

Visualizing Literary Text with GenAI: the *Iliad* Visualization Project

The rapid integration of generative AI in higher education has resulted in a spectrum of responses from administrators, educators, and students ranging from calls to enthusiastically embrace it to entreaties to resolutely ban it (e.g., McDonald et al. 2025). As a virtual archaeologist who uses AI in various facets of their research, the author charts a middle path to explore how AI might be intentionally and thoughtfully integrated into Classical Studies classrooms as a tool to enhance creative and critical engagement with the technology as well as the past.

The following paper outlines the design, implementation, and preliminary results of the *Iliad* Visualization Project, which was piloted in a 100-level survey on the Ancient Mediterranean World in spring 2025 (a copy of the project's guidelines will be shared with the audience). While this project is easy to adapt to other literary works, the *Iliad* is excellent source material since it not only includes one of our earliest examples of ekphrasis (e.g., the vivid description of the shield of Achilles in Book 18), but the Trojan War cycle also had a significant impact on ancient Greek art (e.g., Attic vase painting, see Snodgrass 1998) and continues to have a cultural influence on our visual media today (e.g., Nolan 2026). Consequently, the project encourages students, who are participating in an artistic tradition stretching back more than 2,500 years, to consider the complex interplay between epic poetry and visual culture using AI as their medium. In the process, students exercise creative and critical thinking and literary and visual analysis skills while also developing transferable digital skills.

To complete the project, students are first asked to identify a passage (~15 lines) from E. Wilson's translation of the *Iliad* (2023) that will form the basis for their AI image prompt. The

passage can come from anywhere in the text, offering students an element of choice in selecting an episode that resonates with them on a personal level. Building a successful AI image prompt requires students to practice literary analysis and creative thinking: they cannot simply copy-and-paste the text into an AI image generator (e.g., Google Gemini, Meta AI, Adobe Firefly). Instead, students must craft a prompt that interprets, contextualizes, and focuses the details in the passage to successfully guide the AI in its generation of a faithful image of their scene. Students are allowed to edit the prompt as many times as they wish to arrive at a final visualization that satisfies them. The prompt and editing process must be documented and submitted along with the final visualization and a copy of the original text. As a final step, students complete a survey that asks them to critique their AI image. This critical reflection encourages students to peek into the black box of AI's decision-making processes and weigh the utility, limitations, and ethical concerns of the technology. It should be noted that students have the option to complete the project without AI, using another form of visual media to create their own visualization.

Based on the surveys from spring 2025, students quickly realized that the quality of their prompt directly impacted the quality of their visualization. A number of students admitted their frustration with the AI since it struggled to depict complex human emotions (e.g., grief) and refused to depict violent scenes due to content filters. A few students noted that the figures in their visualizations were predominately white or that the women were overly sexualized even if their prompt did not include directions on race or sexuality. Ultimately, the author feels that the project was successful at meeting its learning goals and at encouraging deeper, more thoughtful engagement with both generative AI and the *Iliad*. When asked whether visualizing scenes from the *Iliad* changed the way they read and/or interpreted the text, the majority felt it had,

commenting on how the images helped them better understand the gruesome, chaotic nature of the war and added emotional depth to the characters, making them more sympathetic.

Works Cited

Homer. (2023). *The Iliad* (E. Wilson, Trans.). WW Norton & Company.

McDonald, N., Johri, A., Ali, A., & Collier, A. H. (2025). Generative artificial intelligence in higher education: Evidence from an analysis of institutional policies and guidelines. *Computers in Human Behavior: Artificial Humans*, 3, 100121.

Nolan, C. (director). 2026. *The Odyssey* [Film]. Universal Pictures.

Snodgrass, A. (1998). *Homer and the artists: text and picture in early Greek art*. Cambridge University Press.