The Iliad is a poem that has been argued over for millennia, and to which there are as many approaches as there are readers. This is, of course, its principal delight, and one of the reasons it continues to enthrall those who encounter it. But it does make it difficult to sum up in a short essay. So, rather than attempting to do so, I will instead highlight just a few ways of reading the poem that I think manifest themselves particularly clearly in the two sections that are up for examination this year: Book 1 lines 1-356 (= 1.1-304), and Book 3. This of course will not be an exhaustive look, or even necessarily go deeply into some of the most important themes of the epic as a whole, but I hope that the areas I will discuss today will provide some useful ways of looking at the entire poem through the lens of the two sections provided. Thus, I will focus here on three particular points of interest in the poem, as they are developed in Books 1 and 3: the Iliad’s position within the Trojan War, and within Classical myth as a whole; the political issues that the poem grapples with, both at its beginning and throughout; and the characterisation of some of the major figures of the poem’s early books, and the insight this can shed on the ways in which the Iliad portrays its own particular version of traditional characters.

To begin, then, at the beginning; or perhaps rather, in the middle, since of course the Iliad, in Horace’s phrase, begins not ab ovo (Ars 147), but instead in medias res/… audirem rapit (‘snatches the listener into the middle of things’, Ars 148-149). The poem opens when the Trojan War is already nine years old and describes not much more than a month of its duration, so that by its end Troy is still standing, Achilles remains alive, and the only major change in the military situation has come through the death of Hector. Yet within this brief chronological period the poem looks both forwards and backwards in order to make itself an epic not merely about the rage of Achilles (as its first words might suggest), but an epic of the entire Trojan War. At the end of the poem this is manifested in the repeated references to the death of Achilles, and to the eventual destruction of Troy. Thus in Book 15 Zeus looks forward to the course of the war after the death of Hector:

And then, from that day on, I’ll turn the tide of war: back the fighting goes, no stopping it, ever, all the way till Achaean armies seize the beetling heights of Troy through Athena’s grand design.

Ili. 15.87-90 [= 15.69-70]

Similarly, the Iliad’s narrator himself looks ahead to the time after the war’s end: ‘once the best of the Trojan captains fell,/and many Achaeans died as well while some survived,/and Priam’s high walls were stormed in the tenth year’ [12.16-18 [=12.13-15]]. Finally, towards the end of the poem the death of Hector and the destruction of Troy seem to merge, so that on Hector’s death the narrator can comment that it seemed ‘for all the world as if all Troy were torched and smoldering/down from the looming brows of the citadel to her roots (22.483-484 [= 22.410-411]), and in the poem’s final scene – Hector’s burial – the image of the cremated man clearly evokes the burning city, and Troy’s ultimate destruction is both anticipated by, and to some extent incorporated into, the Iliad’s conclusion.

The same is true of the beginning of the war in the early books of the poem. Just as a number of later passages either evoke, or refer directly to the death of Achilles and the destruction of Troy, so too does the beginning of the poem look back to events early in the war, either through direct reference to them, or by more allusive means. Into the first category fall statements like Antenor’s reminiscence at 3.247-269 (= 3.205-224), which recalls an encounter he had earlier in the war with Odysseus, who along with Menelaus conducted an embassy to Troy to seek Helen’s return. Antenor does not say precisely when this was, just that it happened ‘in the past’ (3.247 [= 3.205]), but the subject of the embassy clearly suggests the start of the war, when such a
journey would be likely. Elsewhere, meanwhile, a passage from Book 2, in between our two sections, is worth quoting here for its simultaneous expansion backwards and forwards. At lines 354-394 (= 2.303-332) Odysseus attempts to rouse his fellow Achaeans to battle. He begins:

Why it seems like only yesterday or the day before when our vast armada gathered, moored at Aulis freighted with slaughter bound for Priam’s Troy.  
\textit{Il.} 2.354-357 [= 2.303-304]

Odysseus then describes a portent which they all witnessed, a snake eating a sparrow and her eight children, before finishing with the interpretation given by the seer Calchas:

As the snake devoured the sparrow with her brood, eight and the mother made the ninth, she’d borne them all, so we will fight at Troy that many years and then, then in the tenth we’ll take her broad streets.  
\textit{Il.} 2.386-389 [= 2.326-329]

These reminiscences by the \textit{Iliad’s} characters are complemented by a group of scenes that evoke the beginning of the war in a more allusive fashion, even if they do not precisely refer to it. The initial quarrel of Book 1, which I will be discussing further in a moment, begins as a response to retribution dealt out over the capture of a woman (Chryseis), and culminates in Agamemnon’s theft of another woman (Briseis), and thus bears significant similarities to the elopement of Paris and Helen. The same is true of the battle between the Lapiths and the Centaurs, to which Nestor alludes in Book 1 (304-319 [= 1.260-273]), since it also arose from the abduction of a woman: Pirithous’ bride Hippodamia. Similarly, the Catalogue of Ships in Book 2 (573-863 [= 2.484-760]) evokes an initial muster at the beginning of the war (perhaps the muster at Aulis that Odysseus recalls earlier in Book 2) and even contains references to those who, like Protesilaus (2.793-802 [= 2.695-702]), had already died, or, like Philoctetes (2.817-826 [= 2.716-725]), had not yet even made it to Troy. Book 3 is particularly relevant here, as it contains a complex of scenes which suggest the early stages of the war. The duel between Paris and Menelaus (3.383-441 [= 3.328-382]) would not be out of place at the beginning of the war, nor would the review of the Achaean forces by Helen during the so-called \textit{Teichoskopia} (‘View from the Walls’, 3.193-291 [= 3.161-244]). Even the tragicomic rescue and magical flight of Paris from battlefield to bedroom, where he appears as though ‘off to a dance or slipped away/from the dancing’ (3.454-455 [= 3.393-394]), and his and Helen’s bitter lovemaking at Aphrodite’s instigation seems to evoke Aphrodite’s original instigation of their relationship, although it should be noted that the extent to which time has soured Helen’s feelings is obvious.

Helen also offers us a glimpse of the poem’s remarkable self-awareness, and the extent to which it portrays itself as a poem of the entire war, not simply of a brief period towards its end. At her first appearance in the \textit{Iliad}, we come across her in her room, weaving:

And now a messenger went to white-armed Helen too, Iris, looking for all the world like Hector’s sister wed to Antenor’s son, Helicaon’s bride Laodice, the loveliest daughter Priam ever bred.  
And Iris came on Helen in her rooms … weaving a growing web, a dark red folding robe, working into the weft the endless bloody struggles stallion-breaking Trojans and Argives armed in bronze had suffered all for her at the god of battle’s hands.  
\textit{Il.} 3.146-154 [= 3.121-128]

The self-conscious artistry of this is astonishing: one of the war’s main subjects, or rather, and perhaps more pertinently, the war’s chief object, in her first appearance in the poem, is to be found depicting visually the battle which is being waged just outside for possession of her. Moreover, as soon as we see her she changes from chronicler to spectator, since Iris lures her out to the walls to see ‘what wondrous things they’re doing’ (3.157 [= 3.130]); the duel between Menelaus and Paris, which is ‘all for you – and the man who wins that duel,/you’ll be called his wife!’ (3.166-167 [= 3.137-138]). The spectacle of the war, and, of course, its equivalent auditory immortalisation in the epic itself, is clear here, and through the figure of Helen (whose character will be discussed further shortly) the \textit{Iliad} draws attention to itself not just as a memorial of Achilles’ rage, but a memorial of the entire war; an \textit{Iliad}, not an \textit{Achilleid}.

For all that, the poem is primarily about the subject that it announces in the programmatic opening
section (the so-called ‘proem’) of the first eight lines:

Rage – Goddess, since the rage of Peleus’ son Achilles, murderous, doomed, that cost the Achaeans countless losses, hurling down to the House of Death so many sturdy souls, great fighters’ souls, but made their bodies carrion, feasts for the dogs and birds, and the will of Zeus was moving towards its end. Begin, Muse, when the two first broke and clashed, Agamemnon lord of men and brilliant Achilles.

II. 1.1-8 [= 1.1-7]

Accordingly, the next part of this essay will discuss some of the ways in which the first 350 lines of the poem dramatise the causes of that rage, and the political issues that can be said, on one viewing at least, to be one of the prime motivating factors of the clash between Agamemnon and Achilles with which the Muse is asked to begin the poem.

Book 1 portrays a conflict that is not easy to arbitrate, even for a modern audience, and certainly not for the characters of the poem, despite the best efforts of the aged counsellor Nestor. And it is Nestor who sums up these difficulties during his attempt to persuade the two parties to come to an agreement:

Don’t seize the girl Agamemnon, powerful as you are – leave her, just as the sons of Achaea gave her, his prize from the very first. And you, Achilles, never hope to fight it out with your king, pitting force against his force: no one can match the honors dealt a king, you know, a sceptered king to whom great Zeus gives glory. Strong as you are – a goddess was your mother – he has more power because he rules more men.

II. 1.321-329 [= 1.275-281]

Nestor here tries to frame the dispute as one between a king (basileus) and a pre-eminent warrior, whom he later calls ‘our rugged bulwark’ (1.333 [= 1.284]) who ‘stands over all Achaea’s armies’ (1.332 [= 1.284]), and Agamemnon seems to accept this characterisation; the problem, in his mind, is that ‘this soldier wants to tower over the armies,/he wants to rule over all, to lord it over all’ (1.336-337 [= 1.287-288]). But Agamemnon and Nestor are both wrong: Agamemnon may have more power, and Achilles may be stronger, but the relationship is not one between king and soldier, but rather one between two kings, and the narrator has already made this clear before the start of Nestor’s speech, by saying: ‘[h]e pleaded with both kings, with clear good will’ (1.296 [= 1.253]).

So the situation is more complicated than it first appears, and Achilles is to some extent correct to protest at the treatment afforded him, and to point out that he has no personal quarrel with the Trojans (1.179-185 [= 1.152-157]), but is merely following Agamemnon and Menelaus (1.186-188 [= 1.158-160]). But even here the poem does not make it simple; there is no reference to the oath of Tyndareus that in other accounts of the story compelled Helen’s suitors (albeit not Achilles) to fight for Menelaus upon her abduction, and thus the source of Agamemnon’s authority is murky at best. I do not wish to get involved in the issue of the extent to which Homeric society mirrors any real Greek society at any one point in time, or even the slightly less vexed question of the ways in which the Homeric poems model leadership structures, but it is certainly possible to suggest that in the quarrel in Book 1, and in Nestor’s ineffective attempts to mediate it, we can see a poem playing with developing social (even socio-political) roles, by resisting characterising the dispute as a simple one between king and pre-eminent soldier, as Agamemnon and Nestor would have it, but instead portraying a more complex drama of a group of basileis negotiating their rights and their power.

This political drama is of course heightened by the two personalities involved in the quarrel, and thus the remainder of this essay will discuss the ways in which the poem characterises them, as well as other important figures in Books 1 and 3. Of course, this can only be a brief snapshot of the complexities of characterisation in the poem, but some discussion of four main characters from Books 1 and 3 – Achilles, Agamemnon, Aphrodite, and Helen – will, I hope, prove useful in illuminating not only the way in which these particular mythic characters are depicted in the poem, but also the way in which the Iliad deals in general with characters who are already well known figures of myth in their own right.

1 Although it should be noted that Fagles’ ‘soldier’ here translates what in the original is simply ‘man’, anêr.

2 Again, ‘kings’ is an addition by Fagles, the original merely says ‘them’ (sphin), but Agamemnon has already called Achilles one of the basileis at 1.176 (although Fagles here translates the word as ‘the warlords’, 1.208), so the sentiment remains clear.
Achilles, of course, is one of the most famous heroes in Classical myth, and much of this notoriety has to do with the *Iliad* itself. But even at the beginning of the poem it is obvious that we are dealing with someone whom we are expected to know intimately. And the picture we are given of him in the proem is a vivid one. His rage is all-encompassing, even divine in its scope (the poem’s opening word, *mênis*, which Fagles translates as ‘rage’, is used of anger that takes on more than human dimensions), and the first traditional epithet he is given is *dios*, ‘brilliant’ (1.8 [=1.7]), another word which has divine overtones, although it can be used of both mortals and gods.

Indeed, epithets like this (and ‘Agamemnon lord of men’ in the same line) form an important part of the traditional characterisation of figures in epic, as well as showing the ways in which single poems within a tradition can individuate these traditional figures. I do not want to get into the technicalities of oral hexameter composition here, but suffice it to say that these epithets help a singer of epic poetry compose while he is performing, since they have evolved to fit certain metrical scenarios that arise as the poem is composed. But the fact that they are traditional – and not necessarily perfectly contextual in all circumstances – in no way implies that they are meaningless, or even that their meanings are not shaped by the contexts in which they occur. Thus Achilles’ traditional swiftness of feet is used in Book 1 to suggest his impetuosity during his clash with Agamemnon, to the extent that Fagles breaks with strict translation of the epithet at line 174 [= 1.148] to call him ‘the headstrong runner’, rather than simply ‘the runner’. We can see in the characterisation of Achilles the traditional language that forms the building blocks of Homeric epic aiding in the *Iliad*’s composition, but in no way restricting its artistic flexibility.

This individual play on traditional characterisation is also evident in the portrayal of Agamemnon in Book 1. Despite repeated use of epithets that suggest his political power within a community (eg. ‘lord of men’ at 1.8 and 1.203 [= 1.7 and 1.172, respectively]; one of two ‘supreme commanders’ at 1.18 [= 1.16]; and ‘lord of the far-flung kingdoms’ at 1.120 [= 1.102]), he is far more individually minded than Achilles, who is the one who calls the initial assembly out of concern for the deaths of his fellow Achaeans (1.2-64 [= 1.54-56]), and who even in his anger focuses not merely on the impact of his withdrawal on Agamemnon alone, but also on the fact that because of it ‘a yearning for Achilles will strike/Achaea’s sons and all your armies’ (1.281-282 [= 1.240-241]). Agamemnon, by contrast, is more individualistic, as is clear from the repeated first person references in his initial angry response to Calchas at 1.124-141 (= 1.106-120), which begins ‘[s]eeer of misery! Never a word that works to my advantage’ (1.124 [= 1.106]), and concludes:

There is even a suggestion here of the outside baggage that the tradition brings to Agamemnon’s characterisation, since his anger at Calchas becomes more understandable if we consider him to be reacting not merely to Calchas’ directive to return Chryseis to her father, but also to Calchas’ earlier suggestion, preserved in later sources, that Agamemnon needed to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia in order to allow the Achaean ships to reach Troy. The *Iliad* does not mention Iphigenia, and whether or not its poet is familiar with her story is a matter of some debate, but it is certainly possible to see an allusion here, and accordingly to put Agamemnon’s individually focussed anger into a more nuanced context. Neither he, nor Achilles, is a simple or two-dimensional figure, and as with the socio-political aspects of their quarrel, the *Iliad* resists portraying the two men as anything other than complex, fully drawn characters.

The same is of course true of the poem’s female characters as well, and to finish, I would like to look at the characterisation of two female figures who are particularly important both to Book 3, and to the *Iliad* as a whole. The first, Aphrodite, can be seen as a figure of fun in some parts of the poem (witness for instance her humiliation on the battlefield by
Diomedes at 5.370-395 [= 5.330-351], but we can see in her characterisation in Book 3 not only the destructive power of the gods in the *Iliad*, but also their terrifying changeability, as she threatens an unwilling Helen:

Don’t provoke me – wretched, headstrong girl! Or in my immortal rage I may just toss you over, hate you as I adore you now – with a vengeance. I might make you the butt of hard, withering hate from both sides at once, Trojans and Achaeans – then your fate can tread you down to dust.

Il. 3.146-154 [= 3.121-128]

The character of Aphrodite, in fact, mirrors the general portrayal of the gods. Scenes on Olympus can be used for something akin to light relief from the horrors of the war, and the gods’ immortality means that their squabbles are essentially frivolous, but that very frivolity has terrifying consequences for the mortals under their sway, who are driven to their deaths because of it. Thus, for instance, in Book 20 we see the contrast between the Olympian spectators, who view and direct the upcoming battle, sitting ‘at ease’ [20.176 [= 20.149]] on either side of the two armies, waiting ‘to launch out first the wrenching horrors of war …/while Zeus on the heights sat poised to thunder orders’ [20.183-184 [= 20.154-155]]. Again, Aphrodite’s particular characterisation in Book 3 gives us an insight into the ways in which the poem deals with divine power in general.

Finally, Helen is one of the *Iliad’s* most fascinatingly elusive figures. I have already discussed her briefly above, but it is fitting to finish with a character who is something of a cipher not only for the war, but for the poem as well. And Book 3 shows all of the complexities of her character. For instance, Helen’s blameworthiness for the war is always at issue, but only because she insists on making it so (as she does for instance at 3.209-219 [= 3.173-180]); everybody else, including, seemingly, the poem as a whole, is at pains to excuse her. In fact, the general attitude seems to be summed up by Priam at 3.199-201 [= 3.164-165]: ‘I don’t blame you. I hold the gods to blame./They are the ones who brought this war upon me,/devastating war against the Achaeans’. On the other hand, as well as being so adamant about her own culpability, Helen is one of the most self-aware figures in the *Iliad*, if not in the entirety of Archaic Greek poetry. I mentioned above that the first encounter the poem’s audience has with her comes as she is creating an artistic commentary on her own situation, literally weaving the story of the war in her room as it rages outside, and throughout the poem the overwhelming impression of Helen is of a figure who is continually aware, perhaps too aware, of her traditional characterisation and her literary situation, so much so that she can sum up her fate to Hector in less than four lines:

Oh the two of us! Zeus planted a killing doom on us both, so even for generations still unborn we will live in song.

Il. 6.423-426 [= 6.357-358]

This brief discussion of the early part of the *Iliad* has looked in particular at three different ways of approaching the two sections of the poem under examination in 2014, and the ways in which they illustrate some of the main themes of the poem more broadly: the *Iliad’s* vision of itself as an epic of the entire Trojan War; the political dimensions to the quarrel in Book 1, and their implications for the poem as a whole; and the characterisation of four important figures in its early stages. These are, of course, hardly exhaustive. I have not, for example, discussed war, despite this being one of the predominant issues of a poem about the Trojan War (although the first three books of the poem do not depict the process of battle in much detail, with the exception of the duel between Menelaus and Paris); nor have I done more than touch on the technical aspects of Homeric composition or the nature of oral poetry. But I hope to have provided three different ways of seeing the *Iliad*, which may be useful in thinking about the poem in general through the lens of these passages in particular. The *Iliad* is far more than can be seen in Books 1 and 3 alone, but in these two sections we can snatch glimpses of the issues it tackles and of the beauty and complexity with which it addresses them.
Bibliography

Works Cited:

Fagles’ translation also contains a good introductory essay by Bernard Knox which gives a background to the poem and its composition.


Suggestions for Further Reading

A combined general introduction to the poem and commentary on selected books. Contains commentary on both Books 1 and 3.

Probably the best general introduction to Homeric epic in the last decade. Touches on all of the issues discussed above.

As the name suggests, focuses on the political aspects of the poem.

Primarily concerned with the interaction between Homeric leaders and their people, and social interactions within the poems.

The first volume of a six-volume specialist commentary on the *Iliad*, the best there is in English.

A good introduction to the structure of the Iliad, and its overall approach to storytelling.

Possibly still the best overall introduction to the Iliad. Less focussed on the main issues of Books 1 and 3, but does discuss the character of Achilles at length.

A good detailed commentary aimed at informing the general reader. Based on a different English translation, by Richmond Lattimore.