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Homer, *Iliad*. Translated by Robert Fagles, with introduction and notes by Bernard Knox. New York: Viking, 1990. Pp. xvi + 683. \$35.00 (hb). ISBN 0-670-83510-2.

Reviewed by Sheila Murnaghan, University of Pennsylvania.

It is sobering to note the air of anxiety that accompanies this distinguished new translation of the *Iliad*. The physical book is lavishly produced, with heavy deckle-edged paper, large and clear type, a bound-in bookmark, and a rich gold and black dust jacket; but the back of the jacket is crammed with testimonials from big guns ranging from Maynard Mack to Emily Vermeule to Richard Wilbur (more such have been recruited for the print ads) all clearly designed to reassure us that this is not another dusty classic, but a work capable of attracting even a late twentieth century audience. The qualities needed for this task emerge from the unanimous stress in these comments on "energy," "vitality," "relentless sweep," "rigor," and "kinetic power." There is an implicit promise here that this version is not bogged down by the more leisurely dimensions of Homeric poetry, qualities like stateliness and expansiveness, which might have recommended a translation produced in a more sympathetic age. There is even a hint that Fagles has rescued Homer from himself, paring away verbal excesses and tedious formal conventions that hamper the drive and momentum of the poem, archaic mannerisms for which a modern reader cannot be expected to sit still. Fagles in fact says as much in his preface, when he describes his choice of a loose, irregular five- or six-beat meter as a means of "lending Homer the sort of range in rhythm, pace and tone that may make an *Iliad* engaging to a modern reader" (xi).

This concern for reaching the alienated modern reader dovetails with the position taken both by Fagles and by his collaborator Knox on contemporary debates about Homeric interpretation. This position, which is arguably coming to be the current orthodoxy, is decidedly post-Parry. It involves acknowledging the implications of Parry's demonstration of the oral background of Homeric poetry, but stressing the monumental composer as an autonomous genius who, rather than being constrained by the conventions of traditional oral poetry, mastered and transformed them. In practical terms, this position underwrites a translation which by no means dispenses with formulas and other forms of repetition, but which feels no obligation to reproduce them exactly. Formulaic phrases that convey the obvious, such as "thus he spoke," have been eliminated; formulas introducing speakers have been invested with contextual coloration or restricted to less than a full line: "But the lord of men Agamemnon shot back," "And the matchless runner reassured him: 'Courage / . . .'" Ornamental epithets have been recast as pointed descriptions: *polyphloisboio thalassês* becomes "where the roaring battle lines of breakers crash and drag." Neutral expressions have been replaced with vivid ones and objective statements have been made subjective: where the Greek text informs us that Athena arrived from heaven (*êlthe ouranothen*) and that Achilles recognized her at once (*autika d'egnw*), Fagles tries to put us in Achilles' mind: "down from the vaulting heavens swept Athena . . . he knew her at once, / Pallas Athena!" Nor is there any interest here in replicating the artificiality of Homeric diction; Fagles' language is contemporary, even colloquial, and his characters' speech is spirited and informal, often filled with contractions. The Achaean soldiers are "dead on their feet from the slogging work of war"; at his moment of choice, Achilles tells Thetis, "But now I'll go and meet that murderer head-on,/ that Hector who destroyed the dearest life

I know./ For my own death, I'll meet it freely -- whenever Zeus/ and the other deathless gods would like to bring it on." The result, then, is a translation that cuts way down on the formality, archaism, and restraint of the original and that relies a great deal on interpretive interventions by the translator.

In part because it is animated by such a well-defined sense of mission, Fagles' translation is remarkably successful. The interpretive choices that give his text its heightened coloration are, for the most part, unobtrusive and convincing, suggesting a deep and sensitive knowledge of the poem. (Here I would register one general objection -- to the practice Fagles shares with Fitzgerald of giving descriptive titles to the individual books. This exaggerates the significance of a feature that is not original to the poem and imposes unneeded judgments about which episodes are the most important.) There is no question that Fagles' speeded-up, pared-down idiom is appealing to a contemporary ear. After Fagles, Lattimore sounds leaden and stilted (although still providing the most exact guide to the literal Greek), Fitzgerald a bit too fussy and self-consciously poetic. For a quick comparison of the three, here are their versions of the famous line from Book 3 about the fate of the Dioscuri. First Lattimore, who sticks doggedly to the syntax of the original: "but the teeming earth lay already on them." Fitzgerald strengthens the impact by making the Dioscuri the subject: "But her brothers lay/ motionless in the arms of life-bestowing earth." Fagles' version does the same but achieves the simplicity and directness that for us spell poignancy: "but the earth already held them fast/ long dead in the life-giving earth of Lacedaemon." When the paperback edition appears, Fagles' translation should give both of those rivals a real run for their money in the undergraduate course market, which is, of course, by far the largest market for an *Iliad* translation in the late twentieth century. Students, in particular, stand to benefit from the extra guidance Fagles gives his readers and from Knox' fine, lucid introduction. Although, alas, they may find Knox' account of the transmission of the text a bit too leisurely and digressive, perhaps a bit too epic, for their taste.
