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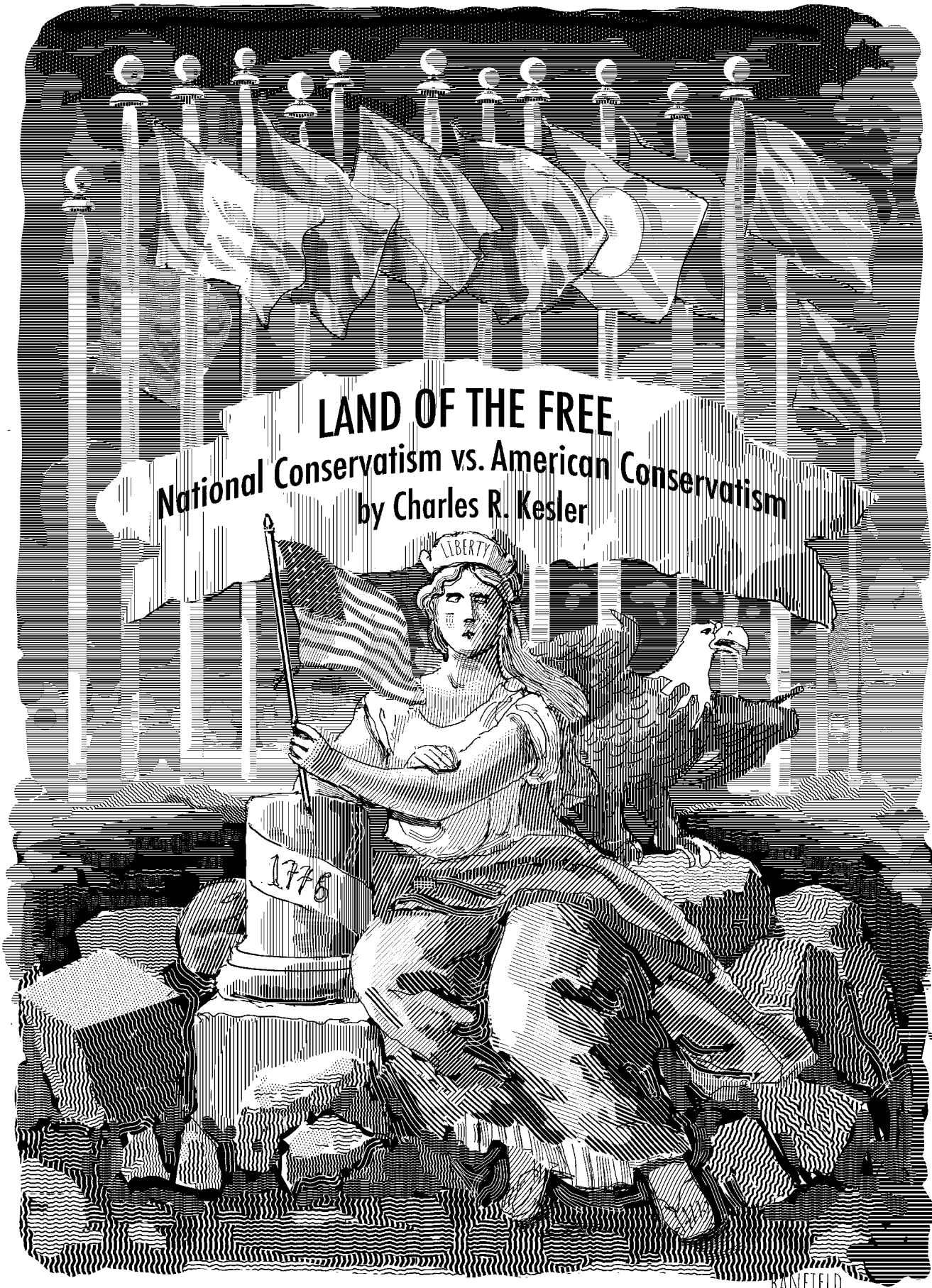
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HOMER WITHOUT HEROES

The Iliad, by Homer, translated by Emily Wilson.
W.W. Norton & Company, 848 pages, \$39.95 (cloth), \$19.99 (paper)



IN BOOK 9 OF HOMER'S *ILIAD*, THE GREEK army chieftains of Achaea send five choice men on a diplomatic mission to plead with Achilles, their best fighter in the war against Troy. He has been insubordinate ever since the grand general Agamemnon presumed to expropriate his favorite concubine. This high-handed insult deprived Achilles of his one consolation for his looming death in war: honor among the Greeks. So, he has withdrawn to let Agamemnon's troops die in their multitudes without his protection, nursing his lethal fury by the shores of Troy. The envoys find him soothing his wounded heart with a cherished prize from an old conquest, a stringed instrument adorned with pure silver. "And with this," says the narrator, "he lightened his spirits, singing the glorious deeds of men."

When she comes to this line in her new translation of the poem, Emily Wilson writes that Achilles' instrument "brought him joy. He sang heroic stories / of famous men." It's loose but not inaccurate: the *klea*

andrōn, the "glorious deeds of men" that Achilles sings about, are certainly stories of heroism. And they do confer fame of a certain kind—the most wondrous kind imaginable, the kind Achilles himself would trade his life for. Soaring poetic memorials of bygone valor are enough to *terpein* the soldier's *thumon*: they can "delight his heart," clearing away the storm clouds of pain and humiliation that have kept him from fulfilling his own legend. In fact, songs of war might be the *only* thing that can keep Achilles from despair, the only answer to the unbearable sorrow pressing down on him at the thought of either life or honor lost.

TO DESCRIBE THIS MOMENT AS ONE of "joy" at "heroic stories / of famous men" is not to mistranslate the Greek, exactly. But Wilson's version saps the marrow and vigor from the words. Compare the 1990 rendering by the late Robert Fagles of Princeton: "Achilles was lifting his spirits with [his lyre] now, / singing the famous

deeds of fighting heroes." Or take navy veteran and Bryn Mawr professor Richmond Lattimore, who put it this way in 1951: "He was pleasuring his heart, and singing of men's fame." Readers who know the poem will come to moments like this in Wilson's translation and find them muted. Students encountering the *Iliad* for the first time might not know there's something missing—though maybe if they've got good ears they'll sense a kind of anticlimax, a dull thud where the verse should surge to an aching crescendo. Unfortunately, this is by design.

Wilson's choices are nothing if not intentional. A lifelong student of Greek and an Oxford-trained professor of classical studies at the University of Pennsylvania, she labored over her *Iliad* for six years after her *Odyssey* appeared to huge acclaim in 2017. Her objective this time around is almost literally to cut Homer's military epic down to size: she explains in her introduction that she "hoped to provide a clearer sense" than other translators "of the small scale of the whole Trojan War."



Wilson writes throughout as if the splendor and dignity of the poem's verse is a modern imposition, foisted onto Homer's modest original by English-speaking warmongers who wanted more chest-thumping than the poem actually provides.

"Many translations describe the dominant warriors as 'princes,'" writes Wilson, "but this term is more appropriate for an early modern nation-state than for the little clusters of men from different territories who travel to Troy to fight." Homer's *basileis* and *archoi*, commanders like Odysseus and Nestor who marshal the sons of their native lands to battle, become simple "leaders" of "troops." Likewise, a "castle" is too grand a dwelling for Priam of Troy—though he is given the title of "king" by Wilson's narrator at Book 3.191 (where the Greek simply has *geraios*, meaning "elder" or "old man"). If Priam can be a king, one might wonder why he can't have a castle, but that's not in keeping with Wilson's approach: Trojans and Greeks alike are downgraded to "huts, tents, and houses, not pavilions."

AS A RESULT OF CHOICES LIKE THESE, Wilson's *Iliad* is so deflated that it's hard to tell what Homer's characters are fighting for. Achilles eases his misery with songs of glory because they are the only human tribute that can do justice to the incalculable loss of a valiant soul. This is the melancholy tradeoff that the hero eventually makes: it has been prophesied that he must suffer an early death if he wants an enduring legacy. That's why Agamemnon's disrespect cuts him so deeply in the first place. Like the Trojan champion Hector, Achilles feels bitterly that war is pointless unless it is bathed in the golden light of renown.

"Why should the Greeks make war against the Trojans?" he asks the ambassadors who come to placate him. "Was it not to retrieve a woman, Helen?" Hector's brother, Paris, has stolen Helen from Agamemnon's brother, Menelaus. In itself this is a sordid palace intrigue, a pitifully trivial inciting incident for mass slaughter. But the Greeks sailed in their battalions to Troy because the abduction of a queen is a matter of pride—much the same sort of pride that Agamemnon offended when he abused his command prerogative and stole a slave-girl from the only man who could win the war for him. Unless Achilles will be remembered as the greatest man among the Greeks, he is fighting for nothing. That's why he holds back until he can be sure that his stature will be worthy of the kind of songs that he himself sings: songs of glory. Songs like the *Iliad*.

In other words, Homer's poem only makes sense if it can plausibly pass muster as a worthy reward for the great deeds of a doomed man. It's totally unsatisfying if it comes across as nothing more than the story of a misbegotten squabble among pitifully overgrown boys. Wilson's fighters shout things like "Got you!" and "So rude!" on the battlefield. They "scream" on the way into combat at moments when they should clearly be roaring or bellowing. The plague-bearing arrow shafts of the avenging deity Apollo (the *kēla theoio*) become "the god's darts." Where Homer's warriors are labeled with the ominous superlative *ekpaglotatos*, meaning something like "terrible in violence, abounding in fury," Wilson's English has "the wildest, most aggressive man alive." She is plainly trying to humanize the poem and its suffering soldiers—a worthy enough aim, since the poem does portray its mortal characters as grievously vulnerable. But the *Iliad* does more than that: it also magnifies its warriors and their courage. Wilson brings

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them so far down to earth that she ends up belittling them.

IN DOING SO, SHE RATHER MISSES THE point. She pictures the Trojan War taking place on a "small scale" because she is evaluating it by modern standards, measuring up the armies in terms of raw numbers and setting the security they lose at a higher value than the glory they gain. Probably, if we could watch video footage of Greek armies in the bronze age, they would in fact look physically small to us in material terms. But Homer isn't thinking in those terms: he is sizing up the spirit, not the body. The "huts, tents, and houses" that the fighters occupy need to loom in the imagination to the height of lofty parapets because of the greatness of the souls within them.

Why else would the narrator say that he "could not tell or name the multitude, / not even if I had ten tongues, ten mouths, / a voice that never broke, a heart of bronze"? That's a strange way to talk about what Wilson calls "little clusters of men." She proposes

that Homer's many tongues "enable a single poem to encompass the whole world and remember the numberless dead." But that's not quite right. The narrator needs more than ten times his own powers to tell about *this* battle, *these* men: not the whole world, but the Trojan War alone is enough to require divine inspiration from the Muses. Only the goddesses of poetry can convey the true magnitude of warriors whose cosmic significance is measureless, regardless of how their numbers and dimensions stack up in absolute terms.

One of Homer's signal achievements is to layer a gloss of majesty onto merely human exploits, so that men grow larger in the light of memory (we're reminded at Book 5.302-304 that even the stones they throw are heavier than two people could lift now). These flawed and temperamental men, pedestrian in their concerns and maddeningly stubborn in their convictions, still tower in the poem's depiction until they can even wound the gods. That's the genius of Homeric style.

Wilson wants to strip that style down and capture its directness, the blunt force of Homer's unflinching language and the gruesome realities of the war he depicts. She's absolutely right that Homer's Greek is often powerfully terse. Her translation is strongest at getting across the unsparing martial frankness, the almost clinical descriptions of moments like the death of the Trojan Pisander: "Menelaus stabbed his forehead / above his nose, right at the bridge, and broke / his skull, and popped his eyeballs out. All bloody, / they fell into the dust beside his feet." But what makes Homer's diction so enthralling is that it somehow combines punishing clarity like this with stately grandeur and magisterial ceremony: when Zeus's son Sarpedon dies fighting for Troy, for example, the Olympian king rains down blood from heaven in mournful tribute. The man himself, in one of Homer's endlessly varied and emotionally disarming similes, falls like a mountain pine groaning at the blow of an axe.

THE GREEK OF THE *ILIAD* IS AN EXHILATING blend of regal solemnity and grim realism. For a rough English analogue, consider Shakespeare's Richard II, driven to helpless impotence by Henry Bolingbroke, pleading with his straggling followers in thudding monosyllables to recognize his humanity: "I live with bread like you, feel want, / Taste grief, need friends. Subjected thus, / How can you say to me I am a king?" Plain language used as a vehicle for high drama: that's what any translator of Homer should aim for.

Wilson is interested in the plain language, but she sniffs at the high drama. Like



Shakespeare, she writes in iambic pentameter, which she rightly considers the best approximation for Homer's loping dactylic hexameter. The ten-syllable English pentameter matches the six-foot lines of the Greek in that it comes trailing associations of epic splendor. It's the meter of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Tennyson's "Ulysses." Yet Wilson wants to gainsay those associations and deliver an *Iliad* shorn of glamor: "I hope that most readers of this translation do not realize how deeply I love Shakespeare, let alone Milton," she writes. This is heroic verse without the heroism.

In an 1861 essay "On Translating Homer," the great critic Matthew Arnold wrote that "in spite of [the] perfect plainness and directness of Homer's style, in spite of [the] perfect plainness and directness of his ideas, he is eminently noble; he works as entirely in the grand style." In the introduction to her *Odyssey*, though, Wilson objects that "Homer is... very often not 'noble': the language is not colloquial, and it avoids obscenity, but it is not bombastic or grandiloquent." Her assumption seems to be that nobility is synonymous with bombast and grandiloquence. That's a misunderstanding of both Arnold and Homer, whose language is dignified without ever becoming pompous.

ARNOLD WASN'T THE FIRST TO OBSERVE this, and he wasn't just indulging in sentimental Victorian fancy. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* took shape as oral poems around the 8th or 7th century B.C. By the high classical period of the 5th century they had been made into written objects of intensive study and subjected to a constant analysis, bordering on veneration, of both form and content. Careful native readers of ancient Greek noticed, as Arnold did, that Homeric verse fuses sublime elegance with bluff candor. In the 4th century Aristotle was impressed that Homer managed to be both "the pre-eminent poet in serious matters" (*ta spoudaia malista poiētēs*) and the premiere "dramatist of the absurd as such" (*to geloion dramatopoiēsas*). The first-century A.D. rhetorician and historian Dionysius of Halicarnassus pointed out that in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* "the most commonplace words" are deployed "with manly confidence." Yet even Homer's gruesome scenes of violence retain their "nobility"; not one word is "without solemnity." Wilson keeps the absurd and the commonplace but scours away the solemnity and nobility. She pities the brave men of the poem; she laments their predicament; she chuckles at their foibles. She may even love them. But she does not honor them.

That's because she doesn't believe with them that honor is worth dying for. "If the *Iliad* teaches us anything, it's [that] getting het up when somebody insults you, that doesn't have good consequences for anyone," she said in a recent interview. "If Achilles had just said, 'Okay! Agamemnon insulted me! I'm cool! Moving on...' we wouldn't have an epic poem with that many massacres." This is a remarkably dismissive way of treating the main character's point of view, and it turns the poem itself into a pointless farce. Wilson cannot bring herself to grant the heroes' premise, which is that shame is worse than death. Maybe this sounds archaic or extreme to some readers today; all the same, it's what Homer's battle-hardened captains believe sincerely, pretty much to a man. The story falls apart unless there's a possibility they might be right. At their moments of deepest pathos, when they are staring down catastrophe with almost fanatical determination, they appear to Wilson only as foolhardy egoists captive to a patriarchal obsession with their own image.

IN WHAT MIGHT BE THE POEM'S MOST exquisitely bittersweet scene, Hector meets his wife, Andromache, and their infant son on the walls of Troy (6.390-496). Both of them know that if he goes back out, he won't return. But, says Hector in Wilson's translation, "my spirit / tells me I must not stop, for I have learned / always to be a warrior and fight / among the frontline champions of Troy, / to win great glory for the king my father / and for myself." Andromache tries to keep him with her in the city—she thinks they'll all be safer if he beats a tactical retreat and sticks to defending the ramparts. This kind of reasoning is far easier for moderns to sympathize with than Hector's suicidal daring, and Wilson clearly thinks Andromache is in the right: "For her, the priority is the safety of the city and the family," she writes in her introduction, "and she suggests a pragmatic strategy for keeping the Greeks out of her home." Meanwhile Hector comes across as a reckless narcissist: "The priority is his own individual glory...even if this prize is won at the cost of everything and everybody else."

Missing from this analysis is one central fact, which Andromache can't bear to contemplate and even Hector can only admit in unguarded moments of brutal honesty: Troy is doomed to fall. "My heart and mind / know this for sure," he tells his sobbing wife: "there will be a day / when holy Troy will be destroyed, and Priam, / lord of the ash-wood spear, and all our people." The *Iliad*, like human life itself, takes place under the lowering shadow of an ending that can't be stopped from coming. Hector will

die. The only question is how. Andromache's plea represents not a prudent alternative to this outcome, but a desperate refusal to face its certainty, a last-ditch effort to delay the inevitable and scrape out a few extra moments with her beloved nearby. It's a tragically beautiful sentiment, but giving in to it wouldn't save either of them from their fate. It would only diminish Hector's final hours by hemming them in with caution and wishful thinking. Wilson doesn't accept this, so she can't give Hector his full due, even in her translation: "always to be a warrior" is a lukewarm and uninspiring way of capturing the Trojan's aspiration *emmenai esthlos / aiei*, "to be valiant always," even in the teeth of death.

Every translator is constantly making choices like the ones Wilson makes with Achilles and Hector, selecting between multiple available renderings of each word and every passing inflection. As Wilson frequently reminds her readers, those choices are partly determined by the translator's own interpretation of the poem. That's why it matters whether she thinks Hector is "valiant always" or simply "a warrior" suffering from unfortunate delusions of grandeur. Ideally, though, where the translator's moral attitudes differ radically from those of the original poet, she should try to curb her own reservations and let the voices of the dead speak through her. A good translator can say of the original poet what John the Baptist said of Jesus: "He must increase, I decrease." The point of keeping an eye on your own modern bias is to counteract it, not showcase it.

THIS IS WHERE WILSON FAILS. HER personal viewpoint doesn't fade into the background of her translations; to the contrary, it's almost impossible to ignore. The press hasn't helped much, either. To say that Wilson has been overpraised for her *Odyssey* and *Iliad* would be an understatement as enormous as Homer's heroes. She has been hailed with a breathless profile in *The New Yorker* and fawning reviews in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, and *Vox* (as well as a very generous assessment of her *Odyssey* in this publication: "Singing a New Song," Summer 2018). She is the recipient of the MacArthur "genius" grant, a \$625,000 "no-strings attached award to extraordinarily talented and creative individuals" (such as celebrity racial activist Henry "Ibram X." Kendi). The glowing coverage has fixated again and again on one apparently dazzling truth about Wilson: she is a woman.

In fact, she is the first woman to translate the *Odyssey* (though not the *Iliad*) into Eng-



lish. Wilson caught the peak of a craze for female translators that accompanied the growing obsession with “marginalized identity” in the late 2010s. First there was classicist and filmmaker Caroline Alexander’s *Iliad* (2015), which, like the Blackberry or MySpace, had the bad fortune of briefly cornering a trendy market until a newer model emerged to dominate public attention. What the iPhone was to the Blackberry and Facebook was to MySpace, Wilson was to Alexander: she arrived at the perfect moment to eclipse her predecessor utterly. After Donald Trump’s election and the attendant horror at his past indiscretions, women’s issues attained such a vogue among the literati that Wilson could be presented as a kind of literary resistance fighter, claiming the supposedly chauvinist tales of ancient Greece for her own. Her *Odyssey* was followed in 2020 by a *Beowulf* from Maria Dahvana Headley, the feminist playwright who was introduced on PBS as “the woman who ‘speaks without permission’” (as if anyone was threatening to stop her). Then came an *Aeneid* from Shadi Bartsch at the University of Chicago (2021). In themselves, some of these translations are better than others. Alexander’s is lovely; Bartsch’s is serviceable; Headley’s is unreadable. But none of them would have been a sensation without the fashionable literary politics that surrounded them.

THIS ISN’T WILSON’S FAULT. HER WORK deserves to be judged on its own merits without reference to the narratives concocted by reporters. She was a female translator long before it was cool, and she’s not to blame if her renditions of Homer now generate sensationalist headlines about her feminist agenda. But she *is* to blame if the headlines are accurate. These days she likes to protest that they’re not: “Most features of my personal identity and biography are largely irrelevant for my work as a scholar and translator, beyond that I’m a serious scholar & translator,” she posted on Twitter/X in September 2023. “I’ve been reading and thinking about ancient texts for over 35 years. I love Homer. I love truth.”

Fair enough, except that this is what she wrote in the introduction to her *Odyssey*: “The gendered metaphor of the ‘faithful’ trans-

lation, whose worth is always secondary to that of a male-authored original, acquires a particular edge in the context of a translation by a woman of *The Odyssey*, a poem that is deeply invested in female fidelity and male dominance.” She wrote in *The New Yorker* that “*The Odyssey* traces deep male fears about female power,” and she told *The Chicago Review of Books* that “I tried to think, as much as I could, about how my own identities and histories might affect my interestedness in the poem: as a woman and as a gender-aware feminist...and as an immigrant, a mother, a writer/poet, and so on.”

Recently, Wilson has tried to distance herself from the “feminist translator” brand. After Twitter/X user Max Meyer went viral with a thread accusing Wilson of “woke” translation, she posted that “feminism has not in fact been central to any of my books or translations till now. But this kind of response reminds me that we do still need to smash the patriarchy.” All of a sudden the idea that Wilson’s “identities and histories” have colored her reading of Homer became an offensive conspiracy theory invented by online trolls, rather than something Wilson herself had repeatedly said. “I’m not sure that I have really injected my politics into my translations more than anyone else,” she told interviewer Audie Cornish on CNN’s podcast *The Assignment*. But if “fidelity” is a sexist male requirement, and if Homer’s characters are afflicted with “deep male fears about female power,” how are readers to *avoid* concluding that Wilson wants to impose her point of view onto poems that she ultimately thinks of as backdrops for her own moral superiority?

WILSON WANTS TO HAVE IT BOTH ways. She wants her womanhood to be relevant to her work if it affords her unique insight and allows her to subvert objectionable ancient attitudes in the name of modern sensitivities. But when critics retort that subversion isn’t exactly the point of translation, or that hostility to manly bravado means disrespect for Homeric poetry itself, she retreats to the position that being a woman has nothing to do with her scholarship beyond media hype. Both of these things can’t be true at once. Either she finds Homer’s

warriors contemptible and wants to puncture their pretensions to glory, or she doesn’t.

Her *Iliad* suggests that she does. The fanfare surrounding these new editions makes it distinctly possible that they could become standard-issue in those classrooms that still feature Homer, which would be a shame. Teachers would be well advised to stick with Fagles or Lattimore instead—they aren’t perfect, but at least they honor Homer and his champions for who they are. The *Iliad* is an enduring testament to the dauntless courage that has always steeled men’s spines to face the awful necessities of war. The heroes of the *Iliad* achieve triumphs that are at once woefully fleeting and luminously eternal. It’s too great a masterpiece to let contemporary quibbles get in the way.

When Andromache confronts him with the horrors that will follow his death, Hector makes this sober reply: *ē kai emoi ta de panta melei, gunai*. “Woman, I care about all these things too,” is how Wilson translates it; I might have said something like, “These things are weighing on me too, my wife.” Legend tells that Homer was blind, but when it came to the savagery of warfare there was nothing he didn’t see: the dismembered limbs, the ruined citadels, the rape, and the desolation. All these things weighed on Homer’s heart, as they weigh on Hector’s and Andromache’s. But there was something else on Homer’s heart, too, something Wilson doesn’t grant: there was glory.

The modern world is supposed by its advocates to be more “rational” than Homer’s, less addicted to the thrill of victory’s shining prizes. But as the spirit of war lifts its grisly head like Ares over the Middle East and Europe, it may be that honor once again takes pride of place as the only fitting tribute to great men who must do terrible things. Because there are always such men, the *Iliad* will forever stand as an indelible monument to them. It deserves translators who can salute its heroes without reserve.

Spencer A. Klavan is associate editor of the Claremont Review of Books, host of the Young Heretics podcast, and author of the forthcoming Light of the Mind, Light of the World: How New Science is Illuminating Ancient Truths about God (Skyhorse Publishing).

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