
The Tears of Priam: Reflections on Troy and Teaching Ancient Texts

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"Sing, goddess, the anger of the critic at the devastation wrought by the movie *Troy*, which put pains a thousandfold upon the bard Homer." Warner Brothers 2004 release of *Troy*, a \$100 million feature film based on Homer's *Iliad*, was a valuable opportunity to present a powerful story to a wide audience whose eyes probably had never seen the written text and whose only familiarity with the poem was through football team mascots and figures of speech like "Trojan horse."

I had excruciatingly realistic expectations going into the film, and did not expect or desire utter fidelity to the original text. I was aware that Brad Pitt was cast as Achilles, so I was fully prepared for a Hollywood dumb-down. I am also (to a fault) a rather gentle critic. Having tried my hand at several literary endeavors, I am always willing to cut authors and directors more slack than they probably deserve. But in the case of this film, my good will simply ran out. Like Achilles, I found myself in the midst of something like rage.

About a half hour into the movie, I wrestled with whether to hold my position or retreat from the scene of battle by leaving my seat and comrades to set up camp beyond the walls of the theater in the hollow of my car. Like a good warrior, I endured to the end, but an intense burning in my breast remained. I have read enough

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Freud to know that such a strong reaction cannot be due to a present event alone. Perhaps, I thought, there was some unmetabolized shard of past experience in my soul that the film simply called forth. Alas, I was correct. The movie, I slowly began to realize, perfectly crystallizes the way most modern students (and some colleagues) approach and interpret classical texts. Thus, my own strong response to the film summons my frustrations from fourteen years of presenting classical material to undergraduates.

Unlike most other texts, the “classics” have the potential to upend our typical modes of understanding, challenge our baser impulses, and confound our historically and culturally constituted presuppositions. The classics are “spiritual exercises” that leave our souls finer and stronger than the way they were before we read them. But the classics are not magical entities. Their power can only be realized in readers who are willing and able to listen seriously to their questions and claims.

To realize their potential as “spiritual exercises,” the classics must be approached with respect.

The problem is that most modern readers do not approach classical material tactfully or respectfully. They are often ensconced in the certitude of their ordinary modes of thought and belief, and read only to have this certitude affirmed and celebrated. If a text is in any way challenging, it is either ignored, e.g., “I don’t get it,” or it is made irrelevant, e.g., “This is so outdated.” Modern readers remind me of the children in Jean Piaget’s¹ early studies on language acquisition who engaged in what he called “collective monologues.” On the surface, the children appeared to be having actual conversation with each other in that they followed the rules of turn-taking and made eye contact while they talked. But upon closer examination, what Piaget found was that these kids were not engaging in dialogue at all, but were treating the statements of their interlocutors as mere occasions to utter what was already on their minds. They were incapable of being truly addressed by the other and modulating their responses to what the other actually said to them.

These children behaved this way because of cognitive limitations. They literally did not have the structural capacity for dialogue. But for many a modern reader, it is a different story. The capacity for dialogue is present, but it is often overlaid by ex-

¹ Jean Piaget, *The Language and Thought of the Child* (Cleveland: Meridian, 1955).

*“Hermeneutics
of monologue”
endemic to
our age.*

tremely bad interpretive habits acquired over a lifetime of bad teaching. In *Troy*, screenwriter David Benioff and director Wolfgang Petersen have served up a case study of a pervasive and dangerous form of interpretation, what we might call the “hermeneutics of monologue.” This way of reading enables readers basically to neuter otherwise challenging classical material.

To illustrate my point, I begin with some of the minor characters in the film. Paris is cast a lover, not a fighter. He’s something of a limp-wristed Don Juan, unable to fight without the help of his big brother Hektor. While Paris is surely not the greatest of warriors in the original text, he is quite brave and can hold his own in battle. In Book Three of Homer’s text, the “godlike” Paris is described as a “leopard” that “leapt from the ranks of the Trojans” and “challenged all the best of the Argives to fight man to man against him in bitter combat.”² This is not the Paris that emerges from the film at all.

*Moral
complexity
ignored.*

Not only is Paris’ physical strength missing from the film, but more importantly, his moral strength is absent as well. For example, when Paris steals Helen away to Troy in the film, he is portrayed as saving her from a loveless and abusive marriage to Menelaos. We are not left to believe he has done anything wrong by abducting Helen. In fact, Paris is not an ethical being in the film at all, but a hapless victim of eros. Gone is the moral complexity involved in the abduction of Helen, particularly Paris’ gross violation of *xenia* and the will of Zeus, *xenia’s* patron, for the sake of romantic (and adulterous) love. Paris is just a guy in love, and we are invited to sympathize with his actions rather than see them in all their complexity.

Achilleus has a bit more moral fiber to him than Paris, but he is similarly cast as a fool for love. In both film and text, we see Achilleus’ mother, Thetis, present him with the vision of his two destinies: stay and fight beside the walls of Troy or return home to a life of family and business. In Homer’s text, Achilles understands his two fates well, “I carry two sorts of destiny toward the day of my death. Either, if I stay here and fight beside the city of the Trojans, my return home is gone, but my glory shall be everlasting; but if I return home to the beloved land of my fathers, the

² *The Iliad* of Homer, translated by Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 100.

excellence of my glory is gone, but there will be a long life left for me.”³ The first path leads to immortal glory and death; the second to obscurity and life. In the text, Achilles chooses death in battle and glory. But in the film, Achilles decides to abandon the Trojan War to sail for Greece with his new love Briseus. He meets his death at the end of the film not by pursuing glory in battle, but because he returns to the burning walls of Troy to rescue Briseus. Thus, Achilles’ “heel” is not his mortality or his humanity, but his love for Briseus.

With Paris as Romeo and Achilles as Iron John, audiences are robbed of the opportunity to wrestle with the tension involved when romantic love conflicts with other—if not more important—goods. Eros is simply the *summum bonum* in the film and conflicts with no other good. In fact, the main lessons most of the film’s characters must learn is that they were seriously mistaken in thinking that there was any good *other than* romantic love. But audiences went into the movie with this presupposition. I cannot count how many times my students have said to me in response to the *Iliad*, “Why so much war? What’s wrong with these people? Why can’t they learn to love?” Benioff’s rendering of the *Iliad* is what nearly every undergraduate in the world *wishes* the poem was about. In a certain sense, *Troy* is a vast undergraduate fantasy, a visual answer to their classroom prayers, rather than an opportunity to reconsider the aspirations that led to these prayers in the first place.

Eros
presented as
summum
bonum.

Agamemnon is cast as a stock villain in the film, a combination of the rapacious appetite of Nero and the cold-blooded calculation of Stalin. In Homer’s text, Agamemnon is a flawed character for sure, and his affront to Achilles’ honor quite real, but he is still enough of a hero to serve as a credible representative of the timocratic order that Achilles has temporarily (and insanely) rejected in his wrath. As we journey with the Achilles of Homer’s text, we struggle with him as he attempts to resolve the conflict between his duty to country and his own irrational impulses to cast himself as a god, somehow beyond the all-too-human demands of society. We become human with Achilles over the course of the text as he gradually decides to accept his humanity, return to battle, and honorably die. “But now,” Achilles says,

³ Ibid., 209.

“seeing that the spirits of death stand close about us in their thousands, no man can turn aside nor escape them, let us go on and win glory for ourselves, or yield it to others.”⁴ In the film, however, we actually become monsters as the flames of his anti-social resentment are stoked without denouement.

*Film version
of Iliad a
product of
historical
provincialism.*

In a related deviation from the text, Briseus is not Achilles’ *geras* in the film, but *Agamemnon’s*. In the movie, Achilles’ wrath comes from seeing Briseus so unjustly treated by Agamemnon and his posse. I suppose the assumption was that modern audiences could not countenance heroes who also view women as spoils of war. But much is lost with this sanitized Achilles and this overly flawed Agamemnon. With Agamemnon as archetypal villain with booty Briseus in tow, Achilles’ anger is portrayed as much more justified and far less complicated than it should be. In the movie, we actually identify with Achilles’ struggle for individual political freedom and resistance to male oppression of women. Who wouldn’t? But as was the case with the romantic-love-as-sum-mum-bonuum rereading, audiences sat down to the film with these presuppositions already firmly entrenched. Individual liberty is good; male domination of women is bad. We leave the film with these beliefs as solid as ever, free to celebrate our glorious, enlightened selves. If we were open to real dialogue with the text, we would have to squirm with the discomfort of seeing how our typical presuppositions about gender, freedom, love, and society fail us and must be abandoned for better ones. This is why the *Iliad* is still worth reading. But when we are our own interlocutors, we do not allow ourselves to be addressed.

Perhaps the most problematic rereading of the original text is the complete absence of the gods in the film. To be fair, I imagine that casting Greek gods in a film presents certain technical challenges, but surely something creative might have been done. In the poem, two narratives—one divine, the other human—unfold in tandem. This parallel action creates a horizon of eternity against which the action of the finite human characters is contrasted. Beneath the immortal backdrop, we can see that *kleos*, the glory achieved through virtuous action and sacramentally recalled in poetry, is the only kind of immortality available to human beings. Achilles says in his stunning realization of Book Twelve, “Man,

⁴ *Ibid.*, 267.

supposing you and I, escaping this battle, would be able to live on forever, ageless, immortal, so neither would I myself go on fighting in the foremost nor would I urge you in the fighting where men win glory.”⁵ Homer teaches us that the gods have no honor because they cannot die. We cherish our capacity for heroic virtue as that which makes us human, and we think somewhere in the back of our minds that the gods may just be a little jealous of us mortals.

For a large part of the original poem, Achilles does not accept his mortality, and much of his wrath springs from his inability to be merely human. Achilles’ folly is that he wants to be a god, not a man. Yes, he has divine blood in his veins, but not enough to make him anything more than a human being. Achilles’ refusal to be human is not some idiosyncrasy of a Greek hero, but points to something in us all that wants desperately to be a god, that views finitude and death as indignities. Witness the contemporary New Age movement as an example of this impulse. The resolution of the entire Homeric epic turns on Achilles’ abandonment of the notion that death is somehow beneath him. We journey with him toward this painful resolution and thereby become human along with him.

It’s hard to see just what existential tension the film helps us resolve. Without the gods, the primary tension Achilles faces in the film is between romantic love and war. His dilemma is something like this: should I continue to allow my anger and blood lust to rule my life, or can I get in touch with my sensitive side and love a woman? Achilles learns in the film—surprise, surprise—that love is better than war. Of course, we already knew this. Thus, viewers of the film do not learn any lesson from the epic, nor are we transformed in any way; rather, it is we who teach our modern lessons to the ancients. This is just the sort of scolding that many students want to give Homer when they first read him. Viewers leave the film with smug (re)assurance that the old days had it all wrong. Couldn’t they see that love is the answer? Aren’t we glad we’re modern and not like those barbarous, war-mongering ancients?

*Homeric
depth omitted
from film.*

There are important similarities between Achilles’ journey of transformation in the original text and the movement modern stu-

⁵ Ibid., 266-67.

dents must make as part of their education away from the hermeneutics-of-monologue. Achilles moves from a petulant, anti-social, disembodied autonomy toward a humble acceptance of his embeddedness in time, a body, and social tradition. The modern reader too must learn to move from a smug, anti-social, disembodied autonomy toward an acceptance of an embeddedness in an already ongoing conversation in which we are open to being addressed by inescapable moral tensions, other valuable voices that have come before ours, and beneath it all, perhaps the Voice of voices.

*Respect for
textual
otherness
needed.*

Only Priam's tears—his moving appeal to piety, compassion, and blood—can coax Achilles down from the dangerous existential precipice to which he has ascended. The suffering and bloody destruction of his fellows, his own physical distress, even the death of Patroklos, cannot snap him out of his monstrous stance. Priam pleads with him, "Honor then the gods, Achilles, and take pity upon me remembering your father, yet I am still more pitiful."⁶ Perhaps something analogous to the tears of Priam might apply in the work teachers do to effect the transformation of the modern reader. With our professorial arms wrapped around the young reader's knees, we do not seek to arouse mere pity through our tears, but honestly to respond to the real damage done to textual otherness through certain hermeneutic practices. It's rather like when my young son pinches my arm too hard. I do not immediately launch into a discourse on moral development with him. This will surely have its place later on. No, I first let out a heartfelt yelp to let him know that he has transgressed a living boundary. Insofar as he is human, he cannot help but to respond to me. He is now open to dialogue, awakened from the perverse sleep of his autonomy. Perhaps in like fashion, through our tears and our patient, reasonable exhortation, the modern reader's eyes will be opened to the still living, but barely breathing, textual other who so desperately longs to be engaged in dialogue rather than be bound and dragged beneath the walls of the academy (and the movie theater).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 488.