



May 2009

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Justin Shelby

University of Pennsylvania, shelby@upenn.edu

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Recommended Citation

Shelby, Justin (2009) "Translating Home: Two Possibilities," *Penn History Review*. Vol. 16 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://repository.upenn.edu/phr/vol16/iss2/3>

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TRANSLATING HOMER

TWO POSSIBILITIES

Justin Shelby

“THERE’S SOMETHING ABOUT THIS OLD MAN, HE CANNOT SPELL AND DOES NOT SCAN, AND HE FAILS TO OBEY THE IRONCLAD LAWS WHICH GOVERN THE GREEK CONDITIONAL CLAUSE.”

Any translation begins as an attempt at a solution to a problem. A translation might be judged then, by how well it solves the problem that it sets itself. By far the hardest task, as with any problem, is the broadest – in this case, to convey to the reader the entirety of the text, complete with nuance, feeling, syntactical structure, pattern broadly understood, emotion, and everything else that makes a text what it is. I will not say that this is not possible, but it is superlatively difficult. More usually, a translator – even one as excellent and experienced as Richard Lattimore – takes his task to be smaller. One tries to convey the text with emphasis on certain parts. Lattimore’s translation conveys the content of Greek in English with line to line accuracy, a remarkable achievement for which he is not often enough praised. The attention to the text is impeccable – very little added, everything retained, with formal elements taking precedence over emotional ones. These may seem to be hasty generalizations, but only look at Logue’s “translations” to see the difference on the opposite pole. There, no attention is paid to formal details – the text seems to exist merely as inspiration for the instantiation of certain feelings and images evoked by the poetry of Logue.

I have little interest *here* in passing judgment on the relative merits of various translations, except to say that the attitude, approaching disdain which some moderns have for the text, is dangerous. If I am reading a translation, I am not so much interested in the thoughts of the interpreter, as I am in the thoughts of the original author. If we lose our texts, we lose everything:

“Literature reaches those who are not its professional students much more by the way of ‘images’ constructed of it in translations, but even more so in anthologies, commentaries, histories and, occa-

sionally, critical journals, than it does so by means of ‘originals,’ however venerable they may be...What impacts most on members of a culture, we suggest, is the ‘image’ of a work of literature, not its ‘reality,’ not the text that is still sacrosanct only in Literature departments.”¹

Our text – which is evidently only respected in stuffy classics departments – is the only thing that firmly separates us from Homer. We know where we stop and Homer begins because the text tells us. Of course, it isn’t that simple – but it is almost that simple. Is it slightly suspicious that the above is invoked in defense of a man who proposes to do something like a translation of a foreign language without knowing any Greek himself? The fact that most people more commonly receive work such as Homer’s through tertiary (that is, not strictly translational) media is not a commentary on how we should translate. It tells us that we should do more to bring secondary and primary literature to the eyes of the public – at least if we are still possessed of the evidently unforgivable conceit that our *texts* are important for people to read and, on some level, understand, in general.

That said, the impulse to extrapolate from the text is certainly understandable. The poems are difficult to feel in the original, and when once even some modicum of understanding of them has been had and the natural desire to share the discovery becomes present in some reader, he is often left at a loss as to how to proceed (of course, here, someone like Logue is an extreme case). If the power of the poem is wrapped in the totality of its diction, subject, and above all, its form (the amalgam of these) how can I make someone unable to read the original feel its power? This “power” of course, is housed above all in my own subjective experience of the poem, which is something quite apart from the formal details of the text. This explains the tendency, when one tries to make a reader “feel” the text as he has felt it, to represent it idiosyncratically. This is why Logue feels justified in rendering “Rosy fingered dawn” as a sequence of colors: “Rat. / Pearl / Onion./Honey:/ These colors came before the Sun / Lifted above the ocean, / Bringing light /Alike to Mortals and Immortals.”² The “Rosy-fingered dawn” formula evokes in Logue the sequence of colors that accompanies the physical rising of the sun, which he in turn represents to the reader as he would represent the rising of the sun to himself. One may see the same procedure at work when he reduces several lines to a single word. At one point in *War Music* he condenses one of Hector’s replies, some five lines

long to “Perhaps.” Certainly the rendering is powerful, but it is the translation of Logue’s own feeling of the five lines. Evocation, hardly translation.

This is a fine procedure, as far as it goes, but the problem is precisely in the idiosyncrasy. One’s own vision of Homer is not that interesting, or at least, it is unlikely that the reader has picked up a translation with an eye to my experience of Homer, rather than with an eye to Homer’s text itself. *Homer* is chiefly interesting, and I ought to understand that as a translator. Thus, the question becomes how to represent the power of the poem without slipping into an idiosyncrasy which in fact hides the original text – Logue’s principal fault – and without producing something that slips too heavily (preferably at all) into “translationese.”³ Yet there is some beauty to the ability of τὰ πράγματα to mean “those things” with an approximate specificity which is lost if you translate it as something more specific – i.e. if you avoid translationese. Why should a reader ever forget that he is reading a translation, after all?

I present the two translations below as possible steps towards solving two very separate problems of translation. The first, A 1-105 looks towards a translation that is literal, but above all, attacks the issue of representing in a language whose native meter is stress based, the poetry of a language whose meter is based on syllable length, with the effects of that syllabic meter in full view. The second translation, seeks to illustrate a possible technique to bridge the large gap between the intended narratee (audience) of Homer and ourselves, this time with the oral and thematic nature (as opposed to literary and fixed, e.g. the *Aeneid*) of the poem in full view.

The first translation (A 1-105) was born out several things. First, I wanted to make a translation of the *Iliad* which was both literal and reflected in some sense the unity lent to the original by the hexameter. This is a particularly egregious problem – Greek meter is quantitative, English meter is stress based. It misses the effect – the lengthening and shortening of the verse according to syllable length – to “translate” Greek hexameter into English hexameter (or pentameter or what have you). I am still somewhat at a loss as to how to resolve this. Ideally, there would be some device to lengthen or shorten (or make less long) each line depending on its pattern within the hexameter. Possibly one could invent some means for measuring the “length” of syllables within English words, and then, by the use of careful diction, match long and short words, blow for blow, with the Greek. If this were done perfectly, it is conceivable that you could have a reasonable representation of Greek syllabic meter in English. Whether such diction

could produce a translation that accomplished anything other than a reproduction of Greek syllabic meter, is another question.

For now though, through the rhyme I've tried to simulate expansion and contraction using a four line stanza with a central couplet sandwiched by two non-rhyming lines. The selection of this pattern was stimulated by the observation, not mine,⁴ that in each line of hexameter, the caesura never falls dead center. The meter is always disbalanced with one "half" longer than the other – this is what provides the meter with its spring. If it were otherwise, the caesura would fall midline and cut the verse into two true halves. The line would fall flat. One can simulate the effect with a system of beats, if he says aloud: "dum-da-dum-dah-dum/dum-dum" and "dum-dum-dum/ dum-dum-dum." Of course, we are not dealing with a system of stress, but with a system of length. Thus, *each four line unit* in the translation is designed to represent this lurch within *each individual hexameter line* in the original:

“And then in turn the sharp arrow flying
 He launched at the men; constantly the close-set corpse fires
 burned all ‘round
 For nine days among the army the God’s missiles felled men to
 the ground
 On the tenth Achilles called the people to the agora.”

Aside from the tendency of the central couplet to be longer, the fact that it rhymes links the two lines of which it is composed. The intended effect is to lengthen the middle, and then shorten the ends of each stanza in order to produce that kind of running lurch which characterizes Homer's hexameter. The intention is for a certain tension to gather into the rhyme, and then release in the following line. Whether it accomplishes that or not is for my reader to decide.

I also made the decision to translate with an extreme degree of literalness:

“...In his heart. Say then, if you will save me.’
 Then replying swift-footed Achilles to him did bellow:
 ‘Take great courage and speak the oracle that you know
 For Kalchas no man, by Zeus, dear Apollo’s prophecies, which you
 Praying make clear to the Danaans,
 No man while I am living and gaze upon the earth

Will lay heavy hands upon you by the hollow ships.
None of all the Danaans, not even if you speak of Agamemnon...”

Here, the Greek reflects Achilles’ agitation – and so the translation has been left confused.

Rhyme and lack thereof, once a pattern has been established, can also be used to emphasize particularly poignant parts in the text. This mirrors the technique by which Homer can use, in each line, certain metrical arrangements to highlight or make certain elements emphatic. Again, here the formal resemblance is in kind and effect rather than in specific instance. I have not gone through and found every single interesting metrical blip, and then manipulated my rhymes to suit. But I have, in areas that seem naturally to form peaks, employed this technique:

“May I not come up on you, old man, beside the hollow ships
Neither tarrying there now nor going later in your turn
For neither the scepter nor chaplet of the God will protect you.
She I will not release, not before old age settles upon her

In our home, in Argos, far away from her father,
busying herself about the loom and busy in my bed.
Do not provoke me, but go so that you yourself home may be led.”
So he spoke; then the old man feared and obeyed the injunction.

Here, the typical rhyme scheme is broken, so that the “couplet”: “She I will not release, not before old age settle upon her/...far away from her father” takes the emphasis. The tension and length of the couplet is delayed. Later, more visually, I isolate the line “May the Danaans pay for my tears with your arrows.” Even though the non-rhyming line falls where it ought given the scheme theretofore established, its isolation (and crescendo, though both are, at least in part, a function of the content) from the other lines is still felt in the context created by the preceding rhyming couplet.

This style, for all the attention that it pays to formal aspects, or at least the representation of those aspects, is problematic for many readers. While I don’t think it quite deserves the slur “translationese,” it is highly artificial, and assumes a fairly large degree of shared knowledge between all parties involved. This character is somewhat intentional, or at least, a consequence of the technique involved. I wanted to pay attention to formal features

within the text, to make it feel in some way, even if only on analogy, like it would have felt to a listener or reader nearer to Homer than we are now. Homer assumes shared knowledge – which is entirely reasonable given his audience, and I suspect that the poems are able to take the form that they do because of this fact. I am able to listen to the song, because I know the words. Except that today, we often know neither the words nor the song. Inevitably then, for a reader coming to Homer cold (and this is based on observations of those to whom I’ve given this translation to read who were unfamiliar with or barely familiar with Homer) some, and maybe substantial difficulty will be encountered. So be it. Ease of reading was never a problem to which the first translation was proposed as a solution.

Thus far, I have behaved as though the text is completely fixed, that is, I have ignored a likely truth about the poem: its oral nature. It is true that our text, as we have received it is fixed, but this fixity is not in the *nature* of the poem. Following Nagy, and ultimately Parry, we have received the conclusion that the poems represent improvisations around fixed themes that exist within a tradition. One upshot of this is that for an experienced listener of epic, most likely,⁵ when a certain person or place was mentioned (a person or place being a “theme”) more was experienced than just the immediate referent of a given noun.

A helpful example – taken gratefully from Gregory Nagy’s *Best of the Achaians* – is the name of Achilles itself. This can be analyzed as “the one who brings *akhos* to his *laos*.” One who brings a grief, which is the product of *menis* (a certain kind of divine anger produced under specific conditions) to his host of fighting men. Understanding this, the first line of the Iliad:

μήνιν ἄειδε θεὰ Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος

becomes substantially more meaningful for someone receptive to the traditional meaning of the name “Achilles.” For one unaware, reading a typical translation, the muse is invoked to sing about an angry man with a strange name. *Menis*, it is well known, also has strong associations, well chronicled in scholarship, that give it very specific characteristics, but that fact is often lost in translation where simplicity and concision gets the nod that should perhaps been given instead to accuracy. How then might one bridge the gap between the Homeric tradition’s narratee⁶ (ostensibly someone accustomed to epic poetry and the themes that function therein), and ourselves, in trans-

lation, while being responsible to the reality of the poem? I represent one possible answer in the second translation, roughly the first ten lines of the Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite (note also the effect of expansion).

Sing to me muse:

all the deeds of golden Aphrodite
she who thrusts sweet desire into the Gods

and breaks the stock of mortal men,
and all beasts and birds

like the Trojans and Greeks and horses broke one

another on the Plain of Scamander,

Before the walls of the wide-wayed city.

Before the cutting down of Hector, axe-among men.

All animals that feed on land and sea

The works of fair-crowned Aphrodite vex them all.

Here the bolded lines are not present in the text, and are my additions. Their purpose however, is to introduce what, in my opinion, is the thematic baggage carried by the verb “δαμάζω” - to tame or break. The use of these lines highlights the martial feel of the verb which is arrayed heavily against the second and third lines of the translation, which are rather pleasant. The concern is that, if we merely translate, δαμάζω as “to break” or “to tame” we miss out on all the other times that it is used to mean “to kill” or “master,” if we translate it as “to kill” or “master” we lose the important quality of “to tame” as often applied to horses which is present in the word. In this way we can render explicit the meaning that is implicit in certain words, the implicit meanings of which would likely have been felt by of the epic-savvy narratees who are the intended audience for the poems. The inclusion of the four added lines accomplishes the introduction of all this, and also establishes that we are in the Homeric world, with all that that fact implies. The final bolded line is admittedly gratuitous.

It should be noted that in this procedure, it is possible to get very far away from the translator’s opinion by tracking down every attestation of a given word (a word suspected of having thematic baggage), and then translating some version of the majority context which attends the word. The translator’s job then becomes to render in some acceptably poetic way, the traditional implicit meanings of various key words, as empirically drawn

from a close examination of other texts within the same tradition. In this way, we can begin to bridge the gap of information between Homer's narratees and our public without doing violence to the notion of the poem as a thematic, oral, and flexible entity.

The daughter of Zeus Athena glancing eyed
since the works of Aphrodite do not please her
but instead wars and the work of Ares:

**He is manslayer and adulterer both
caught by fashioned-nets falling from above
in sin against the Smith with pretty Love
Ares is convinced and beguiled.**

But only battles and wars and glorious deeds please Athena.

This passage is meant to bring to mind Aphrodite's tryst with Ares to the detriment Hephaestus. For someone familiar with archaic oral poetry, putting mention of Ares in a passage about Athena resisting love's charms would certainly evoke this. More critically though, I needed to introduce the idea that God's are often metonymic for those things that they are the Gods of,⁷ Athena is fascinated by War and shuns Love, but War is fascinated with Love. Given the metonymic nature of divine association with principal, and given the thematic baggage carried by the close proximity of Athena, Aphrodite, and Ares, the passage is perhaps a little more difficult to interpret than it would be if the thematic juxtapositioning were unappreciated by a reader, or left implicit by a translator.

Nor ever has Artemis, Goddess- Golden bowed
Been broken in love by ever smiling Aphrodite
**You, Whose body is the bow of moon in wax and wane,
O dart-shedder! How great the animal bellow
which is lost in the din trailing after your arrow!**

Again, the incorporation of traditional material which likely would have been evoked by the name Artemis, including her traditional epithet, "dart-shedder" or, as more usually rendered "shedder of arrows."

It would be silly to generalize about our moment, to fear that Logue might become the Homer of our generation, or to be too peevish about how people translate. Ultimately, as someone once said to me, the text, if it is any

good, will take care of itself. Still, if we, however we wish to label ourselves, believe that these texts on which we have expended so much time and effort, have anything to say to people, we need to find ways to bring that text, minus the obscurantism of excessive idiosyncrasy, to the widest possible audience. This means paying attention to formal textual factors. How we bring those formal textual factors to light, be it the effects of syllabic meter or the fact of the oral and thematic nature of Homer's poems, is a substantial poetic and scholarly challenge. The text might take care of itself, but how we represent the text will have an effect on people. What do we want to reach our reading public? Our own impressions? Or that which has excited so much within us? Homer, at least, will be fine.

TRANSLATIONS

Excerpt Iliad A 1-105:

Sing rage, goddess, of Achilles Peleus' son
 Destructive, which a thousand pains to the Achaians placed
 And to Hades hurled many souls of heroes strong-braced
 and made them feast for both dogs and all birds;

The will of Zeus was being accomplished
 [Sing] From the first time they were set apart in strife-wrangling
 Atreides King of Men and Achilleus bright-shining.
 And who of the Gods the set them together in strife to fight?

Leto and the son of Zeus, for he with the King enraged
 Drove evil sickness through the camp, the people were destroyed;
 For Atreides' son dishonored Chryses, the priest Apollo employed
 And he came to the swift ships of the Achaians

To release his daughter bearing countless ransoms
 Wearing his priest-robe and in hand, the gold scepter
 Of efficient Apollo, and of all the Achaians he was begger
 Most of all to Atreus' two sons, marshallers of men:

"Sons of Atreus and you other Achaeans well-greaved
 Would that the Gods who have Olympian houses
 Give that you sack Priam's city, and return well to your slaves and
 spouses

But release to me my dear child, and receive many ransoms.”

Then all the other Achaians voiced their consent
 Both to respect the priest and the shining ransoms to receive
 But the heart of Agamemnon, Apollo’s priest did not appease;
 Evilly Agamemnon sent him away and laid a mighty injunction
 upon him:

“May I not come up on you, old man, beside the hollow ships
 Neither tarrying there now nor going later in your turn
 For neither the scepter nor chaplet of the God will protect you.
 She I will not release, not before old age settles upon her

In our home, in Argos, far away from her father,
 busying herself about the loom and busy in my bed.
 Do not provoke me, but go so that you yourself home may be led.”
 So he spoke; then the old man feared and obeyed the injunction.

He walked unwilling on the shore of the loud-voiced sea
 Going far away, greatly the old man prayed
 To Lord Apollo: it was Leto that His father layed:
 “Hear me Silverbow, who stalks ‘round both Chryses and
 Holy Killas, with force you rule in strength over Tenedos

And Smynthus, if ever according to your pleasure I roofed a temple
 Or if ever for you I burned fatty thigh bones with the meat clinging
 on
 Of bulls and goats grant that this, my wish, be done:

May the Danaans buy my tears with your arrows.”

So he spoke praying, and Phoibos Apollo heard him.
 He strode from the highest parts of Olympus, wroth in his heart
 Having on his shoulders the quiver full of the deadly darts;
 The quiver clashed upon the shoulders of the raging God,

There he moved. There in the likeness of night
 He sat far away from the ships, and loosed an arrow
 And a terrible clang came from the silver-gilded bow.

First assailed were the donkeys and the Argive dogs.

And then in turn the sharp arrow flying
He launched at the men; constantly the close-set corpse fires burned
all 'round
For nine days among the army the God's missiles felled men to the
ground
On the tenth Achilles called the people to the agora.

For Hera the white armed goddess put it in his mind.
He was troubled for the Achaians, because he saw the dead
Therefore then he called and all-together they were lead
And standing swift-footed Achilles spoke with them.

Atreide, I think now, that we have been foiled
That we ought to return if we would death escape
Since now the common war and plague will break us
But come now, let us consult a seer or sacrifice

Or a dream interpreter (for a dream is from Zeus),
Who might say why Phoibos Apollo is so angry with the host
[Who can say] whether He finds fault with a sacrifice or a boast
If the fat of undefiled goats and calves

He desires by accepting to ward off from us hateful fate.
When thus he spoke, he sat down and to the assembly rose
Kalchas Thestorides, by far the best of the bird augurs
Who knows what was and what will be before what will be is.

He led the ships of the Achaians to Ilion
By this gift of divination, which Phoibos Apollo to him supplied
With good intention he spoke and to the assembly he cried:
"Oh Achilles, you command me, beloved to Zeus, to speak

"The wrath of Lord Apollo the far-shooting
Accordingly I beg: hearken and swear to me,
With a forward mind, to aid me with words and deeds
For I think that I will anger a man, who great,

Rules all of the Argives, and all the Achaians obey him
 For a stronger king, when he is angry with a man of lesser station
 Even though on that day his rage be subject to digestion
 Thereafter he has a grudge, so that he would ... finish the matter

In his heart. Say then, if you will save me.”
 Then replying swift-footed Achilles to him did bellow:
 “Take great courage and speak the oracle that you know
 For Kalchas no man, by Zeus, dear Apollo’s prophecies, which you

Praying make clear to the Danaans,
 No man while I am living and gaze upon the earth
 Will lay heavy hands upon you by the hollow ships.
 None of all the Danaans, not even if you speak of Agamemnon,

Who now boasts to be the best of the Achaians.”
 And then he took heart and the goodly prophet spoke:
 “He is does not find blame with a sacrifice or a boast
 But for the sake of the Priest, who Agamemnon dishonored.

He did not receive the shining ransoms, nor did he release his daughter
 For his sake, the Farshooter gave and yet will give pain
 And for the Danaans he will not drive away this hateful stain
 Not before, the glancing eyed girl be led away to her father

and without payment, without ransom, a holy hecatomb
 is led to Chryses’ then, we, as beggars might obey him.
 Thus speaking he sat down, and stood up to the assembly then
 Atreides son, wide-ruling troubled Agamemnon

They did cover his heart, black thoughts of rage
 His eyes flashed with fire.
 First he spoke to Kalchas, glaring at him with ire:
 “Seer of evil! Never yet did you speak the good to me

To your mind always evil is dear prophesy.

Excerpt Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite Approx 1-10:

Sing to me muse:

all the deeds of golden Aphrodite
she who thrusts sweet desire into the God

and breaks the stock of mortal men,
and all beasts and birds
like the Trojans and Greeks and horses broke one
another on the Plain of Scamander,
Before the walls of the wide-wayed city.
Before the cutting down of Hector, axe-among men.
All animals that feed on land and sea
The works of fair-crowned Aphrodite vex them all.

But:

She is not able to convince nor beguile three minds:

First:

The daughter of Zeus Athena glancing eyed
since the works of Aphrodite do not please her
but instead wars and the work of Ares:

He is manslayer and adulterer both
caught by fashioned-nets falling from above
in sin against the Smith with pretty Love
Ares is convinced and beguiled.

But only battles and wars and glorious deeds please Athena.

Athena gave knowledge to earth-dwelling men, builders
to make chariots, the bronze weapons of war, bearers of heroes
Aphrodite made them know soft-skinned women
Placing shining deeds into the mind of each.

Nor ever has Artemis, Goddess, Golden bowed
Been broken in love by ever smiling Aphrodite
You, whose body is the bow of moon in wax and wane,
O dart-shedder! How great the animal bellow
which is lost in the din trailing after your arrow!

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1. A. Lefevre and S. Bassnett, 'Introduction: Proust's Grandmother and the Thousand and One Nights: The "Cultural Turn" in translation studies.' in S. Bassnet and A. Lefevre (eds.), *Translation, History, and Culture* (London 1990), 9-10 *apud* Simeon Underwood, *English Translators of Homer*.
 2. Christopher Logue, *War Music*, 68.
 3. Credit for this, though I'm sure the phrase pre-existed her, to Prof. Helma Dik.
 4. Credit: James Redfield
 5. That the Homeric epics have this character is probably disputed somewhere. For argumentation see: Alfred Lord, *Singer of Tales*.
 6. The term Narratee is adopted from Irene de Jong's *Narrators and Focalizers*, and stands in for what she denotes as the NeFe₁, that is, the primary object of both the narrator and focalizer.
 7. Textbook examples of this come from those passage where person x is killed by person y, but a line later, is said to have been killed by Ares.