Core Conversations Virtual Book Club
The Iliad
Questions by Professor Kate Brassel

Session 1 (*The Iliad* – Books I-V)

Take the prompts below as points of departure for your discussion: power and persuasion; the complex positions of Helen; the wound of Menelaos and masculinity; Diomedes and the male body; and (as promised) some similes for close reading… And enjoy re-reading the epic!

• "Do you also obey, since to be persuaded is better," Nestor enjoins Agamemnon and Achilleus (I, 274). The great warriors of the Iliad are supposedly renowned for performance in battle and dominance among other kings, both measured by proportions of spoils (women, tripods, armor, etc.). But their characters are very much established by their deliberative faculties—in council, before assemblies, and their responses to good counsel. Persuasion and persuadability will be important to how we come to understand the contest of values that emerges across the epic, as well as what masculinity looks like in the world of the Iliad. What is revealed about Agamemnon and Achilleus in their "battling words of contention" of Books I and II? What are mass assemblies and "debate" really for? What are we to understand about the deliberative faculties of groups? Consider Kalchas, Achilleus, and Agamemnon (I, 68-304); and then Agamemnon, Nestor, and Odysseus (II, 53-420). [Also: Is disorderly, indecent Thersites the true hero of the Iliad? Compare II, 211-277 to I, 149-171.]

• Helen recognizes that she and Hektor have something in common: "we shall be made into things of song for the men of the future" (VI, 358). And she's right—Helen has a complex afterlife across genres and periods of Greek literature, as both a pawn and wielder of power, both lover and lamenter. Although she appears in only a few scenes in the Iliad, we nevertheless see her with as many sides and subtleties of psychology as any of the male figures. Book III presents Helen in two very different scenes: first among the Trojan elders in the so-called teicho-scopia (i.e. "view from the wall," III, 121-244) and later in a confrontation with Aphrodite—that "strange divinity" (III, 383-446). How do you see Helen's particular roles and activities in the teichoscopia as pertinent to the values of the poem? Then, in the tangle with goddess, how do we recognize who or what is desirable? How might we come to understand Helen's relationship to and with divinity over the course of Book III?

• The Iliad is full of false starts: anticipation of full-scale battle gives way to only a duel; the duel is then adjourned by Aphrodite's rescue of Paris; the truce is broken when an arrow is shot at Menelaos—but that arrow is brushed aside by Athena "as when a mother brushes a fly away from her child" (IV, 130-131) so that it may do less harm to the son of Atreus. But the description of this non-fatal wound is extraordinary (IV, 141-147): treasured purple-stained ivory and the shapely thighs of Menelaos are woven together in an elaborate epic simile. How are we invited to see this warrior or to understand masculinity? How does this challenging simile ask us to register wounds and bodies? How can we use the tension that naturally arises from this simile to

understand more about the fears and fantasies of the Iliad?

• The aristeia (scene of excellence) of Diomedes in Book V kicks off the "action scenes" of the Iliad. We move from Book IV's aesthetic description of Menelaos' wound to Book V's graphic—sometimes clinical—descriptions of wounding and death. Why this sudden change? What do we learn about the male body in this book?

• If you'd like to get into some independent close readings, start here:
We might parody epic similes as overly formulaic: "Just as a lion is fast/strong/indomitable against his cowering prey, so too was this hero fast/strong/indomitable against his enemy, who was about to die!" So similes that significantly break from this model merit our particular attention and interpretation. What work do similes do for the text? Do they obscure or reveal? Choose one or two of the following to comment upon.
o assembling army as bees (II, 87-94)
o Achaians as sheepfold/ milk pails/ goatherds (II, 459-483) –A favorite series of mine!
o the youth as poplar (IV, 477-487)

Session 2 (*The Iliad* – Books VI-X)

• Hektor has a target on his back throughout the epic that causes us to lament as we watch this ideal eldest son work to defend Troy. In Book VI, we see him sharing a moment with his wife Andromache and baby Astyanax (VI, 390-502). At first, Hektor looks for Andromache in "his own well-established dwelling, but failed to find [her] in the house" (370-1). Rather than remaining in the palace, Andromache has run to meet Hektor at the wall, between the exterior world of battle and the safer (for now) domestic world. The tenderness among man, woman, and child here belies irreconcilable values. Discuss this conflict. What are the bases of Andromache's appeal? What is the strategic value of her counsel—and what is its value to the narrative? How does Hektor's response complicate the somewhat more straightforward view of the traffic in women in earlier books? What motivates Hektor's decision-making? Also: How might we interpret Hektor's interaction with his son? His parents laugh—but is Astyanax right to fear Hektor's "aspect" and helmet (466-481)?

• In Book IX, the Achaians send Odysseus, Phoinix, and Aias (Ajax) to persuade Achilleus to rejoin the fight. This scene (IX, 182-668), you may remember, is often referred to as the "Embassy to Achilles." They present to Achilleus three complementary sets of values (and valuables) that they expect to be persuasive within the Iliadic world. What is considered valuable

to each ambassador? What sorts of "edits" does Odysseus make to Agamemnon's words (157ff.)? How does Achilleus' response to Odysseus in particular (307-429) present an internal critique of the Achaian value system—to which he too had subscribed—in Books I and II? What does Achilleus offer as an alternative value?

• Achilleus has not returned home as he might have, but has rather carved out a semi-domestic space by his ships. We see in Book IX something of a constructed fantasy home in which the rules of hospitality apply. What is Achilleus doing when we first see him (IX, 185-198)—and why might that be significant within the context of an epic poem? What is Achilleus and Patroklos' relationship like? You'll want to examine passages both before and after embassy speeches (199-224; 620-622; 656-668). Male pair relationships are important throughout this text, but of course none is more significant than this one—indeed it motivate the final third of the epic—so it's worth inquiring into the nature and strength of Achilleus and Patroklos' bond.

• Most scenes in the Iliad are day-scenes. But Book X—often referred to as the "Doloneia"—offers a night-scene. Everything is different at night: we see man-to-man clashes and individual deaths during the day; at night we see a battlefield littered with unidentified corpses (X, 349). We should use this book as counter-evidence that Homer provides to the warrior ethos of earlier books, both stated and implicit. How does the presentation of Odysseus and Diomedes qualify their characterization elsewhere (e.g. Diomedes' aristeia—display of excellence on the battlefield—in Book V). Should we view these characters as outliers? What are lines 572-579 about?

• Book VIII presents a wonderful simile that would well repay close reading: the poppy flower (VIII, 300-308).

Session 3 (The Iliad – Books XI-XVI)

Books XI-XV witness the devastation of the Achaians, which culminates at the beginning of Book XVI in Patroklos' return to Achilleus to beg him to reconsider his hardline stance against participation in the war.

The anxiety over the fate of the body presaged in the proem (Book I, 4-5) and in Hektor's call for a duel (VII, 77-91) is fully on display in Books XI-XVI, where a fallen comrade's body presents as much of a motivation to fight as any spoils to be gained. Remember: the fate of Hektor's body closes the epic ("Such was the burial of Hektor, breaker of horses," XXIV, 804), so the treatment

of each body prepares us in some way to interpret the end.

As you read Books XI-XV, I think there'll be a lot of pay off for keeping the following three questions in mind:

- How many ways can you die in the Iliad? What does this mean about the experience of an Iliadic hero as he moves through space?

- What are male-pair relationships like? How would you characterize them?

- What do you make of "shame" as a motivator? It's often invoked by one or another hero to galvanize others. How is shame different from other feelings (like greed, anger, or even guilt)?

When you get to Book XVI, I think you'll find that it is extremely important not only for the death of Patroklos, which precipitates Achilleus' return into battle and thus the death of Hektor—but also for the death of Sarpedon (who is probably my favorite character in the Iliad!). Sarpedon does a lot for us: He helps us think about anxiety over the fate of the body, about shame, and about the gods with greater nuance, perhaps, than we could before. This is also where things get really tough for Zeus. I think there's something about his eyes that's important, though I'm not quite sure what it is just yet. Compare the eyes of Zeus at XVI, 431-461 and at 637-651.

Recall that in Book IX, three top Achaians—Odysseus, Phoinix, Ajax—attempted to move Achilleus using their best persuasive strategies and failed. In Book XVI it is Patroklos' turn to approach Achilleus. This a scene of persuasion that actually works (XVI, 1-111). What distinguishes the interaction between Patroklos and Achilleus from the "embassy" scene of Book IX? How might we use terms of their addresses to each other to continue to understand this male bond better?

What can these similes be doing?

- XI, 264-274: Agamemnon's pain like the pain of childbirth.

- XVI, 6-12: Patroklos like "some poor little girl"

Session 4 (The Iliad – Books XII-XX)

The most important moments from last week's reading: Patroklos persuades Achilleus to let him fight (and to do so in Achilleus' armour), manages to kill Sarpedon (son of Zeus, who cries tears of blood as he acknowledges the inevitability of this outcome), and is in turn killed by Hektor. A devastating book.

Book XVII opens with Menelaos protecting the body of Patroklos in the midst of battle (XVII, 1-8). Homer narrates this moment with an *extremely* poignant simile: Menelaos "rages" to defend the body against oncoming Trojans, but at the same time, Homer tells us, stands over the body like a mother cow over her calf. How do you interpret this highly nuanced view of male pair relationships? You might like to reconsider the mother-daughter simile at XVI, 1-10. (This moment is also one of the more complex portraits of Menelaos in this epic, which often represents him as the somewhat more vacant, weaker, less competent of the Atreides.)

In Book XVIII, Achilleus finally learns of the death of Patroklos. Notice that Antilochos—who has to give him the message—fears Achilleus as he approaches—fears for his own life (Book XVIII, 32-34). This is the moment in which Achilleus' values change *again*—from valuing the distribution of spoils in Book I, to deciding that no distribution can compensate for his life in Book IX (i.e. his life, he decides, is invaluable), to, now, disvaluing a life without Patroklos, whom he "loved beyond all other companions, as well as my own life" (XVIII, 81-82). What do you make of this change in values and its material consequences?

Meanwhile, Hektor makes an important decision of his own: Poulydamas urges his return and Hektor refuses (XVIII, 243-314), making an argument similar to Andromache's in Book VI. This seemingly minor scene will have major consequences—it will be what Hektor has in mind at his fateful moment.

At Book XVIII's close the god Hephaistos forges a new shield for Achilleus (XVIII, 478-616) in a passage highly influential on later literatures (you'll recall Vergil's shield of Aeneas!). We'll want to think about the description of the shield—called an "ecphrasis." Why does Homer spend so much time with this shield? You might consider symbolic value but also aesthetic competition. (Is this shield overwrought?)

Book XIX finds Achilleus in the arms of his beloved companion. This is a strange moment worth pausing for. Consider their positions. Consider also Thetis' injunction. There's a lot to say here about Achilleus' relationship to life and death—which we have now seen shift in Books I, IX, and XVIII.

How does this relate to the debate over food with Odysseus and Agamemnon? (XIX, 145-275) Briseis laments Patroklos—lamentation is an important role for women in the Iliad, as we'll see in Book XXIV. Here we might notice that Briseis has not told her own story until this moment, when she has a genre of sorts through which to speak. What is highly interesting is that the other women fulfil their roles as lamenters… but "for her own sorrows each." (XIX, 281-308)

Finally, the moment we've been waiting for since the proem (is epic just an exercise in delay? cf. the Odyssey): Achilleus returns to battle in Book XX. And the gods assemble to watch; Zeus watches "to pleasure my heart" (XX, 23). The result is as "an inhuman fire" (XX, 490).

Session 5 (The Iliad – Books XXI-XXIV)

We have reached the dramatic—agonising, even—conclusion of the Iliad, with its most affecting scenes and ultimate reaches of the patterns that have been building up with each book: negotiation, shame, wrath, memory, bodies, eating, supplication, lamentations of women.

Book XXI presents an important opportunity for us to re-evaluate Achilleus. Achilleus has set out to avenge Patroklos—and we might have interpreted this as justifiable, even admirable, in the context of the ethic of the Iliadic heroes. But the supplication of the youth Lykaon by the river—"Achilleus, I am at your knees…"— shows us a disturbing extreme (XXI, 34-135). Lykaon is not wrong—that "the suppliant… must be honoured" (75). Ancient supplication is an act of utter self-debasement to which mercy is an appropriate response. The suppliant holds both the knees and chin of the other; it is not an act taken lightly in this world. Remember that Zeus himself was moved by the supplication of Thetis in Iliad, Book I.

Achilleus hurls Lykaon into the river and then turns to battle the River himself, who cries out "I am congested with dead men… Let me alone!" (XXI, 220-1). How does all this relate to mēnis, the divine-level anger of Achilleus represented in the first word of the first line of the Iliad in the Greek? As discussed in the introductory lecture on GoodReads, recall that mēnis—what we might refer to now as "divine wrath"— is used only of Achilleus and of gods; the raging and anger of no other mortal in this epic is articulated as mēnis. Indeed, the gods themselves will be disturbed by Achilleus' anger.

"No, they ran for the life of Hektor, breaker of horses" (XXII, 161) is, of course, one of the Iliad's most famous lines. If Book XXI showed us the consequences of Achilleus' principles carried to the extreme, Book XXII shows us the consequences of Hektor's principles—and we might reconsider here what we were moved to consider honourable in Book VI. Discuss shame (e.g. XII, 105—this refrain repeated throughout the epic) and memory.

Hektor's view of Achilleus' magnificent, divinely wrought armour, which precipitates his death is worth reading along side the ekphrasis of the shield in Book XVIII, 478-616. It is also worth considering alongside Achilleus' view of Hektor's "splendid body" at that same moment (XVIII, 313-327).

"The darkness of night misted over her eyes" (XXII, 466): Andromache's fainting reaction to the news of Hektor's death is described in terms that are decidedly heroic—which is to say that this language parallels the way heroes die in this epic. Discuss especially in relation to the Hector-Andromache scene in Book VI (390-493).

The funeral games of Book XXIII are often puzzling to audiences. What do you think the literary (as it were) significance is of these scenes—why assign quite so much of the epic's time to the games, even if such practices are customary for funerals?

Book XXIV opens with Achilleus dragging Hektor's body. Examine this moment in conjunction with Achilleus' lying in the arms of Patroklos at the opening of Book XIX and Thetis' instruction to her son to "let this man lie dead" (XIX, 8).

And, finally, Priam's supplication of Achilleus—the best and also most terrible scene of the Iliad. The king "kissed the hands that were dangerous and man slaughtering and had killed so many of his sons" (XIV 478-480): What does it mean to empathise with an enemy? How do you interpret "the two remembered, as Priam sat huddled at the feet of Achilleus and wept close for manslaughtering Hektor and Achilleus wept now for his own father, now again for Patroklos" (XIV, 509-511)?

The scene bizarrely combines the type-scene of supplication with a type-scene of eating. "Now you and I must remember our supper," Achilleus gently admonishes the old man. Consider Achilleus' refusal to eat with his allies before returning to battle in Book XIX to, now, his "full satisfaction in sorrow" (XIV, 513) and breaking of bread with his enemy.

Consider that in ancient funerary practices, women take the lead in lamentation (as we saw with Briseis) and that the order of their laments goes in order of their closeness to the dead. Homer is therefore markedly breaking with that sequence with Helen's final lament, which should belong to the mother. Not only this, but Helen is assigned the Iliad's final substantial speech, as Priam's closing lines are significantly shorter. Please reconsider our earlier evaluations of Helen's motivations and relationship to Hektor and Homer's representation of this woman. And consider the possibility Helen's self-hating language—which Lattimore has translated as "slut" but in the Greek, as we have learned, is "dog-eyed" (the same insult Achilleus hurled at

Agamemnon)—is precisely a consequence of her abuse by gods and mortals. The prominence and moving sincerity that Homer gives to this final lamentation in this final scene is not to be taken lightly.

“Such was their burial of Hektor, breaker of horses.” Why is this the final line of the epic? Consider this in light of the epic’s first line “The anger—Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus’ son Achilleus…”

Similes for consideration:

Hektor rejecting supplication in XII, 125-128

Achilleus observing Priam at his knees in XIV, 480-484—read this one carefully.