

## CRITICAL COMMENT

### Two Translations of Homer's *Iliad*

A work of literature in translation is the creation of at least two individuals: the original writer and the translator(s). Translators do much more than transcribe words; they practice a complex and challenging art that involves constant aesthetic choices and a good deal of subjective interpretation. They must understand the meaning, structure, and style of a work in its original language, then decide how best to preserve and convey those elements artfully in a second language. The original language may have qualities—in terms of grammatical structure, meter, sound (alliteration, rhyme, consonance, onomatopoeia), idiomatic expressions, and other attributes—that the second language does not possess.

Translators must strike a balance between the two extremes of upholding form over content or content over form. The best translators preserve the integrity of the original text while crafting a new text that has literary merit in its own right.

There are many English translations of Homer's *Iliad*, both in prose and in verse. Below is an excerpt from Book 22 of Robert Fagles's recent translation of the *Iliad*. Read these lines of verse; then, on page 146, re-read lines 157–173 of the Fitzgerald translation.

So he wavered,  
waiting there, but Achilles was closing on him now  
like the god of war, the fighter's helmet flashing,  
over his right shoulder shaking the Pelian ash spear,  
that terror, and the bronze around his body flared  
like a raging fire of the rising, blazing sun.  
Hector looked up, saw him, started to tremble,  
nerve gone, he could hold his ground no longer,  
he left the gates behind and away he fled in fear—  
and Achilles went for him, fast, sure of his speed  
as the wild mountain hawk, the quickest thing on wings,  
launching smoothly, swooping down on a cringing dove  
and the dove flits out from under, the hawk screaming  
over the quarry, plunging over and over, his fury  
driving him down to break and tear his kill—  
so Achilles flew at him, breakneck on in fury  
with Hector fleeing along the walls of Troy,  
fast as his legs would go.

### INFORMATIONAL TEXT



*Achilles Defeating Hector* (detail)  
(17th century) by Peter Paul Rubens.  
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Paris.

? What different images does each translator emphasize in showing Hector's fear, Achilles' wrath and determination, and the speed with which Hector flees? What are the differences in the way each translator handles the epic simile that compares Achilles' pursuit of Hector to a hawk hunting its prey? Which version do you prefer? Why?

## Response and Analysis

### from Books 22 and 24

#### Reading Check


1. What advice do Priam and Hecuba give to Hector as he stands outside the city walls?
2. In lines 119–156 of Book 22, what courses of action does Hector consider and reject before fighting Achilles?
3. How does Athena deceive Hector? Why is Zeus unable to save Hector?
4. What is Hector's dying request? How does Achilles respond to it?
5. What does Achilles agree to do to allow Hector a proper burial?

#### Thinking Critically

6. The meeting of Hector and Achilles in Book 22 is the dramatic **climax** of the *Iliad*. At this suspenseful confrontation, Hector trembles and then runs away. How does Homer prepare you for Hector's flight by his revelation of the Trojan's thoughts and by his description of Achilles' advance? Does Hector's action diminish your respect for him, or can you sympathize with his reaction? Explain your response.
7. The Greeks greatly prized the quality they called *arete*, or personal honor. Do Achilles and Hector display this characteristic? Explain.
8. An **epic simile** is an extended simile in which an event of epic proportions is compared to something from everyday life that would be familiar to the audience. Re-read the description in Book 22 of the duel between Achilles and Hector, and identify all the epic similes Homer uses to describe their final clash. What effect do these Homeric similes create?
9. What aspects of Achilles' character are revealed in the scene with Priam in

Book 24? How would your perception of Achilles have been affected if the *Iliad* had ended with Hector's death in Book 22?

#### Extending and Evaluating

10. Consider the role of the Olympian gods in these excerpts from the *Iliad*. List at least three incidents in the epic in which the Olympians direct or influence events. Do you think the mortal characters in the epic are mere puppets manipulated by the Olympians, or does Homer portray mortals as exercising freedom of choice and action? Give reasons for your answer. 
11. What is your evaluation of the oral style of the epic? Did you find Homer's use of formulas, stock epithets, repetition, and similes appealing? How effective do you think such a style would be in oral performance? Explain.

#### Literary Criticism

12. Some critics see the central **theme** of the *Iliad* as the idea that people must be generous with one another—that if people allow reason to guide their behavior, they might be able to live together in peace and harmony. Which portions of the epic support this view of its theme? Do you agree that it is a central theme of the work? Why or why not?
13. The eighteenth-century German critic Gotthold Lessing said that Homer, as a true poet, was primarily concerned with narration and that he instinctively substituted action for description. Do you think this is true of the excerpts you've read? Give examples from the text to support your answer.



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##### Projects and Activities

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#### SKILLS FOCUS

##### Reading Skills

Evaluate historical context.

##### Writing Skills

Compare and contrast heroes.

##### Vocabulary Skills

Understand synonyms and antonyms.