

## Remarks for HUM 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

By Janice Tam

I am thrilled to be here to celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Humanities Sequence and to say a few words about *The Iliad*. The Sequence remains one of my greatest learning experiences; it has shaped the way I perceive the world and my own life. The “HUM” sequence surveys how beliefs and values change over time, and how the fundamental questions of our existence do not—questions such as: Who are we? How do we know who we are? What is worth living for? Dying for?

As we keep these questions in mind, I want to turn briefly to the beginning of the course, to the chaotic, polytheistic world of *The Iliad*. The mortals in *The Iliad* try to live honorably and with dignity in a world over which they have little control—their lives are hemmed in by fate, the Gods and the social conventions of the Greek warrior code.

Unlike some texts we read later in the Sequence, action is not motivated by a sense of good and evil, or eternal reward after death; rather, action is driven and justified by rather base emotions—pride, jealousy, vengeance—not only in men, but also in the Gods.

The Gods are self-centered, moody, and meddlesome. They are constantly interfering in the human realm. Sometimes it is by subtle urging, as when Athena persuades Achilles to refrain from killing Agamemnon in Book 1. Other times it is by direct interference with action, as when Aphrodite whisks Paris away to safety in the middle of his duel with Menelaus.

Mortals—entire societies—are only the pawns and playthings of the Gods, and their fates are freely traded for any number of reasons. Humans offer sacrifices to win the favor of the Gods, but the Gods are at odds with one another, so that by propitiating one God, one often invites the animosity of another. Even more complicated, the Gods are willing to trade the fate of their favorites on a whim.

Zeus decides to relent to Hera's rage and let her destroy the Trojans—despite the fact that Zeus himself prefers them to the Achaeans—on the condition that she promises not to oppose him when he decides to ruin a city she loves.

*And Hera the Queen, her eyes wide, answered,  
“Excellent! The three cities that I love best of all  
are Argos and Sparta, Mycenae with streets as broad as Troy’s  
Raze them—whenever they stir the hatred in your heart.” (4.59-62)*

The Gods' casual indifference to the suffering implied by this bargain highlights the tragedy of human fate. We see the truce struck by the Trojans and Achaeans—each side tired of war—being unraveled by Athena's meddling, and we know what is in store for the Trojans. They are borne into a war they do not want, and are destined to lose.

In addition to the Gods, our heroes are subject to a social code and expectations. There is ultimately only one value for which the Greek hero may live and die and be judged—his honor, and the remembrance of that honor—his glory. The measure of this glory boils down one metric: conduct and prowess in battle.

A long life, the enjoyment of wealth, the love of family—these are all comforts ultimately rejected by the Greek warrior, even though he may wish that things were different, and that a life of war was not his fate.

Nowhere is this more poignant than when Hector considers his wife's plea not to return to war and to his certain death, which would render her a widow and their son an orphan.

*And tall Hector nodded, his helmet flashing:  
“All this weighs on my mind too, dear woman.  
But I would die of shame to face the men of Troy  
and the Trojan women trailing their long robes  
If I would shrink from battle now, a coward.  
Nor does the spirit urge me on that way.  
I've learned it all too well. To stand up bravely,  
Always to fight in the front ranks of Trojan soldiers,  
Winning my father great glory, glory for myself.” (6.521-529)*

We see here how the warrior code is imposed externally and is internalized by the warrior himself. This is all the more remarkable because there is no promise of a reward in the afterlife. Death here doesn't bring a sense of peace or relief, only some restless, shifting darkness in Hades, if there is any existence after death at all. This is in sharp contrast to most of the other texts examined in the course, where we see a clear "pay now, play later" plan where any suffering in this life is more than compensated for during an eternal life in paradise. This is not the calculus here.

No, the warriors choose to go into battle, even when it is to their certain death, even when, as Hector in his heart knew, that his side is doomed; and that his death would not alter the course of the war and the certain destruction of his family and all of Troy. They do so to pursue glory, because it is their only chance in their world for their lives to have some enduring value. And because, in the end, they don't believe they have much choice in the matter. Hector, in consoling his wife, says:

*"Andromache,  
dear one, why so desperate? Why so much grief for me?  
No man will hurl me down to Death, against my fate.  
And fate? No one alive has ever escaped it,  
Neither brave man nor coward, I tell you—  
It's born with us the day that we are born."* (6.579-584)

The Iliad was composed 2700 years ago. Many of us would like to think that we are post-superstitious, post-religious; that we have freed ourselves of the shackles of naïve beliefs and have been "enlightened". We look at the quest for "glory" and think, "how parochial—too bad they hadn't heard of Ozymandias."

I would argue that the world we live in is not so different. We are still manipulated by powerful and fickle forces—beauty, wealth, fame, power—forces that, despite offerings at their alter, can change on a dime.

Our quest is now for "happiness", or its loftier incarnation, "meaning," with the assumption that this is—that this can be—internally and personally derived. We are taught to worship the self: self-expression, self-gratification, self-care. "Do you," we say. As if we have any sense of self

separate from conventions—cultural or otherwise—around us and which, like Hector, we have learned too well.

We may consult Instagram rather than the Oracles, we may believe glory means disrupting an industry rather than a battlefield and therefore write epics about Steve Jobs rather than Achilles, but let's not congratulate ourselves too much by thinking we have progressed beyond our religious and superstitious ancestors. Perhaps we have actually regressed because we continue to be battered about by forces beyond our control, and in our illusion of agency, we don't even acknowledge them. At least the Greeks knew whom to give an offering to. At least they knew they were creatures of fate.

The enduring gift of the Humanities sequence to me has been a sense of humility. For the rest of our lives, we keep asking: Who are we? How do we know who we are? What is worth living for? Dying for? As we examine beliefs—ours, and others—with a sympathetic and searching eye, we can remember that we are all subject to a variety of powerful forces and beliefs that no one alive has ever escaped, neither brave man nor coward; they are born with us the day we are born.