

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

Carey Perloff, Artistic Director Heather Kitchen, Executive Director

PRESENTS

WORDS ^{on} PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

War Music

ADAPTED AND DIRECTED BY LILLIAN GROAG
BASED ON THE BOOK BY CHRISTOPHER LOGUE
CHOREOGRAPHY BY DANIEL PELZIG
MUSIC COMPOSED BY JOHN GLOVER
AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER
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WORDS ON PLAYS PREPARED BY

ELIZABETH BRODERSEN
PUBLICATIONS EDITOR

MICHAEL PALLER
RESIDENT DRAMATURG

DAN RUBIN
PUBLICATIONS & LITERARY ASSOCIATE

LESLEY GIBSON
PUBLICATIONS INTERN

MEGAN COHEN
DRAMATURGY INTERN

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A FURIOUS QUARREL OVER A WOMAN

BY MICHAEL PALLER



The Judgment of Paris, detail from the front panel of a sarcophagus: (L to R) Athena (with helmet), Hermes (with caduceus), Aphrodite (draped), Oenone (Paris's first wife, with pan pipes), Paris himself (with Phrygian cap), and Eros. Roman art work from the Hadrianic period (117–38 C.E.), after Hellenistic themes.

Three salient facts about Homer's epic poem, the *Iliad*, the source of Christopher Logue's *War Music*: 1) It may have been composed (not written) in the late eighth or early seventh century B.C.E.; we don't know for sure. 2) It was composed, and then sung or spoken, long before it was written down. The form in which it was written down (all 15,693 lines in the original Greek) probably doesn't bear an exact resemblance to the poem that Homer composed. 3) Homer may have been "Homer," a number of people who, over time, composed the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and other poems. On Homer as an individual there is no trustworthy biographical information.

Another salient fact is that, despite being composed at an unknown date by a person or persons perhaps unknown, later written down, in a form that may or may not be very close to the oral composition, at a date similarly unknown by other persons known or unknown, the *Iliad* not only has survived for 2,700 years but remains a source of fascination and inspiration in a world unimaginable to he, or those, who wrote it. It could be argued that it survived, at least in part, by luck.





The western half of the Roman Empire fell near the end of the fifth century c.e., and with it, all knowledge of Greek and Roman literature and language disappeared in the West. However, it survived in the Eastern Roman Empire, called Byzantium for its capital (later Constantinople, then Istanbul). There, Greek literature, including the works of Homer as well as the extant Athenian tragedies, were used as tools for teaching Greek rhetoric. In the years leading up to the Turkish victory at Constantinople in 1453, this classical literature began finding its way back into Italy, brought there largely by Christian scholars fleeing the looming end of their empire. The *Iliad* was published in Florence in 1488 and has remained in print ever since. Among its prominent translators into English are George Chapman, Thomas Hobbes, Alexander Pope, William Cowper, William Cullen Bryant, Walter Leaf, Samuel Butler, Richmond Lattimore, Robert Fitzgerald, and Robert Fagles. Christopher Logue wrote what he's referred to as his "account" of Homer (not a strict translation) on commission for a radio broadcast for the BBC, keeping faith with the poem's oral origins.

Neither the *Iliad* nor *War Music* covers all ten years of the Trojan War. Rather, they pick up the story in the last, decisive year, in the midst of a furious quarrel over a young woman named Briseis between the leading Greek general, Agamemnon, and his greatest warrior, Achilles. So it might be useful to fill in the events leading up to that point.

The story starts with the Olympian wedding of the sea nymph Thetis (who would give

birth to Achilles, whom she knew would die at Troy if he fought there) and the mortal King Peleus. The one immortal not invited to the festivities was, unsurprisingly, the goddess of discord, Eris. Nonetheless, she sent a gift: a golden apple inscribed, "To the Fairest." Knowing better than to get



Helen and Paris. Side A from an Apulian red-figure bell krater, 380–70 B.C.E. Tochon Collection, Musée du Louvre. Photo by Bibi Saint-Pol.

involved in a dispute over who should receive it, Zeus instructed Hermes to escort the three likeliest candidates, Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite, and the apple to Mt. Ida, on the outskirts of Troy.

There, the handsome young Paris herded cattle in the company of a beautiful fountain nymph, Oenone. Paris was a son of Priam, Troy's king, but on his birth, a seer had proclaimed that he would be the ruin of Troy, so Priam gave the infant to his chief herdsman to kill. The relatively soft-hearted herdsman couldn't bring himself to murder the child, and so he merely abandoned it on the slopes of Mt. Ida. When he returned five days later, he was amazed to find the boy being suckled by a she-bear, and, giving Priam a dog's tongue as evidence that his order had been carried out, brought the infant home to raise himself.

On Mt. Ida, Hermes informed the no doubt surprised prince that he would be the one to choose which of the goddesses was the fairest. The goddesses, Hermes promised, would abide by his decision.

Paris did what any young man might do in a similar situation: he asked to see the goddesses naked, in order to make a thorough judgment. They assented and appeared before him in turn. Hera promised that if he chose her, she would give him great political power over Asia and untold riches. Athena promised military conquest and wisdom. Aphrodite told him that Helen, the world's most beautiful woman and wife of the Spartan King Menelaus, would be his. When Paris asked Aphrodite about the minor detail of Helen's availability, she said not to worry, she'd take care of everything so long as he set sail for Sparta with her son, Eros, as his guide. Not the most ambitious of men, Paris awarded her the golden apple, reconciled with Priam (to the horror of the king's seers and advisors), and set out for Sparta to woo Helen. Meanwhile, furious that Paris had chosen Aphrodite over them, Hera and Athena vowed to destroy Troy.

Aphrodite failed to mention to Paris that a few years earlier Helen's marriage to Menelaus had resulted in an unusual political and military pact. As a teenager, her beauty had already ignited one war, when Theseus, king of Athens, had abducted her, and her brothers, Castor and Pollox, had to retrieve her, nearly destroying Athens in the process. When the time for her marriage arrived, all the great princes of Greece assembled in Sparta as suitors, many of whom would play important roles at Troy: Odysseus, Diomedes, Ajax, Philoctetes, Teucer, Idomeneo, and others. Fearing that the rejected suitors would react with violence, Helen's stepfather, King Tyndareus (her actual father was none other than Zeus himself), was reluctant to choose one as her groom. Odysseus, known for his tactical cunning, suggested that to avoid bloodshed, Tyndareus insist beforehand that all the suitors take an oath to defend the lucky man against the ill wishes of the others. They

did, and then Tyndareus picked Menelaus, brother of the powerful king of Mycena, Agamemnon, as the winner.

It was a pious duty of all Greeks to extend hospitality to strangers, and a duty of the stranger to thank his host with gifts and the promise to reciprocate should the occasion arise. When Paris arrived in Sparta, Menelaus hosted him for nine days. Paris made no secret of his attraction to Helen, and she feared that Menelaus might blame her. Her husband, however, was oblivious, and on the tenth day set sail for Crete, leaving Paris and Helen to their own devices. Sources differ as to whether Paris abducted her and stole a considerable amount of money or if the two eloped, but what's not disputed is that Paris violated the rules of hospitality. An act of such impiety was an insult to the gods and demanded swift punishment.

When Menelaus discovered that the two had departed for Troy, he invoked the suitors' oath and demanded that Agamemnon raise an army and fetch his wife home. Agamemnon reluctantly agreed. The forces were assembled in a thousand ships that met at Aulis, where Agamemnon and Menelaus were joined by, among others, Achilles, Nestor, and Patroclus, all of whom had come from Phthia.

From the beginning, the omens were inauspicious. While Agamemnon was sacrificing to Zeus and Apollo, a serpent slithered from the altar to a nearby tree, where it devoured eight sparrows and their mother and was promptly turned to stone by Zeus. The prophet Calchas interpreted this as meaning that Troy would not fall before nine years had passed but that in the tenth year the war would be won.

Some accounts of the war include a false start from Aulis, when the Greeks mistook Mysia for Troy and mercilessly pillaged it before realizing their mistake. Returning to Aulis only slightly abashed (the Greeks had a reputation in the ancient world as "ambitious, driven thieves," as the Trojan lord Anchises says in *War Music*), they prepared again for another assault on Troy. But the winds turned against them, pinning the fleet to the shore. Days went by, the forces grew restive, and Calchas declared that Agamemnon had angered Artemis, goddess of the hunt. The winds wouldn't shift, the prophet said, until Agamemnon sacrificed his eldest daughter, Iphigenia. Rather than lose face before his enormous force and fellow generals, the king had her brought to Aulis by a ruse, promising to marry her to Achilles. When brought to the altar, Iphigenia bravely agreed to die for the sake of Greece. Agamemnon performed the sacrifice. The winds died and the fleet sailed for Troy. If Artemis was appeased, however, Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra, was infuriated and swore vengeance. Agamemnon would survive ten years of war at Troy, but on his return to Mycenae, his stay would be shorter.

That, however, is another story.