

H O M E R

The
Iliad

TRANSLATED BY
Robert Fagles

INTRODUCTION AND
NOTES BY
BERNARD KNOX

THE ILIAD

The Greeks believed that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were composed by a single poet whom they named Homer. Nothing is known of his life. While seven Greek cities claim the honor of being his birthplace, ancient tradition places him in Ionia, located in the eastern Aegean. His birth-date is undocumented as well, though most modern scholars now place the composition of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in the late eighth or early seventh century B.C.

ROBERT FAGLES is Arthur W. Marks '19 Professor of Comparative Literature, Emeritus, at Princeton University. He is the recipient of the 1997 PEN/Ralph Manheim Medal for Translation and a 1996 Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Fagles has been elected to the Academy, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the American Philosophical Society. He has translated the poems of Bacchylides. His translations of Sophocles' *Three Theban Plays*, Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (nominated for a National Book Award) and Homer's *Iliad* (winner of the 1991 Harold Morton Landon Translation Award by The Academy of American Poets, an award from The Translation Center of Columbia University, and the New Jersey Humanities Book Award) are published in Penguin Classics. His original poetry and his translations have appeared in many journals and reviews, as well as in his book of poems, *I, Vincent: Poems from the Pictures of Van Gogh*. Mr. Fagles was one of the associate editors of Maynard Mack's Twickenham Edition of Alexander Pope's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and, with George Steiner, edited *Homer: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Mr. Fagles' most recent work is a translation of Homer's *Odyssey*, available from Penguin.

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PENGUIN BOOKS



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To the memory of my father and my mother
and for Lynne, Katya and Nina—

humeis gar theai este, pareste te, iste te panta,

hêmeis de kleos oion akouomen oude ti idmen—

TRANSLATOR'S

PREFACE

"*H*omer makes us Hearers," Pope has said, "and *Virgil* leaves us Readers." So the great translator of Homer, no doubt unknowingly, set at odds the claims of an oral tradition and those of a literary one, as we would call the two traditions now. Homer's work is a performance, even in part a musical event. Perhaps that is the source of his speed, directness and simplicity that Matthew Arnold heard—and his nobility too, elusive yet undeniable, that Arnold chased but never really caught. Surely it is a major source of Homer's energy, the loft and carry of his imagination that sweeps along the listener together with the performer. For there is something powerful in his song, "that unequal'd Fire and Rapture"—Pope again—"which is so forcible in *Homer*, that no Man of a true Poetical Spirit is Master of himself" while he experiences the *Iliad*. "In *Homer*, and in him only, it burns every where clearly, and every where irresistibly." But it also brings to light the Homeric Question facing all translators: How to convey the power of his performance in the medium of writing? "*Homer* makes us Hearers, and *Virgil* leaves us Readers."

Yet the contrast may be too extreme. Virgil the writer was certainly no stranger to recitation. Homer the performer, as the Introduction speculates, may have known a rudimentary form of writing. And writing may have lent his work some qualities we associate with texts in general—idiosyncrasies at times, and pungency and wit—and with the *Iliad* in particular, its architectonics, its magnificent scale, and the figure of Achilles. But even if Homer never used an alphabet himself, he now seems less the creature of an oral tradition whom Milman Parry discovered, and more and more its master, as envisioned by Parry's son, Adam. Homer the brilliant improviser deployed its stock, inherited features with all the individual talent he could muster. Never more so, in fact, than in his use of the fixed and formulaic, frequently repeated phrase. Not only is Homer often less formulaic, but the formulas themselves are often more resonant, more apt and telling in their contexts than the hard Parryites had argued for at first. So the original form of Homer's work, while a far cry from a work of literature as we know it now, is not exactly a song either, pure and simple. It may be more the

record of a song, building over the poet's lifetime perhaps, or what Marianne Moore would call "a simulacrum of spontaneity."

Obviously at a far remove from Homer, in this translation I have tried to find a middle ground (and not a no man's land, if I can help it) between the features of his performance and the expectations of a contemporary reader. Not a line-for-line translation, my version of the *Iliad* is, I hope, neither so literal in rendering Homer's language as to cramp and distort my own—though I want to convey as much of what he says as possible—nor so literary as to brake his energy, his forward drive—though I want my work to be literate, with any luck. For the more literal approach would seem to be too little English, and the more literary seems too little Greek. I have tried to find a cross between the two, a modern English Homer.

Of course it is a risky business, stating what one has tried to do or, worse, the principles one has used (petards that will probably hoist the writer later). But a word or two of explanation seems in order, and the first refers to the more fixed and formulaic parts of Homer. I have treated them in a flexible, discretionary way, not incompatible with Homer's way, I think—especially when his formulas are functional as well as fixed—while also answering to the ways we read today. It is a matter of "riding easy in the harness," as Robert Frost once said of democracy, and my practice ranges from the pliant to the strict. With one of the most frequently repeated phrases, for example—the line that introduces individual speeches—I have been the freest, trying to anticipate the speaker's nuance of the moment yet retaining, at least, the ritual of introductory words for every speech. When Homer introduces a speech of "winged words," however, I rarely if ever omit that well-known phrase, though I like the flight of the words to vary, with a quick burst at times and a longer drift at others, according to what a character has to say. And so with Hector's flashing helmet, in the epithet that clings to Hector's name: I like to ally its gleaming with his actions, now nodding his head in conversation, now rushing headlong into the front lines. But a flashing helmet it is, again and again, and not only to make his own career appear more meteoric and abruptly snuffed out but also to support a chain of tragic ironies throughout the poem. For the flashing helmet—Hector's own at first—is soon replaced by the one he strips from Patroclus when he kills him: the helmet of Achilles. So as prophecy would have it, when Achilles destroys Hector in revenge he must destroy himself as well, his flashing mirror-image embodied in his victim, and the helmet he will wear, fire-new and forged by Hephaestus, flashes like the helmet of Ares when Achilles closes for the kill (Book 20.45,