Teaching Guide for Stephen Mitchell’s *Iliad*

**Before you read:**

1) Homer’s poems come out of an oral tradition that was hundreds of years old before it was written down. Homer himself, if he really existed, may have lived on the cusp of the era of literacy, perhaps in the first generation of poets who had the means to write down, and reshape with writing, these oral songs. Modern undergraduates also live at the cusp of a new media era, the dawn of the digital age. How does the means of transmission affect styles of literature? How is oral poetry, or oral culture, different from written?

2) Homer’s *Iliad*, at the most basic level, is about a war, and its heroes are warriors. But their motivations and behavior are very different from those of modern soldiers. In some ways they are more like modern professional athletes, demanding high pay for making voluntary sacrifice of their bodies, and hoping for “media coverage” – the *kleos* or fame that is their highest reward. Discuss the difference between warfare in ancient times and modern, and the reasons why the Greek of Homer’s time, who presumably has a farm to tend and a family to protect, would go to war.

3) Stephen Mitchell’s *Iliad* gives readers an unprecedented amount of aid with pronunciation of Greek names (always a huge hurdle for first-time readers of Homer). Familiarize students with these aids: acute accents showing syllable stress, diaeresis (or umlaut) showing where two vowels are pronounced as separate syllables, macrons (or bars) over final “e” to show it is sounded like “ay.” Point them to the discussion of pronunciation at p. lxiii and especially to the glossary starting at p. 457, where names are spelled phonetically. Have them practice reading names aloud from the glossary and then from the text itself (p. 37, for example, offers a name-rich passage). If they can develop some degree of comfort with pronunciation, their enjoyment of reading the poem will be greatly increased.

**Book 1**

Homer puts his best foot forward right at the outset with his depiction of the angry Achilles. Students are often tempted to see Achilles as spoiled or whiny, or to regard his fight with Agamemnon as a jealous scrap over a girl. Explore the deeper levels of the quarrel: The different ages, ranks, and fighting abilities of the two men; their different levels of investment in the outcome of the war; above all, the fact that Achilles is the son of a goddess. Students should begin here to sharpen their sense of Homeric character portrayal. All the heroes at Troy are warriors, but their personalities are very different, as revealed in their styles of fighting and speaking, their lineages, and their bonds with other warriors and
with the gods. Achilles’ portrait is laid out first, as the towering absolute against which all the others will be measured.

The first scene on Olympus (pp. 14-17) gives an early opportunity to discuss the gods and their role in the poem. The appearance of lame Hephaestus (p. 17) poses a sharp contrast between the world of the immortals, where injuries and torments end up as jokes in the course of centuries, and that of humans, which is bounded by death. Students should learn to see the Homeric gods in terms of this contrast, rather than—as they often at first do—as puppet-masters controlling the action of the poem.

**Book 2**

Thersites (pp.23-4) is one of Homer’s most vivid characters, and the only one who is not noble in lineage and appearance. Discuss the reasons for his inclusion in the poem. Is Odysseus right to abuse him so violently? Does Homer find him sympathetic, or vile?

The so-called Catalogue of Ships starting at p. 31 offers an opportunity to discuss the Iliad’s relationship to history. To what degree did Homer, or his original audience, regard this poem as a historical narrative? To what degree should we?

**Book 3**

Our first look inside Troy is dominated by Helen, her lover Paris, and the sexualized, domestic life they share. Discuss how Homer uses this domestic world, as he uses Olympus, to pose contrasts with the principal sphere of action, the battlefield. What are the values and qualities of the household, and of women (as seen through Helen)? How do they compare with the values of the warrior? How does the poet regard Paris, the warrior who most easily crosses over to the domestic world?

**Books 4-5**

The poem’s first major battle scenes offer an introduction to the conventions of Homeric warfare: One-on-one duels accompanied by exchanges of speeches, long lists of casualties with details of their wounds, interventions by gods. These points all call for discussion, especially the second: Why does Homer record so many deaths, even of minor characters, and discuss their maimings in such detail? How does the poem’s portrayal of battle compare with, say, those of a modern filmmaker?

Diomedes stands out in Book 5 as the best warrior on the Greek side, in Achilles’ absence. He is one of three men who are ranked, at various times, as second best of the Achaeans, the others being Ajax (son of Telamon) and Odysseus. All three
are put forward as foils to Achilles, illuminating his character by the contrasts they pose. What sort of contrasts is Homer creating through Diomedes? Why is Diomedes only second best, though he has enough prowess to fight even a god?

**Book 6**
The scenes inside Troy show us Hector’s connections to his family, including scenes with his mother, wife, son, and brother. Discuss how such familial relationships, or the lack of them, define some of the poem’s main figures, especially Achilles (note that Achilles’ son, Neoptolemus, is nowhere mentioned in the *Iliad* and seems not to exist; indeed Homer seems to portray Achilles as a man too young to have a grown son.)

**Books 7-8**
A long stretch of battle, punctuated by a long scene on Mt. Olympus (pp. 131-4), offers more contrasts between the divine and human worlds. Discuss how leadership and authority are portrayed by Homer in human figures like Menelaus and Hector, as compared with the god Zeus. How does a divine king wield power, as compared with a mortal one? Does Homer offer any judgments about Zeus’ exercise of power?

**Book 9**
The embassy scene presented here brings Achilles back to center stage. How do each of the three messengers attempt to sway him, and what impact does each man have? Why does Odysseus fail so miserably while Ajax nearly succeeds? What elements of each man’s character is Achilles responding to?

(Book 10)
Readers will be curious about the omission of Book 10, a decision discussed by Mitchell at p. lvii. Mitchell’s version is the only translation to leave out Book 10, an episode in which Odysseus leads a night raid on the Trojan camp. (See the Samuel Butler version of Book 10 posted at www.iliadbook.com.) Discuss the role of an editor or translator in shaping the works that we, as readers, receive.

**Books 11-12**
As the death toll mounts on the battlefield, a curious exchange takes place between Glaucus and Sarpedon (pp. 187-8). Sarpedon asserts that he would not continue to fight if he were immortal; the certainty of his own death impels him forward. Discuss the way in which mortality gives shape and meaning to the warrior’s life, especially that of Achilles, who by his own report has a choice of dying young and winning glory, or living to an obscure old age.

**Books 13-15**
Further slaughter on the battlefield is interrupted by the comic, erotic episode on Olympus in which Hera seduces Zeus. How seriously does Homer take the
gods, or the divine machinery behind the action of the poem? How does his religiousness (or piety) differ from that of a modern novelist who belongs to a monotheistic faith?

**Book 16-17**
Patroclus takes center stage here, as Achilles’ close comrade and only real friend. Discuss the relationship between these two men, and the significance of the fact that Patroclus dies fighting in Achilles’ armor. (Note that the poem neither supports nor refutes the theory, common in ancient times and often asserted today, that Patroclus was Achilles’ lover. Homer seems not to be interested in this issue.)

**Book 18**
The scene between Achilles and his mother, Thetis, is one of Homer’s most poignant episodes. How is Achilles defined by this bond with a divine mother? Contrast the response of Thetis to her son’s imminent death with that of Zeus to the death of Sarpedon in Book 16.

The shield of Achilles calls attention to the brilliance of Homer’s artistry. What kinds of effect does he achieve with this dazzling description? Why is it important that we see it only while it is being crafted, on Mt. Olympus? (Its intricate design is never mentioned again, though Achilles presumably bears it for the rest of the poem.)

**Books 19-21**
The poem comes at last to the rage of Achilles, the theme it announced in its opening line. Why is Achilles’ rage so intense? Is it a quality the poem asks us to admire, or be horrified by, or neither? Mitchell’s introduction claims that “Homer sees everything without judgment” (p. lv). Does that extend even to Achilles’ worst acts of savagery?

Achilles knows that by re-entering battle, he has chosen his own death (p. 322). Discuss again the relationship between mortality and heroic action, also raised in Books 11-12. Point out that the embrace of death gives Achilles a clarity of vision, almost a tranquility, in the midst of his rage (see his speech to Lycaon at pp. 338-9), that deeply humanizes him.

The fight between Achilles and the river Scamander in Book 21 leads to a melee in which the gods begin fighting one another. What is the quality of warfare like among the gods, as compared with among mortals?

**Book 22**
The final combat between Hector and Achilles allows Homer to focus intensely on the causes behind victory and defeat. What are the various factors that contribute to Hector’s downfall? Why is it important to the poem to reveal multiple factors, rather than just portray Achilles as the better warrior? (Useful contrasts might be drawn with the way a modern film superhero defeats his adversary.)

Book 23

The funeral games show Homer at his most artful. The episode does not have a linear connection to the main story, yet it allows us to see the tensions that fill the whole poem getting expressed and, in some cases, resolved. Discuss the importance of each major contest, in its relationship to combat and war, and in the way that conflicts do or do not get resolved. Note particularly the change in Achilles, who now presides rather than competing, and the dismissive way in which Agamemnon is treated at the book’s end.

Book 24

The poem ends at a surprising place, the ransoming of Hector’s body. Discuss the effectiveness of this resolution as compared with other possible ones – Hector’s death, Achilles’ death, or the end of the war.

The scene between Priam and Achilles probes the deepest levels of Achilles’ character. Has the hero changed since the start of the poem? How, and why? Has the world itself been changed by the cataclysm it has gone through?