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Homer,
*The Iliad; translation, introduction and notes by Barry Powell.*


and

Homer,
*The Iliad: A New Translation by Peter Green.*

Cloth (ISBN 978-0-520-28141-7) $29.95;

These two new translations of the *Iliad* are accessible and engaging, with supporting material that will be useful to students and general readers. Though I cannot say that either is better in every respect than the other fine translations of the *Iliad* I have used (by Lattimore, Lombardo, and Fagles), both have qualities and features that may make them more immediately intelligible to students and other first-time readers of the poem.

Both translators have much in common: both have retired from distinguished careers as classicists; Powell is well known as a scholar of Homer, Green as an ancient historian who has published several translations of Greek and Roman poetry already. Both see these new translations as the culmination of a life-long fascination with the *Iliad* and include brief personal accounts that show their passion and affection for the poem, providing at least a partial answer to the question: why, besides profit to the presses, are we getting two new translations of the *Iliad* now, when there are already excellent translations available? The concern and interest of both translators are manifest everywhere in these editions, as is the careful attention of both presses to production quality, with layouts that are reader-friendly and texts that are almost typo-free.

A particularly useful feature of these translations is the short notes explaining challenging aspects of the text printed on the same page, making for immediate
clarification. Both translators share a good sense of what requires comment to be intelligible to readers, and neither overwhelms with excessive glossing. Powell’s notes are more abundant and also address issues of geography or mythology that are not strictly necessary for understanding, but will probably be of interest to particular groups of readers. Green includes helpful appendices: a forty-page book-by-book synopsis of the poem and a glossary that is much more detailed than others, as well as a sizeable bibliography and index. Powell provides, in addition to a short but well-organized bibliography and a brief index/pronunciation guide, eight maps and over fifty black and white images, mostly of works of Greek and Roman art on Trojan themes, a welcome addition in our more visually oriented age, though not as engaging as higher quality color images would be – which would, however, probably make the book too costly.

Both introductions are shorter than the introductions to other major contemporary translations of the *Iliad*, and some may miss the more detailed discussions and literary interpretations of Martin, Murnaghan, and Knox that accompany the Lattimore, Lombardo, and Fagles translations respectively. Green’s serviceable introduction includes a very brief plot summary and overview of the larger Trojan war narrative, and a brief discussion of the historical and social context, including mention of the oral tradition that produced the poem. Powell’s introduction offers a fuller look at the background of the poem, including discussion of the text, oral theory, the alphabet, and the historical context as well as a very brief plot summary, but offers relatively little literary interpretation. Though it is a lively survey of central issues, Powell sometimes asserts his own views as though they are facts: e.g., “Both poems (*Iliad & Odyssey*) are by the same man – Homer - as tradition always maintained.” (p. 5) This comment comes shortly after another acknowledging that there is considerable debate in Homeric scholarship about virtually everything, but readers without any background in this scholarship may still not recognize just how very controversial this claim is. This would not make me any less inclined to assign the translation to students, but users of the book without some grounding in Homeric scholarship should be cautious about assuming that all of Powell’s assertions are widely accepted.

The translations themselves are generally successful: clear, readable, and accurate. Both translators acknowledge the importance of the oral performance of Homeric poetry. Powell supports his conviction with readings of selections from his translation on a webpage (www.oup.com/us/powell) that I recommend to people considering using the translation. The recordings give a good sense of the rather matter-of-fact and self-consciously un-poetic tone of Powell’s energetic and
Green professes himself a follower of Lattimore, both in his desire to get close to the original in all aspects, and in his adoption of the same values espoused by Matthew Arnold in his famous essays *On Translating Homer*, viz. rapidity, plainness of thought, directness of expression, and nobility of concept. He also follows Lattimore’s basic metrical principles for representing the hexameter, 12-17 syllable lines. Green follows the OCT text closely, producing a virtual line-by-line translation, a convenient feature that I have also appreciated in the Lattimore translation. Most books of Powell’s translation actually contain fewer lines than the corresponding OCT book, and his lines and sentences are often shorter. He uses a “rough five-beat line” and espouses a “simple, direct, and sensual” style and the principle of “flexibility within accuracy,” (p. 38) arguing that trying to sound poetic or beautiful or clever would “falsify the plain style of the original.” (p. 39).

Both translators are admirably concise, typically using fewer words than Lattimore and significantly fewer lines than Fagles or Lombardo. This alone may make them more accessible to students. It also can make the poem more forceful and concrete.

Despite these good qualities, to my ear, admittedly conditioned by many years of teaching and therefore rereading Lattimore, Powell’s translation in particular can sometimes sound less emotionally affecting. For example, here is Andromache talking to Hector in the Lattimore translation:

> Hektor, thus you are father to me, and my honoured mother, you are my brother, and you it is who are my young husband.
> Please take pity upon me then, stay here on the rampart, that you may not leave your child an orphan, your wife a widow.
>
> *(Il. 6.429-432)*

Here is Powell’s translation of that same passage:

> But Hector, you are my father and my revered mother and my brother. You are my strong husband. So come, have pity and stay here at the tower so that you do not make your son an orphan and your wife a widow.
>
> *(p. 174)*

Though there are fewer unnecessary words in Powell’s translation, the use of repeated “and” that he uses to represent various Homeric conjunctions (*καί, ἤδέ, δέ, τέ*)
makes lines that are fluid and fluent in the Greek sound dull and wooden. Green translates concisely but more movingly:

Hektor, you are my father, my lady mother,
my brother too, as well as my strong young husband --
I beg you, show some compassion, stay here on the wall,
don’t make your son an orphan, your wife a widow!   (p. 130)

Nonetheless, Lattimore’s “take pity” is more eloquent than Powell’s “have pity” and much better than Green’s trite “show some compassion,” and Lattimore’s “leave” in the final line more affecting than Powell and Green’s “make,” so in my view neither translation clearly improves on Lattimore in representing a speech that for many is a highlight of the poem.

There are, however, places where Powell’s plain-spokenness can be very effective. Hektor’s speech in response to Andromache ends in the Lattimore translation:

But may I be dead and the piled earth hide me under before I
hear you crying and know by this that they drag you captive. (Il. 6.464-5)

Powell translates the same lines with eight fewer words:

But let the heaped-up earth hide me, dead,
before I hear you cry as they drag you away.   (p. 175)

I like the strong language of “hide me, dead,” and its emphatic position. The simple syntax of the second line also conveys the crucial point effectively. Almost as concise, but less effective here is Green:

But may the heaped-up earth obliterate my corpse
before I hear your cries, see them dragging you away. (p. 131)

Green’s “obliterate my corpse” is weak compared to “hide me, dead.” The second line of Green’s translation also introduces an idea of seeing that is not in the original without clearly surpassing Powell’s simpler solution.

In another passage where strong emotion of a very different kind is represented, Lattimore translates:
You wine sack, with a dog’s eyes, with a deer’s heart. Never
once have you taken courage in your heart to arm with your people
for battle, or go into ambuscade with the best of the Achaians.
No, for in such things you see death.  

Green gives:

You wine-sodden wretch, dog-faced, deer-hearted, not once
have you dared to arm yourself for battle with your troops,
or joined in ambush with the Achaian chieftains!
Oh no, such things spell death to you.

Green's last three lines are notably more concise than Lattimore’s, dispensing with
the unfamiliar “ambuscade,” but I find “wine sodden wretch” not as memorable or
vivid as “wine sack” for οἶνοβαρές, though possibly more intelligible to an inexpe-
rrienced reader.

Powell’s translation is also concise but more pedestrian still:

Drunkard, dog-eyes, with a deer’s heart -- you don’t arm with
your people and go out to war, nor dare in your heart to go on
an ambush with the best of the Achaeans. To you that is death! (p. 48)

No student will ever have to ask what “drunkard” means (unlike “wine sack”), but the
clarity gained doesn’t entirely make up for the loss of color. I also miss in Powell’s
translation the forcefulness of Lattimore’s “Never once.” Green’s “not once” is only
slightly more tepid. I found much the same thing wherever I compared the transla-
tions; I often found things I liked better than Lattimore (or Lombardo or Fagles) in
one or both of the two translations, but usually combined with other things I liked
less well.

There are some other issues of taste. In particular, Powell consistently trans-
lates aegis as “goatskin fetish.” While this may be a helpful reminder of some of the
peculiarities in Homer that we may be too quick to normalize, the weird phrase
occurs distractingly often and becomes tiresome. I prefer Green’s solution, which is
to use the word “aegis” in the text with a helpful footnote at its first occurrence and
inclusion in the glossary in the back for those who missed or have forgotten that first
use. Another oft-repeated translation that strikes the wrong note is Powell’s “with
fancy shinguards” (e.g., p. 135) for εὐκνήμιδες, as though the Achaeans were some-
what foppish soccer players. Though our contemporaries are more likely to know what a shin-guard is than a greave (as most others translate), the athletic context is too familiar (to me at least), while the adjective “fancy” seems to poke fun. Green, at the first occurrence of εὐκνήμιδες in the Iliad (1.17), translates “well-greaved,” the standard translation, which seems more dignified if duller; he does not include a clarifying note in situ here, which might be a problem for some readers. For his part, Green occasionally uses dated slang expressions such as “every man jack of them” (p. 31) (too much for the Greek σύμπαντας) or British English that may not be effective with the typical American student or reader.

The critical question for me - will these translations stimulate more interest in the Iliad, even inspiring some students to learn Greek? - I unfortunately cannot yet answer and will have to try them in my classes in order to see how well they work with that audience. I do think that Powell’s in particular may be worth trying, in hopes that his concision and relatively simple vocabulary and syntax, and his supplementary material, will create students more engaged than ever in this exciting, moving, and memorable, but very long, poem.

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