

Greek Epic - Tufts University, Fall 2025



Figure 1: Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, English (born Netherlands) - A Reading from Homer

By Lawrence Alma-Tadema

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Details

Time: M 6–8:30pm

Location: Eaton Hall 201

Instructor: Charles Pletcher (charles.pletcher@tufts.edu)

Instructor Office Hours: TTh 3–4pm

Prerequisites

Completion of Greek 3 or higher, or graduate standing

Description

This course prepares students to read ancient Greek epic (Homer, Hesiod, and — vocabulary notwithstanding — Apollonius). Beginning with a quick review of basic grammar and syntax, we will explore the literary, cultural, historical, and performance context of Homeric epic.

Homeric Greek is peculiar: a *Künstsprache* mixing elements of various Greek dialects in order to broaden its audience, it bears some similarities to the contemporary “mid-Atlantic accent” that populates news stations. At the same time, it is highly formulaic, lending itself well to the oral performance culture that both supported and was supported by it.

In this iteration of the course, we will read *Iliad* 6, which contains the emotionally tense gift exchange between Glaucos and Diomedes, as well as the epic’s only scene of true domesticity, when Hector briefly reunites with Andromache and their infant son Astyanax. Supplementary readings for this unit concern the historical and anthropological backgrounds of gift exchange and the roles of women in archaic Greek society.

Subsequently, we will read books 17 and 18 of the *Odyssey*. These books concern Odysseus's return to Ithaca and his entry into the palace. In addition to the primary text, we will read Eric Auerbach's famous essay on Eurykleia's recognition of Odysseus's scar, as well as texts on class and social status in antiquity.

In addition to gaining essential skills for independent Greek reading, students will also learn how to use modern tools like treebanks and LLMs to complement — **not supplement** — their studies.

Learning outcomes

After completing this course, students will be able to

1. Read Homeric Greek with occasional help from a lexicon or other supplementary material
2. Discuss the history of oral poetry in broad terms
3. Discuss the composition history of ancient epic
4. Understand the basic contours of the history of Homeric reception
5. Interpret episodes from Homeric poetry with attention to their cultural and performance contexts

Required Textbooks

- Graziosi, Barbara and Johannes Haubold, eds. 2010. *Homer: Iliad Book VI*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP. ISBN: 9780521878845
- Steiner, Deborah, ed. 2010. *Homer: Odyssey Books XVII and XVIII*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP. ISBN: 9780521677110

Reading schedule

See the file located at [schedule.md](#) for the most up-to-date schedule.

Grading

- 30% in-class participation and translation
- 15% Midterm 1
- 15% Midterm 2
- 20% Final paper
- 20% Digital commentary

30% in-class participation and translation

Please come to class prepared to translate the assigned reading. It is acceptable (and expected) to bring a “crib sheet,” i.e., a notebook with translations of words and phrases written out. Try not to write out the entire translation, and definitely don't copy directly from another translation.

We'll review translation strategies in the first few sessions.

Keep in mind that the order in which you will have to translate will change from class to class, so make sure to do *all* of the reading.

In addition to translation, you might be expected to answer questions about syntax and grammar.

15% each: Midterms

Each midterm will consist of two or three passages that we have translated together in class, as well as one “unseen” passage for sight-translation.

Translations will be graded on lexical and grammatical accuracy. I'm less worried about your English, but please try to keep your translations legible.

20% Final paper

Towards the end of the semester, you'll each write a 5–7-page paper on a topic of your choosing. (I will provide some suggestions.) We'll decide on precise grading criteria as a class, but in general you should expect to demonstrate your ability to read and accurately interpret Homer in the original Greek, making use of secondary literature as appropriate.

I will provide a detailed rubric along with example prompts.

20% Digital commentary

We will be writing a collaborative digital commentary together as a class, and each of you will be responsible for contributing several glossae.

The goal is partly to give you another opportunity to review the material and partly to provide an opportunity for you to work with digital methods and technologies. We'll start by discussing how to use a digital treebank, and we will also explore ways to use large language models (LLMs) and other "Generative AI" tools to aid in your explication of key passages of the text.

Statement on AI

(Adapted from "Artificial Intelligence" by the Tufts' Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching)

This course discourages the use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) for translation assignments. At the same time, the course also provides opportunities to explore the use of GAI in supplementing or augmenting our abilities to engage with and understand Homeric song.

To this end, we will adhere to the following guidelines:

1. **NEVER** submit AI-generated work as your own. To do so is considered a violation of Tufts' [Academic Integrity Policy] (<https://students.tufts.edu/community-standards/academic-integrity/academic-integrity-overview>).
2. Familiarize yourself with the limitations of GAI tools. These tools all come with inherent biases, and they all make mistakes. Be aware that no matter how "confident" the AI seems, it does not actually "know" anything.
3. Cite all uses of AI. See suggestions from the Chicago Manual of Style and the MLA.
4. In addition to citation, please identify *how* the GAI contributed to your work. (Your explanation need not be more than a sentence or two.)
5. If have any questions, please contact me by email, during office hours, or in class.

Policies

Attendance

Emergencies arise. Everyone is permitted one unexcused absence. If you will need to miss additional classes, please let me know as soon as possible. Unexcused absences will count as a 0 for that day's translation grade.

Late work

Late work will not be accepted. Extensions are handled on a case-by-case basis, but are generally pretty easy to obtain if you provide the instructor with sufficient notice.

Computer use

Please only use your computer (or tablet or phone) during designated times in class. Importantly, please **do not** use your computer when translating.

Food and drink

Please eat only during breaks. (We'll have one about halfway through each class.)

Otherwise, please stay hydrated.

Sharing

This course is designed for everyone to feel comfortable participating in discussion, asking questions, learning, and facilitating the learning of others. In order for that atmosphere to be maintained, the recordings of our conversations will only be shared with the enrolled students in the class (not posted publicly) and it is prohibited for any of us who have access to the video to share it outside the course. Similarly, I have specifically designed the exams, handouts, and lectures for the people who are enrolled in the course this term and those may not be shared outside this course. All of this content is freely available on GitHub under a Creative Commons license — attribution is all that is required.

Resources

Religious accommodations

Tufts University faculty, staff, and administration highly value and acknowledge the religious diversity of its student body. Students seeking religious accommodations related to their holy days are encouraged to collaborate with faculty to make arrangements during the first week of each semester. Consult the Multifaith Calendar for upcoming holidays, links to the University Religious Accommodations Policy, and members of the University Chaplaincy who are available to respond to questions on religious observances.

Accommodations for students with disabilities

Tufts is committed to providing equal access and support to all qualified students through the provision of reasonable accommodations. If you have a disability that requires reasonable accommodations, contact the StAAR Center at StaarCenter@tufts.edu or 617-627-4539. Please be aware that accommodations cannot be enacted retroactively, making timeliness a critical aspect for their provision.

Academic support at the StAAR Center

The StAAR Center offers a variety of FREE resources to all students. Students may make an appointment to work on any writing-related project or assignment, attend subject tutoring in a variety of disciplines, or meet with an academic coach to hone skills like time management and navigating procrastination. Students can make an appointment for any of these services by visiting <https://students.tufts.edu/staar-center>.

Student support, including mental health

As a student, there may be times when personal stressors or difficulties interfere with your academic performance or well-being. The Dean of Student Affairs Office offers support and care to undergraduates and graduate students who are experiencing difficulties, and can also aid faculty in their work with students. In addition, through Tufts' Counseling and Mental Health Service (CMHS) students can access mental health support 24/7, and they can provide information on additional resources. CMHS also provides confidential consultation, brief counseling, and urgent care at no cost for all Tufts undergraduates as well as for graduate students who have paid the student health fee. To make an appointment, call 617-627-3360. Please visit the CMHS website: <http://go.tufts.edu/Counseling> to learn more about their services and resources.

Greek Epic – Fall 2025 – Course Schedule

1. 8 September 2025

- Syllabus and introductions
- Sight-reading diagnostic
- Lamar, 2020, “Generating Metrically Accurate Homeric Poetry”, *International Journal of Transdisciplinary AI* 2 (1): pp. 1–25
- In-class: *Iliad* 6.1–36

Homework

- Graziosi and Haubold, Introduction, pp. 1–8 (“The Poet and the Muses”)
- *Iliad* 6.37–118

2. 15 September 2025

- Tutorial: Using Logeion and Perseus
- Discussion: How do Homer’s narratological decisions influence our understanding of the plot of the *Iliad*?
- Translation: *Iliad* 6.37–118

Homework

- Graziosi and Haubold, Introduction, pp. 8–18 (§§ 2.0–2.3)
- *Iliad* 6.119–236
- Suggested reading: Excerpts from Marcel Mauss, 1925, *The Gift* (in shared folder)

3. 22 September 2025

- Tutorial: Using treebanks
- Discussion: What do the different levels of narrative do for the gift exchange between Glaukos and Diomedes?
- Translation: *Iliad* 6.119–236

Homework

- **Treebanking exercise**
- Graziosi and Haubold, Introduction, pp. 18–24 (§§ 2.4–2.6)
- *Iliad* 6.237–369
- Suggested reading: Excerpts from Marcel Mauss, 1925, *The Gift*

4. 29 September 2025

- Discussion: 1.) What techniques does Homer use to prepare us for Hector’s return to Troy? 2.) How does “potlatch” work in an Iliadic context?
- Translation: *Iliad* 6.237–369

Homework

- Graziosi and Haubold, Introduction, pp. 24–34 (“Book 6 in the Structure of the *Iliad*”)
- *Iliad* 6.370–502

5. 6 October 2025

- Tutorial: Writing a born-digital commentary
- Discussion: Andromache, Astyanax, and Hector
- Translation: *Iliad* 6.370–502

Homework

- **Digital commentary 1**

- *Iliad* 6.503–529 (end)
- Study for Midterm 1

13 October 2025

NO CLASS: Indigenous Peoples' Day

6. 20 October 2025 - Midterm 1

- Translation: *Iliad* 6.503–529
- Midterm 1

Homework

- Steiner, Introduction, pp. 1–13 (“Homer and His Poetic Medium”)
- *Odyssey* 17.1–166

7. 27 October 2025

- Midterm 1 review
- Discussion: What differences do you notice between *Iliad* 6 and *Odyssey* 17 so far?
- Translation: *Odyssey* 17.1–166

Homework

- Steiner, Introduction, pp. 13–31 (“Books 17 and 18 within the *Odyssey*”)
- *Odyssey* 17.167–327
- Beck, William. 1991. “Dogs, Dwellings, and Masters: Ensemble and Symbol in the *Odyssey*.” *Hermes* 119 (2): 158–67. (in shared folder)

8. 3 November 2025

- Discussion: In what ways does Odysseus's *nostos* differ from Hector's return to the palace?
- Translation: *Odyssey* 17.167–327

Homework

- – **Digital commentary 2**
- Steiner, Introduction, pp. 31–43
- *Odyssey* 17.328–491

9. 10 November 2025

- Discussion: How do the shifts between perspectives (“focalizers”) in the *Odyssey* differ from those in the *Iliad*?
- Translation: *Odyssey* 17.328–491

Homework

- *Odyssey* 17.492–606 (end)

10. 17 November 2025 – Midterm 2

- Translation: *Odyssey*: 17.492–606
- Midterm 2

Homework

- **Digital commentary 3**
- Finley, 1954, “Household, Kin, and Community” in *The World of Odysseus* (in shared folder)
- *Odyssey* 18.1–157

11. 24 November 2025

- Discussion: How are we to understand the role of the *demos* in the *Odyssey*?
- Translation: *Odyssey* 18.1–157

Homework

- *Odyssey* 18.158–303
- Work on papers: drafts due next week!

12. 1 December 2025

- Workshop: peer review of paper drafts
- Translation: *Odyssey* 18.158–303

Homework

- *Odyssey* 18.304–428 (end)
- Continue work on papers, begin studying for final

13. 8 December 2025

- Translation: *Odyssey* 18.304–428
- Discussion: Recap and review

Final Exam – TBD

Final Papers Due 18 December 2025 by 11:59 PM Eastern