

## How Emily Wilson Reimagined Homer

Her boldly innovative translation of the *Iliad* is an epic for our time

By Emily Greenwood



John Brooks, *A Banquet for the Birds (Achilles and Patroclus)*, 2023.

EVERY DAY, the news reminds us of our collective failure as knowers. From history and literature, we have learned over and over that war has a boomerang effect that destroys everything. Yet here we are again: in Ukraine, in Tigray, in Syria. As the scholar-poet-playwright-translator Anne Carson has written, extrapolating from the *Iliad*, “In war, things go wrong...YOU LOSE YOU WIN YOU WIN YOU LOSE.” Carson weaves that pithy lesson into her 2019 play *Norma Jeane Baker of Troy*, an adaptation of Euripides’ *Helen*. In ancient Greek literature, reflections on the inexorable reciprocity of warfare almost always lead back to the myth of the Trojan War and the *Iliad*, so there is a lot at stake in the translation of this poem. As Emily Wilson puts it in a note on her new translation of the epic, “There is nothing like *The Iliad*.”

It has been eight years since the appearance of the last major verse translation of the *Iliad* in English (Caroline Alexander’s,

in 2015). But the landscape of Homer in English includes more than translations: since the turn of the twentieth century, stunning adaptations of the *Iliad* have shifted the horizons not only of what the poem can mean in English but also how it feels and sounds. These adaptations include the final installments of the poet Christopher Logue’s 1962–2005 project *War Music*, Elizabeth Cook’s prose poem *Achilles* (2001), David Malouf’s novel *Ransom* (2009), Alice Oswald’s poem *Memorial* (2011), Madeline Miller’s novel *The Song of Achilles* (2011), Lisa Peterson and Denis O’Hare’s play *An Iliad* (2013), and Michael Hughes’s novel *Country* (2018). And the Trojan War has also been revisited in adaptations of Greek tragedies (such as Carson’s reworking of Euripides’ *Helen*).

Like Wilson’s widely acclaimed 2017 translation of the *Odyssey*, her *Iliad* is a Norton edition aimed in large part at the high school and college textbook market. Translating for

this target group limits the textual freedom that a creative adaptation allows. But any translator aiming for their finished product to be a work of literature in its own right cannot afford to ignore these recent adaptations, which have given the Iliad such aliveness. Wilson, who is a professor of classical studies at the University of Pennsylvania, steers her craft by the fathoms of Homeric scholarship and the constellations of literatures in English, and the result—the fruit of six years of work—is impressive.

Most important in a contemporary translation of Homer's Iliad is its ability to compel readers to read on, all the way through, line by line, attentively and with feeling. Many English Iliads fail this test. Some mangle Homer through "a mistaken ambition for exactness" (Donald Carne-Ross's withering criticism of Richmond Lattimore's Homer translations), losing readers' attention for whole sections of the poem. Others previously passed this test, but now the language is no longer contemporary (Robert Fitzgerald's still-estimable 1974 translation of the Iliad falls into this category). A translation that motivates rereading has the capacity to foster interpretative curiosity, the quality at the heart of all good study. This is the kind of translation of Homer that I covet as a teacher and for my own enjoyment.

High school and college syllabuses still include conventional translations, but, wisely, these are now supplemented with freer adaptations in a variety of media. Gone are the days when students were expected to plow dutifully through lifeless translations that, at their worst, make English itself seem like a foreign tongue. As a scholar of translation studies, Wilson is familiar with debates about the theory and practice of translation and is fully aware of translation's slow but sure turning away from unyielding, deadening norms of accuracy, fidelity, and instrumentalism. She embraces the concept of translation as "an interpretative act" (to quote translation theorist Lawrence Venuti in his *Contra Instrumentalism: A Translation Polemic*) and understands that part of the purpose of translating the epic is to illuminate it. Translations have to go further than the works they translate if they are going to gain entrance into a literature and culture that never stands still.

The opening of Wilson's Iliad announces that the work to follow is going to be its own independent thing. The first line of her Odyssey also stands out, but in that case for its low-key familiarity: "Tell me about a complicated man." Her Iliad declares itself through noise: "Goddess, sing of the cataclysmic wrath." Sound is important in the Homeric Greek, but the contemporary translator who tries to reproduce the effects of poetry derived from the oral tradition risks descending into pastiche. One can, however, reproduce the way Homer uses sound to convey the scale of the war and its presence in the landscape; Logue grasped this when he titled his adaptations *War Music*. In Wilson's translation, the adjective *cataclysmic* packs a harsh consonantal punch: three hard c sounds combined with a first syllable ending in t—which briefly stops the flow of air—conjure up the cacophony and stop-start rhythm of warfare. This single word conveys all that flows down from it:

Goddess, sing of the cataclysmic wrath  
of great Achilles, son of Peleus,  
which caused the Greeks immeasurable pain  
and sent so many noble souls of heroes  
to Hades, and made men the spoils of dogs,  
a banquet for the birds, and so the plan  
of Zeus unfolded—starting with the conflict  
between great Agamemnon, lord of men,  
and glorious Achilles.

The use of *cataclysmic* is a bold innovation. Its originality stands out among major English translations of the Iliad from the Greek spanning more than four centuries, since the first installment of George Chapman's Iliad was published, in 1598. The adjective translates the Greek aorist, medio-passive participle *oulomenēn*, which is the first word of the second line of the poem, qualifying Achilles' wrath (*mēnin*)—the first word of the epic. Chapman translated *oulomenēn* as "baneful" and Alexander Pope as "direful." Subsequent translators have gone for "accursed" (F. W. Newman, Anthony Verity), "fatal" (E. V. Rieu), "doomed and ruinous" (Fitzgerald), "murderous, doomed" (Robert Fagles), "black and murderous" (Stanley Lombardo), "deadly" (Stephen Mitchell), "ruinous" (Alexander), while Lattimore opted for a noun ("its devastation"). Wilson tells us that she sometimes uses words of equal syllabic length to translate words that are weighted in Homer. Here, the four syllables of *cat-a-clys-mic* match the four syllables of *ou-lo-men-ēn*. As an evocation of the long-range effect of Achilles' wrath, the harsh, clanging consonance of *cataclysmic* is not unlike the clanging of armor—the sound of all those who will fall in war because of Achilles' angry protest. We can hear in *cataclysmic* the soundscape that the Iliad has acquired in English literature. This aural quality comes alive in Logue's take on the sound of Homeric battle scenes in *Cold Calls: War Music Continued*:

Then, with a mighty wall of sound,  
As if a slope of stones  
Rolled down into a lake of broken glass  
We Trojans ran at them.

In addition, *cataclysmic* is apt in the way it sets up a vague rhyme with "Achilles" in the next line. Classicists might even hear an echo of the apparent wordplay in Achilles' name, which some scholars interpret as an allusion to the distress (*achos*) that Achilles brings to his people (*laos*). By sounding "Achilles" and *cataclysmic* off one another, Wilson makes apparent that the wrath of Achilles is the central theme of Homer's version of the Trojan War. By a process of metonymic translation, *cataclysmic* telescopes vast fields of meaning

into the translation of a single Greek word. As a scholar of premodern literature, Wilson also knows that the incipit—the first words or line of the work—served as an iconic signature for an author’s work. Cataclysmic is her translation’s bold calling card.

In certain other places, Wilson’s choice of words also avoids the norms established by previous English translations. Wherever Homer uses striking vocabulary in the Greek, Wilson matches it. In Book 5, the goddess Athena empowers the Greek warrior Diomedes to go on a rampage against the Trojans; this brings him into conflict with the gods who are fighting on the Trojan side. Athena, overturning her earlier admonition to Diomedes that he not attack any of the gods except Aphrodite, goads him to fight Ares, the god of war:

Do not hold back

from that shapeshifter. He was made for trouble—

violent, aggressive, and insane.

Shapeshifter is Wilson’s translation of *allosprosallos*, a word that occurs only two times in the Iliad. Its literal meaning is: another thing (*allo*) to (*pros*) another person (*allos*). A more idiomatic English translation is: one thing to one person, another to another. Translators tend to emphasize the sense of duplicity: “double-dealing” (Rieu), “double-faced” (Lattimore, Alexander), “two-faced” (Fitzgerald, Fagles, Verity, Mitchell), “shifty” (Lombardo). In opting for “shapeshifter,” Wilson conveys Ares’ duplicity but also hints that—like some of the other gods—Ares has been taking on different identities to interfere in the fighting without being recognized (Chapman’s translation of this term as “inconstant changling” conveys a similar idea).

Wilson does not shy away from some of the stranger images in Homeric Greek. In Book 1, after Achilles’ honor has been insulted by Agamemnon, he begs his mother, the goddess Thetis, to ask Zeus to restore his reputation. Thetis duly goes to Olympus and performs a ritual gesture of supplication, clasping Zeus’ knees to enjoin him to accept her request. The formulaic language in Homeric scenes of ritual supplication tends to bring out wooden contortions in English translations. In this particular case, Zeus takes some persuading, and Thetis clings on. Seth Schein provides a literal translation of these lines in his recent commentary on Book 1: “Thetis took hold of (his) knees...having grown into (them).” Wilson nails the striking botanical imagery in the Greek:

Thetis stayed there,

and kept on grasping at his knees, as if

grafting herself to grow there.

Later, in one of the poem’s domestic tête-à-têtes between Zeus and Hera (which remind us of how low we humans score in the gods’ view of the cosmos), Hera defends her decision to weigh in on the side of the Greeks. She argues

that since mortals can take sides, she, a goddess endowed with great power, can’t reasonably be expected to refrain from doing so. Wilson translates Hera’s words as follows:

How then could I not stitch a quilt of ruin

when I am so enraged against the Trojans?

Homer has Hera, as divine matriarch, use a craft metaphor—*rhaptein kaka* (to sew together evils). Some translators omit this metaphor altogether; those who preserve it have gone for “weave” (Fagles, Lattimore), or “stitch” (Verity), while Lombardo opts for the more striking “cobble up evil.” Wilson goes further, working Homer’s metaphor up into a quilt.

The Iliad’s extensive battle scenes, replete with names that hardly trip off the modern tongue, can quickly bog readers down. Wilson has a way with flow, shuffling the clauses to clarify what or who is being described and resisting the trap of hugging too closely to the word order in the Greek. This skill is especially helpful in passages where the narrator switches between the present tense on the battlefield and life before the war or alludes to earlier episodes in the poem. Book 14 begins with the older Greek statesman-warrior Nestor hearing the sound of battle encroaching on the Greek camp:

With this, he took the well-constructed shield

of shining bronze that horse-lord Thrasymedes,

his son, had left there when he took his father’s.

And Nestor also took a bronze-tipped spear,

and stood outside the hut, and soon he saw

the whole humiliating situation—

the Greeks in panic, trying to escape,

the dauntless Trojans chasing after them.

A literal translation of the first two lines of the Greek would be, “So speaking he took the well-made shield of his son, / Thrasymedes tamer of horses, which was lying in his hut.” Wilson rearranges the word order and abandons the participle *keimenon* (“lying”), which describes the position of the shield, and instead uses a pithy relative clause—“that Thrasymedes, his son, had left there”—to smooth the link between two clauses in the Greek. This switch makes it easier for readers to follow the sequence of events. The detail about father and son swapping armor is not trivial: Thrasymedes fighting in Nestor’s armor foreshadows Patroclus borrowing Achilles’ armor in Book 16, which will lead directly to Patroclus’ death, Hector’s death, and ultimately—beyond the Iliad’s narrative—to Achilles’ death. Another way Wilson opens up this passage is her addition of an intensifier in English that is not there in the Greek. An obvious, literal translation for how the battlefield appears to Nestor in this passage would be “at

once [he] saw a shameful action,” as Lattimore translates the Greek *ergon aeikes*. Wilson translates not just the meaning of the words, but Nestor’s psychology, too: “soon he saw the whole humiliating situation.” (Other translators have had the same intuition: Chapman translated this phrase as “th’ unworthy cause” and Fagles as “a grim, degrading piece of work.”) While the intensifier “whole” does not correspond to any particular word in the Greek, by adding it Wilson conveys the mood of helplessness sweeping the Greek camp.

At many points in Wilson’s translation, one senses subtle cues from Oswald’s *Memorial* and Logue’s *War Music*, which together have redefined our sense of the *Iliad* and its atmosphere. Oswald has shown us the bones of the *Iliad* as an “oral cemetery,” beginning by listing—as though on a war memorial—the names of the 214 fighters whose deaths are narrated in the poem. By projecting the democratizing effect of later war memorials onto Homer’s epic, Oswald counters what Carolin Hahnemann has described as the “narrative privilege” accorded to the front-rank warriors in the *Iliad*. *Memorial*, which, in Oswald’s words, entails the “reckless dismissal of seven-eighths of the poem,” is an unabashedly metonymic translation that strips out the narrative to recreate the *Iliad*’s atmosphere as a poem of human life and death and death in life.

Even in a translation that runs to over six hundred pages, Wilson manages to capture the epigrammatic force with which Homer frames the death of marginal characters caught up in the war. There is a pattern to these passages, with an evocation of the warrior’s homelife and upbringing presenting an ironic, heart-tugging contrast between the promise of his life and its abrupt cancellation. In too many English translations of the *Iliad*, these short vignettes of the minor characters killed on the battlefield blend into narrative monotony. Instead, Wilson’s lines draw readers’ attention to the indiscriminate, multiplier effect of violence in war. She achieves this through a supple handling of her chosen meter (iambic pentameter), not allowing it to plod, and by keeping the lines taut. She opts for short clauses, sometimes unpacking a single line in the Greek into two more direct English ones, and curbs the length of her sentences. This gives the poem pace and force and, crucially, gives the reader’s eye and ear lots of micropauses in which to register the sense.

In Book 5, during his rampage through the enemy ranks, the Greek warrior Diomedes kills the brothers Abas and Polyidus, whose father was a dream interpreter.

[Diomedes] went to Abas and Polyidus,  
sons of Eurydamas, the old dream-seer.

The old man never read their dreams again.

They never went back home to him. Instead,  
powerful Diomedes killed them.

The Greek is ambiguous: it is possible to translate that third line as “the old man did not interpret their dreams for them as they left for Troy” (i.e., he did not foresee their deaths). The ambiguity arises from the Greek participle *erchomenois*, which can mean both for them going and for them coming (back). Wilson diverges from recent English translators in choosing the latter interpretation. In addition, she takes a single line in the Greek and translates it across two in English in order to make this interpretation explicit: “The old man never read their dreams again,” followed by, “They never went back home to him.” This expansion amplifies a fleeting, poignant quasi-epigram in Homer, allowing readers to dwell a moment longer on the loss of these two fighters, whose only mention in the poem is their death notice.

In the *Iliad*, the pathos of death is also heightened by the warped choreography of battle. Overly literal translations often obscure this aspect of the poem by failing to spell out exactly what happens to warriors’ bodies, in all the dire details. Here, too, Wilson’s subtle knack for filling in the scene enlarges comprehension and the aperture of affect. Later in Book 5, the Greek warrior Antilochus kills the Trojan fighter Mydon:

Antilochus pressed on and with his sword

hacked Mydon’s forehead, so he gasped and fell

out of his well-made chariot, headfirst.

His head and shoulders smashed into the ground.

It happened to be very sandy there,

so that the corpse stayed upright, upside down,

until his horses kicked him to the ground.

Other translators have felt it necessary to comment on the strangeness of this scene. Chapman glossed Mydon’s posture in death as, “he...stayd / A mightie while preposterously,” while Fitzgerald and Fagles use parenthetical phrases to underscore the grim irony of Mydon’s double fall (*italics mine*):

Gasping, down he went,

head first, pitching from his ornate car,

into a sandbank—so his luck would have it—

to stay embedded till his trampling horses

rolled him farther in the dust.

(Fitzgerald, 1974)

Antilochus sprang, he plunged a sword in his temple

and Mydon, gasping, hurled from his bolted car facefirst,

head and shoulders stuck in a dune a good long time  
for the sand was soft and deep—his lucky day—  
till his own horses trampled him down, down flat[.]

(Fagles, 1990)

Wilson's touch is lighter ("it happened to be very sandy there"), casually noting the random circumstances that produced this grotesque event. It is through such scenes that readers are never allowed to forget that the pursuit of a good, glorious death in battle produces catalogues of disfigured bodies.

There is too much that I like in this translation to dwell on the little that I do not. If there is a dull element in this book, it is the "Translator's Note," where Wilson's commentary on her methods fails to convey of the excitement of the translation. I was surprised to find the phrase "Iliad feels grand, noble, and sublime" and a reference to "its noble simplicity"—language which hearkens back to Matthew Arnold's insistence on Homer's nobility in his 1860–61 Oxford lectures, "On Translating Homer." Homer may or may not be noble, but we must ask what, if anything, the attributes "noble" and "sublime" signify for readers picking up Wilson's translation in 2023. The one hundred pages of succinct notes that Wilson provides to accompany the text afford a more inspiring insight into the process of the translation; there Wilson draws on her philological expertise to open up important questions of interpretation and provides helpful glosses on the choices that she has made as translator.

A traditional epic poem taken in pieces is no poem at all. What binds together Wilson's different acts of translatorial flair into a meaningful whole is her feeling comprehension—as both scholar and reader—of the Iliad as a poem of life and death, a quality that courses through every line of her translation. Wilson writes candidly about the status that the Iliad holds for her as a poem for life, describing it as "the most gripping and heart-breaking work of literature I know," and noting "Even the most trivial moments of daily life remind me of Homer... The Iliad is with me always. My own life, as a parent, a child, and a human being, has taught me to understand the poem more deeply." This vibrant voice sounds throughout the Iliad. Part of what gives that voice its beating aliveness is Wilson's grasp of the scaffolding of the poem, in which the different themes and episodes are interconnected in a complex system of energy transfer. In one of his many trenchant observations on twentieth-century translations of Homer, Donald Carne-Ross suggested that Logue's adaptations of the Iliad are so felicitous because he was "unencumbered by Greek scholarship" and instead was able to produce a "structural translation [focusing] on the relation of incident and episode within a massively organized total action." The Iliad's structure is imbued with tragic irony: because we know what will go wrong for the characters, we read with foreboding as temporary successes presage failure. That is the poem's narrative logic. Some of the characters comprehend this, and their witness is all the more powerful because they

come from within the unyielding system of Homeric warfare, where war is a system for making a name and losing life, whether the life of another or one's own. As Simone Weil observed in her perceptive 1941 essay "L'Illiade ou le poème de la force," eventually everyone pays, spiritually if not materially: the glory and the futility are intertwined. Wilson reproduces this tragic structure impeccably, sometimes precisely by knowing when to work beyond and between Homer's lines.

There is a saving knowledge in the Iliad: that the varieties of human love persist in spite of the odds of life in war. At the conclusion of her 1985 poem "The Triumph of Achilles," Louise Glück narrates Achilles' decision to avenge Patroclus' death from the perspective of the emotionally stunted gods, who see the half-immortal Achilles as fatally weakened by his human part:

In his tent, Achilles

grieved with his whole being

and the gods saw

he was a man already dead, a victim

of the part that loved,

the part that was mortal.

The fragility and power of the "the part that love[s]" beats through Wilson's Iliad. This is a translation to read and keep reading.