

## **Ancient Greeks speak to Muhammad Ali's greatness - Dallas Morning News, The (TX) - November 29, 1998 - page 8J**

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Recently (as these things are measured) and after almost three millennia of not imitating Muhammad Ali, a Greek boxer named Epeus started saying, "I am the greatest." Epeus is a character in Homer's Iliad; he makes a brief appearance toward the poem's end, in Book 23, during the funeral games for Patroclus. His moment at center stage begins when the bereaved Achilles proposes a boxing match, offering a prize mule to the winner and a two-handled cup to the loser. Epeus stands up to lay his hand on the mule, telling the assembled host that somebody else will have to settle for the cup. He freely admits he is not much of a soldier, but he claims to be the best boxer around and predicts extravagant suffering for his opponent - "I'll open his face and crack his ribs" in one translation. "Huge but compact, clever with his fists," Epeus so effectively radiates competence that the rest of the Greek army, including many of the Iliad's most illustrious god-descended heroes, stand around scuffing the dirt in discouraged silence until a minor hero named Euryalos takes them off the hook by accepting the challenge. Naive, dumb or brave, Euryalos gamely mixes it up with Epeus, who knocks his block off. Although the various translations disagree about the exact nature of the knockout punch In my favorite rendering, Euryalos goes down "the way a leaping fish/falls backward in the offshore sea when north wind/ruffles it down a beach littered with seawrack:/black waves hide him." It's the Iliad, after all, so he can't just fall over. Telling it like it was like it is In two recent translations of the Iliad - Martin Hammond's excellent prose version of 1987 and Robert Fagles' celebrated "modern English Homer" version of 1990 - Epeus in his prefight boast says, "I am the greatest." Neither translator has him add "of all time," as Ali usually did, but "I am the greatest" has since the 1960s been one of Ali's trademarked bits of the English language. (Another is that catamaran of a simile, "Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee," which Homer would have appreciated.) Because Ali repeated his poetic formulas with such Homeric regularity, anyone who has heard Ali say "I am the greatest" often enough - and there was a time when most of the world fell into that category - will hear his mildly hysterical but still Kentucky-soft voice coming from the mouth of Epeus. It is a bit startling to notice that Homer has been made to execute a flawless Ali Shuffle in the midst of his own poetic footwork, but bear in mind the original footwork resembles Ali's in the first place. Mr. Fagles described to me an "ideal coincidence of popular usage and Homer's language." As he said, "I wouldn't have done it if I had to drag the phrase in by the hind legs, but 'I am the greatest' comes so close to the Greek." "I am the greatest" does not turn up in translations of the Iliad done before the rise of Ali in the 1960s. In George Chapman's 17th-century translation, Epeus delivers a lilting "at cuffes I bost me best." Alexander Pope's 18th-century version has Epeus saying, "th' undoubted victor I." In William Cullen Bryant's American Iliad of the 19th century, Epeus is matter-of-fact: "In combat with the cestus . . . I claim to be the best man here." Robert Fitzgerald's translation of 1974, done well into the age of Ali, does not use the phrase, either - his folksy Epeus weighs in with "I'm best, I don't mind saying" - so we must conclude that Ali's effect on Homer has been uneven at best. Ali's fighting style gives a blast to the past It is an uneven effect but a measurable one, so that we are obliged to ask what it might mean that Epeus - a character in a book - has fallen under Ali's influence. When we call the Iliad a classic, we mean among other things that it is living literature constantly given new

resonances by the succession of historical moments in which it is read. It makes sense that Ali, who rose to worldwide prominence as television sports and news came into their own, has inflected our retelling of Homer's boxing match. And the next line of Epeus's speech - "I am the greatest . . . So what if I'm not a world-class man of war?" - now raises echoes of Ali's famous refusal to be drafted during the Vietnam War. An expert punch, like a well-turned phrase, can take on a life of its own. Ali has given us plenty of both: punches like the near-invisible "anchor punch" that ended the second Sonny Liston fight so abruptly, or the series of punches that sent George Foreman to the canvas, his armor clashing around him; phrases including "I am the greatest," "Float like a butterfly . . ." and "I got no quarrel with them Viet Cong." They come down the years with us on videotape, in common speech and the talk of aficionados, and, strangely enough, in Book 23 of the Iliad. The punches and phrases will outlive their author; they already have outlived his youth and vigor. As Muhammad Ali's mouth and hands, once so insistently eloquent, slow down and eventually fall silent in the public forum, we are left to conjure with his handiwork and his words. They, and therefore Ali himself, enjoy the second life in popular memory that the Greek heroes held so dear. Carlo Rotella is a fellow at Harvard's W.E.B. Du Bois Institute and the author of *October Cities*. This essay appeared in the first issue of *Book: The Magazine for the Reading Life*

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