

Emily Wilson's *Iliad*: Crafting an Attainable Tale

[Homer. 2023. *The Iliad*. Trans. by Emily Wilson. New York: WW Norton & Co. ISBN:

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'Modern' is not a word usually used to describe the *Iliad*, though 'dry' is one that is heard often. Yet, to one well-versed in the poetry of Homer, there is an endless richness and vibrancy to the text. And to Emily Wilson, there is nothing more potent and impassioned than this story, a sentiment which lead her to spend six years translating the *Iliad* in order to welcome students and modern audiences alike into an ancient world, where loss and love can be experienced as vividly as clanging armour on a battlefield or a roaring sea in a storm.

Wilson's goal in translating the *Iliad* is made clear in the Translator's Note: the Homeric poems should not be weighed down by overly flowery and complex language. Too many translations

diverge too far from the original metre and do not retain enough of the oral tradition of the poem, making the text, in her own words, 'stilted or archaizing' (Wilson, 2019: 12). Translators should aim to retain the distinct stylistic features of the original work and provide readers with an experience that closely resembles the original oral tradition. So, whether it be students guided by instructors or new audiences engaging with the *Iliad* for the first time, readers should be able to fully experience and understand Homer's world without barriers and the need to speak the original language.

Wilson's translation uses unrhymed iambic pentameter, while the original is in dactylic hexameter. This creates shorter lines, but also lines greater

in number than the original, which she believes closely mimics the oral tradition. It is important to note how the metre works in this text: iambic pentameter creates a natural rhythm to read in, to oneself and aloud, especially in the English language. In terms of other lexical choices in the translation, Wilson has deviated from the use of the Homeric ‘dual’, which is ‘the grammatical form perched between singular and plural that is used when two people act together, and most easily translated by ‘both’ (Buchan 2023: 8 of 10 paras) and has replaced it with the simple third person plural. As Mark Buchan critiques in his review, this choice creates a grammatical separation between characters who would otherwise be inherently entwined in the original language. This does, naturally, present a problem to a reader well-versed in ancient Greek and the Homeric world, and is certainly an aspect that would benefit from being discussed in a classroom that relies on this text. Yet a student not yet fluent in

ancient Greek, or an everyday reader who has never even heard the language, does not fully lose out on the dynamics of the world while reading Wilson’s translation, despite this lexical choice. And it is these readers who this translation is truly for.

It is fair to say that Wilson has accomplished her main goal: immediately, from the call on the Muse at the opening of Book 1 ‘The Quarrel’, the beautifully vivid language echoes the oral tradition, and the sentences are structured in a way that provides the reader with much more clarity and ease in the dialogue and action than previous translations do. Wilson opens strongly, translating the word ‘οὐλομένην’ [oulomenen], meaning ‘ruinous’, or ‘destructive’, as ‘cataclysmic’, which instantly sets the reader up for the scale of devastation that is to follow:

Goddess, sing of the cataclysmic
wrath

of great Achilles, son of Peleus
(Homer 2023: 1)

As Emily Greenwood points out in her review, the use of ‘cataclysmic’ makes Wilson unique to her predecessors, even referring to it as Wilson’s ‘bold calling card’ (Greenwood 2023: 8 of 20 paras), as it has not been used by anyone else; in contrast, some other translations, such as Caroline Alexander’s from 2015, chose to use the direct translation ‘ruinous’ (Homer 2015: 1). Another distinction is the sharpness and clarity of sounds which is constantly present. It is clear that the life found in the work of Homer has been translated with extreme care and detail by Wilson, making these descriptive aspects some of her strongest in the text. Take her descriptions of the sounds of crashing armour and the sea in Book 4 ‘First Blood’:

and as he moved the bronze around
his body

clanged horribly, a noise to terrify
even a person rarely touched by
fear.

Just as when Zephyr rouses more
and more
waves from the deafening sea to
dash against
the shore - a crest of water rises up
out of the deep, then with a mighty
roar
it crashes on the headlands, rises
high,
and at its peak disgorges briny
foam – (Homer 2023: 91)

The beauty of the translation of this passage lies in Wilson’s ability to make description and simile complement each other so well and so clearly, which, when faced with a text where a simile is encountered on nearly every page, is of vital importance. By not weighing this passage down with complex sentence structures and verbose language, Wilson has created a sensory experience where the

frightening crash of armour is brought to life by an audible description of the crashing sea. Thus, the reader is situated right alongside the warriors and their landscape, envisioning their world as they fight and die side-by-side.

It is worth noting that there are occasions where the word choice in the translation feels too modern. For example, in Book 14 ‘An Afternoon Nap’:

From now on, we ourselves must
keep away
from combat, out of range of all the
missiles, (Homer 2023: 332)

‘Missiles’, originally ‘βέλος’ [velos], means ‘arrow’ or ‘dart’. The risk of using ‘missiles’ lies in what the image conjures for a 21st century reader, as Wilson herself points out: “‘Missile’ is likely to suggest modern technology, rather than a simple projectile; ‘projectile’ suggests vomiting’ (Wilson 2023: 71). And though other translators, such as A.T. Murray in his

1924 translation, have also used ‘missiles’ (Homer 1924: 77), others have not:

Caroline Alexander simply used ‘spears and arrows’ in her translation (Homer 2015: 295). While Alexander’s translation of the original word is missing the implication of an object in forceful motion that is conjured by Wilson’s choice, Alexander’s use of ‘spears and arrows’ may keep a modern reader more engaged, given that the words are not mistaken by the contexts of two different time periods. And yet, occasional translation choices such as this do not hinder Wilson’s overall work as, though some of her choices are not necessarily perfect, they are certainly true to the meter and to Wilson’s goal: to introduce and engage students and new readers alike to the vast, wartime landscape which surrounds the characters of the *Iliad*.

By the end of Book 24 ‘A Time to Mourn’, a reader of Wilson’s translation of the *Iliad* has been taken through an expressive emotional journey, filled with

tears for fallen comrades, fear for friends on the battlefield, and anger at the gods for their careless vanity. The oral tradition of the story is inherent throughout, and as someone who has also spent time with the *Iliad*, I found myself experiencing the story anew, and wishing I had had access to this translation during the years in which I first started reading Homer. And that is where the beauty of this translation lies: one does not need to be able to read ancient Greek or recite passages from Homer already in order to understand the devastating violence, loss and pain found in this story. This makes Emily Wilson's translation perfect for anyone interested in exploring Homer's poems for the first time, no matter if they are a student with an instructor beside them or an entirely new reader. It seems likely that those who choose this translation will find themselves ignited by it, and that the broader realm of Homer may in turn seem less daunting. Through this text, it is made clear that the gods of the ancient world

live on, and the pain of ancient mortals can be lifted from the pages and felt deeply by the modern world.

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