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review

A New Prescription for a Lens to Homer

HOMER, *The Iliad,* translated by ROBERT FITZGERALD, Doubleday.

A quondam editor of a one-time journal of and for translation has complained of Fitzgerald's rendering of Homer's *Iliad* that it is not Dryden. All right, it is not Dryden. What is it then? Well, gentle reader, here and there, it's Homer.

One of the best things about this version was Fitzgerald's decision to use the purist transliterations: the effect of this is to invite the reader to read as if he had never read an *Iliad* before. Who, after all, has ever heard of Akhilleus? Or Khriseis? A good-bye forever to the Aitch-heels of the Outcasts of Poker Flat. Similarly, some of the old-hat is rendered anew, sememe-by-sememe, and this calls for thinking anew on the part of the reader. A great desideratum. *Ἀρητήρ*, to cite one example, is in the Greek comprised of one element meaning "pray," a second element meaning "agent noun," and a third meaning "masculine." Fitzgerald sets this all straight out, writing "man of prayer" instead of the old and usual tag "priest." This gives the reader a chance to see that this is Khrysês' (Chryses') effective role for Book One, and an effectiveness without which the story cannot proceed. A small insight, but one which the quotidian title "priest" would never have led to.

Best of all, perhaps, is what happens to *ἑλικώπιδα κούρην*, a common phrase for any pretty feminine face in the accusative. For the first word the elements of meaning are our words "helix" and "face." Or "eyes," "sight," or "vision." This has always been a bumblesome thing for translators, and has been rendered "with rolling eyes," "of darting eyes," "quick-glancing." Phoo. Fitzgerald externalized its motor aspect and produced a plum: "The girl who turns the eyes of men"! Once you see it, you can suspect that this is what it meant all along: a turn-face girl. And whose face is she turning? Ahah! At this point it pleases me to add that *κούρη,* what with Old English turning the c's of its Latinized Greek borrowings into *h*'s (e.g., *ἐπίσκοπος*, episcopus, bishop), is now become our English word "whore." Whores, of course, have nothing to do with Homer: the poor girls were prizes of the spear, and had nothing to say about their situation. But the situation is that each hero had a woman for his prize. No boys. An observation which may (but won't) lay to rest the persisting notion that Akhilleus and Patroklos (Achilles and Patroclus) may really have been a.c. All we have is the text, and in the text no such thing exists. If there is a point here, it is the same

one as before: a single newly thought-out rendering can nudge the reader into new thinking about Homer, thinking which he otherwise would not have done.

But the translator cannot work such magic everywhere. *Καλλιπάρηον*, literally "pretty-cheeked," and another compounded epithet for a sweet young thing in the accusative, is bandied "flower of young girls that she is," or "—in her loveliness." His best effort for this one is simply "charming."

Charming, too, is Fitzgerald's ability to match nicely the meshing of sound to sense which was part of Homer's gift: "by the shore of the tumbling clamorous whispering sea" can satisfy even the reader who knows the line in the original.

But Fitzgerald cannot be trusted everywhere. *"Μάντι κακῶν!"* Agamemnon screams at Calchas (Kalkhas!). C. (K.) is a "seer of bad news" who never prophesies what A. wants to hear. That's all. But Fitzgerald dramatizes this to "You visionary of hell!" Ideally, the translation should imply all that the original implies and imply nothing else. This is not Fitzgerald's ideal. No complaint, just warning. In the present instance he interpolates an extra-cultural anachronism, *viz:* since Polybius (6.56) remarks how clever it was of Romans to invent an afterlife of eternal torment for the bad guys (it tended to keep Romans honest, or at least, Polybius thought, more honest than Greeks), one might make a case for a Roman hell from the third century B. C. on. But in Homer it's a sore thumb.

Fitzgerald attempts to be more picturesque than the original. I will limit my discussion of this to one area. In matters psychological he is generally more physiological than Homer. Though *φρήν* is what you think and feel with in Homer—when your thought is not a god whispering in your ear —yet when you get wounded there it is very clearly the diaphragm. Fitzgerald consistently renders this noun with "heart." This is fine. But "gall," "stomach," and "kidney" mislead, though they might from the literary standpoint add to the impact of his translation. *Θυμός*, "feelings," "spirit," cognate to *fumus*, "smoke," cannot be localized. Ἀέκοντε contains no etymological element suggesting any anatomical portion. A negated present participle, nominative in case, dual in number, it just means "unwilling." The two heralds who were to take away Achilles's girl-prize followed orders though unwilling. In his organic handling, Fitzgerald here commits an ambiguity: Agamemnon gives the command "and they who had no stomach for it went along the waste sea shingle"—which makes it appear that the "they," being identified by a subordinate clause, are persons other than the heralds, a misconception which Fitzgerald steers the reader back from three lines later, but a misconception which the Greek did not permit. A more literal rendering, and one which didn't try so hard, would not have misled the reader. It is still possible, despite the number of times Homer has been Englished, that someone can read an *Iliad* and get the wrong idea of what is going on. Not that Fitzgerald misunderstood, but that he left it

possible for his reader to misunderstand, a thing which our caseless, gen-derless language brings us to more often than is generally realized. For the sweep of the poem, such things matter little. It is conceivable, though, that a more consistent handling would have left us a clearer window onto Homer, and this review so far has been an attempt to show the tint of Fitzgerald's glass.

The ultimate way to experience Homer will ever remain to become at home in Greek. Then the experience is your own. But for the price of fifteen dollars you can experience Fitzgerald's experience of Homer. It is, now and again, a new experience, and worth it. Spend the money.

THOMAS N. WINTER