The Open University

Exploring the classical world

Homer's world

Chris Emlyn-Jones
Someone perpetually in the background but not yet on stage is Odysseus himself, the hero of the poem. At the beginning of book V, shortly after the fraught scene in Ithaka we have just been looking at, we discover Odysseus very much alive despite Penelope's fears and marooned on an island far from anywhere, the prisoner and reluctant lover of a goddess, Kalypso (very aptly named in Greek 'the concealer'). However, the Gods, and especially Zeus, have other plans for him and Kalypso is forced to let him go and allow him to build a raft to convey himself to civilisation. The passage you are going to listen to next finds Odysseus sailing quite happily on his way on the open sea. One god who does not approve, however, is Poseidon the powerful brother of Zeus, who, you may remember from the beginning of book I, was absent when the decision was made to return Odysseus home. But he has his own reasons for opposing Odysseus. We take the story on from there. You will find the passage in Odyssey book V, lines 282-332. As before, be thinking about how the poet presents the scene as well as what he presents. For instance, what do we learn about the relationship between gods and mortals and listen particularly to what Odysseus says in line 299 following. What does this tell us about him and his situation?

Leighton Pugh
Coming back from the Aithiopians the strong Earthshaker saw him from far on the mountains of the Solymoi. He was visible sailing over the sea. Poseidon was the more angered with him and shook his head and spoke to his own spirit. "For shame, surely the gods have rashly changed their intentions about Odysseus while I was away in the Aithiopians land and he nears the Phaiakian country, where it is appointed that he shall escape this great trial of misery that is now his. But I think I can still give him a good full portion of trouble."

He spoke and pulled the clouds together in both hands gripping the trident and staggered the sea and let loose all the storm blasts of all the winds together and huddled under the cloud scuds land alike and the great water. Night sprang from heaven. East wind and south wind clashed together and the bitter blown west wind and the north wind borne in the bright air rolled up a heavy sea. The knees of Odysseus gave way for fear and the heart inside him and deeply troubled he spoke to his own great-hearted spirit: "Ah me unhappy, what in the long outcome will before me? I fear the goddess might have spoken the truth in all ways when she said that, on the sea and before I came to my country, I would go through hardships. Now all this is being accomplished. Such clouds are these with which Zeus is cramming the wide sky and has staggered the sea and storm blasts of winds from every direction are crowding in, my sheer destruction is certain. Three times and four times happy those Danaans were who died then in wide Troy land, bringing favour to the sons of Atreus, as I wish I too had died at that time and met my destiny on the day when the greatest number of Trojans threw their bronze-headed weapons upon me over the body of perished Achilleus. And I would have had my rites and the Achaians given me glory. Now it is by a dismal death that I must be taken."

As he spoke so a great wave drove down from above him with a horrible rush and spun the raft in a circle and he was thrown clear far from the raft and let the steering oar slip from his hands. A terrible gust of storm winds whirling together and blowing snapped the mast tree off in the middle and the sail and the upper deck were thrown far and fell in the water. He himself was ducked for a long time, nor was he able to come up quickly from under the great rush of the water for the clothing, which divine Kalypso had given, weighted him down. At last he got to the surface and spat the bitter salt seawater that drained from his head, which was filled with it. But he did not forget about his raft for all his trouble, but turned and swam back

through the waves and laid hold of it and huddled down in the middle of it avoiding death's end. Then the waves tossed her about, the current, now here, now there as the north wind in autumn tumbles and tosses thistledown along the plain and the bunches hold fast one on another, so the winds tossed her on the great sea, now here, now there and now it would be south wind and north that pushed her between them and then again, east wind and west would burst in and follow."

Chris Emilyn-Jones
I think this passage looks like virtuoso action adventure stuff, with the audience surely on the edge of their seats. Is the hero actually going to survive? To start at the beginning, we are introduced to the god Poseidon whose power over the elements is amply demonstrated. Homeric gods are powerful, jealous of their prerogatives and quite capable of inflicting suffering on humans for good reasons or for none. Look, in lines 283-4, how Homer imagines the picture, the god gazing down from a great height on a mountain sees the tiny figure of Odysseus sailing in the distance, a telling image of the size and insignificance of humans in the hands of the immortals.

Poseidon gets going with his trident, a sort of long, three-pronged fork and the resulting storm brings forth from the poet a strongly atmospheric passage, depicting the violence of the elements where the Greek makes much use of sound, vowels and consonants and rhythms, long drawn out and swift. Just listen to me reading lines 291-4 in the Greek: hōs eipōn sunagen nephelas, etaraxe de pontoon / chersi triainan helōn; pasas d'orothunen aellas / pantoiōn anemōn, sun de nepheesi kalupse / gaian homou kai pontoon; orōrei d'ouranothen nux. Note how light and fast alternates with heavy and slow, storm blasts and heavy skies and the mass of water. What does the translator do with this? Well he can't imitate all the Greek sounds and rhythms in English, simply because it's a different language which produces different effects. What he has to do is to make something special out of it, to try and use his own language to produce a similarly heightened atmosphere and this is what Lattimore does here. He also makes quite a good job of matching the varied lengths of the phrases in the original language, especially in the sudden, "Night sprang from heaven", as abrupt in the English as in the Greek. Let's just listen to these 4 lines again.

Leighton Pugh
He spoke and pulled the clouds together in both hands gripping the trident and staggered the sea and let loose all the storm blasts of all the winds together and huddled under the cloud scuds land alike and the great water. Night sprang from heaven.

Chris Emilyn-Jones
Enough of this now. You will be looking more closely at the technique of translation in the second half of the CD. Just note yet another register, as it were, in the poet's repertory of styles, to match the mood he wishes to create. Typically for a Greek hero, Odysseus, frightened as he is, does not remain inarticulate in the face of the storm. One of the key characteristics of the major figures in Homer is their capacity, even in the most difficult circumstances, to rationalise and reflect on their experience in speech. Starting in line 299, Odysseus, a bit like Penelope in the last passage, develops a lament on his misfortune, here in facing death by drowning, rather than a 'good death' in battle. This is an important sideways look at the subject matter and atmosphere of the Iliad and reflects the intense desire of Homer's characters to leave a name behind them kleos or 'renown'. To be lost at sea was the worst possible fate because nothing remained, not even a body for family or comrades to bury and mourn over.

The rest of the passage, lines 313 to 332 is gripping stuff, the detailed effects of which you can probably, by this stage, work out for yourself. Just note the simile starting in line 328, comparing Odysseus' raft with the hero clinging to it for dear life, to thistledown being blown about the plain and note that Odysseus, typically, never quite loses his nerve. He manages to get back to the remains of his raft and I'm sure you won't be able to resist reading on to the end of book V and find out exactly how Odysseus survives.

Chris Emilyn-Jones
In the course of listening I hope you have appreciated that reading a text like this closely is a fruitful exercise and you feel a bit more familiar with the skills needed to do it and Homer's poem is well worth the exploration. The breadth of his imagination and subtlety of detail has been amply demonstrated in these short pieces. Of course I could have chosen hundreds more. I hope you think I have justified my claim, at the beginning, that you can accomplish a great deal, if not everything, in studying a text through the medium of translation.
I thought you might like to have a brief note on how the rhythm of the Homeric line actually works.

Chris Emilyn-Jones
There are 6 units in each line, often called feet, indicated by the vertical mark. The whole line is described as a hexameter. Each syllable of the Greek is either long or short, 'long' indicated by the dash and 'short' by the little u. Each unit consists of a group of either 3 syllables: long-short-short or 2 syllables: long-long. The final unit or foot is always 2 syllables, either long-short or long-long. I'll now just read the Greek through:

Chris Emily-Jones
Andra moi ennepe Mousa polutropon hos mala polla
Plagthe epei Troies hieron ptoliethron eperse;
Pollon d'anthropon iden astea kai noon egno,
Polla d' ho g' en pontoi pathen algae hon kata thumon
Arnumenos hen te psuchen kai noston hetairon

Chris Emilyn-Jones
Purely for interest I would simply like you to note this apparently strict rhythmic scheme is the basis for the whole of Homer. In particular the rhythmic shape of the line is clearly designed to facilitate some of the more common formulaic expressions from the tradition. For example, 'then in turn the goddess grey-eyed Athene answered him etc'. But in practice, the Homeric hexameter, although fixed in form, is actually far from inflexible and is capable of great variety. Note especially in the above example the contrast between the predominantly skipping rhythm of long-short-short and the heavier rhythm of long-long. The shape, rhythm and sense of words and phrases interact with the metre in subtle ways which, I regret, we don't have time to go into and would anyway take you rather too far from the matter at hand.

But before we leave this you might just like to note one important point. We tend to think of rhythm in terms of heavy stress; 'bom-dee-dee, bom-dee-dee bom, bom etc. This sounds as if it would make the Greek rather monotonous. In actual fact ancient Greek verse probably concentrated much more on length and pitch of syllables and stress so that it would probably have sounded more melodious, indeed even perhaps sung to the accompaniment of the traditional musical instrument of the Homeric bard, the lyre.