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## Teaching Early Modern Poetry With Homer's *Iliad*

by Emma Katherine Atwood

This essay chronicles my experience using Early Modern translations of Homer's *Iliad* to teach a variety of skills in a poetry survey course for English majors at Boston College. This technique could be useful for literature survey instructors, creative writing instructors, Early Modern literature instructors, Classical Studies instructors, and foreign language instructors. Early modern translations of the *Iliad* can be used to pinpoint specific qualities that make a poetic style specifically early modern. They can also be used to provide insight into early modern cultural values. Paying such close attention to word choice and word order when studying translations in comparison makes other early modern syntax more accessible, and is a nice segue into or out of an early modern poetry unit.

Last year, I taught "Studies in Poetry" at Boston College, a course designed to introduce new English majors to the close reading of poems. Faculty members who had taught this required course in the past concocted wildly different syllabi: some used old-fashioned anthologies; some chose a select few authors to highlight; some proceeded chronologically from epic to lyric; some structured the semester around

various poetic forms; one even built his syllabus around local poets whom students could hear at readings in Boston.

The variable approaches to this course were downright dizzying, and ultimately, a bit intimidating. “Studies in Poetry” is likely to be the first and only sustained exposure to poetry our English majors encounter. After they complete the course, they tend to eschew poetry for the ever-popular selections in creative non-fiction and the modern novel. How can an instructor design a course that will leave them loving poetry? Or perhaps more realistically, how can an instructor design a course that will keep them from hating it?

Variety might be an answer: throw the poems against the wall and see what sticks. My syllabus was just this sort of proverbial pot of spaghetti; it featured readings ranging from Chaucer to Philip Levine. Yet despite this variety, the course threatened to grow tiresome. Since the course is meant to emphasize and even drill close-reading skills, its very nature produces teaching ruts. Reliable techniques that usually help break up teaching monotony – like bringing in historical documents – are largely beyond the scope of its firmly new critical ethos. Whichever guiding structure instructors choose, the same daily format usually ensues: the class tackles a new poem and close-reads it together, identifying connections between form and function. Perhaps the instructor lectures briefly on some basic historical context; perhaps students break into small groups to discuss their findings in various stanzas. To break the monotony, I

had my students write their own Shakespearean sonnets. For one class, I even herded them to the closest T station and had them ride the subway as we read “In A Station of the Metro.” Admittedly, my students were often bewildered with my harebrained ideas but generally seemed to be learning. And yet, every time I sat down to write a lesson plan, the threat of stale instruction loomed large.

It may seem counter-intuitive to use an epic poem to breathe new life into a poetry course. After all, how many times can you really close-read Achilles’ swift feet or Hector’s glittering helmet? Yet by using *The Iliad*, I could expose my students to the conventions of ancient epic poetry, walk the line between canon and margin, challenge their ideas about authorship, fine-tune their close-reading skills, help them explore Early Modern poetics, teach a lesson in meter, and even introduce them to theories and ethics of translation.

What I did was actually very simple. I provided my students with the opening lines of Book One. But instead of making the authoritative editorial declaration for my class – Fagles vs. Fitzgerald – I provided my students with a cross-section of over two-dozen translations of these two passages. Hall, Chapman, Ogilby, Hobbes, Pope, Macpherson and Cowper rounded out my early modern selections. Though we used a canonical work, tackling dozens of translations resisted the idea of a single, authoritative canon. Our work was less about the daunting project of “reading *The*

*Illiad*” and more about using translation to dissect how poetry works, when it’s effective, and why.

First, I asked my students to notice similarities and differences between the translations. Some wondered why their favorite evocative phrases – like Chapman’s “invisible cave” – were absent in other translations. This led the class to begin to compare the way this “invisible cave” was labeled in other translations: “Stygian Coasts;” “Erebus;” “Pluto’s court;” “Pluto’s gloomy reign;” “Hades.” We discussed the way each of these literary choices evoked different images and emotions. The “coasts” made this underworld seem wild and particularly English, whereas Pope’s use of the adjective “gloomy” characterizes this underworld as a more Christian hell. Does this belie a theological imperative behind the translation? Hall’s use of the word “court” derives from the Elizabethan courtier culture from which he was writing and leaves the reader with a more ambivalent impression of the space: is the court a hellish place or a peaceful escape? Moreover, is there a social or political commentary at stake in his use of the word “court”? And finally, when Fagles calls it “the House of Death” in 1990, is this to appease a secular society who may find references to hell or Hades too abstract and removed from their own experiences of death? By contrasting the differences between these choices, the historical specificity and subtlety of early modern poetry emerged much more explicitly than they could on its own.

Next, I asked them to identify which core words or concepts they believed must be in the original Greek, basing these assumptions only off the translations. The class agreed that the phrase “O Goddess” must be present in the original, since so many of the translators used it. They were surprised to learn that the vocative “O” was not present in the original Greek. We discussed potential reasons for this addition, exploring the possibility that the translators were simply reading each other’s work, admiring and then imitating their predecessors’ choices. This led us to consider the way we often write in the shadow of our predecessors, and how this can sometimes be a boon and other times a burden. This led us to discuss the way guides like *No Fear Shakespeare* can help some students “translate” early modern language into modern prose, while they can also make it difficult to imagine anything beyond the simplified translation.

I asked them what word they believed started the poem. Goddess? Achilles? Sing? Wrath? We discussed how the choice of an opening word might shape the way a reader approaches the poem. While opening with “Achilles” places your lead character front and center, Hall’s bold choice to open with “I” places the role of the translator and the poet above all else. As the first English translator, such an egocentric move would not be surprising. Southey’s choice to begin with the word “sing” emphasizes the meta-elements of musicality in his poetry, further extended by his use of heroic couplets. Using heroic couplets for a different purpose, Pope’s “wrath” juxtaposes raw

emotion with a hyper-controlled form and brings out the contradictions and ironies in the text, as we might expect from Pope.

This led us to discuss the ethics of translation: as a translator, what responsibility do you have to be “true” to the original text, and to what extent can you add your own interpretations? Can there ever be a truly transparent or objective translation? We debated the extent to which a translator is also a creative writer. For instance, we considered the fact that what Macpherson calls “shades,” Ogilby calls “ghosts” and Pope calls “souls.” I asked my class how they saw diction choices influencing our attitudes towards these heroes. In comparing these simple word choices, I stressed that translation is not just about accuracy but also about capturing and conveying an emotion. Moreover, it is also about speaking to (and from within) a particular culture at a particular time and place. Thus early modern translators were not entirely comfortable ascribing “souls” to these pagan heroes, though modern translators have overwhelmingly opted for this choice, Lattimore and Fagles included.

Not all of our conversations were so deeply philosophical, however. We also discussed such material quandaries such as what happens when you change the meter of your translation? Should you retain the dactylic hexameter and the caesuras of the original poem, as Chapman does? Or should you translate the dactylic hexameter – which is the natural cadence for Greek – into iambic pentameter – which is the natural cadence for English – as Pope does? Should you forego poetry altogether as Hammond

does to avoid the nuisance of rhythm or line breaks? My students overwhelmingly preferred iambs because they found it more natural. However, my students also preferred translations that retained the original Greek caesuras, which they found added complexity and effective dramatic pauses to the rhythm of the poem. This provided an opportunity to discuss the way poets can use pacing, punctuation, and pauses to express meaning. For example, the caesura that Chapman inserts after “no light comforts” dramatically withholds the comfort of a finished line for us as readers, too, allowing form to follow function.

I’d like to suggest that instructors should consider teaching poetic techniques and devices through translation. By looking at translations, instructors can more easily discuss the role of authorial choices in poetry. At the same time, translations also challenge the centrality of the single author. Ultimately, opening up the idea of authorship helped to elevate the level of discussion throughout the remainder of the semester as we explored the blurry boundaries between author and text, speaker and writer, character and personae. While students had been loath to part with their fantasies about authorship and solitary genius – tortured artists toiling in a study with ink-stained fingers – following this exercise, these same students began to accept a more plural view of authorship and a more active approach to readership. This exercise also relaxed students who had previously insisted, “I’ll never be able to write like this!”

helping them realize that despite its polished veneer, making a poem takes hard work and tough choices.

By asking why it was important to early modern writers to translate a classical Greek epic, we can also discuss why writers continue to translate the *Iliad* today. In addition to the translations, I also had my students read Stephen Mitchell's short article "Found in Translation," published in the November 12, 2011 *Wall Street Journal*.

Mitchell's twenty-first century translation of the *Iliad* is one of the most recent permutations to hit the shelves. Is this continual drive to re-translate simply a desire to improve upon our predecessors? To update the language and style to suit a contemporary audience? Mitchell uses his experience translating the *Iliad* to offer advice for contemporary writers to listen: "let your ear, rather than your thinking, revise the line." If we can teach English majors to listen to Homer, his coterie of translators, and themselves, we can create better readers and better writers.

At the end of the week, I asked each student to produce his or her own translation of the opening of the *Iliad*, using the collection of translations I provided as a guide. This take-home assignment was relatively informal and ungraded save a "check/check plus/check minus" scale. This way, students could feel free to experiment without the paralyzing fear of "doing it wrong." However, students knew they would also be sharing their translations out loud with the rest of the class and verbally explaining (and sometimes defending!) their choices to their classmates. This type of

gentle peer pressure helped to ensure that students took their time with the assignment and made thoughtful choices.

I asked students to include a short paragraph following their translation, identifying their primary inspirations or models and briefly explaining how these models affected their choices. For example, a student who wrote in heroic couplets cited Pope as his inspiration though he chose entirely different end rhymes; a student who wanted to emphasize the horrors of Achilles' rampage used an excessive number of exclamation marks, but cited Macpherson's translation as a legitimate precedent for this choice. The ultimate goal of assigning this short paragraph was to assure that students consider where their ideas were coming from, recognizing that no one, no matter how brilliant, writes in a vacuum.

Although the class had access to dozens of translations, the older early modern translations were often chosen as their models. This could have been due my teaching bias, but the class genuinely seemed to dislike the starker, less "poetic" modern translations. For instance, they did not respond well to Fagles' uneven lines of verse. In respect to word choice, the class was almost equally split between "wrath" and "rage," with only a few showing a preference for "anger." The class agreed that "anger" felt more modern, but they decided that it ultimately felt less powerful than the alternatives. Some of the class's favorite phrases like "souls of heroes" spoke directly to the early modern tradition of influence; this phrase was first used by Hobbes in 1676

and was recycled in Lattimore's verse in 1951 and Hammond's prose in 1987. The class felt that these older translations captured more of the drama they were looking for in an epic poem. Given echoes like "souls of heroes," this seems to be the consensus of many contemporary translators as well.

In their short written responses, I also asked students to characterize the controlling tone of their translations in one or two words: formal and somber? wild and raging? rhythmic and entrancing? After each student read his or her translation out loud, the class tried to characterize the translation's mood. Once the class had discussed their impressions, the writer shared his or her tonal goal. This was a good opportunity to see if the writer's intentions were matching the text's reception. It also allowed us to discuss this gap between writer, text, and reader as it applies to poetry and writing more generally.

That none of my students knew ancient Greek before attempting a translation didn't really matter, at least not for the purposes of this lesson. They were able to mine the translations for favorite phrases, concepts, word orders, and cadences and find a way to tell the story in their own voice. Some wrote in prose, others in rhymed meter. Some kept the language stark and cold while others wallowed in the drama of carrion vultures. As might be expected, no two translations were the same.

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