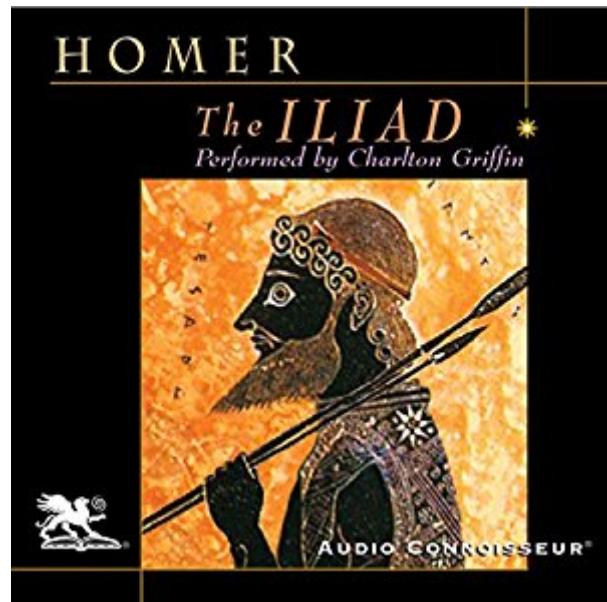


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The Iliad



Synopsis

The Iliad is one of the most enduring creations of Western Civilization and was originally written to be recited or chanted to the accompaniment of various instruments. Properly performed, this work today is just as meaningful, just as powerful, and just as entertaining as it was in the ninth century BC, and it casts its spell upon modern listeners with the same raw intensity as it did upon the people of ancient times. As you listen to this great work, you feel yourself to be in the presence of a grandeur that suffuses the very air. There is no question that the poet, whether his name was Homer or not, was one of the supreme artists of all time and all civilizations. But this wonderful piece of poetry is not merely a catalog of events of the Trojan War. Specifically, the poem deals with the bitter dispute between Achilles and Agamemnon, and how the Greeks were almost destroyed by their hubris. Hovering about, the Olympian gods watch the unfolding events with keen interest, sometimes lending help and encouragement on one hand, or spreading fear and hatred on the other. The Iliad is ultimately about the free will of man and his ability or failure to make rational choices in the face of conflict and chaos. Unlike the gods, men must face death, which gives their decisions a spiritual meaning which is absent on Olympus. The great legacy of The Iliad is its shattering revelation of what it means to be human in the face of life's uncertainty and fleeting mortality.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I won't try to give yet another summary of the Iliad's plot nor give my insignificant opinion on the importance of Homer to Western Culture. More important is to discuss this translation and the

translation of Homer in general. When it comes to classic works of poetry in translation, such as those of Homer, Vergil, Dante and others, the translation makes all the difference. The type of translation, whether in rhyming verse, blank verse, prose etc., whether it is a strict line by line or more liberal translation, whether the wording and idioms are old fashioned or modern, can play such a great role that one translation may be completely different than another. This fact is probably often overlooked and attributes to the neglect of these classics, since a bad or difficult translation makes the poem seem tedious or dull. Since Chapman's first translation of Homer into English in 1611 there have been dozens of others. Chapman's translation remains a classic, though its heavy and elaborate rhyming Elizabethan style and old wording make it quite laborious to read today. The next great translation was that of the renowned Enlightenment poet Alexander Pope; his *Iliad* was published progressively between 1715 and 1720. Pope's translation is in rhyming verse with his heroic couplet and is eminently poetic. It is considered the greatest translation of Homer into English (Dr. Johnson called it "the noblest version of poetry which the world has ever seen") but it is not as plain and straightforward as Homer apparently is in the original. It is mostly for this reason that Pope's translation has been criticized as being more the work of the poet Pope than the poet Homer. Of the more recent verse translations a few are worth recommendation.

Fortunately, Homer is so wonderful that even fairly imaginative renderings of the text, like Fagles', can't obscure his genius. I guess I have a bit of a problem with Fagles' translation. When I read Homer, I want to read Homer, not Robert Fagles re-writing Homer. This version reminds me of the comment made to Alexander Pope after he published his version of "The Iliad" - "a pretty poem, Mr. Pope, but you must not call it Homer". This translation is kind of a modern play on the Fitzgerald - something of an "artistic" version rendered into a kind of de rigueur semi-elliptical poetry-speak, relying on a reconfiguration of lines and sentences, replacement of Homer's own phrases, etc. If that's your bag, by all means get this. But for me, the best translation out there is that which translates Homer as faithfully as possible consistent with comprehensible English. Fagles' cavalier handling of the source text eliminates this as the "best" translation for me. Both the Loeb and Lattimore versions are very faithful, but I think some readers may find them fairly difficult, and then stop reading the book altogether, which would be a great shame since *The Iliad* is well worth reading even in the worst translation. My two cents is that the translation out there which does the best job of combining fidelity to the original with readability is the Jones/Rieu put out by Penguin. It doesn't have the packaging of the Fagles nor the great essay by Bernard Knox in the front, but I think it does the best job at maintaining transparency, really letting Homer shine through. (But if you

have the stomach for the Loeb, you could go hardcore and try that, too. But don't try this unless you're familiar with the entire story first...).

I think I must have read every major translation of the Iliad by now. They all have something to recommend them. There are some to which I will never return. I think I would rate Robert Fagles translation as the best. All of which will afford some context when I say that Lombardo is a must read. Enough glowing things have been said here by other reviewers, so I will refrain from commenting over much on the translation per se. What I will say is this. I SAW Book I of Lombardo's translation enacted on the stage in New York about a year and a half ago. If EVER one needed a reminder that the first auditors of this tale were listeners and not readers and that the Iliad was composed first and foremost FOR listeners, actually seeing Book I brought to life was it. It was magnificent. I had read Lombardo in preparation for the play. I LOVED it -- the immediacy of it, the currency, the urgency, the sheer page turning pace into which he rendered the Iliad. But actually seeing it? It is something I shall never forget. The audience was actually laughing outloud at certain points -- and we forget, don't we, that there is much humour in the Iliad? That laughter brought a sense of community. And it was actually possible, closing your eyes, to imagine yourself transported back in time, listening to a retelling of the Iliad -- so very, very long ago. Traditionalists will no doubt have MAJOR problems with Lombardo. I consider myself to be reasonably traditional, but I fairly EMBRACED this translation. But I can imagine many will, like my father, run with horror from lines like: "Now get this straight. I swear a formal oath:.....

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