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Caroline Alexander,
_The Iliad: A New Translation by Caroline Alexander._


According to Samuel Johnson, when Alexander Pope first set about translating Homer’s _Iliad_, “he was for a time timorous and uneasy; had his nights disturbed by dreams of long journeys through unknown ways, and wished, as he said, ‘that somebody would hang him.’” Such apprehensive feelings are unsurprising, given Homer’s towering genius and the monumental literary and cultural significance of the poem itself. Whatever anxiety translators of the _Iliad_ must feel today is likely to be compounded by the simple fact that the field is now more crowded than ever. A plethora of recent translations confronts the reader seeking an English _Iliad_; over a dozen have been published since Richmond Lattimore’s well known edition of 1951.

Those who take on the task of translating Homer tend to be guided by one of two basic approaches. Some seek to capture in self-consciously poetic language the strange and mesmerizing power of Homer’s Greek. In their view, the _Iliad_’s violence, grim brutality, and existential drama are best brought to life in English by a radical departure from Homer’s traditional epic phraseology. Others eschew this approach and seek instead to reproduce Homer in translations that stick very close to his actual words. Robert Fagles, for example, takes rather generous liberties with Homer’s language to achieve an English version that is vibrant, expressive, and marked by a dynamic rhythm; likewise Stanley Lombardo and Stephen Mitchell drop traditional epithets and occasionally even patronymics to rework Homer’s uniquely epic style into vehicles that are contemporary and colloquial in tone, yet highly readable; still others, including most recently Barry Powell and Peter Green, follow in Lattimore’s path while striving to render Homer’s actual words with an even greater degree of literal fidelity.

Caroline Alexander’s _Iliad_ falls squarely in the latter category. Her translation follows the Greek text of M. L. West in a line-by-line verse translation. In a brief introduction geared toward the general reader, she summarizes the poem’s plot before covering standard topics such as Troy’s place in Late Bronze Age Greece, the archaeology of the city, possible theories for the collapse of Mycenaean civilization,
and the poem's linguistic origin in Aeolic Greek. Related subjects are not overlooked: the amalgamated language of the poem, the oral tradition, the rediscovery of writing in the 8th century BC, the Homeric Question.

Also included in this edition: a single two page map of the *Iliad’s* geography; four single page genealogical tables of the Titan and Olympian gods and the houses of Atreus, Aeacus and Priam; nine pages of clear and concise notes on the text; and a four page section of selected further reading. Unfortunately, there is no glossary of characters, a worthwhile feature that is found in the editions of Lattimore, Fagles, Lombardo, Mitchell, Powell and Green.

Alexander’s *Iliad* is marked most conspicuously by a nearly word-for-word adherence to the Greek. In a prefatory note she states that she has “tried to carve the English as close to the bone of the Greek as possible.” Indeed, a cursory glance reveals that she has often cut beyond the actual bone and into the marrow. While she follows the Greek with the scrupulous reliability of a crib, her translation—usefully following the exact line numbering of the original text—consistently maintains a straightforward simplicity that flows with an unaffected grace. There is no superfluous enhancement, elaboration, or embellishment anywhere in sight. For classics instructors who wish to assign to students a text that captures unerringly what Homer says, this translation will be an ideal choice.

A comparison of Alexander’s text with other translations is instructive. At 1.4, Lattimore has “but gave their bodies to be the delicate feasting / of dogs;” Mitchell has “leaving their naked flesh to be eaten by dogs;” Lombardo has “And left their bodies to rot as feasts / For dogs.” In Alexander this is simply “and rendered their bodies prey for the dogs” – clearly the most precise rendering of the Greek, since in Homer there is no “delicate feasting,” no “naked flesh,” and no “bodies to rot.”

At 1.8, Lattimore translates the so-called epic question thus: “What god was it then set them together in bitter collision?” With his typical panache, Lombardo has “Which of the immortals set these two / At each other’s throats?” Powell comes a little closer to the Greek with “Which god was it who set them to quarrel?” Likewise Green, who has “Which of the gods was it brought them into contention?” Yet all ultimately miss the mark for strict accuracy, as Alexander renders “Which of the gods, then, set these two together in conflict, to fight?” This is exactly what the Greek says. She has taken pains to bring out the force of ἄρ, which only Lattimore includes; she renders the dual pronoun σφωε as “these two,” which only appears in Lombardo; most notably, she alone brings out the full force of ἔριδι ξυνέηκε μάχεσθαι, where all four rival translators have opted to elide or compress the meanings of the individual Greek words. In the Greek there is no “bitter collision” (Lattimore) and no
men who are “at each other’s throats” (Lombardo). There is as well something more than a simple “quarrel” (Powell) or “contention” (Green). (This brief analysis is of course undertaken simply to highlight Alexander’s modus operandi and not to cast a disapproving light on what are otherwise excellent translations.)

Take up this new Iliad at any page, compare a line with the Greek of Homer and it will be seen that Alexander consistently follows the original text with a nearly photographic fidelity. Throughout her translation she also favors an English syntax that is more natural than the awkward inversions occasionally found in Lattimore. For example, at 1.18-19 Lattimore has “to you may the gods grant who have their homes on Olympos / Priam’s city to be plundered.” Alexander writes “may the gods who have their homes on Olympus grant you / to plunder the city of Priam.” She also avoids the sporadic pitfalls that plague those who attempt Homer in a contemporary English idiom. There are no jarring departures from the heroic register, no unfortunate improprieties such as Mitchell’s “you son of a bitch” (Achilles to Hector) or Lombardo’s “You sissy, curly-haired pimp of a bowman!” (Diomedes to Paris).

In the end, the most obvious question raised by such a directly literal translation may simply be, does it work? Here the individual tastes and desires of different readers will inevitably vary. Perhaps a translation that comes so thoroughly close to Homer may be more than modern readers can tolerate, and they may seek out a version with a more colorful or colloquial feel. Yet this seems an ungracious observation, since this is an altogether outstanding translation. There can be little doubt that it will easily find favor among those who long to get as close as possible in English to the original Greek of the Iliad.

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