

## REVIEW ARTICLE • BESPREKINGSARTIKEL

Richard Whitaker, *The Iliad of Homer: A Southern African Translation*. Cape Town: New Voices, 2012. Pp. 528. ISBN: 978-1-920411-97-8. R180.00.

The publication of Professor Whitaker's translation has been eagerly awaited. It has been, as the very first sentence in his Preface proclaims, 'a labour of love' and has been widely trailed in readings, seminars and lectures in Europe as well as in South Africa. This international hinterland is important, but it was initially the South African context that inspired the work. Whitaker's 'love' is for Homer's text and for the possibilities that it opens up for the students that he teaches. To actualise that through translation also invokes his love for his country and its richness of linguistic energy, past, present and future. Both aspects of this 'love' are informed by Whitaker's experience of encountering Homer for the first time as a teenager in an English translation. This was the prose translation by E.V. Rieu, first published by Penguin in 1950 and reprinted many times. Whitaker went on to study Ancient Greek at the University of the Witwatersrand and in his professional career taught the *Iliad* both in the original language and in translation (Preface p. 7). This dual teaching was important in developing his sensitivity to the power translations have to awaken literary sensibility and to communicate insights into the relationships and contrasts between the cultures of the Homeric world and of modern readers. His reading of the Greek text and its 'Englishing' led to dissatisfaction with the Anglo-American English translations that predominated. He felt that the language of these was often remote from the lived experience of Southern African readers and audiences and that this served to deny the many resonances that Homer offered to their situation and heritage. Furthermore, he considered that Southern African English had developed 'a vocabulary and register of its own that deserved to be reflected in poetic translation' (p. 7).

The result is a translation that is also important for the paramaterial that accompanies it. In addition to commenting on the context and aims of his translation, Whitaker has provided an Introduction to the poem, in a format designed to be attractive to student readers and to the general public. He starts by setting out briefly why Homer's epic is still important

and how modern readers might respond to it directly. His opening statement that 'the millennia between Homer and ourselves seem to dissolve, and we recognise that the men and women in his epic are people like ourselves' of course underplays the differences in religion, society, values and environment, not just between ancient and modern but also between the different modern contexts and societies in which the poem is read. However, Whitaker is skilful in engaging readers' attention by setting out right at the beginning the points at which different sensibilities *can* meet – the baby's fear of his father's military helmet; the building of sandcastles on the beach; the great themes of anger, folly and ignorance. Whitaker then offers a useful summary of the individual books, with discussion of what Homer takes from myth and what is omitted. This is followed by a more demanding discussion of what Whitaker characterises as Symbolic Narrative (pp. 42-52) – that is, the poetic communication of the temporalities within and without the poem. He also introduces some of the major themes of the poem, notably its exploration of the characteristics of the hero and the treatment of the troubling relationship between fate and human action.

The second part of the Introduction discusses the translation itself. Whitaker is attracted by the relationship between translations of Homer and the development of literary traditions, for which he cites the introduction and content of George Steiner's *Homer in English* (1996). Whitaker situates the issue a little differently, by asking what opportunities the current state of South Africa's languages and cultures offer to the translator. There are several steps in his argument. Although he concedes that English is marked by its history as a colonial language, he points to its current role as the most common *second* language amongst all language-speakers in South Africa ('English is certainly the closest the country comes to having a common language', p. 53). This raises interesting questions about the differences between a widely-used but subaltern language and a hegemonic language. Whitaker chooses not to pursue that aspect (although he could have pointed out that any language used as the medium of translation of an Ancient Greek text might in terms of its relationship to the ante-text be viewed as a subaltern language, rather than as necessarily an appropriating one). What he does do is to explore the variety of Englishes that make up world usage, pointing out how Southern African English is 'studded with words from other local languages' (p. 53) and how this is especially important as a counter to the apartheid years in which languages and cultures were kept apart.

Whitaker's distinctive claim is that the mingling that has taken place has always occurred at the level of vernacular speech (p. 54), although it is

progressively becoming embedded in the more official media. His example of TV as a medium in which 'characters will switch between English and Afrikaans, Zulu, Sotho, Xhosa or whatever language, often in the same sentence' does, however, appear to slide from a concept of linguistic exchange/hybridity into an example of multi-lingualism. Multi-lingualism as an aesthetic as well as a political practice has been notably explored by Yael Farber in her play *Molora* (published text 2008). Farber's play is a transposition of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and other responses to the myth of the house of Atreus into the context of contemporary South Africa (see further B. van Zyl Smit, 'Orestes and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission', *Classical Receptions Journal* 2.1 [2010] 114-35) and contains a rich collage of languages and excerpted translations.

Nevertheless, the thrust of Whitaker's argument is to propose the *Iliad* as a poetic site in which the concrete and metaphorical range and cultural force of a Southern African language that is in a phase of dynamic development can encounter Homeric concepts and practices and clarify them by relating them to elements of the emerging hybrid language. Whitaker judges that this both makes Homer more 'real' and gives the modern idiom a higher status. In justification he points out that Homeric Greek itself embodies a mix of linguistic elements (Ionic, Aeolic, Attic) and that Homer has sometimes been criticised through the centuries for including 'vulgar' elements, especially in the similes that extend the horizons of the poem to the agricultural and nature environments familiar to the ancient audiences of performance epic. Whitaker argues that it is this nexus that enables him to use Southern African English words 'to render Homeric Greek terms more precisely, or economically, than Standard English could' (p. 55). He gives some examples from the Dictionary of South African English. These include *lobola* (gifts of cattle as bride-price); *muti* as covering the multiple senses of the Homeric term *pharmakon*; *inyanga* (traditional healer or diviner, especially one specialising in herbalism) to render the Homeric *ietēr* or *ietros*. A second category of words is used not because of greater precision than is possible in Standard English, but because Whitaker expects the terms to make the Homeric text at once more familiar and more unfamiliar. So indigenous words are used to bring the text closer to the Southern African speech community (for instance, *amakhosi*/commanders; *kgotla*/assembly; *sloot*/ditch). At the same time, these also defamiliarise by providing a disjunctive voice and thus unsettling notions that the Standard English words that have been 'sanctioned by centuries of translation' (p. 57) in the belief that they provide an exact equivalent of the Homeric word. Where terms like *basileus* are concerned, Whitaker makes the further point that translating as 'chief' rather than as

'king' neatly undoes any appropriation of Homer to notions of monarchical power (and actually echoes the practice of some 18th to mid-19th century translators, p. 59). Whitaker provides a Glossary of the main Southern African words that he uses. This includes brief comments on linguistic derivation and will be especially useful to the non-Southern-African reader.

Whitaker also explains how he relates the oral tradition that underlay Homeric composition to that of African-language tradition, singling out the praise poem as the most relevant type of African oral composition, while also noting its differences (pp. 60-61). He cites passages from nineteenth-century Zulu praise poems that list the killings of enemy chiefs, proposing them as comparators to the catalogues of killings in the battle scenes of the *Iliad*. Then, in turn, he relates this to Nguni (mainly Xhosa and Zulu) oral praise poetry and to the Homeric concept of *kleos*. Thus *kudos* and *kleos* are translated not as 'glory' or 'fame' but as 'praise' or 'praises' (p. 62).

While recognising that the written/printed form brings its own requirements, Whitaker aims for his translation to give an 'impression of orality' (p. 63) and to this end has included equivalents for the Iliadic formulae used (for instance *anax andron Agamemnon* becomes *inkosi of men, Agamemnon*), although formulae are not replicated at every occurrence. He also retains the Homeric characteristic of repetition of passages. Both these decisions underlie his choice of poetry rather than prose for his translation and are conditioned by his experiments with rhythm and length of line. Whitaker rejected the long six-beat line in spite of its affinity with the Greek hexameter, and instead opted for a five-beat line which he describes as 'something like an iambic pentameter, but with frequent trochaic elements, to enhance the speed of the narrative' (p. 63). He concedes that this shorter line resulted in some compression, but looks to the increased 'speed and lightness' for compensation. He succeeded in keeping line correspondence with Homer's text, not just for poetic reasons but also (and perhaps primarily) in the hope that it would help teachers to guide students to references in secondary literature and in commentaries. This is, then, a translation created by a teacher, one who in the best Greek sense sees his role as contributing to the development of the wider community as well as to the individual students.

How, then, might Whitaker's achievement be evaluated and by whom? No colleague can read his translation without respect for his scholarship and his commitment to the endeavour. The work will surely enhance appreciation of how Classicists in South Africa are in their different ways contributing to critical debates on the development of education, ethics

and historical and cultural understanding in the new South Africa and beyond (the list of outstanding recent research and/or translations by classicists is a long one and far beyond the scope of this review, but would have to include work by Jo-Marie Claassen, John Hilton, Michael Lambert, Margaret Mezzabotta, Elke Steinmeyer and Betine van Zyl Smit).

Whitaker's translation and the decisions that underlie it will doubtless provoke comment from those for whom Southern African English is a language of daily use. Whitaker's choice of words to embed in the text has already attracted media attention; *Cape Argus Life* (Monday 19 November 2012) carried an article headlined 'Homer comes home to the Kraal' in which Esther Lewis describes how Whitaker 'writes about Priam's *impis*, panicking sheep in kraals and *inkosi* Agamemnon'. Whitaker's choice of Southern African terms (and those he decided not to introduce) should also stimulate discussion of the pedagogical outcomes and about the principles and practices that underlie the compilation of dictionaries and glossaries (an area of increasing interest for classicists; see for example, C.A. Stray [ed.], *Classical Dictionaries: Past, Present and Future*, 2010, which drives home the point that no choice or comment on derivation should be taken for granted).

As an 'outsider', I am not qualified to evaluate Whitaker's linguistic choices and his perceptions of cultural equivalence, but I am convinced that his translation is equally important outside its immediate South African context. Two aspects are especially significant. The first is his text's qualities of readability. The second (deriving from this) is its place in the field of global responses to Homer. First, for the reader (on the page or aloud, and so including listeners), Whitaker succeeds in his aim of communicating speed and lightness. Matthew Arnold might not have understood the South African imperatives that inspired the work, but he would surely have warmed to the vitality and directness of the narrative, speech and imagery. This is no leaden prose work that removes challenge and ambivalence in the interests of accessibility. Equally, the language never becomes bogged down in an attempt to 'elevate' the subject matter or to mimic archaism in the receiving language. It is, quite simply, a good read. Furthermore, it is a translation that does not duck the issues. Whitaker's version of the famous scene in Book 6 in which Hector's plumed helmet frightens his son drives home the disturbing intersection between family affection and the competitive values explicit in Trojan and subsequent societies:

[Hektor] rocked the boy  
in his arms, kissed him, and then said in prayer  
to father Zeus and all the other gods:

'Make my son like me the finest  
of the Trojans. Make him a strong warrior,  
inkosi over Troy; then they will say  
"The son outstrips the father" when  
he kills his enemy and brings home  
bloody spoils to please his mother's heart.'  
(Whitaker 6.473-81:179)

This provides a striking contrast with another recent translation by Anthony Verity (Oxford 2011):

He kissed his dear son and dandled him in his arms  
and spoke in prayer to Zeus and all the other gods:  
'Zeus and all you other gods, grant that this son of mine  
may be marked out above the Trojans, as I am, and be  
strong and brave as me, and may he rule Ilium by might:  
and may men one day say as he returns from battle, "This man  
is far better than his father." May he kill his enemy and  
bring home bloody spoils, and may his mother's heart be glad.'  
(Verity 6.474-81:102-03)

Verity's is a fine and scholarly translation which, in this passage, seeks to hold a balance between domesticating language ('dandled') and the rhythms of religious invocation ('grant that this son of mine'). But his lines slide into the inclusion of the mother's future feelings in the prayer without being specific that it is 'the bloody spoils' that will be crucial to the status of her son and so gladden her heart. There is a similar distancing in Lattimore's version (1951). The sense of Lattimore's and Verity's translations is accentuated by punctuation that divides the future violence and the connection with the mother's feelings. Whitaker, however, uses the infinitive directly, with no intervening comma. There is not the slightest sanitisation of the values of a warrior society nor of the male assumption that wives and mothers are expected to have internalised those values in their own emotions. Even the poetic response of Michael Longley stops at the point at which 'shiny Hector' prays that 'his son might grow up bloodier than him' ('The Helmet', in *The Ghost Orchid*, 1989, a collection that uses Homeric allusion to expose the self-perpetuating and generational cycle of violence in the North of Ireland during the Troubles). Whitaker's directness also serves to intensify the pathos of Andromakhe's lament for Hektor, a 'mourning and ululating' that closes the episode and is also communicated by Whitaker in terms of Southern African tradition (Whitaker 6.497-502:179).

Thus Whitaker's translation immediately presents opportunities for use in comparison with other translations. Such comparisons are, or should be, an integral part of education for students of literature and of classical subjects (whether texts are studied in the original language or in translation or, ideally, in both). Translation comparisons immediately bring readings of Homer into the sphere of world literature, texts that resonate across languages and cultures as well as temporally. As David Damrosch has put it: 'works become world literature by being received *into* the space of a foreign culture, a space defined in many ways by the host culture's national tradition and the present needs of its own writers' (*What is World Literature?*, Princeton 2003, 283). In terms of the contribution of ancient texts to world literature, Damrosch's formulation is too restricted, since the texts have been refracted through multiple mediations and are read and translated in diverse situations. In the case of translation into Southern African English, the receiving language and culture is itself more than usually in a state of dynamic exchange and development. Whitaker's translation both provides a document that is part of that process and also constructs a bridge into the history of Homer translation and *its* relationship with world literature.

Barbara Graziosi and Emily Greenwood have discussed how the vision of Homer as (merely) the fountain head of all 'western' literature seriously underplays the poet's role in modern culture. They demonstrate that shifts in the cultural landscape of the 20th century (and now the 21st) implicate Homer in a series of complex relationships that are transcultural as well as transhistorical (Graziosi and Greenwood [edd.], *Homer in the Twentieth Century: Between World Literature and the Western Canon*, Oxford 2007, 1-3). This repositioning of Homer brings with it the opportunity for comparison with other oral traditions in epic poetry, an aspect that Whitaker addresses in his Introduction with translated extracts from nineteenth-century praise poetry that detail the military conquests of Shaka and, memorably include lines from the Zulu praise poet Magolwana:

Though people may die, their praises remain,  
These will remain and bring grief for them,  
Remain and lament for them in the empty homes.'  
(tr. Rycroft & Ngcobo 1988:25, quoted in Whitaker 2012:62).

The Kenyan writer and scholar Ngugi wa Thiong'o devoted his 2010 Welleck Library Lectures in Critical Theory (an annual event at the University of California, Irvine) to discussion of global reading, imagination and the politics of knowing, suggesting that: 'Central to the pedagogical

enterprise is the practice of translation. Translation is the language of languages. It opens the gates of national and linguistic prisons. It is thus one of the most important allies of world literature and global consciousness ... This may also mean the act of reading becoming also a process of self examination' (*Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing*, New York, Columbia University Press 2012, 61.)

Whitaker's translation provides a further rewarding and thought-provoking document in this expanding mosaic.

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