

~ APPENDIX I ~

Iliads Compared

HOW, ONE ASKS, is this translation unique, capturing Homer more accurately, concisely, or sympathetically than other translations of note? Its uniqueness resides, first, in meter—the first and only translation of Homer into a twelve-syllable—i.e., dodecasyllabic or iambic hexametric—line. The meter resides midway between the customary ten-syllable line (iambic pentameter) and sometimes used “fourteener” (iambic heptameter). The pentameter, as noted, is often too short (entailing omissions from the Greek); the second, too long (inviting errancy). A twelve-syllable line, however, was not necessarily “chosen” as a compromise between the two or otherwise. In fact, it wasn’t chosen at all, but sooner emerged as the translation got under way—the twelve-syllables lines either naturally occurring or readily fashioned as such. The increase in measure, from ten to twelve syllables, allows a more polysyllabic rendering, combatting a marked monosyllabism of word or uneventfulness of phrase in the translation of polysyllabic Greek epic.

The polysyllabism of this translation is thus prosodically more faithful to or representative of the original. Incident to this quality, the translation archaizes, where necessary or advised, to convey a sense of Homer’s own archaic stylings (Homer archaic in his own time, c. 750 BC). In this sense, the translation purposefully departs from other recent, i.e., “modern,” translations, underscoring the work’s status as “classical” rather than—once again—“new.” Moreover, and as a matter of “optics,” I capitalize the first word of each line while using the papyrus font. The first signals poetry in the traditional sense; the second affords a quasi-Greek appearance. As Homer’s Greek unrolls in uniform and unerring dactylic hexameter, so does this translation offer resolute dodecasyllabics—no errant ten-, eleven-,

thirteen-, or fourteen-syllable lines mixed in (excepting possible error or inadvertence). Moreover, and as concerns fidelity of meaning, the dictates of meter play their part in effecting a compromise between what needs be said and what the meter will allow. The results are often unanticipated, if surprisingly inventive. It is, further, the panoply of poetic licenses that helps effectuate the compromise. The more disciplined the meter, the greater the license allowed. The freer the meter—or in its absence—the greater the adherence to the original expected. The point, in any event, remains that poetic versus prose translation renders meaning or sense—ideas, not words. The prescription hearkens back to antiquity.

The rendering of the opening lines of a lengthy poem is often the bellwether of what follows. As goes the opening, so goes the rest (the *Iliad* 16,593 lines). For an inquiry of this kind, one thus begins not *in medias res* but *ab initio*, focusing not on some purple or particularly favored passage, but on the inexorable beginning. Setting forth the original, I begin by translating as literally as possible. I next provide my verse translation (in Papyrus font) and briefly comment on those of Richmond Lattimore (1951), Robert Fitzgerald (1974), Robert Fagles (1990), and Emily Wilson (2023).



μῆνιν ἄειδε θεὰ Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος
 οὐλομένην, ἣ μυρὶ Ἀχαιοῖς ἄλγε’ ἔθηκε,
 πολλὰς δ’ ἰφθίμους ψυχὰς Ἄϊδι προΐαψεν
 ἡρώων, αὐτοὺς δὲ ἐλώρια τεῦχε κύνεσσιν
 οἰωνοῖσι τε δαῖτα Διὸς δ’ ἐτελείετο βουλή,
 ἐξ οὗ δὴ τὰ πρῶτα διαστήτην ἐρίσαντε
 Ἀτρεΐδης τε ἄναξ ἀνδρῶν καὶ δῖος Ἀχιλλεύς.

The wrath sing, goddess, of Peleides Achilles, (the) baneful (wrath), which placed pains a thousand-fold on the Achaeans. Many mighty souls of heroes to Hades it cast forth, but (the men) themselves prepared as prey for dogs and feast for birds. The plan of Zeus was being fulfilled, from the time the two first stood apart quarreling, Atreides king of men and divine Achilles.

*

SING, Goddess, the wrath of Peleus' son Achilles,
 The cause accursed of Achaean pains uncounted.
 Many a hero's mighty soul did it hurl down
 To Hell, the mighty themselves making meal for dogs
 And banqueting for birds. Thus Zeus' intent advanced 5
 From when the two contending parted first as foes,
 Agamemnon king of men and dread Achilles.

– Jeffrey Duban (2024) [57 words]

*

Sing, goddess, the anger **of** Peleus' son Achilles
and its devastation, which put pains thousandfold **upon the** Achaians,
 hurled **in** their multitudes **to the** house **of** Hades strong souls
of heroes, but gave their bodies **to be the** delicate feasting
of dogs, **of all** birds, **and the** will **of** Zeus was accomplished 5
since that time when first there stood in division **of** conflict
 Atreus' son the lord **of** men and brilliant Achilles.

– Richmond Lattimore (1951) [72 words]

Long the gold standard of Homeric translation, and subject to a 2011 sixtieth-year anniversary edition, Lattimore's *Iliad* effected a line-for-line correspondence between the Greek and English, while falling into a fairly consistent six-stress line. This latter feature occasioned reference to his *Iliad* as "dactylid," given that Homer's dactylic hexameter consists of six poetic feet with a weighted syllable at the start of each. However, line-for-line correspondence could result in "filler" or excessive monosyllabism, the tendency shown in bold, above.

*

Anger be now your song, immortal one,
 Akhilleus' anger, doomed and ruinous,
 that caused the Akhaians loss on bitter loss

and crowded brave souls into undergloom,
 leaving so many dead men—carrion 5
 for dogs and birds; and the will of Zeus was done.
 Begin it when the two men first contending
 broke with one another—
 the Lord Marshal
 Agamemnon, Atreus' son, and Prince Akhilleus.

– Robert Fitzgerald (1974) [65 words]

Fitzgerald's opening offers lines of ten or eleven syllables. The repetition of "anger," supposedly for emphasis, is uncalled for, and "doomed" is extraneous to the Greek ("ruinous" quite sufficing). Likewise the repetitious "loss on bitter loss" (no "bitter" in the Greek). "Crowded" (line 4) for Greek "cast forth" is dubious and unneeded as a matter of poetic license. "Brave souls" (line 5) for "brave souls of heroes" misses the thrust of the heroic evocation, and "leaving so many dead men" (line 5), with no Greek counterpart, is mere filler. "And the will of Zeus was done" connotes finality, while the Greek verb in question, in the imperfect tense, indicates continuous or ongoing past action, i.e., "the will of Zeus was being done." The imperfect indicates that the exercise of Zeus' will in the *Iliad* is but part of a greater exercise of will and purpose lying outside of the poem. The sense, highlighting the imperfect, is "the will of Zeus was here being done." Moreover, "for dogs and birds" and "and the will of Zeus was done" are inexpressively monosyllabic. "Begin it when" is both prosaic and vague as to antecedent. Finally, there is no excuse for "Lord Marshall / Agamemnon" instead of "Agamemnon, king of men," or "Prince Achilles" instead of "divine Achilles." No lord marshals or princes appear in Homer's original or in translations to date. Fitzgerald's locutions import an element of English medievalism, and even science fiction. Fitzgerald is elsewhere fond of un-homeric abstractions. See Jeffrey M. Duban, *The Lesbian Lyre: Reclaiming Sappho for the 21st Century* (Clairview Books, 2016), 467 (Fitzgerald abstracting the personified god "Hades" as "Lord of nightmare, Death").

*

Rage—Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles,
 murderous, doomed, that cost the Achaeans countless losses

hurling down to the house of Death so many sturdy souls,
 great fighters' souls, but made their bodies carrion,
 feasts for dogs and birds, 5
 and the will of Zeus was moving toward its end.
 Begin, Muse, when the two first broke and clashed,
 Agamemnon lord of men and brilliant Achilles.

– Robert Fagles (1990) [67 words]

This is not blank verse, or even approximate blank verse (as is Fitzgerald), but free verse—and too free at that. The repetitions of “rage” (line 1) and “souls” (lines 3-4) are gratuitous, and “murderous” for Gr. *oulomenēn* ‘accursed, baleful’ strikes a dubious note, to say nothing of the rendering “murderous, doomed” (line 2) (cf. Fitzgerald, above, “ruinous and doomed”). Rage might result in doom but is not itself “doomed.” “Cost” (line 2) in the alliterative “cost the Achaeans countless losses” imparts a mercantile flavor. “Caused” is the better word (in Greek, “placed upon”). The “house of Death” (line 3) is an unhomeric abstraction. “House of Hades” is traditional, accurate, and preferable. We halt our analysis with “feast for dogs and birds,” as limping half lines are foreign to Homeric verse-making in which every line is hexametrically complete. Such a line alerts the reader to the free-for-all that Fagles’ free verse intends. See Duban, *The Lesbian Lyre*, 433–435, 480–485, 504–505.

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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, 5
 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 . . .

– Emily Wilson (2023) [60 words]

We begin, as does Wilson, with “cataclysmic” as translation for Gr. *oulomenēn* ‘destructive, baleful, harmful, deadly’. While the war itself was antiquity’s greatest cataclysm, Achilles’ wrath, however great, was not itself cataclysmic. Initial overstatement is also apparent in Wilson’s *Odyssey*, where *andra . . . polutropon* ‘the man of many turns’ is translated “a complicated man.” There is nothing complicated about Odysseus. He is simply an Athena-assisted survivalist, consummately lying and dissimulating his way through every difficulty. “A complicated man” is modernist affect. So, too, “cataclysmic” in Wilson’s *Iliad*—a self-made overstatement calling attention to itself.

The translation misses the adversative pairing of “souls” (line 4) and “men” (line 5). The sense is that the souls of men were hurled to Hades, but the men themselves (i.e., the corpses) became prey, etc. “Glorious Achilles” (line 9) being accurate and entirely fit, one wonders at “great Achilles” (line 2). Achilles is not so designated in the Greek, and if he is properly “glorious,” there is no point in calling him “great.” The same applies to “great Agamemnon” (line 8), greatness subsumed in “lord of men.” The added “great” is in both cases gratuitous with a line-flattening effect. The repetitious “so many (line 4) and “so the plan” (line 6) was avoidable, especially as the Greek simply says “many,” indicating quantum enough. The opening of Wilson’s *Iliad* further suffers from an abundance of prepositions (“of” six times), articles (“the” six times), and repeated monosyllabic adverbs (“so” two times), collectively constituting 23 percent of the whole; this in contrast to my using “of” three times and “the” four times; collectively 12 percent of the whole.

It is further noted that Fitzgerald and Fagles were professors of English for whom Greek was an avocation, their grasp of Homeric language and its conventions variously assessable. Finding their own English tillage either exhausted or at length uninviting, they turned to the harvesting of Classics as a putatively more fruitful endeavor. However resourceful as poets of their kind, they thus worked at a remove from the original Greek and its nuances, doubtless relying on already published translations or—as they variously avow—on the prose renderings or coaching of classicist friends. The rationale for their doings has been that classicists, however knowing of source languages,

are by nature scholars sooner than poets. Enter the “poet-translator” who, knowing no or little Greek, is likely, by virtue of poetic bent, to better the classicist-translator. Greekless translators of Sappho and the lyric poets have operated under the same premise. The lay reader, encountering this phenomenon, stands dismayed. Then again, and as shown by the above comparisons, a Ph.D. in Greek does not of itself assure felicity.