Homer Inc: Review of The Iliad by Homer translated by Stephen Mitchell.

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At the beginning of January, in the bookshop of Terminal 2 at San Francisco airport, I looked for a translation of the *Iliad* – not that I really expected to find one. But there were ten: one succinct W.H.D. Rouse prose translation and one Robert Graves, in prose and song, both in paperback; two blank verse Robert Fagles in solid covers; one rhythmic Richmond Lattimore with a lengthy new introduction;* and three hardback copies of the new Stephen Mitchell translation, with refulgent golden shields on the cover and several endorsements on the back, of which the most arresting is by Jaron Lanier, author of *You Are Not a Gadget*: 'The poetry rocks and has a macho cast to it, like rap music.'

There was also one translation of the *Odyssey*, by Fagles again. It was ever thus: for all its well-remembered adventures and faster pace, the *Odyssey* has always been outsold – out of 590 Homer papyrus fragments recovered in Egypt at the last count, 454 preserve bits of the *Iliad*. The ready explanation – that ancient schoolmasters preferred the *Iliad* because the other Homer is just too much fun – is no doubt true but doesn't explain why the *Iliad* has been preferred outside the schoolroom as well, from antiquity and the Byzantine millennium to the Terminal 2 bookshop.

Why are our contemporaries so keen on buying and presumably reading the *Iliad*'s Iron Age reminiscence of Bronze Age combat? Publishers certainly view it as a paying proposition: at least twenty new English-language translations have been published since 1950, not counting ones from private presses. In Greece, as in Italy for students of the *liceo classico*, it is a compulsory school text (several modern Greek versions also serve as cribs), but why are the passengers at Terminal 2 in San Francisco buying the English versions? Uniformed and desert-booted soldiers are a common sight in US airports – the uniform secures lounge access and early boarding – and it is a fair surmise that warriors and would-be warriors, these days more often college-educated, are war-book buyers, of which the *Iliad* is the echt and ur. Some of course – nasty fellows – would widen the explanation by seeing Americans as a whole as war-lovers, hence war-book addicts, hence *Iliad* buyers. That's lame to begin with, for there are countless ways of getting that fix much more easily than by reading 15,693 lines of hieratic verse bound to offend military history buffs, because of both the extreme, pervasive emotionalism – all the weeping wives of other war books are outdone by the floods of tears of Homer's greatest warriors – and the frequent confusion of the battle tactics of two different eras. As against the precise description of each killing, which if anything spoils the fun, there is the impossible coexistence of archaic chariots with the hoplite phalanx, of single combat with walls and trenches.

In any case, the nasty explanation collapses because the old firm is doing very well in new markets far from America. The only Chinese Homer used to be Donghua Fu's 1929 version of the *Odyssey* (*Ao-de-sai*) published in Changsha in 1929, but that renegade engineer and pioneering Chinese grammarian translated an English text. To translate Homer once is inevitable treason, but twice? Things are far better now that the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences supports the study of ancient Greek and Latin at its Institute of Foreign Literature. Luo Niansheng, once its most distinguished classicist, who studied in the United States and at the American School of Classical Studies in Athens before the Second World War, died in 1990 while translating the *Iliad*. His version was completed by Wilson Wong, who learned his Greek at Moscow State University in the 1960s, and who went on to translate the *Odyssey* as well, in verse form. Until then, China's only translation from the Greek had been in prose, by the celebrated Yang Xianyi, who with his wife, Gladys Taylor, translated many Chinese classics into English as he lived through the hellish vicissitudes of China from 1940 till his death in 2009, including his and his wife's separate imprisonment. Wong and Niansheng, who also translated Aeschylus' tragedies, propelled the first Chinese-Ancient Greek dictionary, published in 2004. By then, another member of the Institute, Zhong Mei Chen, who studied

Homeric Greek at Thessaloniki's Aristotle University after a spell at Brigham Young University in Utah, had published poetical new translations of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.
The Luo Niansheng/Wilson Wong *Iliad* is on sale online, with a handsome Zeus on the cover, for just 19.60 yuan, or $3.10 at the skewed exchange rate. By contrast, writing in *Al-Ahram*'s English edition in 2004, Youssef Rakha complained that Ahmed Etman's new prose translation of the *Iliad* into Arabic was 'unaffordably priced at LE250' or $41.44, although he acknowledged that Egypt's Supreme Council of Culture was publishing a presumably much cheaper paperback edition of Suleyman al-Boustani's pioneering 1904 verse translation of both Homers. Etman – a professor of classics at Cairo University and chairman of the Egyptian Society of Graeco-Roman Studies, as well as a talented playwright – was quoted in the article explaining why Homer was not translated into Arabic until 1904, and then by the Maronite Catholic al-Boustani, even though his writings were ubiquitous in the Greek-speaking lands that came under Arab rule in the seventh century: 'Homer is all mythology,' Etman says, 'his numerous divinities alone would have been all too obviously incompatible with the Muslim creed. Early Arab authors were too concerned with religion to consider promoting such mythology, however familiar they might have been with Homer and however much they might have admired him.'
One hopes that recent changes will not exclude Homer again, as historical studies of early Islam already have been. If they do, Etman is apt to resist valiantly:

The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are the two greatest epics to appear in the history of humanity, and they gave Greek authors and thinkers all their cues. Without Homer there could have been no such thing as ancient Greek culture, and without the Greeks there could have been neither Romans nor subsequent generations of European literature. So when you have a thing of such immense value and such eternal beauty, it seems pointless to ask about its relevance to the present.

But for its succinct eloquence, this evokes countless Letters to the Editor defending the teaching of the classics, whose authors might not perhaps imagine a Professor Etman in Cairo. It does not, moreover, explain the goings on at Terminal 2: it is implausible that passengers are buying the *Iliad* to uphold Western civilisation, so why are they buying it?

In Japan, Homer is so familiar that Japanese have been known to describe their own lengthy Heike epic on the (fully historical) downfall of the Taira clan as a Japanese *Iliad*. It is a truly national epic: I have yet to meet a Japanese who couldn't recite its opening line – 'Gionshōja no kane no koe. Shōgyomujō no hibiki ari', 'The bell of Gion Temple recalls the impermanence of all things' – which echoes, though in Buddhist resignation, Homer's bitter evocation of human mortality at the very start of the *Iliad*. Like the *Iliad*, *The Tale of the Heike* was sung, by blind itinerant monks strumming the four-string *biwa*, colleagues of the rhapsodes who strummed the often four-stringed *phorminx* lyre while singing Homeric compositions (and of the *cantastorie* who recited tales of Federico Secondo Hohenstaufen in the Palermo of my childhood with the aid of highly coloured storyboards; and the Serbian singers of the Sanjak of Novi Pazar recorded by Milman Parry and Albert Lord in 1934-35). Yet another similarity is in the parallel fates of the infant Astyanax, son of Hector, destined successor of King Priam, and that of the child emperor Antoku, the former thrown from the walls of Troy during its sack according to the post-Iliadic *Ilias mikra*, or 'Little Iliad', the latter drowned by his own grandmother, who threw herself into the sea with him after the Taira were defeated in 1185 off Shimonoseki. His mother survived in perpetual sorrow at the appropriately melancholy Jakkō-in nunnery at Ohara just above Kyoto, which no tourist should miss, especially in the rainy mists of June.

Indeed, Japanese familiarity with Homer can be excessive: I once saw a manga in which the central focus of the Trojan War was a voluptuous nymphomaniac Helen, while the central object of the great

quarrel was a sadistically ravaged Briseïs, even though in the *Iliad* Agamemnon swears 'by the greatest of oaths' that he never went into her bed or slept with her (no Clintonesque reservations here, please), while Achilles calls Briseïs his darling wife, adding: 'I loved her with all my heart though I had captured her with my spear.' This sort of soft porn abuse would not be allowed if Homer Inc had the revocation powers that McDonald's Corporation exercises from Oak Brook, Illinois over its franchisees in 119 countries – nor would the new Stephen Mitchell translation be allowed.

It's not that I would hazard to challenge the merits of Mitchell's translation. On matters of taste there is no disputing, and some may even find it inspiring that his 'poetry rocks and has a macho cast to it, like rap music': this is a misrepresentation in any case, since except for rare vulgarities such as a 'son of a bitch' Agamemnon, and a profusion of added adjectives ('naked flesh'), it is a far more conventional translation than, say, the Graves mixed-form version. In any case, I am scarcely an authority in translating anything from any language, and cannot even advance a weaker claim to connoisseurship because my favourite English *Iliad* is William Wyatt's 1999 updating of his great-uncle A.T. Murray's 1924 version, because of the Greek text on its facing pages, because of the handy Loeb format well suited to air travel (and to cheap replacement when left aboard), and for its literal yet stylish accuracy – in that order.

Nor would I presume to impugn Mitchell's qualifications as a translator of the peculiar Homeric mixture of archaic Ionic with some Aeolic (Sappho's dialect), bits of more recent Attic no doubt derived from its written stage, and even some faint remnants of the Mycenaean Greek of the previous millennium, roughly contemporaneous with the famous boar's tusk helmet of Book 10. In my own ignorance I do not impugn his mastery of Homeric Greek, the never spoken language that did not exist outside the two epics apart from in a profusion of later imitations, even though I learn from the dust jacket that Mitchell has also translated the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (from the Old, or the Standard Babylonian version?), the *Tao Te Ching* (now *Dao De Jing*), less well known than its supposed author Lao Tzu (now Laozi), Rainer Maria Rilke (from German, French, or both?) and the Book of Job, *Sefer Iiov*, which I happen to know quite well but would never dare translate. In any case, Mitchell persuasively describes himself translating the text by looking up the Greek words he didn't know, and proffers thanks to M.L. West for unstinting help and advice. As the author of the indispensable if not uncontroverted *Making of the 'Iliad'* as well as the editor of the newest Teubnerian *Iliad*, and of the new Loeb volumes on the Homeric hymns and the Epic Cycle (a wonderful achievement in itself), West is the current Zeus of the Homeric world – with his divine afflatus Mitchell could translate anything.

My objection is another: that Mitchell took it on himself to produce and circulate an *Iliad* that is improperly abridged, indeed mutilated. His text is bereft of the formulaic epithets and set phrases that characterise Homer, which were not only indispensable memory aids for improvisational oral re-compositions by unlettered performers, as Parry and Lord famously demonstrated (a function now admittedly obsolete), but which can serve as ironical foils. Alongside dispensable 'flashing-helmet' Hectors, 'bronze-clad' Trojans and 'single-hoofed' horses, there is 'fleet-footed Achilles', even as he sits sulking in his tent; 'fleet-footed glorious Achilles', even as he refuses to fight while his fellows are being massacred by Hector; 'wide-ruling' Agamemnon, as he is being humiliated by the powerless seer Calchas; and 'most glorious son of Atreus', even while he is being reviled as dog-faced and the most covetous of men.

Such and more warrants keeping what Mitchell has chosen to leave out, for its ironical undertone is by far the most subtle of all the virtues of the many-virtued *Iliad*. To deny the irony is impossible, for it starts at the very beginning. The opening words, 'Menin aeide thea Peleiadeo Achileos,' 'Sing goddess, the anger of Peleus' son Achilles,' are immediately followed by the bloody consequences:

the sending down to Hades of many valiant warrior souls, whose bodies are left as spoils for dogs and birds – 'and thus the will of Zeus reached its fulfilment.' The listener is squarely told who is to blame for all the evil in the world: the supreme deity himself, the most unfatherly 'father Zeus'. He is most literally satirised in a passage in Book 14, which Mitchell does not omit. To give Poseidon freedom of action to help the Achaeans, Hera decides she must bed Zeus. She first equips herself with Aphrodite's seduction gear, duly inflames him, and then cunningly announces that she is embarking on a trip.

'Darling Hera,' said Zeus, 'surely another day will do as well? Let us make love at once! Never in my entire life have I felt such intense longing for goddess or nymph as I feel for you this afternoon! Why, my interest in Ixion's wife Dia, on whom I begot the wise Peirithous, was nothing by comparison; and this also applies to Danaë, daughter of Acrisius, the girl with the beautiful ankles, on whom I begot the hero Perseus ... Why, I would venture to say, dearest wife, that I have never yet conceived so delirious a passion even for you yourself!'

The text would make Zeus an insensitive oaf even if stiffly translated, but the above is the Graves version, which particularly brings out the irony. This sort of thing provoked the very first critic of the *Iliad* known to us, the sixth-century Xenophanes of Lydian Colophon, who objected that 'Homer and Hesiod attributed to the gods all things which are disreputable and worthy of blame when done by men.'

Mitchell's excisions of detail are too frequent, but his much greater offence is an outright mutilation: he omits the entirety of Book 10, a 'baroque and nasty episode' which, he writes, 'has been recognised as an interpolation since ancient times, and by modern scholars almost unanimously: it has major inconsistencies with the rest of the *Iliad*, its style is different, and it can be excised without leaving a trace.' Each contention has some merit, yet the exclusion of Book 10 still amounts to an extreme case of chutzbris – chutzpah for effrontery, hubris for arrogance. Mostly, the omission is a very major loss for the reader.

I begin with the arrogance. Mitchell justly praises West's text, which was published in Germany as *Homeri Ilias* in two volumes in 1998 and 2000. He even adds, most misleadingly, that '20th-century translators of the *Iliad* worked from a Greek text (the old Oxford Classical Texts edition, first published in 1902) that is far inferior' to the new West *Iliad*. This ignores not only the successive revisions of the Oxford text but also the great advance of Helmut van Thiel's 1996 edition, which added many readings from papyri. A fine new translation by Anthony Verity that I much prefer to Mitchell's relies on van Thiel's text, though not uncritically.‡ The largest difference between the van Thiel and the West *Homeri Ilias* is that the former is decidedly more inclusive, adding extra material of varying value from late antique sources, though in square brackets, while West is much more severe in rejecting what he views as interpolations, again by placing them in square brackets. Neither would dream of simply deleting parts of the received text, let alone an entire book.

As for the negative opinions in 'ancient times' that Mitchell cites, the ones that count are the opinions of the Hellenistic trio most responsible for the redaction of the texts of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as we now have them: Zenodotus of Ephesus, the first librarian of the Museum of Alexandria, fl. 280 BCE; Aristophanes of Byzantium, its fourth librarian; and the sixth librarian and most important Homeric scholar of the three, Aristarchus of Samothrace. Surviving bits of Homer on earlier papyri as well as Homer citations by earlier authors show that there were large variations in different copies of both Homeric texts. But that all ended with the Alexandrian trio's culminating achievement, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* editions of Aristarchus. Evidently, master copies were made available to scribes from near and far, or perhaps scribes were employed to produce copies in numbers for sale, which thus became the only editions. Hence post-Alexandrian variations in the text are much smaller

than before, the result of scribal errors, omissions and interpolations as papyrus rolls and then codices were copied again and again down the centuries, rather than different textual origins. The most important *Iliad* witness we have, Venetus A, the tenth-century manuscript now in the Biblioteca Marciana in Venice that came from Byzantium via Cardinal Bessarion's Roman collection, is essentially the *Iliad* of Aristarchus, with his own marginal notes (*scholia*), further lexical and a few exegetical notes by others, and precious excerpts from the lost *Chrestomathy* of Proclus, our major source for the Epic Cycle on the Trojan War, which describes how it started and ended, on either side of the *Iliad*'s account of a few weeks in the ninth year of the war.
The textual supremacy established by Zenodotus, Aristophanes and Aristarchus was very hard won. Zenodotus had to start by compiling glossaries of Homeric Greek, because by then the received songs were at least half a millennium from their terminal composition, while even written renditions had been circulating for three centuries, so that many words had changed their meaning. Each had to be understood in order to redact the text, but there was no translation into contemporary literary (Attic) Greek – even then, Homer was a revered ancient whose archaic language was not to be profaned. Grammatical studies followed, and the alphabet too had to be repaired in many texts before editing could begin, because Athens was a major source of variant Homers, and till 403 BCE Athenians had used an older alphabet in which epsilon made good for epsilon-iota and eta as well, the omicron enclosed omicron-upsilon and omega, while xi and psi were absent. Aristophanes of Byzantium is reputed to have added punctuation and accents, editorial signs were invented by all three, the present division of both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* into 24 books was set, and only then could the actual editing begin, to compare variant writings and correct them, to obtain the most authentic, most coherent and no doubt most attractive text possible at each remove. That required the condemnation of spurious, confusing and displeasing words and phrases, and Aristarchus became so famous for his severity that Horace, in his bit in *Ars Poetica* about good friends not allowing friends to drive to town with bad verse that would embarrass them, invited them to become Aristarchs.

Inevitably, well-salaried establishment intellectuals were a stuffy lot, so Zenodotus, Aristophanes and Aristarchus also questioned text they accepted as authentic because it was too prurient (as with Agamemnon's wanting Chryseis to serve him in bed till she grew old) or disrespectful of the gods, or lacking in the nobility expected of Homeric heroes, a definite problem with Book 10, in which Odysseus and Diomedes set out on a night scouting raid to find out what the victorious Trojans will do next – fit duty for first-class heroes – but then infiltrate the camp of their Thracian allies purely for the sake of loot: the magnificent white horses that pull the gold and silver chariot of Rhesus, their chief. They know of the horses from their hapless captive Dolon, a weakling who tells all (including relevant intel on Hector) in a desperate plea to be spared. He is reassured by Odysseus in warm and friendly tones, but is then abruptly decapitated by Diomedes, thus adding cruelty to treachery and greed.

Unlike Mitchell, the Alexandrian trio did not suppress what they doubted or disliked, or found improper, but only what they were sure was post-Homeric pastiche. Otherwise they suggested, not deleted. We know that of 413 alterations proposed by Zenodotus, 240 remained without effect in extant manuscripts and only six changed readings appeared in all of them; of 83 known emendations by Aristophanes only seven appear in most manuscripts that have reached us, while Aristarchus offered 874 suggestions we know of, of which only eighty are in the text of all our manuscripts. One of these suggestions was that Book 10 was added to the *Iliad* at a later stage than the other parts, though still before written versions, and long before its first official recitation in the Panathenaic Games that started in 566 BCE (that would have been 24 hours of non-stop declamation, or longer if sung, or three days if more mercifully recited).
Aristarchus did not delete Book 10 – had he done so, we might well have lost it altogether. Instead, he merely noted his opinion of certain lines, agreeing for example with Aristophanes in rejecting ll.

51-53 as interpolations, rejecting l. 84 on his own, agreeing with Zenodotus in rejecting l. 240 and so on. They would not have bothered with this had they thought the entire book was spurious. Nor would the delayed insertion of an originally separate account of the night raid signify anything, given the fluidity of the epic at that unwritten stage. Almost two thousand years before Parry/Lord uncovered the mechanics of composition in detail, Josephus described its essence in *Against Apion*, and because he was certainly well educated but not uniquely accomplished, this must have been a common opinion among literate contemporaries: Homer, 'they say, did not leave his poems in writing. At first transmitted by memory, the scattered songs were not united until later; to which circumstance the numerous inconsistencies of the work are attributable.' (These lines by Josephus, incidentally, started Friedrich August Wolf on his 1795 deconstruction of Homer, whose nonexistence now coexists with the sensational Hittite evidence of a Trojan War.)

Mitchell, moreover, is entirely wrong when he claims that Book 10 can be removed without loss. On the contrary, without it, Book 11 cannot be reconciled with Book 9, judged the finest of them all by many, including the master philologist and literary appreciator Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (in *Die Ilias und Homer*, 1916; he was forever cited by my father as a *real* scholar, and among the very greatest after only his father-in-law, Theodor Mommsen). The context of Book 9, which contains the celebrated protest of Achilles against the heroic code, by which competing translations are often judged, is his continuing refusal to fight even as the Trojans are winning and defeat seems imminent. With many of his famous men killed and more demoralised, a weeping Agamemnon first proposes to abandon the war and sail away, then humiliates himself by offering all manner of rewards to induce Achilles to rejoin the fight, including marriage with whichever of his daughters he prefers. Obviously, the situation is desperate. Yet at the very start of Book 11, after the supposedly useless Book 10, the minor female deity of war Eris (Enyo elsewhere in Homer) easily rouses the Achaeans to fight rather than flee, a striding Agamemnon shouts aloud to command his eager men to array themselves for battle, and off they go to attack the Trojans in full force and high spirits. What happened to raise morale so much was Book 10's successful night raid. Take it away, and we are left with an incomprehensible non sequitur. Some things in war really are eternal and universal: if a great fight is expected next morning, launch a night raid to raise morale on your side and demoralise the enemy – or at least ruin his sleep.

The issue of style isn't as simple as Mitchell seems to think either: other books of the *Iliad* also contain 'later' wording and frequent dialectical apposition. It is true that there is rather more of it in Book 10 than elsewhere in the *Iliad* – but by 'later' what is meant is the language of the *Odyssey*, not of some post-Homeric age. That again suggests that Book 10 was added after the other books were formed, in place of an earlier, shorter transition between the defeated gloom of Book 9 and the high-morale attack of Book 11.

There is thus an excess of compelling reasons not to deviate from the *Iliad* that we have had for the last 23 centuries, but even if none were valid, Book 10 would still be most precious because it contains the description of the boar's tusk helmet – a single object that illuminates the entire Homeric question. Odysseus is kitting out for the night raid with a bow, quiver, a sword and a helmet made of hide, better suited for fast movement than the much heavier bronze helmet with ridge and horsehair crest. But this isn't a simple skullcap: 'With many a tight-stretched thong was it made stiff within, while on the outside the white teeth of a boar of gleaming tusks were set thick this way and that, well and skilfully' – i.e. running in alternate directions – 'and on the inside was fixed a lining of felt.'

The poet and his audience would have known that this was an outlandishly antique helmet whose arrival on Odysseus' head needed explanation. It is duly supplied: Autolycus stole the helmet from Amyntor (as a son of the god Hermes, thievery was in his blood), gave it to Amphidamas, who gave it to Molus as a 'guest gift', who gave it to his son Meriones, who gave it to Odysseus. Actually, it must

have had a much longer history, because parts of exactly that kind of helmet have been found in Mycenaean shaft graves dating back to the second millennium.

It might seem obvious that the earliest stage of the *Iliad*'s composition would be Mycenaean, as obvious as the clear parallels between the material evidence of the Mycenaean sites and the artefacts described in the text, from the bronze swords of Skopelos to the chariots often depicted on pots. But until the 1952 decipherment of Linear B by Michael Ventris and John Chadwick, the ruling orthodoxy was that a hypothesised 'Minoan' was the (un-Greek) language of the palace culture of Crete and the Mycenaean settlements, so that the origins of the *Iliad* must come after that, not earlier than the start of the first millennium. It had to be post-Mycenaean because its language was post-Mycenaean, i.e. Greek. The Linear B decipherment overthrew this presumption: its starting point was Ventris's bold theory that the words were in Greek ('Evidence for Greek Dialect in the Mycenaean Archives' was the suitably restrained title of the sensational 1953 announcement in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies*). That would allow the oral composition of the *Iliad* to start at a much earlier date, say around 1500 BCE, give or take a century, and the boar's tusk helmet of Book 10 is hard evidence that it did, because there is no possibility whatever that it, or its memory, could have survived for half a millennium. It is mentioned nowhere else in the *Iliad*, and nor for that matter is horse-riding, another unique feature of Book 10 (the horses were ridden off by Odysseus and Diomedes, leaving Rhesus' chariot behind) and another reason to keep it.

The earlier date, moreover, opens the door for the evidence extracted from deciphered Hittite cuneiform tablets, irrelevant to a ninth-century bce or later *Iliad*, because the last remnant of that empire had been extinguished by then, but contemporary with Mycenaean Greek life over the previous thousand years. Much fuller use of new archaeological evidence is being incorporated in the monumental (one volume per Homeric book) and wonderful *Basler Homer-Kommentar* by Anton Bierl and Joachim Latacz, but for the rest of us a mere catalogue of names is already quite illuminating. To begin with the identity of the tablet-writers, they were the second millennium Indo-European conquerors of the more ancient Hatti, whose prestigious name they took over, and whose imperial capital was Hattusa. Our form 'Hittite' from the Hebrew 'Hitti' is the biblical version. They are often mentioned, from Genesis 15.9 onwards, but the clincher is 2 Kings 7.6, which identifies the Hittim as a mighty empire that fights with war chariots – no mere Canaanite tribe they (with a coincidentally similar name). Those war chariots, incidentally, linger in the *Iliad* as mere golf carts because all the fighting is done on foot. One set of tablets preserves the text of an elaborate treaty of friendship in the form of a letter from 'His Majesty Muwattalli [the second], Great King, of the land of Hattusa to Alaksandu ruler of Wilusa', which is identified as being near Arzawa.

Muwattalli II's regal dates fit, roughly 1295-1272 BCE, and so do the names: Alaksandu cannot be other than Alexander, which happens to be the other name of Paris, he who stole away the wife and treasure of Menelaus, but it is certainly the name of a decidedly Greek ruler. Wilusa is most definitely Troy. The book we know as *Iliad* is the adjective for the city of Ilios – in our present text of the *Iliad* the place is called Troié less often (53 times) than it is Ilios (106 times). Ilios sounds much closer to Wilusa than Troié but their identity need not rely on a similarity that could be coincidental, because it can be shown quite conclusively that the city's original name was 'Wilios': the W sound, in both spoken and written East Ionic Greek, was used till 1200 BCE and became increasingly silent thereafter: the *Iliad* was really the 'Wiliad'. As to the location of Wilusa, it is certainly in western Anatolia, the Roman province of Asia, because the Arzawa mentioned in Muwattalli's letter is definitely there (indeed the Roman and modern 'Asia' is most likely derived from 'Arzawa'). Beyond that, other deciphered cuneiform evidence more precisely correlates Wilios with the present Truva, the new Turkish name (there is a large wooden horse too) for the ancient city long rumoured to be

Troy, which was first excavated in 1865 by the underpaid consular Brit Frank Calvert, and then on a much larger scale by the wealthy German adventurer, genius and fabulist Heinrich Schliemann.

More evidence, the so-called Tawagalawa letter, from an unnamed Hatti ruler to an unnamed ruler of the Ahhiyawa, refers to a past conflict that has been resolved amicably: 'Now as we have come to an agreement on Wilusa over which we went to war.' Even though the date is uncertain because the author has variously been identified as Hattusili III (1265-1235 BCE, the earlier Muwattalli II (1295-1272 BCE) or even his revered ancestor Mursili II (1322-1295 BCE), there is no doubt whatever that the war over Wilusa had been fought with the Ahhiyawa, i.e. the Achaeans, by far the most common name in the *Iliad* for Agamemnon's people alongside the less frequent Danaans and Argives. There is much more to this body of evidence, including a vastly intriguing to-do over the dangerous and obviously Achaean raider Piyama-Radu, who acts rather like Achilles did just before the *Iliad* starts (that's how he got the girl), and whose extradition is politely requested under assurances of safe conduct (!) – what did the Hatti ruler want to chat about with him?

What is certain is that while poor Homer has been kicked out of history, the *Iliad* can now be treated as a historical source, if only because of its many and surprisingly precise geographical references – none more so than in the bit about Poseidon looking at the plain before Troy from a mountaintop on the island of Samothrace (Samothraki) notwithstanding the island of Imbros and the horizon in between: no need to be a god, because the plain is indeed visible from the peak of Mount Fengari, 1611 metres high.

None of this offers even a start to the question of why people keep buying and presumably reading an interminably long, frequently repetitive and intermittently gruesome Iron Age rendition of Bronze Age combat. One reason, obviously, is that had Homer existed (in spite of his deconstruction by Wolf, and in spite of his substitution by Parry/Lord), he would have been the star pupil of any creative writing course. They teach a variety of tricks and techniques for different kinds of writing, but Homer uses absolutely all of them: the *Iliad* begins in medias res with the action underway, and instead of a tiresome summary of the first nine years of the war, necessary context is supplied by scattered flashbacks; it starts, moreover, with a quarrel on the Achaean side that is a fast way of introducing its two principal protagonists, Agamemnon and Achilles, each acting out at maximum volume to reveal his character immediately; the indispensable enlistment of emotions to make us care for the characters' fates is fully accomplished, on both sides, most strongly perhaps for Hector as he parts from his infant son and desolate wife for a day of combat, but also for the teenage fighter who grasps Achilles' leg in a futile plea for mercy in Book 22, and many others; the build-up of tension leading to a great climax is relentless, and achieved not once but twice, first in the long delayed return of Achilles to combat, preceded by dramatic renditions of the bloody losses his absence had caused, and then in the duel between Achilles and Hector, all the more dramatic because of the final loss of nerve of Priam's most valiant son. On top of that, there are the production values, as Hollywood calls them: lots of special effects ranging from the habitual falling-star incandescence of the gods to the extraordinary revolt of the river god Scamander against Achilles, who had fouled the river with bleeding dead bodies (he would have drowned in a thunderous flood had not the gods intervened); the gorgeous Cecil B. DeMille battle scenes written as if seen from above, sex scenes all the more erotically charged because they are inserted between dramatic peaks and, throughout, the reciprocal balancing of the inevitable human tragedy of mortality with the tragicomedies of the cavorting gods.

It is those gods who supply an excellent reason for the millennial success of the *Iliad*: the fact that it offers a vision of uncompromised human dignity which was very rare indeed over much of human history. None of the characters is piously god-fearing, even if all fear the harm that the frivolous and often malevolent gods can and do inflict, usually to punish the merest slights. These are gods who have only power and no moral authority – when they have their own battle in Book 21 they are not

awesome but ridiculous. Such gods can only evoke grudging compliance rather than sincere devotion – nobody would voluntarily renounce any pleasure for them, let alone die for them.
Undiminished by gods, human dignity is not diminished by secular authority either. Agamemnon commands many more troops than Achilles: he has a hundred ships in Book 2's catalogue and his brother Menelaus has sixty more, as against fifty. Achilles is therefore forced to give up his prize captive, but he is not forced to be deferential, and roundly insults Agamemnon to his face. It wasn't necessary to be the issue of Zeus and a great hero to be free from deference, or indeed to insult a king: Thersites, the nearest thing to a bolshie private in the *Iliad*, loudly insults Agamemnon as well, for which he is not executed for lèse majesté but merely beaten up by Odysseus in another of his ugly roles, as a bully boy.
That is the supremely enhancing vision that has always been offered by the *Iliad*: human dignity at its fullest, undiminished by piety or deference to gods or kings. In recent centuries, the *Iliad* could also offer another kind of freedom, from the collective obligations levied on individual freedom by patriotism, and from the more intense compulsions of nationalism, both all the more destructive of freedom when entirely voluntary. Achilles is angry and therefore refuses to fight, and nobody tells him that it is his duty to fight for the Achaean/ Danaan/Argive cause because he is Achaean/ Danaan/Argive, nobody calls him a deserter because there is no presumption of any obligation to serve.
Another reason for reading the *Iliad* is the fighting, although the battles do not even start until Book 4. Necessarily composed for audiences of fighters, because all able-bodied free men, rhapsodes included, were called to arms in the Greece of independent cities, the *Iliad* describes fighting with an exactitude that is perhaps entirely meaningful only for those who have themselves fought as individuals with individual weapons, for whom all of life and death can turn on the very smallest details of terrain, equipment and circumstance. Of these, only equipment can be controlled at all, and so one checks and rechecks one's weapons and kit, after having cleaned, assembled, even repaired whatever is at hand; having never fought in a cold climate, I never had to worry about clothing, but I certainly fussed over the rest, and can now bore any victim by arguing the very, very detailed pros and cons of every weapon I ever handled. In the *Iliad* likewise, each account of combat begins with a precise account of the arming:
he uncovered his polished bow of the horn of a wild ibex ... of 16 palms; these the worker in horn had worked and fitted together, and smoothed the whole with care ... This bow he set firmly against the ground, bent it, and strung it ... Then he opened the lid of his quiver, and took out an arrow, a feathered arrow that had never been shot, loaded with dark pains and immediately he fitted the bitter arrow to the string ... And he drew the bow, clutching at once the notched arrow and the string of ox's sinew; the string he brought to his chest and to the bow the iron arrowhead. But when he had drawn the great bow into a curve, the bow twanged and the string sang aloud, and the sharp arrow leaped.

The bowman is Pandarus, son of Lycaon, the target is Menelaus, within easy range under a truce, Athena having induced the treacherous attack to ensure that there will be no peace settlement. The listener would have immediately recognised the weapon, not a simple wooden reflex bow but one of horn or with a horn belly to add compression energy. Only the weapon with which Odysseus kills the suitors in the other epic was a more powerful compound bow, with layers of dried horse tendon on the back to add tension to compression, but that weapon, a very rare import from the far steppe, could not be strung by bending against the ground because it is so powerful that it reverses itself when unstrung (Odysseus evidently knew how to pull in the horns with bastard strings, because he strung it while sitting down). But in the *Iliad* all bowmen are despised because they can attack from a distance, and treacherously too, as Pandarus did.

'Arrow-fighter' is an insult, in spite of Apollo's godly archery: 'Argives, you arrow-fighters, have you no shame?'; 'you archer, foul fighter'; 'the bow is the weapon of a useless man, no fighter'; and most

contemptuously when the mighty hero Diomedes addresses Paris, who has pierced his foot with an arrow:

Bowman and braggart, with your pretty lovelocks and your glad eye for girls; if you faced me man to man with real weapons, you would find your bow ... a poor defence ... All you have done is to scratch the sole of my foot ... a shot from a coward and a milksop does no harm. But my weapons [heavy throwing spears] have a better edge. One touch of them and a man is dead.

The *Iliad* is an epic – the point is not to win but to gain honour by fighting not efficiently but heroically. Yet for all that, with an audience of soldiers, precision about kit is present throughout: when Agamemnon, at his best at the start of Book 11, neither arrogant nor greedy but valiant, sets out to fight, first there is the preparation:

the greaves first he set about his legs ... next he put on about his chest the corselet [*thorikos*, 'breastplate'] ... and about his shoulders he flung his sword [a secondary weapon for the *Iliad*'s fighters, who were spearmen first and bowmen last] ... and he took up his richly inlaid, valorous shield, that sheltered a man on both sides [i.e. a hoplite's large shield] ... and on his head he set his helmet with two ridges and with bosses four, with horsehair crest, and terribly did the plume nod from above.

One such helmet terrifies the infant Astyanax when Hector leans down to give him a parting kiss.

When the fighting begins, the relentless bloodletting is intermittently accompanied by technical asides. Agamemnon first kills the chief Bienor ('shepherd of men') and then his charioteer Oïleus, whom he strikes on the forehead with his spear, which goes right through the heavy bronze helmet to reach the bone 'and all his brain was spattered about inside.' Next he goes after two sons of Priam, Isus and Antiphus, who are in the same chariot; 'he struck Isus on the chest above the nipple with a cast of his spear, and Antiphus he struck close to the ear with his sword, and cast him from the chariot.' Next he kills Peisander and Hippolochus after rejecting their plea to be taken alive for ransom. He 'thrust Peisander from his chariot to the ground, striking him with his spear in the chest, and backward he was hurled on the earth ... Hippolochus he slew on the ground, and shearing off his arms with the sword, and striking off his head, sent him rolling like a rounded stone.' Next he does his killing in bulk as he chases the fleeing Trojans: 'And many fell from their chariots on their faces or on their backs ... as he raged with his spear.' He is then confronted by Iphidamas (who lives on as Jupiter's asteroid 4791), 'a powerful man and tall'; his spear cast having missed Iphidamas, Agamemnon stabs him with his spear beneath the breastplate, putting his weight in the thrust, but can't pierce the belt as his spearhead is bent 'like lead'. Agamemnon seizes the spear, and pulls it from the hand of Iphidamas, before striking him on the neck with his sword.

Spears cut through temples, foreheads, navels, chests both below and above the nipple. Even despised bows kill, and heavy stones appear as weapons. Joyful victors strip their victims of their armour and gain extra delight from imagining their weeping mothers and wives. Yet the *Iliad* is a million miles away from the pornography of violence offered by many lesser war books, battle paintings, martial sculptures and most obviously films, in which the enemy bad guys are triumphantly trampled or gleefully mown down, because the humanity of the victims, their terror and their atrocious pain, are fully expressed. The powerful affirmation of the warrior's creed – we are all mortal anyway so let us fight valiantly – coexists with the unfailingly negative depiction of war as horrible carnage.

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Edward Luttwak begins his brilliant essay on Homer with the mistaken premise that the *Iliad* has always been preferred to the *Odyssey*, 'from antiquity and the Byzantine millennium to the Terminal 2 bookshop' at San Francisco airport (*LRB*, 23 February). The preference for the *Iliad*, in English translation at least, ended rather

before Luttwak's visit to San Francisco earlier this year. As I point out in my prefatory essay to the forthcoming catalogue of the Bibliotheca Homerica Langiana to be published by the University of Chicago Library, this preference continued to be reflected, in English at least, until the end of World War One. Not surprisingly, by the November armistice, the Western romantic notion of war, first expressed in Homer's portrayal of aristocratic warriors engaged in glorious combat, was utterly shattered. On the battlefields of France and Belgium the sword and spear were superseded by a chilling impersonal mix of wire, gas and artillery. The tactics of modern warfare could no longer accommodate Homeric models. Reflecting this cultural turnabout, the line of translations reveals that during the three centuries between Chapman's version and the November armistice, the *Iliad* was fully translated into English 38 times, compared with just 26 versions of the *Odyssey*. In the nine decades after 1918, only 16 complete *Iliads* appeared, compared to 25 *Odysseys*. Thus it seems to have taken almost three thousand years for the story of Odysseus' long and difficult journey home to finally surpass, in general popularity at least, Homer's pounding tale of war.

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