

BOOK REVIEW

The Odyssey. Translated by BARRY B. POWELL. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. xxi + 459. Paper, \$29.95. ISBN 978-0-19-992588-9.

The fact that the poems of Homer have been translated so often—more than 130 times, as Powell points out in his introduction—makes it easy to wonder why new translations are warranted. Is each rendition of Homer's poetry different enough from its predecessors to make the reader experience the poems uniquely? Fortunately, Powell's new edition of the *Odyssey* distinguishes itself not only by means of its faithful and powerful translation but also with its extensive footnotes, images, and introduction, elements which allow for a more thorough understanding of the epic.

The translation is in general a joy to read. In the introduction, Powell describes Homer's style as "simple, direct, and sensual," (35) and Powell's style is all of these things, too. I include as an example a passage that is unremarkable in the original Greek but nevertheless emblematic of the readability of Powell's translation: "There she found the proud suitors. They were taking their pleasure, / playing board games in front of the doors, sitting on the skins / of cattle that they themselves had slaughtered. Heralds / and busy assistants mixed wine with water for them / in large bowls, and others wiped the tables with porous sponges / and set them up, while others set out meats to eat in abundance." (1.100–105) Powell translates the Greek fairly literally while utilizing more English-friendly sentence structure and punctuation. He eschews Homeric extended parataxis, breaking long sentences into shorter sentences and adding variation with dashes and subordination, while his loose five-beat rhythm pleasantly captures the flexibility of Homeric hexameters.

Unfortunately, there are a few instances where the translation is either too vague or somewhat inappropriate in connotation or tone. For example, the description of Odysseus' fatigue as "awful" (5.453) lacks specificity (the original *δυσπινέος* of 5.493 connotes the difficulty and toil which so epitomize Odysseus' experiences), while the crew's dining on "flesh" (9.151) is an accurate rendition of the word *κρέα* (9.162), to be sure, but one that can have troubling implications. My least favorite of Powell's choices is the rendering of "well-greaved" as "who

wear fancy shin guards,” as it lacks the gravity of the original epithet. There are some grammatical ambiguities and errors, as well; indeed, the beginning of Book 9 contains a few in short succession, where “Likewise did Kirke ... *tried* to hold me back in her halls ...” (9.29–30) and where “there is nothing sweeter than one’s homeland and one’s parents, even if *he* lives far away ...” (9.32–33). In Book 6, Nausicaa has a friend who is “the daughter of Dymas, famed for his ships and *of a like age to Nausicaa*” (6.21–22). This line seems grammatically to ascribe epithets that originally had two different referents to one individual, Dymas.

Nonetheless, these infelicities of grammar and word choice are few. All in all, Powell’s *Odyssey* is captivating; through Powell’s sharp lens, for example, I found myself breathless at the end of Book 5 after experiencing Odysseus’ shipwreck and struggle to survive in the open water. It is in the extensive introduction, notes, and maps, however, that Powell’s edition is truly remarkable. The running notes, which cover everything from historical context and linguistic features to narrative inconsistencies, are not always helpful to an understanding of the text, since they sometimes give overly extensive information about tangential matters. Yet even when these notes are not necessarily helpful, they are interesting; everyone from the seasoned scholar to the beginning student will find something appealing in them. The notes are especially helpful in Book 11, where they explain the significance of each character in Odysseus’ catalogue of ghosts. Here, Powell errs on the side of too much information (as, for example, in his note at 11.282 regarding certain elements of the Chloris myth), but surely too much information is preferable to too little. Likewise, the numerous images of ancient art drawn from the *Odyssey*, while not explicitly relevant to an appreciation of Homer’s text, provide an understanding of the artistic context and reception of Homer’s work while simultaneously presenting the reader with something interesting to look at. These images are black and white, no doubt to preserve the edition’s affordability, but of fair quality nonetheless.

And yet it is the very wealth of information given in this edition of the *Odyssey* that leads to the greatest point of confusion: who is the intended audience? Students unfamiliar with Homer’s epic may be overwhelmed by the detailed information given in the introduction and in the notes; scholars may be disappointed by the way in which Powell oversimplifies complex issues. This is particularly apparent in the introduction, where Powell simultaneously belabors the Homeric question *and* manages to answer that question unsatisfactorily, privileging his own argument and, in doing so, making unsubstantiated claims about, e.g., the poem’s audience. Thus the comprehensive nature of Powell’s scholarly

commentary, though undoubtedly meant to make this edition more appealing and accessible to readers with a wide range of familiarity with the *Odyssey*, becomes a somewhat double-edged sword.

Overall, Powell's translation of Homer well deserves a place on the bookshelf beside all the others. Its readability, accessibility, and erudition make it a welcome addition to Oxford University Press's catalogue of academic texts.

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