: he has known success, glory, and love, as well as loss. The

implied third jar containing only blessings, like unmixed wine or ambrosia, is for only the immortal gods.

Achilles' wrath is driven by a belief that he, an extraordinarily talented, quick-footed fighter with divine blood in his veins, should never have to suffer loss without adequate compensation. His wrath can end only once he recognizes that no mortal, even the son of a goddess, can ever hope for such good fortune.

The City of Troy

The wealthy ancient city, known as Wilusa to the Hittites, and Ilios or Troia to the Greeks, was built just to the south of the Dardanelles, in what was then Anatolia, now Türkiye. The location was an essential trading post because the narrow strait of water known to the Greeks as the Hellespont links the Mediterranean and Aegean seas with the Sea of Marmara and the Black Sea. Archaeologists have identified nine distinct layers of the city, representing multiple different eras of habitation followed by destruction, dating back as far as the Early Bronze Age; "Troy 0," the earliest identifiable layer, goes back as far as 3500 BCE. The city was destroyed many times, by earthquake, fire, and human conflict, and repeatedly rebuilt. There were many Troys, constructed one on top of the other over many centuries. There were many Trojan wars.

Those sailing past this coast in the eighth century BCE would have glimpsed the ruins of an ancient lost city, and large mounds associated with long-dead heroes. These mounds, so legend had it, included the tomb that held the bones of two loving comrades: Achilles, the greatest warrior who ever lived, and his dearest friend, Patroclus, both killed in war and buried together.

From ancient times, people have searched for the historical truth that might lie behind the myths about "the" Trojan War, and the city as described in *The Iliad*. Heinrich Schliemann in the 1870s was one of the earliest modern archaeologists to dig at the historical site known as Hissarlik. Schliemann, who shoveled his way through the mound of the ancient city, destroying invaluable evidence as he did so, was convinced he had discovered the real treasure of Priam. Contemporary archaeologists observe that Schliemann's treasures were far too old to correspond to the poem. They are from Troy II, which was destroyed around 2300 BCE—over fifteen hundred years before the earliest possible dating of the written epic.

The Late Bronze Age city of Troy VI roughly corresponded with the flourishing of Mycenaean culture in the Greek-speaking world, when there were great palaces in places such as Mycenae, Pylos, Athens, Tiryns, and Thebes, with centralized economies and hierarchical power systems. This culture was literate, using a form of script known today as Linear B. Writing seems to have been used primarily for keeping records, so that the great lords could keep track of their wealth. Troy VI was

destroyed around 1250 BCE, and at approximately the same time, many of the great Mycenaean palaces were destroyed, burned, or seriously damaged.

With the collapse of the palace economies that had required bookkeeping, Greek speakers lost the use of literacy for over three centuries. Bards developed tales about a bygone era, when great heroes, many half divine, killed monsters, sailed on adventures, interacted with goddesses and gods, performed extraordinary exploits, and fought in monumental wars around the majestic cities of Thebes and Troy.

Ancient audiences would have been familiar with many stories about the Trojan War. The title by which this poem has been known since antiquity, *The Iliad*, implies that its subject is the city known to the Greeks as Ilios or Troia—names associated with the city's legendary founder, Tros, and his son, Ilus. With divine aid, these kings built a mighty city, rich in gold and horses. But Laomedon, the son of Ilus, incurred divine anger when he forced two gods, Apollo and Poseidon, to build thick defensive walls for the city, and then broke his promise to pay them for their service. Thereafter, Poseidon and Apollo planned to destroy the city and its people.

A second set of divine machinations brought yet more trouble to Troy. An obscure sea goddess, Thetis, was desired by Zeus and Poseidon. But a prophecy foretold that the son of Thetis would be more powerful than his father. The Olympian gods forced Thetis into marriage with a mortal, because the existence of a deity greater than Zeus or Poseidon would threaten their own hold on cosmic power. They held a wedding for Thetis to marry Peleus, who would father Achilles. But they failed to invite Conflict (Eris) to the party. She showed up anyway, Malificent-style, and threw a golden apple amid the divine partygoers, inscribed with the word *kallistei*: "for her who is finest" (or "most beautiful" or "best"). Three goddesses—Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite—each claimed the apple, and a bitter quarrel ensued. Paris, a young son of Priam (then king of Troy), was chosen to adjudicate. All the contestants bribed the judge, in the hope of success. Hera offered power; Athena promised intelligence. But Aphrodite vowed to give him the most attractive woman in the world as his wife—Helen, a half-human daughter of Zeus who had been courted by every leading warrior in Greece. Paris chose Aphrodite.

Helen was already married to Menelaus of Sparta. Paris went to visit the happy couple and abducted her—a violation of the norms of hospitality (*xenia*). Inspired or enabled by Aphrodite, he took Menelaus' wife back to Troy. Helen went with him, either willingly or unwillingly; ancient accounts differ about her feelings, thoughts, and actions. Some say she never went at all but stayed in Egypt while the Greeks and Trojans fought over a phantom in her likeness. In any case, the loss of his wife was not welcome to Menelaus, a rich, powerful man, whose brother was the even more powerful king of Mycenae, Agamemnon. Moreover, Helen's former suitors had vowed to join forces to retrieve her if she slipped from the clutches of her chosen husband. Menelaus and his brother invoked the oath and worked to assemble a

massive naval force, led by leaders from all over the Greek world, to set sail on Troy and make war, to recover Helen, and punish the Trojans.

The divine walls of Troy held firm, and the Trojans kept the enemy out of their city for ten years. Many of the greatest Greek warriors were killed, including Achilles, shot by Paris with an arrow through his heel (which was, according to legend, the only area where he could be hurt). Odysseus and Diomedes crept into the city and stole the statue of Athena from the citadel, thus ensuring that the city's divine protection was lost. Finally, Athena gave Odysseus the idea of creating a huge wooden horse, purportedly as a gift to the temple of Troy. Armed Greek warriors hid inside the structure, and when it was dragged inside, they leapt out, opened the gates for their comrades, and sacked the city. Priam and the other men, boys, and children of Troy were slaughtered. The surviving women were raped, enslaved, and taken by their enslavers to many different areas of Greece.

The outline of these stories was familiar throughout the archaic Greek-speaking world, along with many variations. We know about many of them from quotations and summaries of lost texts, such as the *Cypria*, the *Little Iliad*, and the *Aethiopis,* all non-Homeric epics about Trojan legends. Numerous ancient poets, dramatists, and visual artists recycled and reinvented this rich body of myth. And yet almost none of these stories appears directly in *The Iliad*. The poem avoids all the obvious highlights of the traditional story, including the Wooden Horse. It does not start at the beginning—with the Judgment of Paris, the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, the abduction of Helen, or the muster of ships at Aulis—or end with the fall of the city. Instead, the action takes place over a few days in the last year of the war—neither the beginning nor the end. A brief and ostensibly trivial episode—a squabble between two Greek commanders—becomes the subject of a monumental twenty-four-book epic.

Moreover, *The Iliad* eschews the obvious way for Greeks to tell the Trojan War story: as a conflict between "us" and "them." The Trojans are not dishonest foreigners, despite the fact that Paris abducted his host's wife. Implausibly, they speak the same language and worship the same gods as the Greeks.

The poem is ancient from our perspective. But it came at the end, not the beginning, of a long poetic tradition. Whoever created *The Iliad* used the myths, tropes, and techniques developed by many generations of oral poets, and reinvented them to create an extraordinarily original and surprising written epic.

Who and When Was Homer?

The singers of Iron Age Greece developed a world of stories that were repeated and altered in the course of many retellings. Bards chanted their songs with musical accompaniment, echoing and reinventing the tales they had heard from others.

The Homeric poems themselves are set in a world that is almost entirely illiterate. The only reference to writing comes in Book 6 of *The Iliad*, where a jealous husband sends Bellerophon, a man accused of trying to rape his wife, off to another rich man's house, bearing a tablet inscribed with instructions to kill the bearer. The writing, which is incomprehensible to Bellerophon himself, is described as "dangerous and deadly symbols" (6.226), because literacy is an unusual skill, liable to get people into terrible trouble. These great written epics evoke a distant world in which they themselves did not and could not exist.

But around the mid-eighth century BCE, Greek speakers borrowed the Phoenician alphabet, and the Greek world became literate again. Sometime between the late eighth and late sixth centuries, this new technology was used to create the two long poems attributed to Homer: *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. How, where, when exactly, and by whom the poems were made, we do not know. Maybe an oral poet, or several such poets, became literate. Maybe an illiterate or semiliterate poet, or group of poets, collaborated with one or more scribes, perhaps using dictation. Perhaps one great composer was named Homer (a name that was associated in antiquity with the word for "hostage," *homeros*, although various other speculative etymologies were also posited). The composer may have been "a blind man who came from rocky Chios," as the narrator of the *Hymn to Delian Apollo* asserts—although this was only one of numerous rival local legends about this most elusive of poets. Every statement about the historical person or people who composed *The Iliad* must be hedged with maybes. Ancient "lives" of Homer are set in the cloudy lands of biographical myth.

Somehow or other, the written poems had been produced by the late sixth century. But the Homeric poems were still often performed and experienced orally. Ancient rhapsodes (poetry-performers) provided entertainment at banquets, drinking parties, festivals, and competitions with thrilling dramatic renditions of passages from Homer. As happens with any popular performance text, *The Iliad* was altered in numerous ways by the creative performers who recited it over the course of many years—although such variations were relatively small, compared to the vast variations possible within an entirely oral tradition. For instance, we know of alternative versions of Book 1, line 6, which reads either "a banquet for the birds," *oionoisi te daita*, or "for all the birds," *oionoisi te pasi*. But we do not have evidence of the kind of wholesale alterations in plot and characterization that we might expect if the poem were being reinvented without the use of a script. We do not know of an *Iliad* in which Hector kills Achilles, or an *Iliad* in which Patroclus survives—and arguably, such a poem would not be *The Iliad*. Rhapsodes presumably used written texts of the Homeric poems to learn their lines. Meanwhile, throughout antiquity, poets continued to tell, embellish, and invent other stories from the mythic cycle—including tales of heroes who are unmentioned or marginalized in *The Iliad* and many alternative versions of the old stories that are now lost to us forever.

The earliest extant texts of Homer, as of other archaic Greek literature, are fragments of the papyrus editions of Homer created in Egyptian Alexandria in the third century BCE, when scholars labored to establish fixed texts of these poems and other canonical works from the archaic and classical past. The ancient papyri were eventually copied by medieval scribes, whose manuscripts form the basis for all modern editions of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, including the Oxford Classical Text, the Greek edition used for this translation.

It is usually illuminating to situate a work of literature in its own time and culture. But it is peculiarly difficult to do this with the Homeric epics, because they draw on the multiple distinct eras and places in which the oral poetic tradition developed. Homeric Greek is a mixture of dialects from different areas and periods, never spoken simultaneously by any single person—just as no speaker would employ Chaucerian, Victorian, Glaswegian, Californian, and Australian phrases and forms of English together in any normal conversation. In theme and content, too, the Homeric poems are a strange conglomeration. They look back to a fictionalized version of the Mycenaean past. But they also engage deeply with the much later cultural developments of their own time of composition, including widespread Greek colonization of non-Greek regions in the archaic period, as well as the expansion of trade routes across the Mediterranean and beyond. The Greek warriors in *The Iliad*, like the historical Greeks of the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, enrich themselves by sacking local towns and settlements, and appropriating goods, animals, and enslaved humans from those places. Their swift black ships are tools of colonization and conquest, as was the case for historical Greek captains, sailors, and pirates.

"Greece" did not exist as a political entity in the archaic period. Yet Greek speakers were becoming increasingly aware of their common identity. They also developed new pride in their own local communities and in newly flourishing city-states. The leading men of neighboring territories vied with one another through trade, sports, war, and colonization. Some of the new city-states were governed by powerful autocrats known as tyrants, and others were ruled by an oligarchy ("the rule of the few"), in which a group of elite men, unrelated to each other by birth, shared power together. People became intensely aware of the presence of conflict, both between Greeks and non-Greeks, and within Greek communities. *The Iliad* reflects all these social and cultural changes, and reinvents myths of the distant past to become directly relevant to the concerns of its present: a time of intense rivalry between the Greeks themselves as well as between Greek speakers and their neighbors.

Ten Tongues

The oral poetic heritage of *The Iliad* explains features of its style and poetic technique that are otherwise likely to seem puzzling. Oral poets had developed traditional ways

of describing everything and everyone who might appear in a heroic story. These formulas made fluent oral storytelling much easier: there was no need to pause and come up with new adjectives for any proper name or noun. Achilles is "swift-footed" or "the son of Peleus," Diomedes is "master of the war cry," Agamemnon is "the son of Atreus, the lord of men." Elite female characters always have white arms, trailing dresses, neat sashes, and well-braided hair. Such descriptors mark the characters' honorable status in the narrative; they are not individual characteristics or fashion choices. Ships are generally "black," "swift," "well-balanced," or "equipped with benches," depending on the metrical requirements of the line. Known as epithets, such descriptors evoke a general characteristic of the object or person and are used even when they are irrelevant to the action or events described. The Greek ships remain "swift" despite having been stuck on a beach for the past ten years. Zeus is "cloud-gathering Zeus" even when the sky is clear. Achilles is "swift-footed" even when he spends many days sitting in his tent. Sometimes there are resonant ironies in the use of traditional epithets, as when Helen thinks of her brothers, not knowing that "they lay beneath the earth, the source of life" (3.298).

Oral poets also developed patterns for how to narrate particular kinds of scene, although there might be infinite variations on the general pattern. These include arming scenes; scenes of successful, glorious massacre (*aristeia*); scenes of sacrifice, hospitality, feasting, lament, mockery, and council discussions. *The Iliad* creates a virtuosic range of new variations on these limited traditional tropes. For instance, in Book 14, the general structure of an arming scene—typically used to describe male warriors preparing for an important battle—is used when the goddess Hera "arms" herself with a great outfit, fabulous skin creams, and the perfect accessories, before setting out for her "battle" to seduce her brother-husband, Zeus, and distract him from his military plan.

Another traditional narrative technique prominent in *The Iliad* is the use of lists or catalogs. To a reader accustomed to the norms of modern prose, these passages may look off-putting on the page. Read them out loud: in mouth and ear, the long lists of names become music. Catalogs also serve to evoke the vast scale of the war and the world, and to gesture towards all the many people and events that are omitted from the narrative. The Catalog of Ships is long, but it suggests that there are many times more people at Troy than can ever be named. The poet needs something more than a normal human voice to tell such a vast story:

> *I could not tell or name the multitude,*
> *not even if I had ten tongues, ten mouths,*
> *a voice that never broke, a heart of bronze. . . .* (2.586–88)

Catalogs give a human singer something like ten tongues: they enable a single poem to encompass the whole world and remember all the numberless dead.

Perhaps the most beautiful technique drawn from the oral poetic tradition is the extended simile. Similes, like catalogs, allow the narrative to contain far more worlds within itself than we might expect—including domestic activities in peacetime, vivid descriptions of animal behavior, and thrilling evocations of fire, snow, storms, and winds. Often these images create a sense of shifting scales—from small to vast, or from the human to the divine—as when Athena saves Menelaus by brushing an arrow gently aside,

> *as when a mother strokes away a fly*
> *to keep it from her baby, sweetly sleeping.* (4.169–70)

Apparently abstract feelings can be represented by concrete imagery—as in this marvelous simile of a storm at sea, comparing a psychological crisis to a clash between winds and waves:

> *as when two winds stir up the fish-filled water,*
> *Zephyr and Boreas, who all at once*
> *appear from Thrace and blast the sea—black waves*
> *crest high and clash haphazardly, and pour*
> *masses of seaweed from the salty depths—*
> *so the Greeks' confidence was ripped apart.* (9.5–10)

The extraordinary poetic effects are created by alliteration and by the energetic pileup of verbs, as well as by the inclusion of numerous vivid details.

Extended similes usually have more than one point of comparison, and often provide unexpected insight into how the characters in the narrative feel. One of the great joys of Homeric poetics is the invitation to consider how each simile does and does not match its main point of comparison. So when the Trojans build fires out on the plain and wait for battle in the morning, the primary point of comparison in the simile is between the appearance of these fires, and the appearance of stars emerging suddenly from behind the clouds:

> *Hearts high, they sat in lines arranged for war*
> *all night and burned a multitude of fires,*
> *as when around a dazzling moon, bright stars*
> *shine in the sky when no wind moves the air—*
> *all the high lookout points and tall clifftops*

and valleys suddenly are visible—
the vast expanse of upper air breaks open,
and all the stars are seen—the shepherd's heart
is glad—so many were the gleaming fires
burned by the Trojans on the plain of Troy. . . . (8.727–36)

The fires are as bright and as revelatory as the stars, and the inclusion of the shepherd's perspective takes us, for a moment, to the emotional state of the Trojans. But the image is different as well as similar. The shepherd is glad because he looks forward to a peaceful day herding his animals in the sunshine, whereas the Trojans survey their watchfires with the optimism of warriors who hope to slaughter their enemies in the morning.

Narrative Composition

In Book 18, Hephaestus builds a great shield for Achilles, depicting the whole world forged out of precious metals. There is a city at war, a city at peace, and numerous other images of people, animals, and the natural world, arranged with divine skill and encircled by the great River Ocean, which wraps around the earth itself. This shield parallels the composition of the poem itself, which also provides an image of the whole world, and does so through artfully symmetrical patterns, balancing one episode against another. Metallic images do not usually move, sing, dance, or speak, and yet the god's shield seems magically kinetic and noisy. The poem performs an analogous work of magic: its purely verbal art seems to engage the eyes and hands as well as ears, through the artful manipulation of perspective.

The narrator shifts with ease from inside the city to the windswept plain, from an individual character's feelings to the sights and sounds of the battlefield, appearing before us as if from a god's eye view:

they clashed together—shields of leather, spears,
bronze-armored bodies, and fierce human will.
Their shields collided and the metal bosses
clanged in cacophony. On every side
men shouted out in agony and triumph,
killing and being killed. The earth was flooded
with blood. . . . (4.596–602)

Many diverse experiences—"agony and triumph, / killing and being killed"—are forged into a single story. We feel the thrill and glory of successful slaughter, and we

feel equally clearly how it feels to watch the darkness cover your eyes for the last time.

Like the shield of Hephaestus, *The Iliad* contains multitudes within a single monumental composition. The poem repeatedly alludes to stories it does not tell directly—like the first gathering of the fleet at Aulis (told indirectly in the Catalog of Ships in Book 2); or the first abduction of Helen (told indirectly in the abduction of Helen in Book 3); or the theft of the statue of Athena by Diomedes and Odysseus (told indirectly in the night-raid episode of Book 10); or the sack of the city (told indirectly in the death of Hector). Through its artful use of parallel stories, the poem enfolds numerous different myths into its own encyclopedic narrative.

The shield of Hephaestus creates visual symmetry between one image and another: the city at war is balanced by the city at peace. So too in the poem. One warrior fights with gods (Diomedes in Book 5), as does another (Achilles in Book 21). One quarrel (between Agamemnon and Achilles) is mirrrored by another (between Zeus and Hera). Imagery often invites us to hear an echo. For example in Book 1, a mother, Thetis, comforts her weeping child, Achilles, and grants him what he asks—a gift of honor that will cause his death. In Book 16, Achilles compares himself to a mother, with Patroclus as his weeping daughter. Like his own mother, Achilles agrees to the request of his short-lived "child."

But as on the shield, symmetry is not the only principle of composition. There are also separations that demarcate contrasting areas of the design: the pasture is separated from the dancing floor, the vineyard from the field of harvest. So too in the poem, there are breaks dividing sections of the narrative, like the walls and rivers that cross the great plain of Troy. Like other ancient texts, *The Iliad* is divided into "books" (not "chapters")—a unit whose size is limited by the length of a manageable scroll. But the division into twenty-four books, which was probably established significantly later than the original composition, is far from the only organizing pattern. The first nine books, beginning with the quarrel of Achilles and Agamemnon, culminate in the embassy, in which Achilles reiterates his position, and refuses to accept Agamemnon's first attempt at reconciliation. In the next seven books (10–16), the Trojans grow ever closer to burning the Greek fleet, until Patroclus enters the battle and is killed. The final sequence of the poem, Books 17–24, show how Achilles' feelings are transformed after the death of Patroclus.

Within this large three-act structure, there are several smaller units of story. Books 1–4 trace the failure of diplomatic solutions. Books 5–9 show the rise of Hector (while also introducing us to the warriors who lead the Greek war effort in Achilles' absence, most notably Diomedes). Books 10–11 evoke two Greek missions into hostile spaces, one unsuccessful and one successful (providing symmetry at the heart of the poem). Books 11–15 focus on what is often dubbed the Great Battle, the long day of fighting in which Hector approaches the Greek ships and eventually, in Book 16, Patroclus dies. Books 17–22 describe the return of Achilles to the battlefield. Books 23 and 24

are another pair, with two counterpoised scenes of lament and mourning for the dead: the Greek Patroclus, celebrated with athletic games, and the Trojan Hector, lamented by the women.

The Iliad evokes the sublime magnitude of the world, and aims to entertain listeners for whom all the old tales of the Trojan War are deeply familiar. The narrative patterning is always complicated enough to ward off boredom and to suggest a grand plan beyond the ken of humans. The poem repeatedly confounds and surprises its listeners with the artful dispersal of narrative fog—just as Zeus, god of plotting and strategy, knows when to favor human warriors with a clear bright sky, and when to obscure their actions in a baffling thick mist. Even on the second or tenth or twentieth iteration, it is easy to feel lost, unsure which side has the upper hand or where the story is going. Patterns in one direction are crossed by countercurrents, like weft and warp on a loom.

The mythical story of the Trojan War presents the Greeks as the attackers, who push forward into the city of Troy, and destroy it. Yet *The Iliad*'s narrative arc moves in exactly the opposite direction. The great plan formed by Thetis and Zeus honors Achilles by making the Greeks suffer terribly in his absence. For much of the poem, it is the Trojans, not the Greeks, who are on the offensive. The Greek ships and camp are besieged by the troops of Hector and Sarpedon, who almost manage to burn this temporary home to the ground. The narrator makes us constantly worry for Greeks; even if we know that ultimately they will win the war, we are also shown how many smaller battles they will lose, and how many men die along the way.

But there are even deeper crosscurrents in the monumental plot. The tide of battle shifts and turns, like great winds and waves that "clash haphazardly" towards the shore and out again to sea. We can never assume we know what will happen in the thick of war. Despite the divine plan formed by Zeus and Thetis, the poem repeatedly pushes back again in the opposite direction—driven by the opposing plans of other deities and the prowess of other mortals. The Greeks achieve great victories through the zeal of Diomedes in Book 5. The multiple blockades set across the plain—the Greek wall and trench, and the river—echo the narrator's artful ways of blocking the narrative momentum, ensuring that the endings we expect (the glorification of Achilles, the fall of Troy) cannot happen too soon, and can never be taken for granted. The spy mission in Book 10 and Hera's seduction of Zeus in Book 14 both contribute to Greek success and Trojan loss, in contradiction to the primary narrative drive towards the triumph of Hector. The Great Battle sequence of Books 11 to 15 encapsulates the extraordinary way the poem deals with time and story on the battlefield, telling of a single, impossibly long day of fighting, in which the movement towards Trojan triumph and the burning of the ships is repeatedly counteracted with Greek pushback, and success and glory for several important warriors on both sides. Waves of defeat, panic, and bewilderment buffet both Greeks and Trojans. The plans of Zeus are repeatedly countermanded by the counterplots of Hera, Athena, and

Poseidon, while Ares, god of war, rages across mortal divisions, causing terror and panic rather than ultimate victory for either side.

Conflict and the Norms of War

"Conflict" (*eris*) appears at the start of Hesiod's *Works and Days*, a didactic poem about rural life from the same era as *The Iliad*. Hesiod's narrator declares that there are two types of conflict, one bad and one good. Bad conflict causes war and destroys communities, while good conflict motivates people to outdo their neighbors. When one potter competes with another, everyone wins. Even the less successful artisan ends up with a better piece of work.

But *The Iliad* suggests that "good" and "bad" kinds of conflict cannot be so easily disentangled. The desire to outdo rivals inspires brave, glorious actions, and also leads to massive loss of life. Battle is the "sphere where men win glory" (*kudianeira*), but also where many lose their lives—so war is also "the cause of many tears," "the cause of so much grief" (*polydakrytos*, *polystonos*).

The work of war entails a constant struggle to gain glory or a win (*kudos*) and an opportunity to boast (*euchos*), which must be achieved by outdoing fellow warriors on the battlefield, gaining both the glory and the material wealth that comes from slaughtering, stripping, and humiliating the enemy. The more people you kill, the greater your triumph. An individual fighter gains an *aristeia* ("bestness"—a period of extraordinary military success) when he robs numerous opponents of their lives, their weapons, and their honor, and thus shows himself the "best" among his peers. Warriors compete against not only their enemies but also, simultaneously, their own comrades, who are their rivals for the title of "best" (*aristos*).

In the Greek encampment, there is constant potential for rivalry. All the leaders come from different homelands and lead separate assemblies of troops, and there is no clear order of command. Agamemnon is the richest and brings the most troops to Troy, but Achilles is the fastest, most athletic fighter—and Odysseus is best at strategy, Telamonian Ajax at heavy-armed close combat, Diomedes is a proven city-sacker who excels at chariot driving, Nestor is the oldest warrior with the longest memory, and Menelaus, master of the war cry, is the husband for whose wife the whole war is fought. The clash of incommensurable talents and interests creates irreconcilable conflict among the Greek leaders, as among the three "finest" goddesses. There is no agreement about how collaboration between different types of excellence might happen. Such differences might not matter if multiple leaders could share power, or if—as with Hesiod's potters—there could be multiple winners and multiple forms of success. But in *The Iliad*, every great warrior wants to be the only winner, outperforming his peers, comrades, and allies as well as defeating his enemies.

The warrior's glory (*kleos*) is created by his community. People honor and praise the most successful fighters as if they were gods, and their names are remembered and handed down in songs such as *The Iliad* itself. The yearning for greater and greater honor drives the hero to ever-greater demonstrations of his own superiority. And yet the values and practices of the community also provide checks on the warrior's yearning for success at any cost. Treaties and oaths can be formed even between enemies, and ratified by the gods. Supplication, as well as the possibility of taking prisoners alive rather than dead, offers the warrior a chance to display his capacity for mercy—and to gain further profit, because a living captive can be sold into slavery on the open market, whereas a dead one has no value except to his family. Battle generally takes place during the daylight hours; Ajax famously prays that he may at least die in the light. Both sides are expected to allow for breaks in the fighting so that the dead can be retrieved and buried with due honor.

The Iliad shows what happens when all these social norms are violated, and fighters push for victory at any cost. When Achilles reenters the battlefield after the death of his dearest friend, he refuses mercy to suppliants, mocks the idea of treaties, and rebuffs the usual temporal and social limits placed around the battlefield, such as pausing in the fighting to eat, rest, sleep, and wash. Achilles even pushes beyond the norms inscribed by the gods and by the natural world. He fills the river with corpses, and in a chilling episode in Book 21, the river god himself speaks out against him:

> *"My lovely streams have been filled up with corpses.*
> *I cannot freely pour my waters down*
> *into the shining sea, because the bodies*
> *choke me, but you keep killing even more,*
> *annihilating everyone. Come on,*
> *leader of troops, stop now! This is too much."* (21.288–93)

Achilles' wrath is far deadlier than ordinary human rage, and Achilles pushes conflict beyond its usual bounds, by slaughtering with the indiscriminate rage of Ares himself —and then by desecrating his enemy's body after death.

The Iliad, like *Works and Days*, treats conflict as an inevitable feature of life, both in war and in peace. But the final sequence of the poem marks a return to the norms that Achilles had violated in his wrath. The athletic games of Book 23 feature conflict without death, and the distribution of prizes without further conflict. In the final book, Achilles treats the suppliant Priam with mercy, and allows for a brief cessation of fighting to enable the dignified burial of his enemy Hector. The limitless wrath of Achilles can end only once he recognizes that no absolute, permanent victory is ever possible. Everyone must bear unbearable losses, for which no compensation could ever be enough. In the end, we all lose. Our best hope is to accept partial, temporary

limits on conflict, accepting human companionship and community as our only, always inadequate compensation, for the pervasive experience of loss.

The Code of Honor

The violence of war is enabled by preexisting social hierarchies: glorious leaders gain the resources to make war on one another because they already subjugate so many others. Vast quantities of wealth—weapons, animals, and human bodies—lie in the possession of a few well-born commanders. Most combatants at Troy receive no honor at all. The common troops (*laoi*) row the ships to Troy and populate the battlefield, but their deeds are unremembered, their deaths forgotten. They join the war out of necessity: Agamemnon and the allied Greek leaders impose fines on men who refuse to join the expedition to Troy ("the Greeks' steep fine," 13.884), making it economically ruinous to stay home. The common troops die of plague with the dogs, and when they die in battle, the dogs and birds will feed on their forgotten corpses. The presence of these underarmed, underequipped, and unwilling common fighters allows the leaders to win honor by rushing to battle ahead of them, clad in glittering bronze.

Only one named character may be a member of the common troops: Thersites, who may be a commoner, or perhaps a second-tier leader. He speaks out against the Greek commanders in Book 2 and is described as "the ugliest man who marched on Troy" (2.259). Thersites is punished for his outspokenness by Odysseus, who thrashes him with his golden staff:

> *a bloody weal puffed up beneath the rod*
> *of gold. He sat down, frightened and in pain*
> *and helplessly he wiped away his tears.* (2.327–29)

Odysseus' violent response demonstrates the threat posed to the existing command structure by the possibility of resistance from below. The leaders are outnumbered and must force subordinates into line. The narrator's emphasis on Thersites' "ugliness" reinforces *The Iliad*'s preference for the aristocratic and sturdy warrior ideal. His silencing reminds us that we are in the world of heroic epic, not satirical or comic poetry (rival genres that were also popular in archaic Greece). Yet Thersites' critique of the leadership of the expedition is reminiscent of Achilles, who also insists that it is pointless to risk his life shoring up wealth for Agamemnon.

In contrast to the common troops, who are forced to fight, the dominant warriors in *The Iliad* choose to risk death in battle for the sake of honor. The poem itself glorifies these brave fighters, showing us the beauty and magnificence of those who

willingly risk death in battle. It also shows the terrible dangers and costs of the warrior code—not only for the numberless, largely nameless people killed, raped, and enslaved by the most brilliant celebrity fighters, but even for the warriors themselves.

Elite fighters always have "excellence" (*aretē*), because of their skill in fighting and their noble birth. But they also aspire to the highest possible social status—a position that always depends on the opinions and actions of others. Honor is often acquired through material possessions—and these things can be lost or taken away. A "trophy" or "prize of honor" (*geras*) is a piece of important property, awarded to the most successful or honorable warriors once a battle has been won. These trophies include the most highly valued women enslaved after the sack of a city or settlement, as well as other valuable possessions, such as tripods (made of valuable metals like bronze or gold) or herd animals (for food and sacrifice). Briseis, awarded first to Achilles and then seized by Agamemnon, is such a trophy. The quarrel of these two leaders reveals the double-sidedness of such possessions as generators of status. A man who enslaves a valuable woman increases his own status by doing so. But his social position also becomes dependent on his ability to retain possession of her, because it is humiliating to be deprived of a prize. The same applies to prizes won in athletic competitions (*aethlia*, from which we get the word "athletics").

The possession of trophies, prizes, and other honorific goods, such as the finest cuts of meat at a banquet, or lavish funeral honors in death, all contribute to a man's portion of social status or value in society (*timē*). A person who has been robbed of such objects can demand recompense (also *timē*), as Menelaus does in his demand that the Trojans return his wife and all the other wealth stolen from Sparta by Paris. Through lavish gifts, Agamemnon tries to compensate Achilles for the humiliation of the original quarrel.

Status is also built out of language (*kleos*, a noun cognate with the verb *kaleo*, to "call" or "name"). Warriors are inspired to fight by the promise of praise and memory in stories like the poem itself. Homeric men use each other's full names, titles, and patronymics to show their respect for one another, and to acknowledge their place within a larger social system, as sons, grandsons, and comrades of other men, and as leaders from particular places. Warriors are also inspired to fight by the threat of shame if they shirk from battle. Some of the most common terms of insult involve comparing the opponent to an animal ("dog!"), or suggesting that he is a gymnast or dancer rather than a warrior, or impugning his gender identity (for instance when Thersites calls his fellow fighters "girls, not men," at 2.282).

The leaders with the highest status—like Agamemnon, Achilles, and Hector—are most vulnerable to the threat of shame. Any slight, such as an insult or the loss of a particular prize, may threaten a leader's whole identity as well as his standing in the eyes of his peers and his inferiors. The furious insults hurled by Achilles and Agamemnon at each other in Book 1 may seem overblown or even ridiculous, unless we realize how much both men have to lose from even the smallest diminution of

honor. Those who are the greatest winners can be damaged most by any loss. Privilege entails terrible vulnerability.

The elite warrior earns his social privileges, such as the best cuts of meat at banquets, by fighting at the front lines of battle and thus risking his life. This trade is worthwhile, as Sarpedon movingly explains, because nobody, even those without any honor at all, gets to live forever. Zeus never serves any human from the third jar.

> *"You see, my brother, if we could escape*
> *this war and then be free from age and death*
> *forever, I would never choose to fight*
> *or join the champion fighters at the front,*
> *nor would I urge you to participate*
> *in war where men win glory. But in fact,*
> *a million ways to die stand all around us.*
> *No mortal can escape or flee from death.*
> *So let us go. Perhaps we shall succeed,*
> *and win a triumph from another's death,*
> *or somebody may triumph over us."* (12.395–405)

Sarpedon, a mortal son of Zeus, will lose his life at Troy, although his divine father weeps for him and wishes he could be saved.

Sarpedon, a Lycian ally who has traveled to Troy to help the Trojans against the Greeks, is presented as a team player, admirably focused on the collective need to defend the people of the region from the invaders. He speaks not of why "I" should risk my life, but why "we" should do so. His warrior ethic is founded explicitly on the trade of life for honor, but implicitly on the close bond he has with his comrade, Glaucus—as well as his other fellow fighters.

But Sarpedon's public-spiritedness is not easy for an elite warrior to maintain. The desire to outdo peers and gain glory can isolate the greatest fighters from their own communities, and even from their closest comrades and family members. In a terrible irony, the warrior's high-risk behavior in battle both wins him social approval and also isolates him from his own society. The two greatest fighters in the poem—the Trojan Hector and the Greek Achilles—frame the warrior code in tragically solitary terms. The poem traces the terrible slippage between fighting for one's people, and fighting for individual glory.

When Hector bids farewell to his wife, Andromache, in Book 6, she echoes the words of his parents and begs him not to fight alone outside the city walls. She reminds her husband that he risks not only his own life, but his whole city, which will fall after he is killed. His baby son will be thrown from the city walls by the victorious Greeks. Hector's rash courage also endangers Andromache herself, who knows that