

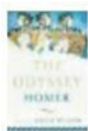
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BOOKS REVIEWS

A woman's place is in the canon

Edith Hall on the first ever translation of the *Odyssey* into English by a woman – and why it's so brilliant



THE ODYSSEY
tr Emily Wilson

592pp, WW Norton,
£30, ebook £17.09

★★★★★

Homer's *Odyssey*, with its blatant sexual double standards, is hardly promising material for a feminist. While its hero enjoys exciting adventures, erotic encounters with gorgeous goddesses and international fame, his wife weaves for 19 long years, lonely and celibate, on the rocky little island of Ithaca.

But now we are treated to a truly exceptional translation of the *Odyssey*. It is the first into English to be published by a woman, but that's not why it's exceptional. (A learned matron named Anne Dacier produced estimable French translations of both Homeric epics more than 300 years ago.) The real reason why Emily Wilson's version of a poem nearly three millennia old is so important is that it combines intellectual authority with addictive readability.

Wilson has a true ear for the enormous tonal variety of the

Odyssey, which ranges from heroic action narrative to magical realism, in the encounters with nymphs and monsters and the Phaeacians' sentient ships, which "intuit what is in the minds of men", rushing of their own accord "at full tilt right across the gulf/ of salty sea, concealed in mist clouds"; from high comedy (Telemachus is called "a stuck-up, wilful little boy") to abject existential despair, when Odysseus sits "on the rocky beach, in tears and grief,/ staring, heartbroken, at the fruitless sea".

Wilson is an English, Oxford-trained classicist, who teaches at the University of Pennsylvania and has published several highly regarded academic studies. Her *Odyssey* is the fruit of a peerless familiarity with the ancient Greek language and intense engagement with Homeric scholarship. The book also comes with extra benefits: informative maps, lucid notes, a glossary and 93 pages of fascinating introductory essays on the poem and her own philosophy of translation.

Quite apart from her immense erudition, Wilson is a fine poet in her own right. Many individual lines recast formulaic Homeric epithets in unsettling but exquisite ways: the routine Homeric epithet for sunrise, "rose-fingered", is rethought on every one of the numerous occasions on which it appears. Book Two opens with the singing, vowel-rich: "The Early Dawn was

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born; her fingers bloomed." But to launch Book Eight, the same Greek words become: "Soon Dawn appeared and touched the sky with roses." Both versions, and all her others of the same formulaic line, are equally true to the original Greek, but the effect of the changes that Wilson rings is cumulatively mesmeric.

Her approach to this masterpiece of world literature is brave and innovative. She lays out her cards in the opening lines. She translates the first adjective used to describe Odysseus, which literally means "much-turning" and has traditionally been rendered as "resourceful" or "versatile", as "complicated" instead. The contemporary resonance of her word, which can be used to describe slightly less than satisfactory individuals or relationships,

sets the perfect tone for her translation's exploration of a hero whose intelligence and valour are indeed somewhat compromised by his leadership flaws and double standards in sexual morality. This statement of her confidence in her own aesthetic judgment is followed by one of the very few exceptions to her rule of adding nothing to the original text: she asks the Muse to help her "tell the old story for our modern times". And the effect of the translation is decidedly modern, without using the sort of ephemeral slang that would render it swiftly out of date. Helen has a selection of "narcotics"; Hermes, wittily, is "mercurial"; Aphrodite is dressed up by the Graces "in gorgeous clothes. She looked astonishing".

The *Odyssey*, like all classical epics, was composed in a rolling, six-beat dactylic rhythm. Victorian translators often tried to imitate it in English, with clumsy results. Wilson knows that the poetic form which, since the renaissance, has sounded most natural to the English ear is blank verse, and so has chosen a clean, delicate,

but flexible five-beat iambic line.

Within this basic structure, she everywhere creates stunning effects with enjambement (carrying the sentence over the line break), as in the famous description of Hermes' aerial journey to Calypso's island, when "from the sky/ he plunged into the sea and swooped/ beneath the waves."

Is it strange that the *Odyssey* has taken so long to find itself a female translator in the English-speaking world? In antiquity, it was regarded as somehow more "feminine" than its more martial counterpart, set at Troy, the violence-suffused *Iliad* (which in 2011, however, was adapted in ways that make the reader painfully aware of the cost of war in terms of fatalities and bereavement by another woman, the poet Alice Oswald, in her *Memorial*). Some ancient scholars even believed that the *Odyssey* was composed by a Greek woman living in Egypt called Phantasia. The hypothesis that the author of the *Odyssey* was a woman was revived by Samuel Butler in 1897, and reflected in the colloquial, sunny style of his (still useful) prose translation of the epic, published in 1900.

Wilson herself believes that her translation practice is necessarily affected by her gender, because she is obliged to make significant choices when finding modern equivalents for Greek terms to do with the way women's lives are limited and their behaviour judged. Her rendering of the direct speech of the female characters in the *Odyssey*, especially the dignified Calypso, and the kind but determined Penelope, is notably sympathetic. She has deliberately avoided using words that carry contemporary ideological weight by condemning women for their sexual behaviour, such as "slut", which previous translators have used to describe the women slaves whom Telemachus executes in

punishment for having made relationships with the suitors. There is, after all, no such term in the Homeric Greek.

In the history of *Odyssey* translations, few have exerted such a cultural influence that they have become "classics" in their own right. Keats was so enthralled by George Chapman's 1616 version that he said reading it made him feel "like some watcher of the skies/ When a new planet swims into his ken"; Pope's 1726 translation set the standard for decades, and EV Rieu's novelistic Penguin translation (1946) was for many years the bestselling paperback in Britain. I predict that Emily Wilson will win a place in this roll-call of the most significant translations of the poem in history. She certainly deserves the honour.

Edith Hall's *Aristotle's Way: How Ancient Wisdom Can Change Your Life* (Bodley Head) is out in May. Call 0844 871 1514 to order the *Odyssey* for £24.99

Wilson captures the *Odyssey's* tonal variety, from magical realism to comedy to despair

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