

11 Late Victorian musical odysseys, scholarship, and translation

The curious case of Samuel Butler

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In 1897, the world of classical scholarship was upset by the publication of Samuel Butler's *The Authoress of the Odyssey*, a carefully documented scholarly volume arguing that this celebrated ancient Greek epic poem was the creation of a young woman in north-western Sicily at the end of the Bronze Age. Butler (1835–1902) held no academic post; he was a freelance writer, now in his early sixties. He was the author of a well-received utopian satire on Victorian society, *Erewhon* (1872), and some works on evolution, psychology, and travel. Butler had been born into a strict Anglican family, the son of a Nottinghamshire rector, and after graduating with some distinction in Classics from Cambridge, had originally been destined for ordination into the Church of England himself. But he doubted his faith, quarrelled with his father, and emigrated temporarily to New Zealand. There he made a good deal of money as a sheep farmer. His financial independence was further secured by the death of an aunt in 1880.

From 1864 he lived alone in central London, in rooms in Clifford's Inn just off Fleet Street. He had a series of intense friendships with men and took long holidays every year in Italy. It was on a visit to Trapani, once the ancient Greek town of Drepanē on the north-western coast of Sicily, that his theory about the *Odyssey* came to fruition: it was the work of a young woman, and a domestic tale about a journey within Sicily and neighbouring islets, written at the end of the Bronze Age. In this article, I argue that this theory, and the pioneering colloquialism of his translation of the poem, published three years later in 1900, are fundamentally related to the Victorian genre of operetta known as classical burlesque.

It is possible that ancient Greek women sang epic stories: the catalogue of famous women in the Underworld (*Odyssey* 11.336–41), enjoyed by the Phaeacian queen, may contain vestiges of the types of women's traditional song that have been recorded in Indian villages.¹ And Butler was not the first individual to have sensed that there was something "feminine" about the *Odyssey*. It is true that when Aristotle summarized this epic in his *Poetics*, he neglected to mention any female at all (1455b.17–23):

A man is away from home for many years; he is watched closely by Poseidon; further, things at home are such that his property is being wasted by suitors and his son is being plotted against. He arrives, storm-tossed; he causes

certain recognitions. Attacking, he survives, and destroys his enemies. This is proper [to the poem's plot]; the rest is episodes.

But Penelope, at least, lurks mysteriously even beneath Aristotle's diction: whom are these wasteful "suitors" wooing? Even with Aristotle's peerless intellect and the best patriarchal will in the world, it proved impossible to delete all traces of the enigmatic Penelope from the story.

This may explain why it has often been denigrated as "feminine" and "elegant":² In the late nineteenth century, personifications of the *Odyssey* tended to be decidedly ladylike.³ Richard Bentley argued that while Homer had composed the songs constituting the *Iliad* to perform at festivals in front of men, those in the *Odyssey* were designed for women.⁴ William Golding agreed, saying, "anyone who prefers the *Odyssey* to the *Iliad* has a woman's heart";⁵ it has proved much more difficult to turn the *Odyssey* into "masculine" tragic drama than into domestic comedy.⁶ Recently it has been argued that "Homer" was in fact female, on the unscientific grounds that both epics seem "sympathetic" to women and sometimes to question violence.⁷ But a better case was made over a century ago by Samuel Butler. Yet, he was no feminist: his main arguments are blatantly sexist: the poem "whitewashes" the morals of its females in a way only a woman would do, is replete with domestic detail, and ignorant of some types of "manly," technical knowledge, such as boatbuilding.

The most reputable scholars are still divided on the question of whether Butler believed his own arguments,⁸ or was writing a parody of the earnest, archaeologically informed Homeric hypothesis that had been such a feature of nineteenth-century scholarship in Britain, especially after William Gladstone's *Homer and the Homeric Age* (1858). I used to be inclined to believe Butler's biographer when she maintains that in *The Authoress of the Odyssey*, he was irreverently debunking both Victorian scholarship and the patriarchal values it embodied:

[no one] could go as unerringly to the heart of Victorian prejudices as he. The very title of his book [...] was calculated to offend the entire establishment nurtured on Gladstone's notion that a classical education, a grounding in the political and military tactics of Homer's *Iliad* and the navigational prowess of the *Odyssey*, was the best preparation for young men whose task was to rule the empire.⁹

The idiom of Butler's work also catches the tone of the historicist studies of Homer then in vogue; to document his treatise, he travelled with his camera not only to Greece and Schliemann's excavations of Troy, but to Sicily. There he recorded images of the impoverished home of his "authoress": small sailing boats, dusty courtyards, and farm animals, especially pigs. The originals of these photographs, some included in *The Authoress of the Odyssey*, are still to be seen in the Biblioteca Fardelliana at Trapani.

Butler's project was supported by his fluent prose translations of both the *Iliad* (1898) and the *Odyssey* (1900), which challenged the archaizing style of verse

translation then in vogue and, as he said, were aimed at an audience of young girls uneducated in Classics. Bouncy Edwardian suffragists certainly had their own way of reading the *Odyssey*, if the Nausicaa written by Mary Hoste (a tutor at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford) for performance in girls' school is anything to go by: she recommends Nausicaa as a role model because she "is strangely modern" and "active, self-reliant, and courageous...well able to take care of herself": after all, she can harness mules as well as supervise the laundry.¹⁰

Butler was capable of powerful satire, as his dazzling, posthumous semi-autobiographical indictment of Victorian moral hypocrisy *The Way of All Flesh* (1903) demonstrates. He enjoyed unusual and extreme clashes of register in literature, once translating into Homeric Greek hexameter a piece of comically demotic dialogue by Charles Dickens, spoken by the alcoholic nurse Mrs. Gamp in chapter 19 of *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844).¹¹ It is possible that in *The Authoress of the Odyssey* he was giving mischievous expression to the current state of scholarly controversy. There was a long tradition arguing that the domestic *Odyssey* was not authored by the same poet as the warlike *Iliad*. This had culminated in F. A. Wolf's proposal that many bards had contributed to their composition.¹² But the Victorian defenders of the unity and greatness of Homer, including Gladstone and Matthew Arnold, especially in the latter's *On Translating Homer* (1861), preferred to praise his "grand style," elevation, and Odysseus's identity as a gentleman and patriarch. Perhaps it was an entirely tongue-in-cheek response that Butler cast doubt on their values and grandiloquence by claiming that the canonical author of one of these works of genius was in fact a woman, but I now think it likely that he was seriously convinced of his own hypothesis.

His theory has since been espoused by at least two serious scholars of ancient Greek civilization.¹³ It also inspired Robert Graves's novel *Homer's Daughter* (1955), narrated by a high-spirited Sicilian princess named Nausicaa, who grafts onto legends the names of her own friends, foes, and slaves. This in turn was adapted into *Nausicaa*, one of the few *Odyssey* operas written by a woman, Vaughan-Williams's student Peggy Glanville-Hicks. Her "grand opera" premiered in Athens in 1961, with the Greek-Canadian Teresa Stratas in the title role.¹⁴ It outraged the male-dominated Greek establishment, although Glanville-Hicks insisted (disingenuously) that she despised feminism. Glanville-Hicks understood Butler's arguments as insouciant, but Butler's irreverence does not mean he did not believe his own case. Writing at the moment when women classical scholars were beginning to emerge in institutionalized academia,¹⁵ he could be convinced of his case while simultaneously poking fun at the pompous Victorian patriarchal philological establishment by drawing attention to epic's status as a male preserve. Even to translate Homeric epic seems largely to have been seen as beyond some mutually agreed pale (today most women poets adapting the *Odyssey* have chosen lyric or lyric-narrative form).¹⁶ There have been two notable exceptions: Anne Dacier's neoclassical French prose *Odyssey*, which came out in 1708, and now Emily Wilson's outstanding verse translation (Norton 2017).

But the colloquial prose of Butler's *Odyssey* translation was a game-changer in itself. Many critics have seen the affinity between it and the conventions of nineteenth-century fiction. Booth has argued, for example, that Butler "seems to have rewritten an ancient epic as a Victorian novel, much as the Higher Criticism translated the Bible from sacred to secular."¹⁷ The chatty, informal style of the translation resulted in it being rejected by publishers no fewer than thirty times.¹⁸ Booth acknowledges that, "Butler cannot be unaware of the comic misrule in unveiling 'Homer' to reveal a quick-witted young lady. He persists in taking the absurd seriously and mocking the sacred."¹⁹ Yet, despite sensing the "comic misrule" and the "mocking" of the most esteemed and elevated aspects of culture, neither Booth nor any other critic of whom I am aware has seen the profundity of the debt Samuel Butler's *The Authoress of the Odyssey* (1897) and his translation of the *Odyssey* (1900) both owe to the popular London theatre of the nineteenth century, and especially to musical comedy. Butler loved all forms of music and was an amateur composer himself. My case is strengthened by his interest in musical-theatre adaptations of classical literature; not only had he previously composed the somewhat frivolous pseudo-Handelian *Narcissus* and *Ulysses* cantatas with Henry Festing Jones,²⁰ but he corresponded with Robert Bridges, author of a five-act stage version of the *Odyssey* published in 1890.²¹

Going by several names—burlesque, burletta, travesty, farce, extravaganza, operetta—light-hearted comic versions of well-known myths, stories, plays, and operas were a staple of the London stage from the 1830s to the 1870s. The fashion for burlesque was consolidated by the popularity of Offenbach and achieved its most famous offspring in the comic operettas on which W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan collaborated between 1871 and 1896. But, for four decades previously, other burlesque writers had dominated the theatre scene. A particular species of the genus *burlesque* had re-cast classical Greek tragedies, episodes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and, significantly, Homeric epic, as musical comedy in which famous young actresses starred as cheeky, likeable hero/heroines, often in breeches roles.²² The close relationship between the *Odyssey* and the history of classical burlesque is expressed in the use of the Nausicaa episode at the beginning of *Odyssey* book VI in the scene where Frederic meets Mabel in Act I of Gilbert and Sullivan's 1879 hit *The Pirates of Penzance*.²³

The breeches roles and the insouciant tone of the medium of classical burlesque resulted in this type of musical theatre's tendency to upgrade the agency of the women in ancient mythology and to allow them to score points off traditional masculine heroes. I believe this convention was seminal in the emergence of Butler's conception of the *Odyssey*. The parts of Prometheus and Mercury, for example, in Robert Reece's 1865 *Prometheus; or, the Man on the Rock!* were both played by actresses.²⁴ I have discussed classical burlesque at length elsewhere, but the titles alone express its bizarre proto-feminist tendency, e.g. Frank Talfourd's *Alcestis; the Original Strong-Minded Woman: a Classical Burlesque in One Act* (Strand Theatre, 1850), further brazenly subtitled *a Most Shameless Misinterpretation of the Greek Drama of Euripides*, and the same author's *Electra in a new Electric Light* (1859). Robert Brough's 1856 *Medea* burlesque was subtitled *The Best of*

Mothers with a Brute of a Husband. Francis Cowley Burnand, perhaps the greatest of all the authors of classical burlesque in its later stages, first made his name with *Dido, the Celebrated Widow: A New and Original Extravaganza* at the St James's Theatre in 1860. In this burlesque, Dido outwitted Aeneas, did not commit suicide, and lived happily ever after!

Burnand, I suspect, was enormously instrumental in the development of Butler's conception of the *Odyssey* and its author. This prolific playwright and satirist is best known today as the editor of *Punch* magazine in the 1880s and as the librettist of Arthur Sullivan's *Cox and Box* (1866). But he was also the author of two of the most important burlesques of the *Odyssey*—*Patient Penelope; or, The Return of Ulysses* (which premiered at the Strand Theatre, 1863–4) and *Ulysses, or, The Iron-clad Warrior and the Tug of War* (also Strand Theatre, in 1866). If we look at the first part of the 'List of Characters' for *Ulysses*,²⁵ a sense of the (now excruciating) racism becomes apparent (Euryclea was played in blackface, as was Sambo), but so does the wildly cross-dressed atmosphere of classical burlesque:

JUPITER	Miss Charlotte Saunders
MERCURY	Mr. H.J. Montague
MINERVA	Mr. Felix Rogers
CUPID	Miss Weber
ULYSSES	Mr. F. Robson
AGAMEMNON	Mr. J. Johnstone
MENELAUS	Mr. A. Brown
PALAMEDES	Miss Aleynne
MEDON	Mr. Barnes
EURYCLEA	Mr. Smithson
TELEMACHUS	Miss Bessie Aleynne
SAMBO	Mr. Lewis
EURYMACHUS, PISANDER (TWO OF PENELOPE'S SUITORS)	Miss Marion, Miss Cardinal

The authoritative or elderly female parts of Minerva and the nurse Euryclea are taken by men, but Jupiter, Cupid, Telemachus, one of the Greek soldiers, and two of the suitors are played by women. Moreover, the title role of Ulysses, who had to dress up in disguise as a woman for climax, was taken by none other than Frederick Robson, one of the most famous "drag" comedians of the Victorian musical stage, who had made theatre history with his realization of the role of the indignant heroine of Robert Brough's hit burlesque *Medea; or, the Best of Mothers with a Brute of a Husband*, in 1856.²⁶

In Burnand's burlesque *Patient Penelope*, the killing of the suitors is completely avoided. Everyone kisses and makes up, even though the sexually excited Eurymachus has actually climbed in to the marital apartment. The program even reproduced quotations from the *Odyssey* (the set, representing Penelope's room, was also decorated with various scenes from Greek myth to be serially identified by the audience). The suitor Eurymachus was played by Maria Simpson, while

Robson as Ulysses dressed up as Penelope, in her bustle and ribbons, for the boudoir dénouement. This show therefore involved a woman dressed as a man climbing in a window, and a man dressed as a woman reclining on a bed to await an amorous encounter.

Butler cannot have been unaware of these famous burlesques, with their chaotic gender politics, and given his enjoyment of music and popular culture, I suspect he saw them in performance. When he moved back to England from New Zealand in 1864, at the height of the success of *Patient Penelope*, he took up residence in Clifford's Inn off Fleet Street. This apartment had immediate access to London's theatreland (it was a two-minute walk from the Strand Theatre), where he was to live his life of financially independent leisure for the rest of his days. He must have known about Francis Burnand, and I suspect had more than a passing acquaintance with him, since they were exact contemporaries. Butler was born in 1835 and Burnand in 1836; they entered Cambridge University to study Classics at the same time, in the autumn of 1854, at the physically adjacent colleges of St John's and Trinity, respectively. They undoubtedly sat in lecture halls and took examinations together.

Andrew Lang, Scottish academic at St. Andrews University and co-author with Samuel Butcher of the much-praised, archaizing, 1879 prose translation of the *Odyssey* with which Butler's was repeatedly compared and found inferior, waspishly discussed *The Authoress* in several articles during the 1890s. In one fascinating passage he responds to Butler's coining of the name "Mrs. Homer." Lang remarks that this is appropriate to nothing other than a journal featuring "Ally Sloper," one of the very earliest comic-strip characters, who leapt into the public imagination in 1867 with the first edition of the comic journal *Judy*.²⁷ This was meant as a lower-class counterpart to the satirical journal *Punch*, but with more of a female perspective, and including some ribald women characters such as Mrs. Sloper. Ally was an archetypal lazy trickster, always "sloping" off somewhere rather than work. But Lang's barb was gendered. Sloper was drawn by the pioneering surreal cartoonist Marie Duval, whose real name was Isabelle Émilie de Tessier. She co-created him with her husband Charles Ross and visualized him entirely by herself.²⁸ The comic-strips also featured a female "narrator" in the form of commentary by Sloper's daughter Tootsie, a music-hall star. Yet I emphasize the class profile as much as the gender of the characters in the Ally Sloper narratives and of their implied readers. The feminization is important, but so is the *demi-monde* context, on the lower fringes of respectable and polite middle-class society. Lang clearly feels that Butler's approach to Homer has ramifications in terms of social class.

A similar unease is conveyed in the review of Butler's actual translation by the temperamentally patrician, young Cambridge scholar Francis Cornford. He wrote that Butler's version "makes no pretence to accuracy or to scholarship, and can hardly be called a translation, unless it be in Quince's sense: 'Bless thee, Bottom! bless thee! thou art translated.'"²⁹ The translation is here equated with the comic figure of the proletarian weaver Nick Bottom in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, who is "translated" by having his head turned into that of a

common donkey. As examples of slang, Cornford selects “The naughtiness of their hearts,” “age-mate”; “enlisting public sympathy”; “transport of sorrow”; “there’s no accounting for luck”; “seven years straight on end”; “put me off”; and “scandalous goings-on.”³⁰

As late as 1929, the “low” style of the translation was still routinely denigrated (this changed when T. E. Lawrence’s translation, which was also novelistic, appeared in 1932, and E. V. Rieu’s bestselling Penguin in 1946). It was in 1929 that classicist A. Shewan, a friend of Lang’s, wrote:

There is even, especially in his *Odyssey*, a deliberate and frequent resort to expressions which would be in place in a version of one of Aristophanes’s plays, or in a mere farce, but which in a rendering of Homer only displease and irritate the reader. The misdeeds of Penelope’s wooers are ‘scandalous goings-on’. The Cyclops, hurling a rock, comes near ‘pounding into a jelly’ the heads of the crew of a ship and its ‘timbers’. The ogre himself is ‘a horrid creature’. ‘You precious gods’, and even ‘you precious idiot’ are other unseemly specimens. The grave Homeric formula, ‘what word hath passed the barrier of thy lips?’, becomes ‘what are you talking about?’, perhaps ‘what *are* you talking about.’³¹

The references here to Aristophanes and farce are revealing. Yet, amongst the negative reviews by classical philologists, by far the most perceptive one was written in 1892, by George Charles Winter Warr. This was before either *The Authoress* or the *Odyssey* translation had even been published. Warr was Professor of Classical Literature at my own institution, King’s College London, immediately neighbouring the Strand Theatre, and a great supporter of classical education both for women and for the working classes. He was, socially speaking, very far from being an elitist or a snob.

His perceptive diagnosis of the literary affinities of Butler’s Homer followed neither *Odyssey* book, but Butler’s published lecture *The Humour of Homer*, which Warr reviewed in *The Classical Review* in 1892. Butler had delivered the lecture on January 30th at the Working Men’s College in Great Ormond Street in London to a packed audience: many attendees had needed to stand. But some of them were hardly working men: several well-known classical scholars, including Warr, were present.³² At that lecture, Butler described the plot of the *Odyssey* thus:

its interest centres mainly in the fact of a bald elderly gentleman, whose little remaining hair is red, being eaten out of house and home during his absence by a number of young men who are courting the supposed widow—a widow who, if she be fair and fat, can scarcely be less than forty.³³

Both Odysseus and Penelope are described in a manner suited to the burlesque stage—balding, ageing, and possibly obese. The reverence felt toward Homer at that time meant that this description “seemed sacrilegious to people of such

intellectual hauteur as Jane Harrison, the Miss Butchers and Dr. Richard Garnett, all of whom were present.³⁴ But it could have come directly from the imagination of a burlesque author such as Francis Cowley Burnand.

Warr was extremely interested in theatre. In the 1880s, he had masterminded important and very solemn amateur academic performances of adaptations of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, with women including scholarly prodigy Jane Harrison taking the female roles, and no transvestism whatsoever.³⁵ Warr always preserved a genteel and reverential tone when discussing ancient Greece, especially Homeric epic. And his ear for the theatrical affinities of Butler's conception of Homer is, I believe, perfectly attuned. He suggests that Butler thinks in terms of a "travestie" rather than a "translation" of Homer. He writes, "his piquant and frankly modern paraphrases of the 'scenes' in the Olympian household and of the meeting of Odysseus with Nausicaa are strongly suggestive of an 'up to date' Homeric extravaganza." Warr points out that Butler himself refers to Athene in the *Odyssey* as playing "the part of a fairy godmother," a figure from children's pantomime, a genre which developed out of Victorian burlesque. He thinks that Butler is writing from "the burlesque point of view," and that readers ought therefore perhaps to be grateful that Butler has refrained from throwing in a reference to Jacques Offenbach's opéra bouffe *La belle Hélène*. Warr even comes up, accordingly, with a new title for Butler's impending translation, "The *Odyssey* up to date." This is telling: the phrase "up to date" was closely associated with the genre of burlesque, as can be seen by titles such as these: *Faust up to date: a burlesque in two acts*, by G. R. Sims & Henry Pettitt; music by Meyer Lutz (1888); *Venus up to date: Dilke, Maybrick, Gladstone, Hartington, Tartarus and the County Council*, by "Jeremy the Taylor" (1889), *Ali Baba up to date, or, The bandits of Boileaugunge: not quite the Arabian nights story but a very "Simla" version of the Forty thieves: a burlesque opera in four acts* by E.A.P. Hobday (1896), and *Carmen up to Date: A Burlesque opera* (1890).

The burlesque theatre offered its own strange version of the "liberated" New Woman,³⁶ but it also transcended class barriers. Unlike virtually all other professionals, actors were recruited from across the class spectrum. Theatre audiences also included the proletariat: in 1859, as many as 60,000 individuals attended the plebeian Standard Theatre in the East End of London—at the time the largest theatre in Britain—to witness John Heraud's *Medea in Corinth*. One censorious commentator describes the audience of burlesque as a mixture of "vapid groundlings who take stalls, and, with vacant mind, 'guffaw' over the poor antics they come to see" and the fashionable "swell of our day."³⁷ The Adelphi Theatre was associated with raucous burlesques, popularly known as "Adelphi Screamer,"³⁸ and with the unruly fans of Mr. Edward Wright, a drag actor specializing in transvestite roles such as *Medea* in Mark Lemon's *Medea; or a Libel on the Lady of Colchis* (1856). The plebeian Grecian Saloon in Shepherdess Walk, off what is now the City Road, which could seat 700 members of the urban and suburban working and lower middle classes, specialized in firework displays, cosmoramas, grotto

scenes, statuary, and colonnades. It was home to John Wooler's *Jason and Medea* (1851), which was held to have been "nicely got up, but very vulgar in dialogue."³⁹

Henry Morley, Professor of English Literature at University College, London, wrote in the 1850s: "There is a large half-intelligent population in London that by bold puffing can be got into a theatre. It numbers golden lads and lasses as well as chimney sweeps."⁴⁰ Yet the audience also often included this worthy academic. For at the other end of the spectrum, the big West End theatres attracted spectators including people of much higher social class and education, and burlesque in such contexts could be extremely sophisticated. George Henry Lewes (George Eliot's partner) recalled the performances of the suave public-school-educated Charles Mathews, at the time of his famous realization of *The Chorus* in James Robinson Planché's *The Golden Fleece* (1845), as characterized by grace, elegance, and "delightful airiness." Mathews had been "the beau-ideal of elegance" whose costumes were studied by young men of the town "with ardent devotion."⁴¹ An engraving by "Phiz" beautifully captures the mixed constituents of the audience in the 1850s: in the stalls sit the middle classes, in the boxes the most affluent of families, and in the gallery the standing hordes of the working classes.⁴² At the end of the period for classical burlesque, when it was partly replaced by that taste for light opera and Gilbert and Sullivan, the singer Emily Soldene recalled with pleasure that it had been her privilege "to earn the applause of all ranks," from members of the royal family to the fishmongers and their wives in the working-class district of Whitechapel.⁴³ Those who loved the theatre for the most part simply accepted burlesque as one of the range of entertainments on offer: theatre-going diarists tend to record accounts of serious performances of Shakespeare alongside those of burlesque, without any sign that one was inherently superior to the other. The worlds conjured up in burlesque were just as authentic and valid, in the public's view, as those created in elevated "classic" literature. And the worlds conjured up in burlesque were in many respects not so much deliberately bathetic as remorselessly *realist*.

Finally, it should be stressed that in the eyes of the late Victorian British intelligentsia, with its colonial mindset and naïve racism, Sicily itself had few of the associations with ideal classicism that the visitor today to Syracuse or Segesta may anticipate. In polite, prejudiced English drawing rooms, Sicily was still seen as a semi-barbarous backwater, where poverty and crime proliferated. We know that Butler was invited to Trapani after "The Humour of Homer" was published; there he worked "feverishly" at his *Odyssey* translation in trains, railway stations, and inns.⁴⁴ And he wrote in his *Notebooks*, "If a person would understand either the *Odyssey* or any other ancient work, he must never look at the dead without seeing the living in them, nor at the living without thinking of the dead. We are too fond of seeing the ancient as one thing and the moderns as another."⁴⁵ Under the title TRANSLATING THE ODYSSEY, he noted, "If you wish to preserve the SPIRIT OF A DEAD AUTHOR, YOU MUST NOT SKIN HIM, STUFF HIM, AND SET HIM UP IN A CASE. You must eat him, digest him and let him live in you, with such life as you have, for better or worse."⁴⁶

In thinking about the *Odyssey* theatrically, and setting that conception of the story in the actual, physical, material context of Sicily, Butler was committing a crime against the cultural monopoly on classical civilization which the British educational system and elite curriculum at expensive schools attempted to preserve.⁴⁷ The schoolmasters and university professors who lectured on “The Glory That Was Greece” did not like to be told such things as this: “I never quite understood the fastening of the Odyssean bedroom door, till I found my bedroom at the Hotel Centrale, Trapani, fastened in the Odyssean manner.”⁴⁸ In my view, Butler saw the world conjured up in the burlesque theatre’s self-consciously contemporary take on old stories as real and valid. He was, similarly, absolutely serious in his view that the *Odyssey* was written by a woman.

His close friend and sympathetic obituary writer, Richard Alexander Streatfeild, pointed out that a woman, Lady Shikibu Murasaki, wrote the Japanese eleventh-century classic romance *Genji Monogatari*, and I suspect that this comment may stem from something Butler said to him.⁴⁹ It may be very relevant that the first English translation of this text was published in 1882, and was by Kenchio Suyematz, who translated it when a distinguished visitor to Butler’s own Cambridge college of St. John’s.⁵⁰ If Japanese classical literature on such a large scale was by a woman, why not its equivalent in ancient Greece? In the same obituary, Streatfeild also remembered that Butler was delighted to discover, shortly before his death, evidence of an ancient tradition that the Homeric epics were originally written by a woman, a Greek named Phantasia resident in Egypt:

It is said that one Naucrates has recorded how a woman of Memphis named Phantasia, daughter of Nicarinos, a Professor of Philosophy, composed both the story of the Trojan war and that of the wanderings of Odysseus, and placed the books in the temple of Hephaestus at Memphis, whereon Homer came there and, having procured a copy of the originals, wrote the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Some say that either he was an Egyptian born, or travelled to Egypt and taught the people there.⁵¹

And Streatfeild understands that social-class politics have something to do with establishment scholars’ outrage that Butler often makes not only his goddesses but also his male gods talk “like angry housemaids.” Streatfeild concludes, “They did not so much resent the suggestion that the author of the *Odyssey* was a woman; they could not endure that he should be treated as a human being.”⁵²

Perhaps even more importantly, they could not endure that the world she inhabited and portrayed poetically was neither upper class nor refined. It was inhabited by people like the ordinary Sicilians he met around Trapani, and they in turn were like the ordinary working-class people who could enjoy classical culture in the burlesque theatre of London. Butler was no conventional political radical, as his mockery of Socialism and indeed the campaign for Women’s suffrage reveals. But in his identification and exposure of the exclusionary class politics underlying the Victorian elite’s identification with classicism, he showed himself capable of intellectually radical insights that were far ahead of his time.

Notes

- 1 Lillian Doherty, "Putting the Women back into the Hesiodic Catalogue of Women," in *Laughing with Medusa: Classical Myth and Feminist Thought*, edited by Vanda Zajko and Miriam Leonard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 303–4.
- 2 See Barbara Clayton, *A Penelopean Poetics: Reweaving the Feminine in Homer's Odyssey* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003), 1–19.
- 3 See Edith Hall, *The Return of Ulysses* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008), fig. 14.1.
- 4 Bentley, quoted in George Grote, *A History of Greece* (New ed. London: John Murray, 1869), vol. I, 151n.
- 5 William Golding, in conversation, quoted in Piero Boitani, *The Shadow of Ulysses: Figures of a Myth*, translated by Anita Weston (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), viii.
- 6 Edith Hall, "Can the *Odyssey* Ever be Tragic? Historical Perspectives on the Theatrical Realization of Greek Epi," in *Performance, Iconography, Reception* (Studs. Oliver Taplin), edited by M. Revermann & P. Wilson, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 499–523.
- 7 Andrew Dalby, *Rediscovering Homer: Inside the Origins of the Epic* (New York & London: W.W. Norton, 2006).
- 8 A view supported, for example, by Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 48–9.
- 9 Elinor Shaffer, "Butler, Samuel (1835–1902)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/32217>, accessed 31 March 2016.
- 10 Mary R. Hoste. *Nausicaa: An Idyll of the Odyssey, Adapted and Arranged as a Play* (London: David Nutt, 1906), vii.
- 11 Henry Festing Jones and A. T. Bartholomew, *The Samuel Butler Collection at Saint John's College Cambridge* (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, 1921), 17.
- 12 Wolf, *Prolegomena ad Homerum, sive De operum Homericorum prisca et genuina forma variisque mutationibus et probabili ratione emendandi* (Halle: Libraria Orphanotrophi), 1795.
- 13 Benjamin Farrington, *Samuel Butler and the Odyssey* (New York: Haskell House, 1974); Raymond Ruver, *Homère au féminin* (Paris: Copernic, 1977).
- 14 See Winifred Carr, "Opera at the foot of the Acropolis," *Daily Telegraph*, 7 September, 1961.
- 15 See Rosie Wyles and Edith Hall, eds. *Women Classical Scholars*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- 16 Sheila Murnaghan and Deborah H. Roberts, "Penelope's Song: The Lyric Odysseys of Linda Pastan and Louise Glück," *Classical and Modern Literature* 22 (2002): 1–33.
- 17 Alison Booth, "The Author of The Authoress of the *Odyssey*: Samuel Butler as a Paterian Critic." *Studies in English Literature* 25 (1985), 865.
- 18 Clara G. Stillman, *Samuel Butler: A Mid-Victorian Modern* (London: Martin Secker, 1932), 265.
- 19 Booth, "The Author of *The Authoress of the Odyssey*," 866.
- 20 It was not published until after Butler's death, as Samuel Butler and Henry F. Jones, *Ulysses: a dramatic oratorio in vocal score with accompaniment for the pianoforte* (London: Weeks & Co., 1904).
- 21 Jones and Bartholomew, *The Samuel Butler Collection*, 36; Robert Bridges, *The Return of Ulysses: a Drama in Five Acts in a Mixed Manner* (London: Edward Bumpus, 1890).
- 22 See Edith Hall and Fiona Macintosh, *Greek Tragedy and the British Theatre, 1660–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), chapters 12–15.
- 23 David Schaps, "Nausicaa the Comedienne: The *Odyssey* and the *Pirates of Penzance*," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 15 (2008): 217–232.
- 24 See Hall and Macintosh, *Greek Tragedy and the British Theatre*, figs. 13.2 and 13.3.
- 25 Included at the front of F. C. Burnand, *Ulysses, or, the iron-clad warrior and the little tug of war: an entirely original burlesque* (London: T.H. Lacy, 1864).

- 26 See Hall and Macintosh, *Greek Tragedy and the British Theatre*, ch. 14 with fig. 14.3.
- 27 Andrew Lang, "On William Morris, Samuel Butler, Northern and Greek Mythology and Homer," *Cosmopolis* 8.25 (1898): 62–6.
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- 29 F. M. Cornford, Review of "The *Odyssey* by Samuel Butler," *The Classical Review* 15.4 (May 1901), 221.
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- 32 Philip Henderson, *Samuel Butler: The Incarnate Bachelor* (London: Cohen & West, 1953), 171.
- 33 Samuel Butler, *The Humour of Homer. A lecture* (Cambridge: Metcalfe, 1892).
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- 39 E. L. Blanchard, *The Life and Reminiscences of E. L. Blanchard*, ed. Clement Scott and Cecil Howard (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1891), vol. 1, 86.
- 40 Henry Morley, *Journal of a London Playgoer from 1851 to 1866* (London: Routledge, 1866), 23.
- 41 George Henry Lewes, *On Actors and the Art of Acting* (London, 1875), 62.
- 42 Reproduced in Ronald Pearsall, *Victorian Popular Music* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1973), 67.
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- 45 Henry Festing Jones, ed., *Samuel Butler: The Notebooks* (London: Fifield, 1912), 265.
- 46 Jones, *Samuel Butler*, 274.
- 47 See especially Christopher Stray, *Classics Transformed: Schools, Universities, and Society in England, 1830–1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) and Hall, "Putting the Class into Classical Reception," in *Blackwell Companion to Classical Reception*, edited by Lorna Hardwick and C. Stray (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 386–97.
- 48 Samuel Butler, *The Authoress of the Odyssey* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1897), 141.
- 49 Richard Alexander Streatfeild, "Samuel Butler," *Monthly Review* (September 1902): 137–47.
- 50 Kenchio Suyematz, trans. *Genji Monogatari: The Most Celebrated of the Classical Japanese Romances* (London: Trubner, 1882).
- 51 Streatfeild, "Butler." Naucrates' story is retold by the Byzantine scholar Eustathius of Thessalonica, in his *Commentary on the Odyssey* 1.2. An earlier author, Photius of Constantinople, attributes this slightly different version of the same tale to Ptolemy Chennus (a Greek mythographer active first and second century CE): "Phantasia, a woman of Memphis, daughter of Nicarchus, composed before Homer a tale of the Trojan War and of the adventures of Odysseus. The books were deposited, it is said, at Memphis; Homer went there and obtained copies from Phanites, the temple scribe, and he composed under their inspiration."
- 52 Streatfeild, "Butler."

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