



Exploring the classical world

Interpreting Homer

Chris Emlyn-Jones

I'm Chris Emlyn-Jones, Exploring the Classical World. We are going to look at what is involved in reading Homer. Now usually reading is an everyday activity, we probably don't think twice about when we pick up newspapers like novels, that sort of thing. But we are putting emphasis on active reading that is, reading texts with our critical faculties focused on the nature of what we are reading. This requires more than average concentration and is a vital skill which needs to be learned. This is because so much information about the ancient world comes down to us through texts, especially in the case of the earliest periods where material evidence tends to be scanty.

Reading the *Odyssey* in the version by Richmond Lattimore, one of the most frequently used translations of Homer, considering the story of Ithaka, Telemachus, Penelope and the suitors and how Homer tells it, developing the plot and the characters.

In this section I want to use Lattimore's translation to concentrate more closely on the nature of the text, to put a microscope, as it were, on selected passages. This will lead naturally into the second half of the CD, presented by Naoko Yamagata. She will be looking at other translations of Homer alongside Lattimore to examine how they relate to the original, the different ways they have of rendering and interpreting it.

But, before we get down to the detail, I'd like you to spend a few minutes thinking about what reading a text through the medium of a translation means. The idea of reading a text in translation tends to provoke different reactions. Here are two extremes.

You may imagine that a translation can be treated entirely as if it were the original and we can forget about the original language altogether. For example, this is actually the way in English speaking cultures the Bible, in the King James version, is usually read, despite the obvious fact that it is a translation.

At the other extreme, you may think that the qualities of the original work are unattainable simply because we are reading a translation, so, in fact, we might as well give up and leave the whole question of interpretation to those who can read in the original language.

I would say that both of these extremes are incorrect. A translation does represent a kind of barrier. There are things you can and things you can't do with a text in translation but it depends very much on the kind of text you want to read, whether poetry or prose, literary or documentary. A documentary text, for example, a recording of a political decision, may lose little or nothing in a direct translation, whereas, in a poetic text, transferring sound and rhythm and meaning from an original language into a totally different language, may be challenging, if not sometimes impossible.

But, in general, I always think that reading an ancient text in translation is like receiving a signal from a distant star. The conventions and language need de-coding but, depending on the nature of the text and the quality of the translation, it can speak with the immediacy of today and, don't imagine anyway that just being able to read the original solves all the problems of interpretation.

Homer is poetry with a verse form in many ways unlike any other poetry the Greeks and the Romans ever experienced and they, themselves were aware of its uniqueness. It was based on oral composition, that is, composition primarily without the use of writing and this fact is of

supreme importance in understanding its nature. For now, just note that each of the 25,000 or so lines in the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* is composed in 6 rhythmical units, quite strictly organised.

Some translations of Homer choose to ignore the metre and line lengths and even translate into prose, for example, the very popular Penguin versions. However, Lattimore translates into a kind of verse in which he makes a virtue out of rendering the elements of the language, for example, epithets and formulae of speaking and answering as literally as possible.

I want to use his translation as a medium to examine critically some passages of Homer which display the different qualities of his verse.

Let's start by looking at the beginning of *Odyssey* book IV. Please listen to quite a substantial passage, This passage tells of the arrival of Telemachus and Nestor's son Peisistratos at the palace of the Greek hero Menelaos and their reception. While listening think first of all about the type of verse this is, is it narrative, description or speech? Look also at the different kinds of details Homer focuses on and how he expresses them. When it's finished, make brief notes on your findings.

Leighton Pugh

They came into the cavernous hollow of Lakedaimon and made their way to the house of glorious Menelaos. They found him in his own house giving for many townsmen a wedding feast for his son and his stately daughter. The girl he was sending to the son of Achilles breaker of battalions, for in Troy land first he had nodded his head to it and promised to give her and now the gods were bringing to pass their marriage, so he was sending her on her way with horses and chariots to the famous city of the Myrmydons, where Neoptolemos was lord and he brought Alector's daughter from Sparta to give powerful Megapenthes, his young grown son, born to him by a slave woman. But the Gods gave no more children to Helen, once she had borne her first and only child, the lovely Hermione with the beauty of Aphrodite the golden.

So these neighbours and townsmen of glorious Menelaos were at their feasting, all about the great house with the high roof, and taking their ease and among them stepped an inspired singer playing his lyre, while among the dancers two acrobats led the measures of song and dance, revolving among them.

These two now, the hero Telemachus and the shining son of Nestor in the forecourt, themselves and their horses stood, while powerful Eteoneus who was the active henchman of glorious Menelaos came forward and saw them and went with his message through the house to the shepherd of the people. He came and, standing close beside him, addressed him in winged words. "Menelaos dear to Zeus, here are certain strangers, two men and they look like the breed of great Zeus. Tell me then whether we should unharness their fast horses or send them on to somebody else who can entertain them?"

So he spoke. And the man hurried through the hall bestirring the other active henchmen to come on the way along with him. They set free the sweating horses from under the harness and tethered them fast by the reins in front of the horse mangers and put down fodder before them and mixed white millet into it and leant the chariots up against the glittering inner walls and led the men inside the divine house. These marvelled as they admired the palace of the king whom Zeus loved, for as the shining of the sun or the moon was the shining all through this high roofed house of glorious Menelaos. When with their eyes they had had their pleasure in admiration, they stepped into the bathtub smooth polished and bathed there. Then when the maids had bathed them and anointed them with oil and put cloaks of thick fleece and tunics upon them they went and sat on chairs beside Menelaos the son of Atreus. A maidservant brought water for them and poured it from a splendid and golden pitcher, holding it above a silver basin for them to wash and she pulled a polished table before them. A grave housekeeper brought in the bread and served it to them, adding many good things to it, generous with her provisions while a carver lifted platters of all kinds of meat and set them in front of them and placed beside them the golden goblets."

Chris Emilyn-Jones

In Homer the poet sometimes narrates and sometimes speaks in the person of one or more of his characters. Here, he is primarily narrating and moving the story on at a fairly leisurely pace. The latter part of it is what we call a “genre” passage, that’s lines 37-58, a conventional description of the reception of guests and hospitality, getting horses seen to, getting bathed and being offered food. This is a social activity to which the Greeks gave the collective name of *xenia*, the hospitality you owed as host to a *xenos* or a stranger who arrives at your house. You have met descriptions of this kind of activity almost word for word in earlier books, for example, book I and book III, but even within this “genre” passage the poet puts in something distinctive.

Look at lines 43-47. Menelaos’ palace is particularly splendid and glittering, remember he is the brother of Agamemnon who led the expedition of the Greeks to Troy and the husband of Helen and he has the epithet, in lines 2 and 15, “glorious”. This magnificence is seen through the eyes of these young men whose admiration reflects their lack of experience. It’s also anticipated in the epithets in lines 42 and 43, “glittering inner walls” and “divine house”. Now let’s go back to the beginning of the passage, a nice dramatic touch is that Telemachus and his friend are actually gate-crashing unawares a major event, a double wedding in the family. Lines 4-14 are actually a highly compressed and elusive reference to events with which the audience was presumed to be familiar. Achilles was the most prominent hero in the *Iliad* - you will be meeting him later - and his son Neoptolemos (line 9) played an important part in the capture of Troy.

The details of the wedding aren’t important for the main narrative and not easy to disentangle if you don’t know the background, but just note how the poet in this compressed passage reveals a background of events and places. They are probably in his repertory and he could doubtless construct an elaborate and dramatic poem about them if he wished or was asked to. It’s interesting too that, in the subsequent entertainment of Telemachus and his long conversation with Menelaos and Helen, the fact that they are actually at a wedding feast appears to be completely forgotten.

Notice how, in line 15, the narrative is resumed by repeating roughly the words he used before the little digression starts in line 3. This is a characteristic of Homer’s narrative called “ring composition”, bringing the audience in a circle or a ring back to the main subject as it were.

In line 20 our attention is again drawn back to line 2, Telemachus and his friend whom we left standing outside the house. I think that this sort of reference strongly suggests an oral delivery. Unlike readers, the audience cannot refer back up the page to previous narrative and so needs to be brought back to the main focus of interest.

Within this smooth narrative, however, the poet inserts a short but sharply characterised few lines, a kind of miniature drama. In line 22 we are introduced to a minor character, Menelaos’ servant Eteoneus. On spying 2 strangers he appears to be in the grip of acute social anxiety, should he admit the strangers to this family feast or send them on to somebody else? Menelaos’ reply, in lines 31-6, is short, explosive and quite vituperative. One can just imagine the poet putting a lot into this. And it also characterises Menelaos as a short-tempered yet hospitable man.

There are also subtle individual touches to Eteoneus, a big, bustling perhaps rather fussy character. Note how even the conventional start to speech, in line 25, “he came and, standing close beside him, addressed him in winged words”. This is given a distinctive touch. He wants a word in Menelaos’ ear, we don’t want discussions about social niceties broadcast to everybody, do we, or the suggestion that a wedding celebration leaves us too overstretched or plain mean to accommodate strangers? And, in line 37, Eteoneus speeds away with the rebuke ringing in his ears. Homer casts a comic light, as he so often does, on an everyday social event, the reception of strangers or *xenia*.

I would be very surprised if you got all of this out of the passage, especially at first go, though I hope you spotted some of it. The main point I want to make is this is a comparatively

undramatic “genre” passage, describing a traditional social situation, hospitality and designed essentially to get Telemachus and Peisistratos out of their chariot and into Menelaos’ palace, from A to B as it were. But even here, there are a number of subtle touches which make it individual and distinctive. The poet is using the traditional elements of his craft in an original way.