

**ON TRANSLATING  
HOMER. THREE LECTURES  
GIVEN AT OXFORD**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9781760572556

On translating Homer. Three lectures given at Oxford by Matthew Arnold

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Cover @ 2017

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ON TRANSLATING HOMER

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THREE LECTURES

GIVEN AT OXFORD

BY

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LONDON

LONGMAN, GREEN, LONGMAN, AND ROBERTS

1861

## ON TRANSLATING HOMER.

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### I.

It has more than once been suggested to me that I should translate Homer. That is a task for which I have neither the time nor the courage; but the suggestion led me to regard yet more closely a poet whom I had already long studied, and for one or two years the works of Homer were seldom out of my hands. The study of classical literature is probably on the decline; but, whatever may be the fate of this study in general, it is certain that as instruction spreads and the number of readers increases, attention will be more and more directed to the poetry of Homer, not indeed as part of a classical course, but as the most important poetical monument existing. Even within the last ten years two fresh translations of the Iliad have appeared in England: one by a man of great ability and genuine learning, Professor Newman; the other by Mr. Wright, the conscientious and painstaking translator of Dante. It may safely

It may safely be asserted that neither of these works will take rank

as the standard translation of Homer; that the task of rendering him will still be attempted by other translators. It may perhaps be possible to render to these some service, to save them some loss of labour, by pointing out rocks on which their predecessors have split, and the right objects on which a translator of Homer should fix his attention.

It is disputed, what aim a translator should propose to himself in dealing with his original. Even this preliminary is not yet settled. On one side it is said, that the translation ought to be such "that the reader should, if possible, forget that it is a translation at all, and be lulled into the illusion that he is reading an original work; something original," (if the translation be in English), "from an English hand." The real original is in this case, it is said, "taken as a basis on which to rear a poem that shall affect our countrymen as the original may be conceived to have affected its natural hearers." On the other hand, Mr. Newman, who states the foregoing doctrine only to condemn it, declares that he "aims at precisely the opposite: to retain every peculiarity of the original, so far as he is able, *with the greater care the more foreign it may happen to be*;" so that it may "never be forgotten that he is imitating, and imitating in a different material." The translator's "first duty," says Mr. Newman, "is a historical one; to be *faithful*." Probably both sides would agree that the translator's "first duty is to be faithful;"



but the question at issue between them is, in what faithfulness consists.

My one object is to give practical advice to a translator; and I shall not the least concern myself with theories of translation as such. But I advise the translator not to try "to rear on the basis of the *Iliad*, a poem that shall affect our countrymen as the original may be conceived to have affected its natural hearers;" and for this simple reason, that we cannot possibly tell *how* the *Iliad* "affected its natural hearers." It is probably meant merely that he should try to affect Englishmen powerfully, as Homer affected Greeks powerfully; but this direction is not enough, and can give no real guidance. For all great poets affect their hearers powerfully, but the effect of one poet is one thing, that of another poet another thing: it is our translator's business to reproduce the effect of Homer, and the most powerful emotion of the unlearned English reader can never assure him whether he has reproduced this, or whether he has produced something else. So, again, he may follow Mr. Newman's directions, he may try to be "faithful," he may "retain every peculiarity of his original;" but who is to assure him, who is to assure Mr. Newman himself, that, when he has done this, he has done that for which Mr. Newman enjoins this to be done, "adhered closely to Homer's manner and habit of thought?" Evidently the translator needs some more practical directions than these. No

one can tell him how Homer affected the Greeks; but there are those who can tell him how Homer affects *them*. These are scholars; who possess, at the same time with knowledge of Greek, adequate poetical taste and feeling. No translation will seem to them of much worth compared with the original; but they alone can say, whether the translation produces more or less the same effect upon them as the original. They are the only competent tribunal in this matter: the Greeks are dead; the unlearned Englishman has not the data for judging; and no man can safely confide in his own single judgment of his own work. Let not the translator, then, trust to his notions of what the ancient Greeks would have thought of him; he will lose himself in the vague. Let him not trust to what the ordinary English reader thinks of him; he will be taking the blind for his guide. Let him not trust to his own judgment of his own work; he may be misled by individual caprices. Let him ask how his work affects those who both know Greek and can appreciate poetry; whether to read it gives the Provost of Eton, or Professor Thompson at Cambridge, or Professor Jowett here in Oxford, at all the same feeling which to read the original gives them. I consider that when Bentley said of Pope's translation, "it was a pretty poem, but must not be called Homer," the work, in spite of all its power and attractiveness, was judged.

Ὡς ἂν ὁ φρόνιμος ὀρίσειεν—“as the judicious would

determine"—that is a test to which everyone professes himself willing to submit his works. Unhappily, in most cases, no two persons agree as to who "the judicious" are. In the present case, the ambiguity is removed: I suppose the translator at one with me as to the tribunal to which alone he should look for judgment; and he has thus obtained a practical test by which to estimate the real success of his work. How is he to proceed, in order that his work, tried by this test, may be found most successful?

First of all, there are certain negative counsels which I will give him. Homer has occupied men's minds so much, such a literature has arisen about him, that everyone who approaches him should resolve strictly to limit himself to that which may directly serve the object for which he approaches him. I advise the translator to have nothing to do with the questions, whether Homer ever existed; whether the poet of the *Iliad* be one or many; whether the *Iliad* be one poem or an *Achilleis* and an *Iliad* stuck together; whether the Christian doctrine of the Atonement is shadowed forth in the Homeric mythology; whether the Goddess *Latona* in any way prefigures the Virgin *Mary*, and so on. These are questions which have been discussed with learning, with ingenuity, nay, with genius; but they have two inconveniences; one general for all who approach them, one particular for the translator. The general inconvenience is,