

Listening to

HOMER

Our writer joins a group of faculty, staff, and students to read Homer's *Iliad* aloud and quickly sheds his initial misgivings about classical literature.

BY STEVE VESHOSKY

PHOTOS: NICK LACY





*Begin, Muse, when the two
first broke and clashed,
Agamemnon lord of men and
the brilliant Achilles.*

Having been exposed to the poetic prose of Homer as a semi-attentive high school student, I first read the astonishingly detailed accounts of bloody battles and encounters with gods and sirens as if they amounted to little more than mildly interesting but largely irrelevant tales from one more dusty volume of boring literature forced upon us by the school board. But the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are better suited for the spoken word, my 10th-grade English teacher might have told me. Perhaps she said something about them being part of a timeless oral tradition—a wonderful vehicle for the lost art of storytelling. “Yeah right,” I probably thought at the time. “Sure.”





Illustrations from *Homer, His Iliads*, translated and illustrated by John Ogilby, London 1660. This copy was once owned by former Trinity president Remsen Ogilby and was presented to the Watkinson Library at Trinity by his son Alexander.

However, on a frosty day last winter, Hobart Professor of Classical Languages A.D. “Tony” Macro gathered together a small group of students, faculty, and staff members and began to read aloud the *Iliad*, Homer’s epic story of the war at Ilium (Troy), complete with Achilles’ rage, its effect on the course of the battle for Troy, and its eventual resolution. While my high school encounter with ancient literature left something to be desired, I’d had an extremely positive experience with the *Odyssey* as an undergraduate and so I was among those assembled that day. As Professor Macro began to read, whatever misgivings I might still have harbored toward classic Greek literature fell away. The story, its characters, scenery, and twisting plot lines, came to life. The undeniable beauty of the verse leapt from the page as seamless notes from a harp. I was hooked. Indeed, it is true—Homer is meant to be spoken. And listened to.

Never a dull moment— an epic full of dramatic action

“Neither the bard nor his audience had written texts to refer to,” notes Macro in his understated, elegant English accent. “The performance was entirely oral. To the accompaniment of a lyre and inspired by the Muse, Homer sang *ex tempore* for listeners familiar with the heroic tales and ancestral myths that were his subject. So today, whenever we read the *Iliad* or *Odyssey* silently to

ourselves, we miss not only the ambiance of a responsive audience, but the sound and music of the rhythmic verse that convey so much of the drama. And there’s plenty of drama in the *Iliad*: on the battlefield and in the Greek camp, at Hector’s house in Troy, and on Olympus among the gods and goddesses. Homer reveals his characters’ feelings and motives through their own words—the words he gives them, and so his epic is full of dramatic action; there’s never a dull moment.”

Sponsored by the Trinity Center for Collaborative Teaching and Research, and organized by Macro, the once-a-week lunchtime reading sessions continued throughout the spring semester, bringing together an eclectic sampling of the campus community. Jeff Kaimowitz, head librarian of the Watkinson Library, is a regular participant, as is Mark Silk, director of the Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion and Public Life. Alexandra Hoffman ’08 and Andrew Baird ’06 are among a small but loyal group of students who make it a point to fit our literary excursions to Troy into their busy schedules. “I’ve always wanted to participate in a live reading of the *Iliad*,” says Silk, “and the chance to do it in a mixed group of students, faculty, and staff has been a special treat. It’s what a liberal arts education at a place like Trinity is, or should be, all about.”

With each of us reading approximately 100 lines at a time, including the inevitable (and, at times, humorous) struggles with the pronunciation of unfamiliar names and places, we completed the first 12 books last spring. We are now working our way through the second half of the story. “I look forward to that hour each week,” says Baird, a classics major. “It’s a welcome break from my typically heavy schedule and, also, it’s a chance to spend time with other members of the College who esteem the classics as much as I do. And there is nothing more relaxing than listening to the time-weathered voice of Professor Macro as he tackles the words of Homer—stepping through the text with a wit and sensitivity that is rare and precious.” Regularly joining the somewhat fluid group this semester are Yelena Baraz and Elizabeth Baughan, both assistant professors in the Classics Department; Brownell Professor of Philosophy Richard Lee; Daniel Taravella, a visiting lecturer in Classics; and Maureen Sullivan, an IDP student.

Homer—One author or several?

Wednesday at noon in Gallows Hill Bookstore—over lunch, coffee, and cake—we are once again sitting in a circle and taking turns reading the wondrous words of the Greek bard, who most likely lived in the late eighth and early seventh centuries, B.C. Scholars have been wondering for centuries about the so-called “Homeric Question.” Could poems such as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* been produced in a society without writing? Could one

person be responsible for poems of such length and complexity? Studies on human memory and especially comparative work done in cultures with a still vibrant oral tradition now suggest that the works may have, in fact, been created by one author using the building-blocks of a centuries-old epic tradition.

“The debate definitely still exists,” explains Baraz, who earned her Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley, in 2004 and plans to coordinate a similar reading of the *Odyssey* in the fall. “Oral composition, the need and ability to compose while performing, explains the use of formulaic language for similar situations. An oral tradition lasting several centuries also accounts for mentions of objects and practices that no longer existed in Homer’s time, such as particular weapons and battle practices. It is impossible to deny that the poems are part of an oral tradition: the ‘material’ arguments are weighty and the explanatory force of the oral composition theory is great. At the same time, that these two poems exceeded others of their kind was already recognized in antiquity.”

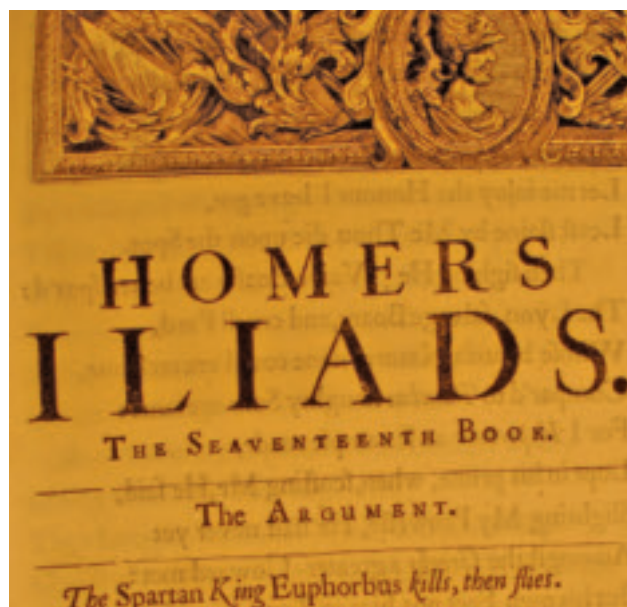
For those of us who show up each week to enjoy the style and rhythm of the verse, in addition to the camaraderie of the group, it hardly matters. Whether Homer was the name of the man who composed the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, or the nom de plume of a group of writers, we are sharing a meaningful literary experience as members of the Trinity community. The value of that, quite simply, cannot be overstated. And, of course, we are getting an education along with our cake and coffee.

“Homer composed his heroic poems in a specialized vocabulary and according to a strict metrical pattern of heavy and light syllables to form the hexameter verse, which, incidentally, was the established meter used by all subsequent epic poets in Greece and Rome,” explains Macro. “Robert Fagles, in his translations into English of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, wisely does not attempt to replicate the Homeric hexameter, but chooses a line of five or six beats that captures meaning and cadence with great success. An example can be found in the first book of *The Iliad*, when an angry Apollo strides down to the Greek ships”:

*with his bow and hooded quiver slung across his shoulders.
The arrows clanged at his back as the god quaked with rage,
the god himself on the march and down he came like night.*

“The translation is as faithful as it can be to the Greek word-order and well captures—with ‘quiver,’ ‘clanged,’ and ‘quaked’—the onomatopoeia of the Greek ‘k-sounds’ of the arrows clanking in the quiver.”

As we savor the exploits of Hector and Achilles, of Zeus, Apollo, and Athena, it is easy to get lost in the glorious



battles and divine spirit of it all. Relating the nearly 3000 year-old text to the state of the world today is perhaps the easiest part, as human nature and the things that most deeply affect us all—love, honor, power, glory, death—obviously have not changed since Homer first explored them. It is the curse, and splendor, of the human condition that seems to captivate us. As Zeus, king of the immortal gods, posits in Book 17 of *The Iliad*:

*There is nothing alive more agonized than man
of all that breathe and crawl across the earth.*

After nearly four decades at Trinity, Macro will retire at the end of the spring term. A graduate of Oxford University who went on to earn a Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University, he was a child in London during Germany’s infamous WWII bombing raids in that city. “Warfare is horrible and ugly; but there is also a fascinating beauty, even joy, to be found in it,” he says. “Homer shows us that in scenes of unparalleled force; and it is what my father and uncles would tell me as a boy, when I could get them to talk about it. Recently published accounts written by soldiers returning from action in Iraq say the same.”

Macro told me the bombers’ engines became so familiar he could tell the difference between the types of planes that filled the sky just by hearing them, by identifying their distinctive sounds. Even then, some 60 years ago, as he listened to the timeless sounds of war, Tony Macro began to understand both the horror and the poetry of the moments when “man killed man in the pell-mell clash of battle/ captains going at captains.”*

**The Iliad*, Book 16