

The purpose of this note is to give members who might be interested in joining the course in Series 1 2021 ample time to obtain and read a copy of *The Iliad*

GODS, WAR & TRAGEDY: Homer & Euripides

The myth of Troy held a special place in the thought and culture of ancient Greece. The sacking of this Asian city was probably a real event (1184 BC, to be precise) around which a dense fabric of mythology and theology has been woven so that in two distinct periods in Greek history, two literary and performative genres, the Homeric epics (C.8th-7th centuries BC) and classical tragedy (5th century BC) embraced in their different ways aspects of the myth.

Homer's *Iliad* gives us a few weeks in the final year of the siege of Troy, in which crucial events point toward the inevitable Greek victory (it doesn't occur within the poem). The focus is not on a simple narrative sequence from the mythical beginnings to the end of the matter, but on the human cost of war in a 'heroic' age, the intricate interpenetration of the divine and human worlds and, ultimately, their absolute separation.

There will be three sessions on the *Iliad*. The first will give some background to the myth and the poem, then attempt to examine some of the ideas that lie behind it: 'Heroic' values and the nature of Death as a fact of life; the gods and fate – how are they conceived? The code of *xenia*, or guest-friendship, and the idea of reciprocity.

The second will focus on Achilles, the 'hero' of the story, and his anger, the way that the gods fit in and the savagery of war. Finally, the third will touch upon the other side of life beyond war; those human institutions, like the *polis* (city) that war destroys and the beginnings of a concept of character that anticipates classical tragedy.

The text used for these sessions will be, *Homer: Iliad*, trans Robert Fagles, Penguin Books.

Almost half of all surviving Greek tragedies are Troy related and there are fragmentary remains of many more. Euripides in particular had a focus on the aftermath of war in his two plays *Hecuba* & *Women of Troy*. Both feature Hecuba, the enslaved ex-queen of Troy, exposing the psychological torture of defeat and the psychological corruption of victory. The plays refer back to elements of Homer, but apply a different sensibility for which the remnants of the heroic world are the last illusions of war.

Texts of the two plays, in my own translation, will be available for sessions four and five. The final session will be the showing of *Women of Troy*, from a performance held in Allen Hall in 2013.

Harry Love

10th June 2020