

Homer

The Odyssey

Translated by EDWARD McCORIE

With an Introduction & Notes by RICHARD P. MARTIN

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Translating Greek epic poetry is a little like deciding to sing, I say, lyric Italian opera without having the music and having only the words as a guide—a daunting task under the best of circumstances. Unlike Latin, we can only guess 3,000 years later what *The Odyssey* actually sounded like when it was performed. One of my fonder and more nostalgic moments from an undergraduate education in the classics was a comparative literature class taught by Robert Fitzgerald. We read Homer, Virgil, and Dante; wrote forgettable papers on unimportant aspects of a particular book; and listened to Fitzgerald talk about his favorite authors in the world. I remember best his comment about “the essential musicality” of the poetry of *The Odyssey*. He was referring both to the idea that *The Odyssey* was sung by a “singer of tales” accompanied by some kind of harplike stringed instrument and to Homer’s amazing capacity, as Professor McCrorie puts it, “to move rapidly in hexameters with a subtle timbre and texture of vowels and consonants, with varied and dramatic pauses.” To translate 24 books of 500-plus lines each in a way that’s accurate, faithful, and consistently musical and poetic, as McCrorie has done in this new translation, is a great accomplishment.

Two obstacles loom large between the 21st century and the Mediterranean Bronze Age in which *The Odyssey* is set. As McCrorie notes in his preface, “right from the start translators have the Greek-into-English *line* to grapple with.” Greek was an inflected language, and the order of words could be varied to satisfy metric or dramatic requirements without changing the meaning of a particular line or sentence. Imagine that the previous sentence was written in ancient Greek. It might read like this: “Language Greek inflected was and varied of words the order could be requirements dramatic or metric to satisfy.” Further, Greek syllables were long and short while English is only stressed. Where Homer used six feet, each a dactyl (a long and two short beats: / x x) or a spondee (/ x), English translators have mostly stuck to a five-beat accentual line. Richard Lattimore, in his widely praised 1961 translation of *The Odyssey*, stretched to a six-beat line, Fitzgerald an iambic (x /) five-beat line. Each approach has its drawbacks. The six-beat line can be ponderous and wooden while, as Pound said, “too much iambic will kill any rhythm.”

McCrorie has chosen a loose five-beat scheme with a variable number of short or unstressed syllables, freely mixing iambs and trochees (/ x) “to orchestrate, as Homer usually does, the mood and pace of the movement.” Importantly, he’s also chosen to echo Homer’s hexameter by ending most of his lines as Homer did, with a dactyl-trochee (/x x /x) or dactyl-spondee (/xx //) combination. The scheme works well. After Odysseus washes up in Book 5 in the Phaiakians’ land, he’s challenged by his host’s son to join in some proto-Olympic

games. When he demures, Euralos taunts him and Odysseus replies:

*“Stranger, you don’t speak well, like a man who is reckless.
Clearly the Gods don’t lavish favors on every
man alike: good shape, clear thought or the best speech.*

.....
*You’re so striking to look at—a God would not make you
otherwise—yet your mind and words are quite empty.”*

The other major hurdle for the would-be translator is to decide whether to translate faithfully or creatively, whether to make verse that accurately and reliably renders the original Greek or to create poetry to rival the original. The two camps have not always seen eye to eye. Lattimore, a Greek scholar in his own right, chose the first course, garnering praise from other classicists for his faithfulness to the original text, but disdain in some quarters for his single-mindedness. “Professor Lattimore adheres to the literal at times,” Guy Davenport once wrote, “with the obstinacy of a mule eating briars.” Squarely in the other camp, what McCrorie calls the “free Homeric spirits,” sits Fitzgerald. As McCrorie sees it, Fitzgerald “paid less attention to the technicalities of Homeric verse and more to an inventive American style in [his] mother tongue.” Seeking a middle ground, McCrorie has tried to be literal, faithful, and vital, thinking that a “close adherence to form [might] actually have the effect of liberating, not constraining, the poet-translator.”

In Book 22, Odysseus and his son Telemachus are cleaning up the carnage after they’ve slaughtered the suitors who’ve been living like a plague of locusts in their house. Odysseus wants to cut them up with a sword. Telemachus prefers hanging. He explains his decision to hang the unfaithful female servants (so their “feet might jerk a little but not long”) thusly in Lattimore’s translation:

*Now the thoughtful Telemachos began speaking among them:
“I would not take away the lives of these creatures by any
clean death, for they have showered abuse on the head of my
mother,
and on my head too, and they have slept with the suitors.”*

*So he spoke, and taking the cable of a dark-prowed ship,
fastened it to the tall pillar, and fetched it about the round-
house.*

Fitzgerald’s version vividly captures Telemachus’ bloody emotion of the moment in colorful, direct language:

*Telémakhos, who knew his mind, said curtly:
“I would not give the clean death of a beast
to trulls who made a mockery of my mother
and of me too—you sluts, who lay with suitors.”
He tied one end of a hawser to a pillar
and passed the other about the roundhouse top,
taking the slack up, so that no one’s toes
could touch the ground.*

McCrorie’s lines, as he intended, fall neatly in between these two, happily avoiding Lattimore’s doggedness without tipping toward Fitzgerald’s inventiveness:

*Then shrewd Telemakhos spoke to the others:
"I want no simple death taking these women's
lives. They poured disgrace on the head of my Mother,
on my own head, and they slept with the suitors."*

*He spoke that way and knotted a line from a dark-prowed
ship to a high column, circling the roundhouse
and stretched up high: no woman's foot would be touching
ground.*

McCrorie's new translation can be recommended without reservation to the generations of students to whom it is bound to be assigned and to any reader who'd like to get as close to the original as is possible without reading the original Greek. It is refreshing, accurate, and direct. It echoes the rhythms of the original hexameter line and renders the various formulas of epic verse ("rose-fingered dawn," "long-suffering Odysseus," and "glow-eyed Athene") with brilliant poetic sensitivity. Professor Martin's introduction and notes add much value to the book. They provide a broad introduction and suitable depth to the Bronze Age world of the Aegean, its history and culture, and the technique and tradition of Homeric poetry. ■

REVIEWER: **Jay Kenney** is an assistant editor at *The Bloomsbury Review*.