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## HOMER AND THE POWER OF MEN THAT HAVE CHESTS

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Welcome to the class of 2007, to those beginning their studies in the Graduate Institute, to parents and friends, and all members of the college community.

One of the many things I love about this college is that everyone must begin with Homer—and not only Homer, but the *Iliad*. It's not just that this happens to have been my favorite book for most of my life. It is a collection of things, all of which have something to do with your initiation into this community of learning, something to do with the liberal education you are about to begin here.

Homer is arguably both the first and the best of poets and we want you to read the best and most original of books at this college. Montaigne, another author you will meet here in your sophomore year, wrote this about Homer:

“It was against the order of nature that he created the most excellent production that can be. For things at birth are ordinarily imperfect; they gain size and strength as they grow. He made the infancy of poetry and of several sciences mature, perfect and accomplished. For this reason he may be called the first and last of poets . . .” (*Of the Most Outstanding Men*)

There is also something glorious about undertaking your studies at this particular beginning, because the *Iliad* takes hold of the imagination from its first line, when it sweeps the reader into the Achaean camps, to face the towering figure of Achilles: “Rage — Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles, murderous, doomed, that cost the Achaeans countless losses...” The images and the pace of the poetry appear to be artless, yet commanding.

The *Iliad* has a kind of immediacy you will find nowhere else. It has irresistible momentum. It grabs you in the middle, somewhere in the vicinity of the chest or the heart, and it demands the attention of your sensibility.

Consider the size of the heroes and the size of the themes. Who is this godlike Achilles and what is his glory? What is the rage that has power over him? Where does it come from? What are the consequences of unleashing it upon others? Is it purely a destructive force? Can it be directed or controlled? What does it take to dissolve this rage?

Why are these men fighting? Who or what drove them to it? What is the price of defending illicit love? Can one ever exercise control over the forces of nature, change fate, or fight the gods?

Look at the great battle-armies. What propels these heroes to action, especially when they have knowledge of the risks, dangers and dreadful consequences of battle? What is courage? What good is honor, and what does it mean to die honorably? What is virtue and excellence of character, and can you find these in the poem?

Well, here is your chance to read about the bold and to talk about the question of character.

C. S. Lewis wrote a little book that perhaps you have read, *The Abolition of Man*, in which he argued that modern education (he was writing in 1955) was failing to help the young develop a sense of morality. In man, Lewis said,

“[the head rules the belly through the chest – the seat ... of magnanimity, of emotions organized by trained habit into stable sentiments. The chest – magnanimity – sentiment – these are the indispensable liaison officers between cerebral man and visceral man. It may even be said that it is by this middle element that man is man: for by his intellect he is mere spirit and by his appetite mere animal.”

What Lewis feared from modern education was that it would stamp out the spirited element in the young, causing the atrophy of magnanimity and sentiment. And all the while, we clamor for more drive, or more self-sacrifice:

“... {We} remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.”

C. S. Lewis may have had cause to complain, but you do not – not now. Surely there is not a more powerful book anywhere than the *Iliad* with which to examine the virtues and vices, the beauty and terrible power for good or ill, of men with chests. So the *Iliad*, and later, the *Odyssey* form a good beginning to philosophy; they ask you to confront powerful aspects of your nature on your first day at the college - aspects that often function independently of your rational capacity. You are asked to face the spirited element within you and to wonder whether it can or should be shaped and tempered by your reason.

I've been referring to a “spirited” element within man. You'll be reading a lot about this in your freshman year, first in Homer, then in Herodotus and Sophocles, Plato and Aristotle. The Greek word is **θῦμός**. It is variously used to mean the breath of life, the principle that animates life, the soul, the heart, the spirit, an attitude that inspires action, a capacity for vigor, courage, mettle, liveliness, indignation, anger, righteousness or pride. It is a word used of men and women both; it is what moves individual men and women from thought to action. So, while the *Iliad* is a stage for the display and destruction of **θῦμός** among warrior men, you will have ample opportunity during the years for recognizing its place in the breasts of women too. If you look hard, you may even find it used to describe Penelope in Homer's *Odyssey*.

Now back to the *Iliad*, where you are also asked to consider the power of community, the bonds of friendship, the call of duty toward one's own people, all abandoned by Achilles very early in the

poem. Achilles becomes both a lesser, meaner man and a distant, godlike emblem because of this. He must learn to take responsibility for the awful consequences of his withdrawal from battle; he must suffer a terrible personal loss and rise up above himself before he can again stand beside his fellow Achaeans. He must also learn compassion before reentering the community of men.

Why is community important? What is friendship, and what does it require? Where does the sense of self belong in a community? These are the same questions you must ask when trying to learn the best way to live with others.

You will read about the power of civil discourse as battle plans are shaped and reshaped, about the path to wisdom through suffering and re-commitment, the power of human empathy, and the need for magnanimity and generosity in dealing with others. And always in the shadows are the fates, spinning and inevitably shortening the thread of life. We are, in the end, mortals and we must come to accept this fact. How do we do this? We all want to know. How does one come to terms with death when everything in our being screams with life and the will to live?

Who are the gods and what is our relation to them? What of honor, glory, mercy, forgiveness, and the possibility for heroism? What is the authority of law and custom, and how should we behave when this authority threatens the bonds of family? What do we make of Helen who strangely serves as a kind of prime mover in the whole drama, but also as an object of spoil.

Name a theme in the realm of human activity that is not dealt with in the *Iliad* and you are likely to find it in the *Odyssey*. There, our hero learns what it means to trade the offer of immortality for the possibility of returning home, the need to face one's demons and overcome one's weaknesses before deserving the right to return, the importance of taking life's journey and facing its dangers and temptations in order to grow, the necessity for leaving home in order to discover the bedrock that was there all along. There, we find wisdom in survival, truth in lies, and strength in weakness. And always is our hero's happiness bound up with the need to search—to search at any price. This too sounds a lot like the kind of question that you might need to examine to understand why you even decided to come to St. John's.

We meet the glorious Penelope, Odysseus' match in every sense. How well has she raised their son to manhood in his father's 20-year absence? How has she maintained home, family and kingdom

all on her own? How should she treat her returning husband and gain mastery over this wayward stranger of a man, to test his love and confirm that he is fit to return to his place beside her and his seat of power in Ithaca? It is in the *Odyssey* that we see the strength of Homer's women and goddesses who serve as Odysseus' protectors and saviors as well as his reason for returning – they become both the means and the end of his journey from the world of Troy to home in Ithaca.

Last, you get the experience of beauty in Homer's unforgettable images. I still wake up to dawn's rosy fingers stretching across the waters of the Chesapeake. I see the father's unbound joy as he tosses his young boy about in his arms, kissing him lovingly, before heading back out to the field of honor for his final battle. I watch the wise and lovely Penelope at her spinning wheel, weaving the web that makes Odysseus's homecoming possible.

Consider now this new beginning to your education: you get the beautiful, the great, the first and the last; you get to start with the issues of the heart and the spirit, those things that move you to action. You will talk about honor and courage, beauty and glory, gods' laws and man's, mortality and death, community and friendship, family and love, and the inevitable longing for the next challenge, the search for an answer, the way to human happiness.

With these first two books, you are diving into the greatest project of your education, which is to consider how to compose your character, to figure out what is necessary to live life well – your life – the one you are building for yourselves. In other words, you are not being told to love or admire Achilles or Odysseus or Helen or Penelope – only to let them into your lives so that you may engage with them. Incidentally, it is another fine quality of these poems that Homer doesn't try to tell you what to think; he lets the story act upon you without intervention. You get to think for yourselves about what is fitting and what is not. But please listen to your classmates too; you might actually learn something from them. Our job, your tutors' job, is to listen and to ask; yours is to read the books and wrestle with the questions. You will experience no more liberating an activity than this, for a question is a door opening wide, inviting you to explore and discover what's inside. Trust yourselves to take advantage of this invitation; we do. We believe in the power of your rational capacity. We believe in your power to become your own teachers. Walk through this door, and you will soon find yourselves exercising those intellectual muscles that will allow you to transform a little of what you read here and something of what you hear there into a work that is all your own. We call

this work “your judgment.” And we suspect strongly that you'll find that a little injection of the spirited element right at the beginning will be just what you need to get your project going.

If you are now worried, however, that the classroom is the only place you may exercise the spirited element within you, have no fear. There are many other opportunities around this campus, among your friends or on your own, on the playing fields or upon the stage, in community activities or choral groups, in competing for glory or singing to the gods:

“Sing, Goddess, the wrath of Achilles . . .”

May the poet inspire each and every one of you to love your learning with us and move you to shape a life that is worthy of living.

Thank you. And enjoy!

I declare the college in session for the entering class.

*Convocatum Est*



*Convocation Address, August, 2003*

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## WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

**Deniz Ates**

**Chad Koehn**

**Joni Montover**

***We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.***

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