

H O M E R



THE ILIAD

Winner of The Academy of American Poets 1991 Landon Translation Award

TRANSLATED BY
ROBERT FAGLES

INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY BERNARD KNOX



The Rage of Achilles

Rage—Goddess, sing 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 toward its end.
Begin, Muse, when the two first broke and clashed,
Agamemnon lord of men and brilliant Achilles.

What god drove them to fight with such a fury?
Apollo the son of Zeus and Leto. Incensed at the king
he swept a fatal plague through the army—men were dying
and all because Agamemnon spurned Apollo's priest.
Yes, Chryses approached the Achaeans' fast ships
to win his daughter back, bringing a priceless ransom

and bearing high in hand, wound on a golden staff,
 the wreaths of the god, the distant deadly Archer.
 He begged the whole Achaean army but most of all
 the two supreme commanders, Atreus' two sons,
 "Agamemnon, Menelaus—all Argives geared for war!
 May the gods who hold the halls of Olympus give you 20
 Priam's city to plunder, then safe passage home.
 Just set my daughter free, my dear one . . . here,
 accept these gifts, this ransom. Honor the god
 who strikes from worlds away—the son of Zeus, Apollo!"

And all ranks of Achaeans cried out their assent:
 "Respect the priest, accept the shining ransom!"
 But it brought no joy to the heart of Agamemnon.
 The king dismissed the priest with a brutal order
 ringing in his ears: "Never again, old man,
 let me catch sight of you by the hollow ships! 30
 Not loitering now, not slinking back tomorrow.
 The staff and the wreaths of god will never save you then.
 The girl—I won't give up the girl. Long before that,
 old age will overtake her in *my* house, in Argos,
 far from her fatherland, slaving back and forth
 at the loom, forced to share my bed!

Now go,
 don't tempt my wrath—and you may depart alive."

The old man was terrified. He obeyed the order,
 turning, trailing away in silence down the shore
 where the battle lines of breakers crash and drag. 40
 And moving off to a safe distance, over and over
 the old priest prayed to the son of sleek-haired Leto,
 lord Apollo, "Hear me, Apollo! God of the silver bow
 who strides the walls of Chryse and Cilla sacrosanct—
 lord in power of Tenedos—Smintheus, god of the plague!
 If I ever roofed a shrine to please your heart,
 ever burned the long rich bones of bulls and goats
 on your holy altar, now, now bring my prayer to pass.
 Pay the Danaans back—your arrows for my tears!"

His prayer went up and Phoebus Apollo heard him. 50
Down he strode from Olympus' peaks, storming at heart
with his bow and hooded quiver slung across his shoulders.
The arrows clanged at his back as the god quaked with rage,
the god himself on the march and down he came like night.
Over against the ships he dropped to a knee, let fly a shaft
and a terrifying clash rang out from the great silver bow.
First he went for the mules and circling dogs but then,
launching a piercing shaft at the men themselves,
he cut them down in droves—
and the corpse-fires burned on, night and day, no end in sight. 60

Nine days the arrows of god swept through the army.
On the tenth Achilles called all ranks to muster—
the impulse seized him, sent by white-armed Hera
grieving to see Achaean fighters drop and die.
Once they'd gathered, crowding the meeting grounds,
the swift runner Achilles rose and spoke among them:
"Son of Atreus, now we are beaten back, I fear,
the long campaign is lost. So home we sail . . .
if we can escape our death—if war and plague
are joining forces now to crush the Argives. 70
But wait: let us question a holy man,
a prophet, even a man skilled with dreams—
dreams as well can come our way from Zeus—
come, someone to tell us why Apollo rages so,
whether he blames us for a vow we failed, or sacrifice.
If only the god would share the smoky savor of lambs
and full-grown goats, Apollo might be willing, still,
somehow, to save us from this plague."

So he proposed
and down he sat again as Calchas rose among them,
Thestor's son, the clearest by far of all the seers 80
who scan the flight of birds. He knew all things that are,
all things that are past and all that are to come,
the seer who had led the Argive ships to Troy
with the second sight that god Apollo gave him.
For the armies' good the seer began to speak: