

Thomas G. Palaima REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

The Iliad gets lost in Hollywood's translation

Do you know what a man is? Is not / birth, beauty, good shape, discourse, manhood, / learning, gentleness, virtue, youth, liberality, / and such like, the spice and salt that season a man?"

— Shakespeare, "Troilus and Cressida"

"But Hippolochus / Bore me, and I am proud he is my father. / He sent me to Troy with strict instructions / To be the best ever, better than all the rest, / And not bring shame on the race of my fathers."

Homer — Iliad 6.211-215, Lombardo translation

A few years back, very wealthy donors wanted to back a project to promote Hellenic culture in the United

States. I had an idea. I invited my friend Bill Broyles to lunch. Bill is an intelligent man, directly experienced in the ways of war and the ways of

the world. He is plain-spoken and wise. Some of you may recently have read his splendid editorial on the virtues of mandatory national service. The former Austinite is also a good myth-maker. His Hollywood screen-writing credits include "Castaway" and "Apollo 13."

I asked Bill, "Could Hollywood do an Iliad?" I explained that it had never been done, that two readable and moving translations of Homer's epic had just appeared, that part of one translation had been successfully staged off-Broadway. We then discussed what we both already knew.

The Iliad contains everything about war: real courage, real cowardice, real command failures, real command genius, real self-seeking, real self-sacrifice, real equipment malfunction, real logistical mistakes, real supply shortages, real bad luck, real good luck, real



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Brad Pitt as Achilles: What is he fighting for?

love of family, real love of friends, real love of brothers in arms, real love of country, real hatred, real sorrow, real pity, real wisdom, real folly, real enemies, real death, real ugliness, real beauty, real fog and real clarity, and, yes, even real gods. Let me repeat that: real gods. Just as real as the God proclaimed in Exodus (King James version): "The Lord is a man of war: The Lord is his name." Real gods who inscrutably shape and shake human lives.

The Iliad is real, and it taught Greeks, young and old, what they needed to know about war. It helped them to understand what it is like to attack in an army and to be attacked. Because they knew the Iliad, Greeks who were coming of age for obligatory military service knew what war was. War was a grim necessity. War could confer honor and glory and make a man a hero, a woman a heroine. War could break and ruin good human beings, forever, and bring death to innocents.

This is why I spend four weeks on the Iliad in my mythology classes. This semester, students who are veterans back

from Iraq, or husbands or wives or friends of soldiers there, told me that the Iliad helped them understand their own experiences and feelings.

Bill thought a bit and said, "It could be done, but it would have to be done as 'Planet of the Apes' or something like that."

What Bill meant was that a high-dollar Hollywood production would be ruinous. Economic forces would make the film a spectacle, rather than a valuable myth. But if the story were translated into a different setting and filmed at a modest budget, the core values of the Iliad might be communicated.

Alas, Bill has proved more accurate than the Greek seer Calchas. I have been involved in a Discovery Channel documentary related to the film "Troy," and I saw the film last night. Economic forces turned a potentially fine documentary into a two-hour promotion for the film, with four or five good moments of edu-tainment.

As to "Troy" itself, my reactions have little to do with changes in the plot of the Iliad. In "Troilus and Cressida," Shakespeare plays as freely with the plot as Hollywood. The Greeks are in the seventh year of the siege. Achilles' comrade Patroclus has parodistic acting talents. Ajax is as alienated as Achilles. So a film version that makes the entire war at Troy last, by my reckoning, 15 days (instead of 10 years), that kills off Menelaus on the first day of battle (instead of having him return home with Helen), and that lets Helen and Paris and Hector's wife and child escape, would be OK — if the changes amounted to something.

What they amount to is summed up, unfortunately, in Brad Pitt's reply — it is certainly not Achilles' — to the question of why he has come to Troy. Pitt says he wants what every man wants. He wants more.

If you see the film, ask yourself, "More of what?"

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