

**THE RIVERSIDE LITERATURE
SERIES. FOUR
BOOKS OF POPE'S
ILIAD: I, VI, XXII, XXIV**

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The Riverside Literature Series. Four Books of Pope's Iliad: I, VI, XXII, XXIV by Homer

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HOMER

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FOUR BOOKS OF POPE'S ILIAD

I, VI, XXII, XXIV

*WITH AN INTRODUCTION, THE STORY OF
THE ILIAD, AND NOTES*



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INTRODUCTION.

POPE's translation of the Iliad is by no means the most important or characteristic of his works, nor is it, perhaps, the most satisfactory of English translations of Homer. It is nevertheless one of the significant books of our literature, for it was that one of Pope's writings which most influenced the age that succeeded him; and it has had probably a wider and more popular vogue than any other of his poems.

It is Pope's chief claim to distinction that he gave to the English tongue a clarity and a conciseness it did not before possess and has never since lost. He followed Milton and Dryden in their departure from the Elizabethans, with their abundant and often turbid imagination, and he carried this movement for restrained and rational writing to its highest pitch. The wit and epigram of a poem like the "Essay on Man" are at the opposite extreme from the marvellous fancy and invention of a play like "The Tempest" or the "Midsummer Night's Dream."

Shakespeare and his fellows were children of a buoyant and natural age, an age full of adventure and purpose and self-reliance. Their only law was their own whim; their only restraint the verges of imagination. They had only innate and instinctive standards. They were great without the help of guidance or rule, rank and beautiful and unhampered as nature herself. The age of Pope, however, was a far different time. Artificial is the word usually applied

to it; and artificial it certainly was. Its dress, its speech, its interests, its morals, were all artifice of a single piece. Life was a pose, art a pastime, and the grand game of statecraft a by-play for fops and favorites. Perhaps no age has ever been farther removed from the temper and feeling of the Greeks and the Homeric poems. And yet it was into such an atmosphere that Pope attempted to transport those immortal figures who people the Iliad. To do it as well as he did, to create an eighteenth century pseudo-epic of the story of the fall of Troy, is almost as great a feat as it would have been to make a final and competent translation of the original, — something that he cannot be said to have accomplished at all.

The two most imperative demands made upon letters in Pope's day were, that they should never offend by being obscure, and that they should always please by being elegant. It was for such an age that Pope turned the sounding hexameters of the Iliad into the jingling couplets of "The Rape of the Lock." That he was no Greek scholar is true; he was forced to depend on the interpretations of his predecessors in the same field, on Dryden, Dacier, and Chapman. But this did not deter him. He was at no loss to find his aim. The task set for him was simple enough. Any one making the same attempt now would first of all be confronted by the question *how* Homer should be rendered; in what style, in what diction, in what metre. And a dozen theories of the right and the wrong way of turning Homer into English. But for Pope there was no preliminary embarrassment like this to be overcome. He was merely to take the Homeric story and turn it into an elegant poem in the manner of

his own day, converting its primitive and simple air into the air of a powdered court, and substituting for its plain nobility of diction the regulated poetic jargon of his time. For that was a critical period; standards of taste, however false and vicious, were clearly defined and rigorously imposed. There was no play given to the vagaries of the writer, no scope to his whim; he might not exercise his cleverness in the invention of a new style; he must follow the code; he must submit a too florid fancy to the wholesome discipline of fashion. Pope, in other words, was in no perplexity as to what his undertaking must be. His style and medium were already fixed. He would have made a translation of the *Æneid* quite as brilliant and readable as his *Iliad*, and quite as unlike the original. At the present day, the most obvious quality we should look for in a translator would be a certain likeness to his original in genius. We should hardly expect an Emerson to give us the ideal translation of Horace, nor a Walt Whitman to give us the ideal translation of Virgil; simply because at the present day we set far less store by formal excellence in writing than we do by individual quality in the writer. We have lapsed again from the ideas of Anne's time — the supremacy of regularity and style — to the ambition of Elizabeth's time — a supremacy of whim and imagination. The vagaries of a poet like Browning are exceeded only by the vagaries of a critic like Mr. Ruskin.

It was under Pope's influence, as Matthew Arnold has pointed out, that English literature first came to have "regularity, uniformity, precision, and balance," the essential qualities of good prose, rather than good poetry. This influence helped us to the clear rational-

ism of the eighteenth century ; it was valuable and tonic ; but it was lacking in those forces which make up the greatest poetry, and the revolt against it was inevitable. The reaction towards simplicity and the freedom of the imagination, which was perfected by Wordsworth, was begun by Cowper. And Cowper, like Pope, was a translator of the Iliad ; though his manner was as far removed from Pope's as Pope's was from Chapman's.

To revert for a moment to Pope's literary life and the part his translation played in it. Alexander Pope, the son of a London merchant, of strict Catholic belief, was born in 1688, the opening year of a new political era in English history, and one fatal to the ambitions of his co-religionists. The fact that he belonged to a persecuted sect probably had a great influence on Pope's character and development. Denied the free play of his intellectual energies and the freedom of speech under constant public suspicion, denied, also, a healthy intercourse with his fellows by reason of his sickly constitution and rickety body, he would easily be driven to a hatred of intolerance ; quite as easily, too, he would be driven to subterfuge and deceit. The fact is that Pope's life is an elaborate story of petty intrigue and self-seeking among his contemporaries. He falsified the letters of his friends and repudiated his own replies, whenever it would advance his own renown, with a shamelessness that is nothing but contemptible. He was precocious, ardent, afflicted, and ambitious ; he grew hard, sinister, cynical, and unscrupulous. His education was wholly desultory ; he never went to school after he was twelve years old ; but he early became an omnivorous reader, directed by his own fancy. His bent led him to

poetry, and he became widely versed in the poets of his own country; but of Latin, or Greek, or French, he knew almost nothing. He never was a scholar, in the strict sense of the term. Yet before he was fifteen he had the ambition to attempt an epic poem which was to emulate the finer passages of Milton, Homer, Virgil, Cowley, Spenser, and a few other ancients and moderns. Four books of this work survived for many years.

About 1718 Pope met Swift, then at the height of his power, and was introduced by him to Oxford, Bolingbroke, and other influential men. Pope with his vanity was not slow to plume himself on this acquaintance with the great; at the same time he had enough independence, or at least enough policy, not to commit himself as a supporter of either party; and in fact he managed to secure the patronage of both for the great work he had in hand. This was his translation of the *Iliad*. It was to be issued in six volumes, for which his publisher, Lintot, was to pay him £200 apiece. And in addition to this, Lintot was to supply him gratuitously with copies for his subscribers, at one guinea a volume. There were 575 subscribers, who took 654 copies; so that Pope received in all over £5320 at the regular price. As a matter of fact, many distinguished persons bought the work at a greatly advanced price. From the very first, therefore, the work was a financial success.

It is interesting to note the similarity between the manner of the *Iliad* and the manner of Pope's later work. What he trained himself to use with so much ease and flexibility in the one, he brought to still greater perfection in the latter. The heroic couplet has very little musical compass in his hands; it is apt