The name of Homer is associated with two great epic poems – the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* – which were required reading for well-educated people for more than 2,500 years. While scholarly debate about the true authorship of these poems continues to this day, our interest is confined to the *Iliad*, which dates from around 750 BCE, and describes the war between the Trojans and the Greeks (or ‘Danaans’ or ‘Achaeans’) that had occurred about 400 years earlier. This places the action in the heroic age which is associated historically with the Mycenaean civilisation of around 1600–1100 BCE.

Although the *Iliad* is epic fiction rather than history, it conveys a comprehensive worldview which comes down to us as ancient heroism. We are presented with an aristocratic society where heroic warriors lord it over camp-followers who count for nothing in war. Aristocratic warriors respect those people, like themselves, who are the ‘best’ because they are men of power and courage. In heroic societies, power and courage on the battlefield are valued for obvious reasons, but so are noble oratory, beauty and excellence in living. To be the ‘best’ is to pursue personal glory through warlike achievement and a deep feeling for the tragedy of human life. But personal glory has to be earned and recognised by others and so the fierce behaviour of aristocratic warriors is regulated by the uncompromising judgements of their peers. The striving to be the best ceases only in a noble death. If shame is berating oneself for an incompetent act, and guilt is berating oneself for an immoral act, the warriors of the *Iliad* know little of guilt. Theirs is a ‘shame culture’ governed by unceasing striving for power and glory.

The values, actions and foibles of the mortal warriors are at one with those of their immortal gods who live on Mount Olympus. As aristocrats themselves, the gods support the warrior heroes with whom they
have a special affinity. These anthropomorphic gods enter and leave the action in a manner which infuriates modern readers because, in acting as a *deus ex machina*, a god brings an air of improbability to the plot. Gods are important for Homer because their interventions are used to explain the eccentric behaviour of warriors in a language that does not permit ‘psychological’ explanations. Homer’s gods are not spiritual and his language is innocent of spiritual and psychological terms, such as ‘soul’, ‘mind’, ‘psyche’ or ‘ego’. Reading Homer, therefore, represents a challenge for modern readers who are used to stories about individuals with psychological powers. It is as if the gods on Mount Olympus have left the mountain and taken up residence inside human individuals: they appear in psychology books as personality traits which allegedly cause individuals to behave in certain ways, thus by-passing the fact of human choice. We shall leave the gods to their own devices in the knowledge that after about 600 BCE they were, with one exception, retrenched.

The *Iliad* begins with the wrath of Achilles. Agamemnon, the commander-in-chief of the Greeks, has violated the heroic code by depriving the great warrior Achilles of his just rewards after his success in battle. Having been dishonoured, Achilles withdraws his labour and refuses to fight. Without Achilles and his forces, the Greeks are nearly defeated by the Trojans. Concerned at the Trojan success, Agamemnon sends Ajax and Odysseus to persuade Achilles to return to the battle-field. Even though Achilles is offered one of Agamemnon’s daughters as a bride, Achilles rejects Agamemnon’s overtures. The fighting resumes without Achilles and under Hector’s inspiring leadership the Trojans cause the Greeks to retreat. Achilles’ closest friend, Patroclus, returns to battle at the behest of Nestor who asks him to disguise himself in Achilles’ armour to frighten the Trojans. The two armies fight a bloody battle on the beach in sight of the Greek ships which, if destroyed, would bring an end to the war. Patroclus receives permission from Achilles to wear his armour as the first ship is set on fire. Believing that Achilles has returned to the battlefield, the Trojans retreat to their city wall where Patroclus, who has ignored Achilles’ warning about advancing too far too quickly, is killed by Hector. Hearing of Patroclus’s death, Achilles is stricken with grief and burns with revenge. He establishes a truce with Agamemnon, puts on his new armour, and attacks the Trojans with a ferocity that sentences to death every warrior who confronts him without the assistance of the gods. The Trojan retreat is hindered by a river which runs red with the blood of Achilles’ victims. Inevitably, as befits their status as great warriors, Achilles and Hector meet in single combat. Achilles