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The *Kalevala* Melody for an English *Odyssey*
Stephen Pittman '23

I chose to translate lines 469 to 498 of Book 8 of the *Odyssey* into English verse. The meter I use in the translation is trochaic tetrameter, the meter used in the Finnish epic, the *Kalevala*. I was inspired mainly to use that meter because of the beauty it adopts when performed in the Finnish language to a famous, traditional melody for it. I have only known this melody as “the *Kalevala* Melody,” and it can be found under that name easily on the internet, with some performances of the epic poem in that melody available on video.¹ I became also inspired to use this meter because of precedents for it in English poetry, such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s *Song of Hiawatha*, which was itself inspired by the *Kalevala*.

Most importantly, though, for my reasoning to choose this way of translating, was my desire to evoke the same sort of sound and emotion that the immersive poetic recitations that ancient bards of the Homeric epics produced. Of course, they used a completely different kind of meter, with different musical elements, among many other things; therefore, the color of those ancient poetic recitations could not have possibly been reproduced in what I have done, for, after all, I have made a translation, in a completely different language with its own poetic tendencies and limitations. Nonetheless, the immersive, trance-like singing of Finnish oral poetry is possibly similar to the experience ancient listeners had when they heard the oral performances of Homeric epic. Thus, I hopefully can reproduce a bit of what that might have felt like in performing my English translation according to that Finnish melody.

In keeping with my attempt to evoke this sense of a traditional poetic oral performance, I specifically chose the scene from the *Odyssey* Book 8 in which Demodocus begins his own

poetic oral performance for the third time in that book. Such a topic is not only directly pertinent to the experiences I am trying to replicate by having Odysseus' praise for poets and the actual act of performing referenced, but I wanted to translate a scene in which a bard is being encouraged to perform. This kind of encouragement would probably be a common experience for bards across cultures with similar poetic traditions. The *Kalevala* itself begins with exhortations to a brother to begin singing together with the singer.

The translation, due to these highly limiting stylistic choices, is incredibly free, and in no way literal, and, in some cases, barely faithful to the Greek lines themselves. It is faithful throughout in meaning and in events and order, but much detail is omitted and some material added in order to fit the meter and keep the rhyming scheme, both of which are not perfect themselves. I would thus consider the translation as "paraphrasing," at best. This is very different from translations I normally produce or seek out to read, so it felt rather uncomfortable being so liberal with the original meanings of the words and even more so in adding parts that cannot be gathered at all really from the original text in a literal sense.

My choice to write in rhyming couplets was mainly due to the fact that my chosen meter limited the length of my lines, so I aimed to spread each line of the original poem across two. Thus each couplet roughly corresponds with one line in the original poem, although not at all perfectly.

Translation:

By the throne of Alkinoös,
Sat the clever Odysseus.

There was food and wine abounding,
Ere the poet's lyre was sounding.

Then a herald did come nearer,
Leading in that trusted singer.

Honored poet, Demodocus,
Sat in a great place of focus.

Then Odysseus was cutting,
Tender pieces of pork, shining.

Told he to the herald, serving,
"Give the poet this deserving.

Even though I'm full of sorrow,
I embrace this poet fellow.

For of all the classes of men, Poets
are placed high amongst them.

By the Muse they are beloved.
Skill in singing on them she shed."

So the herald fed the singer,
And all ate their fill of
dinner.

Then Odysseus the clever,
Spoke all these words to the singer:

“O Demodocus, I will say,
You all mortals greatly outweigh.

By the Muse or by Apollo,
Surely you learned how the tales go.

For you tell the stories so well,
Of what fate upon the Greeks fell.

How at Troy they suffered and won,
You tell like you saw it happen.

So now sing me of the wood horse,
Which passed into Troy without force.

By Odysseus it was planned,
That the horse by armed men be manned.

Thus the Greeks did sack the city,
By deceiving Troy so slyly.

If you could recount this story,
Just as they achieved this glory,

I will speak to all, declaring,
That the gods inspire your singing.”

Endnotes

1. Here is a link to a video of a full performance of the first rune of the *Kalevala*, sung in Finnish to the *Kalevala* Melody and accompanied with kantele playing:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XRdCsEVfd4I>.