

# Draftings In

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Volume 2  
Number 2 *Draftings In Homer's Iliad and  
Odyssey*

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Article 2

1987

## Prefatory Note

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### Recommended Citation

Amend, Edward W. (1987) "Prefatory Note," *Draftings In*: Vol. 2 : No. 2 , Article 2.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/draftings/vol2/iss2/2>

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# Prefatory Note

The three essays in this issue of *Draftings In . . .* are a sample of the papers written for the first Presidential Scholars Seminar at the University of Northern Iowa. President Constantine W. Curriss began the steps towards establishing the Presidential Scholars program soon after he took office at UNI in 1983. Robert D. Talbott, Professor of History and Director of the Scholars Board, administers the program. The first group of fifteen scholars began their studies during the fall semester of 1986. I was chosen to teach their first "scholars-only" seminar on the topic of The Ancient Epics.

The sixteen of us engaged upon an informal, though concentrated, investigation of ancient Neareastern, Greek, Roman and, we hoped, Indian epics. The qualification has to be made concerning *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* inasmuch as we ran out of time before we were able to read selections from the great Indian works. Rather, we studied the ancient Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, those selections of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (*The Torah* or Pentateuch) attributed to a narrative tradition called "The Yahwist," Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and Virgil's *Aeneid*.

Our discussions were lively throughout and at times even penetrating. The scholars, all from Iowa, have set their sights on a variety of scholarly and professional careers, including mathematics, physics, medicine, accounting, and literature, and that range of interests manifested itself in the papers they produced as their special contributions to the seminar. The three edited for publication under the guidance of Barbara Lounsberry are representative of their diversity. Tracy Lesan shows how *The Odyssey* can be interpreted as a romance. Debbi Hoepner argues that the ancient Greeks, at least according to Homer, displayed a greater sensitivity towards animals than is to be seen in a world of modern technology. Heather Merrick contrasts the morality of the Greek pantheon with that of the Hebrew Yahweh. All three scholars exemplify how getting acquainted with ancient texts enabled them to think more seriously about some important aspect in the lives of their contemporaries.

The three essays highlight several discoveries that we made during the period of the seminar: these stories are worthy introductions, not only to their authors and earliest audiences, but also to the first weeks of university study; Homer, Virgil, and the other anonymous writers have much to say about human concerns and preoccupations *since* their

times as well as *during* them. The ancient epics provide insights into the panorama of civilization, into ourselves, and into those enduring issues that continue to challenge human beings today.

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