

Review: “Homer Iliad I-XII: A text and translation for students & Homer Iliad XIII-XXIV: A text and translation for students”

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By Wayne Rimmer

The reason that the *Iliad* is one of the most translated works of literature in the world is its literary merit. The brilliant design principle of telescoping the ten-year saga of the Trojan war into one episode, Achilles’ response to an affront by his own commander, is executed in an epic verse form that embodies the intensity of the narrative. The privilege of retelling the *Iliad* for a new audience motivates fresh translations, as does the challenge of reimagining a poem far removed in time and context for the modern reader. This challenge is exacerbated by the sad reality that fewer and fewer study Greek or the ancient world in any depth. Hanson & Heath’s (1998) provocatively titled *Who killed Homer?* acknowledges the double-whammy that the forgotten worldview of the *Iliad* makes it “an alien text” (p. 207), one which modern readers are less likely to have been orientated towards as education systems are increasingly skewed away from the classics. Andrew Mackay’s two-volume translation cannot bridge our distance from Homer, even in the classical period the language felt an artificial construct, but it is a further attempt, one I feel that is very successful, to render the poem’s redolence.

The two volumes are necessary because of the unique stratagem of presenting the original Greek with the English translation underneath on the same page. The Loeb collection comes close with parallel texts on opposite pages, but otherwise a reader accessing the Greek must flick between a text and a translation or two, which is tiresome when your table might also include one of those massive Greek lexicons, a commentary, and a grammar (hardly room for the mug of coffee). As the over-loaded table implies, the target audience is students, those who, as the preface to the first volume (p. ix) explains, “have not had the luxury, as we did, of being taught both Latin and Greek from an early age.” Accordingly, there are a set of notes corresponding to each

book commenting on linguistic issues and clarifying obscure references. The general reader would probably be less interested in these notes but they may find the presence of the Greek text gives the translation authenticity. After all, a translation is just that. As Emily Wilson (2023) concedes before her own acclaimed translation, the original *Iliad* cannot be replicated or outshone.

The best way of estimating the translation is to examine a portion. There is no text wasted in the *Iliad* (compare filler scenes in Shakespeare often cut in productions) so any passage could profitably be offered. Given that by Jasper Griffin’s (1986) calculations almost half of the text is character speech, it seems appropriate to begin with one of the speeches. I have chosen Odysseus’ rebuke of the foot soldier Thersites in *Iliad* book 2, the first volume of the translation. In a rare moment of melodrama, Thersites, “αἰσχιστος δὲ ἀνὴρ ὑπὸ Ἴλιον ἦλθε” (Hom.*Il.*2.216, “the ugliest man who went to Ilion”), stirs up the restless Greek soldiers. Odysseus then rounds on Thersites, concluding with a warning.

ἀλλ’ ἔκ τοι ἐρέω, τὸ δὲ καὶ τετελεσμένον ἔσται·
εἴ κ’ ἔτι σ’ ἀφραίνοντα κυχίσομαι, ὡς νῦν περ ὦδε,
μηκέτ’ ἔπειτ’ Ὀδυσῆι κάρη ὤμοισιν ἐπέιη,
μηδ’ ἔτι Τηλεμάχοιο πατῆρ κεκλημένος εἶην,
εἰ μὴ ἐγὼ σε λαβὼν ἀπὸ μὲν φίλα εἴματα δύσω,
χλαῖνάν τ’ ἠδὲ χιτῶνα, τὰ τ’ αἰδῶ ἀμφικαλύπτει,
αὐτὸν δὲ κλαίοντα θοὰς ἐπὶ νῆας ἀφήσω
πεπλήγων ἀγορήθεν ἀεικέσσι πληγῆσιν. (2.257-264)

But I tell you plainly, and it will be fulfilled:

if ever I find you still playing the fool, as indeed you are now,
then no longer may Odysseus’ head rest on his shoulders,
nor may I any longer be called the father of Telemachos,
if I do not seize you and rip off your clothes,
both cloak and tunic, that cover your nakedness,
and send you yourself away weeping to the swift ships,
having whipped you out of the assembly with humiliating
blows.”

(p. 60 of volume 1 of the translation)

As a note on the Greek, Andrew Mackay has principally adopted the open access Perseus Digital Library text, itself based on the OCT, with an eye on West’s Teubner edition (an appendix lists any departures from West). The only deviation in this passage is orthographic, the comma between “κιχῆσομαι, ὥς” (1.258), which works nicely in separating “ὥς νύ περ ὥδε” (“as indeed you are now”) as an adverbial, prosodically marked as a colon.

The prose translation follows the Greek closely, for instance the emphasis of the reflexive pronoun “αὐτὸν” is kept by “you yourself”, and the participle form of “πεπλήγων” carries the English equivalent “having whipped”. This is very useful for the student of Greek in analysing the form. The diction is quite conservative, possibly with the exception of the contemporary sounding “playing the fool” for “ἀφραίνοντα” (1.258); compare Jeffrey Durban’s (2025) “witless”. However, “playing the fool” appears established as it is adopted here in Rieu (1950), Wyatt’s revision of the 1924 Loeb edition, and Green (2015). Sticking to prose means that the full sense can be delivered. Verse translations give an impression of the poetry, but their success is always limited because they target readers, not listeners, as comprised the original audience. It is also impossible to reduplicate the performative conditions where the poem was sung to music in front of a festival audience. In addition, verse often has to compromise the text to accommodate the metre. There is no doubt that a prose translation is of more service to the student.

Turning to the narrative sections of the *Iliad* and the second volume of the translation, in contrast to the farcical confrontation between Odysseus and Thersites, a hero matched against a misfit, I choose the final reckoning between the great heroes Achilles and Hector in book 22. In surely one of the greatest scenes in world literature, where the beauty of the poetry belies the awfulness of the action, Achilles chases Hector around Troy with murderous intent.

Ἔκτορα δ’ ἀσπερχές κλονέων ἔφεπ’ ὤκυς Ἀχιλλεύς.
ὥς δ’ ὅτε νεβρὸν ὄρεσφι κύων ἐλάφοιο δίηται,
ὄρσας ἐξ εὐνῆς, διὰ τ’ ἄγκρα καὶ διὰ βήσσας·
τὸν δ’ εἴ πέρ τε λάθησι καταπτήξας ὑπὸ θάμνω,
ἀλλά τ’ ἀνιχνεύων θέει ἔμπεδον, ὄφρα κεν εὐρη·
ὥς Ἐκτωρ οὐ λήθε ποδώκεα Πηλεΐωνα. (22.188-193)

Now swift Achilles was pressing on Hector, driving him on relentlessly.

As when in the mountains a dog chases the fawn of a deer,
Having started it from its lair, through valleys and through glades,

and even if it escapes him by cowering under a thicket,
nevertheless, keeping on its trail, he runs on steadily until he finds it:

so Hector could not hide from the swift-footed son of Peleus.

(pp. 415-416 of volume 2 of the translation)

Andrew Mackay diverges here from West (2000) in disregarding the iota adscript in θάμνω[ι] (l.191), and εὔρη[ι] (l.192), both purely orthographical (and unpronounced). Of much more interest is the simile of “a dog [chasing] the fawn of a deer”, which is translated faithfully and vividly. For example, “lair” for “εὐνής” is a deft touch as it has a sinister connotation (fans of horror fiction may know that the sequel to James Herbert’s “The rats” was the equally disturbing “Lair”). I am not sure “glades” is very exact for “βήσασα” as the probable etymology is βαθύς, deep, and glade suggests a clearing rather than hollow, but this picturesque panorama gives the simile vigour and contrasts rural tranquillity with the violence of the animal world, the human world in particular. Certainly, the translation preserves both the drama and pathos of the unfolding tragedy.

Neither of the passages examined referenced notes, explanatory material accompanying each book, but where provided these are helpful and learned. For instance, in a note on 5.205, there is an explanation for why “τόξοισιν” is in the plural when the singular would be expected (*multi pro uno*); the meaning of “οἴνου ἀποβλύζων” (“sputtering out (some of) the wine”) in 9.491 is clearer when οἴνου is explained as a partitive genitive; in 19.326-327 the problematic, and isolated, reference to Achilles’ son is discussed with a reference to standard commentaries where this troublesome passage is treated in more depth. These notes cannot compete with full commentaries such as recommended in the bibliography completing the first volume of the translation. However, students will find them illuminating and probably less intimidating than commentaries with their dense coverage.

The standout characteristic of this translation is the convenience of interleaving the Greek and English. The student is also aided by an accurate and lucid translation that mirrors the Greek as far as possible. This ease of reading should also appeal to the general reader wondering what all the fuss is about when it comes to Homer. The translation succeeds because it does full justice to the powerful mix of storyline and narrative style that makes the *Iliad* superlative. There is a danger in scholarly reception of the *Iliad* that the joy of reading the poem is lost. Not with this translation.

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