

At Howard, 'The Iliad' Is An Odyssey of Rebirth

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The day grows darker. There is a chill in the air. The room is alive with danger, delight and wonder. You want to build a fire here in the browsing room of Howard University's Founders Library.

Students sit in a circle to perform an out-loud reading of "The Iliad," a two-day marathon, speaking the old saga the way Homer might have—his words filling the air with bloody all-out battle between the Greeks and Trojans; the conflicted Achilles, whose pride clouds his courage; the heroics of Odysseus and Patroclus; the mayhem brought about by malevolent and mischievous gods.

"It's a story of male growth," says sophomore Keenon Perry, 20, "full of massive battles about things being fought over today—women, property."

Perry a film major from Teaneck, N.J., has been here since the first words were uttered around 9 on Thursday morning. He is still here at 3 in the afternoon in gray T-shirt and silver chains around his neck, the insouciant simplicity that decorates so many college students. His is not sure if he will be around Friday afternoon when the reading is scheduled to end.

He reads of "a fierce wild boar with the shining teeth. . ."

Someone else at one point reads: "For I remember this action of old, it is not a new thing, and how it went; you are all my friends. I will tell it among you."

"Now let us give way to black night's persuasion," Joy Womble reads. She wears a black fleece pullover.

It's a heartening scene: young people huddled, exploring grand literature, sharing a book as if it were the bread and wine of life. You're in the past, when storytellers—such as Homer the sightless and insightful—unwound stories that went on for hours and inspired lives forever. And you're in the future, a "Fahrenheit 451" era when people become books. And you're in the present. The number of students swells—to 30 or so—then recedes to a handful, then swells again—a sort of tidal pulse to this ceremony..

A couple of classics professors—Molly Levine and Caroline Dexter—sit in the somber circle, too. Dexter organized the marathon. Levine when it is her turn, recites in old Greek—a strange lost tongue.

"It's now 3:30," Dexter announces. "If you have a 3:40 class, you should leave."

Shandi Fuller, a senior biology major in a dark red coat, rises. She's been reading for an hour and a half, "out of respect," she explains, "for the oral tradition."

She loves reading out loud and "visualizing what's going on" among Agamemnon, the leader of the Greeks, and the soldiers and the gods in the city of Troy. She carries her lunch—a plastic carton of macaroni-and-cheese and corn bread.

On and on it goes.

Russell Adams, chairman of the African American studies department, dashes in, sheds his scarf and coat. In a large, clear voice that makes you think of ancient generals addressing armies, he tells about Odysseus and Patroclus trying to get Achilles to forgive Agamemnon.

". . . give way from the anger that hurts the heart," Adams intones from Book 9, line 260. "Agamemnon offers you worthy recompense if you change from your anger."

A new wave of students flows in. They wear hoods and scarves. They set down their purses and textbooks. They share copies of the Richard Lattimore translation they all read from. Outside, wind whips the trees. Inside, pages turn.

A young man in a black hat shifts his book and reads. He is a double major in biology and Egyptian studies.

Then, in black beret, Rudolph Hock takes a chair. Hock has been teaching at Howard since 1984. He has been the chairman of the classics department since 1998.

"There is new blood, new direction, new enthusiasm in the department," Hock whispers while taking a break.

This year there are 17 classics majors. In 1998, there were none.

Hock has tried to jazz up the languishing department. He changed the names of a couple of courses. "Love and Poetry in Antiquity" is now called "Love in Antiquity," and a course on women is now a course on gender.

"I now teach a course on ancient slavery," Hock explains.

And the college is looking for other ways to reel in classics students. Classics majors get to take part in a secret ceremony. And, of course, there is the Iliad Marathon.

"And the games broke up, and the people scattered to go away, each man to his fast-running ship, and the rest of them took the thought of their dinner and of sweet sleep and its enjoyment"