

BOOK REVIEW

The Odyssey. By HOMER, Trans. BARRY B. POWELL. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. xxi + 459. Paper, \$16.95. ISBN 978-0-19-98288-9.

Barry B. Powell, well known to myth teachers as the author of the popular textbook *Classical Myth*, now in its 8th edition (Pearson/Prentice Hall 2014), has also authored the volume *Homer* in the series “Blackwell Introductions to the Classical World” (2nd ed., Wiley/Blackwell 2007); *Writing and the Origins of Greek Literature* (Cambridge 2002); and *Writing: Theory and History of the Technology of Civilization* (Wiley/Blackwell 2009). In the latter two books Powell argues that the Greek alphabet was invented to record literature, perhaps specifically for recording the Homeric poems. He has spent his career thinking and writing about Greek myth, Archaic Greece, and the Homeric poems, so an English rendering of them by his hand is particularly welcome.

Powell’s translation of the *Odyssey* appears soon after his *Iliad* (Oxford, 2014) and follows the same format: a foreword by Ian Morris (who also wrote the foreword to Powell’s *Iliad* and was co-author, with Powell, of *The Greeks: History, Culture, and Society*, Pearson/Prentice Hall 2006); a brief Preface; several maps; a timeline; a lengthy introduction; the translation itself with occasional footnotes and two or three plates of illustrations per book of the epic; a short bibliography; and a glossary of names with pronunciation guide.

In the preface, after discussing the origin of his nearly life-long love of Homer and Archaic Greece, Powell tackles head-on the question that greets every new translator of Homer: why another new translation? Powell’s direct and honest response is that, while there are many translations of the Homeric poems by others, they had not yet been translated by *him*: “here was a chance to put into English what the Greek had come to mean to *me*.” (xv) His translation is thus the distillation of his lifetime of reading, loving, and thinking about Homer, and his attempt to convey that to a modern reader.

The introduction covers much the same general ground as the introduction to his *Iliad* translation: Powell discusses the historical and cultural background of the Homeric poems; summarizes the history of “Homeric Question” and the

work of Parry and Lord on oral-formulaic composition, and his theory about the Homeric origin of the Greek alphabet; and briefly discusses the history of the text and suggests the inadequacy of an alphabetic text in representing a work originally intended to be performed orally.

Powell follows the practice found in many recent English translations, by rendering Homer's Greek in an English that comes across as slightly versified, not prose but not too 'poetic'—with "a rough five-beat line"—in which he strives for "flexibility within accuracy." (35) He says, "My focus is on the meaning of Homer's words and how they would sound today in contemporary English." (35) The result is a translation that is fluid, readable, and easily comprehensible in a modern English idiom, without lapsing too much into contemporary colloquialisms:

Then the shrewd Telemachos replied:
 "Eurymachos and you other proud suitors, I will not beg
 these things any more from you nor speak of them,
 for now the gods know all about it, as do all the Achaeans.
 But come now, give me a swift ship and twenty companions
 who will help me complete my journey there and back." (2. 201-206)

Preferences in translations always come down to taste and what a reader is looking for in a translation; likewise, a translator has to make choices. Powell has chosen to err on the side of readability without sacrificing too much of the meaning of the Greek, but at the same time sacrificing much of the sheer strangeness, artificiality, and difficulty of Homer's Greek, so that in this regard his translation doesn't try to recreate the *experience* of reading the original text so much as to convey its basic meaning as well as something of its energy and flow.

By his own assertion Powell's rendering of names more or less follows the practice of *The Homer Encyclopedia* (Wiley/Blackwell 2011): better-known personal names, and all geographical names, are given in their more familiar—to English-speaking readers—Latinized forms, while lesser-known ones are given as more literal transliterations from Greek. The effect is idiosyncratic and inconsistent, and occasionally jarring: thus we have Achilles, Nausicaä, and Ajax; but Kirkê, Alkinoös, and Aigisthos. Ithaca but Skylla; Lacedaemon but Klytaimnestra.

The illustrations, mainly of ancient vase paintings, sculptures, and wall paintings, have been chosen to illustrate characters, scenes, or customs described in the books which they accompany. The illustrations are all reproduced in black

and white; this is also the practice for most of the illustrations of ancient art in Powell's myth textbook, where color plates are generally reserved for reproductions of more modern paintings based on classical themes.

Powell's translation is appropriate for general readers, since it is written in an engaging style and presents the major issues needed for reading the poem intelligently without overwhelming the reader with scholarship and detailed footnotes. It should also be particularly appealing to teachers already using his *Classical Myth*, to give students a version of Homer reflecting the same overall sensibility and perspective on the myths and their place in literature and history as found in his textbook. Powell's *Odyssey* is a welcome addition to the pantheon of recent Homer translations.

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