

Homer the South African

Richard Whitaker (tr.). 2012. *The Iliad of Homer: A Southern African Translation*. Cape Town: New Voices. 528pp. \$23.50 (pb). ISBN 9781920411978.

Reviewed by Jeffrey Murray

When reviewing a much-translated canonical text such as Homer's *Iliad*, it has become something of a *topos* to question the need for yet another translation of it. In the twenty-first century alone, Homer's *Iliad* has benefited from at least six published English translations already: Rodney Merrill (2007), Herbert Jordan (2008), Anthony Verity (2011), Stephen Mitchell (2011), Edward McCrorie (2012) and James Muirden (2012).¹ Richard Whitaker adds his translation to the list with a slight variation on the standard Anglo-American English translations already available, presenting his readers instead with a 'Southern African English' version.² With such a variety of Standard English prose and poetic translations already on offer, is there really a need for yet another *Iliad*? Will the novelty of its subtitle, as a 'Southern African English' *Iliad*, justify its publication, and what will prevent it from being judged merely as a postcolonial curiosity?

After a clear and concise summary of the narrative of each book of the poem, as well as a survey of the poem's major themes in the Introduction (which, no doubt, will be a useful aid to students), Whitaker provides his own justification of the translation (pp. 52–62). In response to critic George Steiner's *Homer in English* (1996), Whitaker poses the following questions in order to probe the rationale behind his translation: 'What conditions in South Africa, what in the state of South Africa's languages and culture(s), lend themselves to such a translation of the *Iliad*?' (p. 53). Admittedly, in a country where there are eleven official languages, English could be seen as an odd choice for the translation, particularly in the light of the fact that in South Africa, it is a language which not only is tied up with the country's often tragic colonial past, but is one that is also the mother tongue of a relatively small part of the population. Whitaker, however, is quick to point out that English is the most common second language spoken across the country, and the closest one South Africa has to being a 'common language' (p. 53). He is not unaware also that it is more correct to speak of 'Englishes' in South Africa rather than simply

'English'. Southern African English, in contrast to Standard English, is a language enriched with words from other languages indigenous to the region, for example Afrikaans, Zulu and Xhosa. While during the apartheid period languages in the country were actively kept divided, post-apartheid South Africa has seen an increased hybridization of its languages, particularly English, common not only in the colloquial speech of its population, but also in more 'official' avenues of communication, especially, for example, in the media (p. 54).

Southern African English, Whitaker believes, offers an advantage to the translator of Homer's Greek because of its hybridity (pp. 54–5). As classicists will know, Homeric Greek is itself a hybrid of various Greek dialects (mainly Ionic, but also Aeolic and Attic). In this way, where for example a word from Standard English doesn't quite meet the semantic range of a Greek word, or an equivalent term cannot be found, a word from another language – in this case, perhaps Afrikaans or Sotho – in common usage in colloquial English in South Africa can be substituted and render the word, or concept, more familiar to a reader aware of its meaning. Whitaker provides a few examples (pp. 55–6), with words taken from the *Dictionary of South African English* (1996). For the sake of example, I will quote his explanation of one such case:

No single word in Standard English captures the full range of the Homeric word *pharmakon*, which means 'medicine', 'medicinal herbs', 'drug', but also 'magic potion', 'poisonous drink', 'poison'. However, the African-language term *muti*, widely used by South African English-speakers, has this precise meaning: 'A substance or object which has or is believed to have curative, preventive, protective, or harmful powers of a medicinal or supernatural kind'. So, using Southern African English *muti*, I am able to render Homeric *pharmakon* in all its senses with a single term.



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This economical substitute provided by Southern African English could easily be demonstrated by countless other examples, and Whitaker provides a useful glossary of the Southern African English words used throughout his translation at the end of the book for easy consultation (pp. 517–21).

Compare, for example, an extract of the poem in Whitaker's translation from 1.53–67, with one of the most popular Standard English translations of the poem, Richmond Lattimore's 1951 edition:

Lattimore:

Nine days up and down the host ranged the god's arrows,
but on the tenth Achilleus called the people to assembly;
a thing put into his mind by the goddess of the white arms, Hera,
who had pity upon the Danaans when she saw them dying.
Now when they were all assembled in one place together,
Achilleus of the swift feet stood up among them and spoke forth:
Son of Atreus, I believe now that straggling backwards
we must make our way home if we can even escape death,
if fighting now must crush the Achaians and the plague likewise.
No, come, let us ask some holy man, some prophet,
even an interpreter of dreams, since a dream also comes from Zeus, who can tell why Phoibos Apollo is so angry,
if given the fragrant smoke of lambs, of he goats, somehow
he can be made willing to beat the bane aside from us.

Whitaker:

For nine days the god's shafts struck the impis;
on the tenth, Akhilleus summoned an indaba – the goddess, Hera, gave him the idea,
caring for the Akhaians, since she saw them die.
When they had all gathered at the indaba, standing up, quick-footed Akhilleus said:
'Son of Atreus, now we shall be driven home again to escape death, if plague and war together beat the Akhaians down.
But come, let's find some priest, sangoma, or dream-interpreter – dreams too come from Zeus – to tell us why Apollo rages so,
if he finds fault with prayer or sacrifice

perhaps, appeased with smoke of lambs and goats,
he'll be willing to protect us from the plague.

To any English speaker unfamiliar with Southern African English, words such as *impis* (a Zulu word for 'armies'), *indaba* (Xhosa and Zulu, meaning 'assembly', 'council', 'meeting', 'discussion'), or *sangoma* (Zulu for 'traditional diviner' or 'healer') can be disorientating, obscuring the meaning of the text. Even I, as a mother tongue English-speaking South African, who learnt basic Zulu at school level and have a fair level of competence in Afrikaans, felt the experience of reading Whitaker's translation to be jarring – an experience that he himself preempts (p. 54). As I know the meanings of the colloquial South African terms used, I judge this disorientation to be caused by my familiarity with Lattimore's translation (through which I first encountered the poem), and with having studied the poem as a university student in Greek; caused by placing the familiar into an unfamiliar environment. This experience, I would argue, has been a positive one (and hence I am dissatisfied with the negative connotation that the term 'jarring' implies), because I often found myself interrogating the translation (and Whitaker's choice of term), going back to the Greek original which has led me to read the poem more sensitively. The experience of non-Southern African readers waits to be heard.

In conjunction with the linguistic aspects associated with the translation of the poem, Whitaker argues that South Africa is fertile ground for cross-cultural exchange as well (pp. 57–62). Taking his lead from the questions raised by J. M. Coetzee in his novel *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), Whitaker highlights the similarities of some elements of traditional South African society with Ancient Greek culture. Cross-cultural comparison of this kind – particularly if it is between ancient 'Europeans' and contemporary African society – is problematic for a number of reasons. The person performing the comparison, if not careful, can cast himself in the role of Victorian ethnographer, and resurrect all the patronizing evils that this role complicitly shares with colonialism. This point has been made articulately recently by Michael Lambert in *The Classics and South African Identities* (2011), who states, 'In any comparison in South Africa, where one of the poles in the comparison is European and the other African, the author of the comparison, particularly if he is a white classicist, has constantly to interrogate where he positions himself, in order to avoid implicit value-judgments which result in *othering* the African material chosen for the comparative study' (2011: 86). Returning again to Coetzee, and one of his recent essays in which he discusses his own interactions with translators and the 'everyday difficulties of a practical nature

that [they] encounter' (2008: 419), this problem of cross-cultural translation is again highlighted. In relation to one of his novels, Coetzee writes,

The heroine of *Age of Iron* is a classics professor dying of cancer. The novel follows the movement of her thoughts, and this creates certain problems for the Korean translator. When Professor Curren's mind wanders to the West's classical past, should he treat these moments as allusions and footnote them? Since such allusions are often glancing and casual, how can he be sure he has picked them all up? Is a passing reference to a photograph of Sophie Schliemann worth a long footnote on Troy, Homer's *Iliad*, and the excavation of what he thought was Agamemnon's tomb by Heinrich Schliemann? The phrase *amor matris* crosses the professor's mind. For the benefit of a reader without Latin, the famous ambiguity of the phrase can be explained in a quick footnote; but how does one evoke the atmosphere of rote learning in classrooms going back six centuries in the West? (2008: 412)

Whitaker is not naïve about the problematic nature of this kind of comparison, nor these problems of translation, and instead envisions contemporary South African culture as an example of 'postcolonial hybridity' in the manner of critics like Homi Bhabha.³ He is able to side-step these difficulties through the democratizing power of Southern African English. In any given passage words denoting traditional or non-traditional, past or present, aspects of South African society are employed; hence 'chief', a word that conjures up for the South African reader traditional African chiefdoms, still in operation within the country, can be used instead of 'king' and is arguably a better rendering of the Greek *basileus*, as can *lobola* (a Xhosa and Zulu term indicating 'bride-price', usually paid in cattle), *braai* (an Afrikaans term for 'barbecue'; something roasted over an open flame), or *sjambok* (a South African-Dutch term of Malay origins connoting 'a whip'). Another area of cross-cultural commonality that Whitaker believes provides an advantage to the South African translator (pp. 60–2) is that a rich tradition of oral composition and performance poetry exists in the country, particularly in the form of praise poetry, a style of poetry that he adapts especially to the battle scenes of Homeric epic.

On the actual mechanics of translation, Whitaker has attempted to contain Homer's hexameter into a five-beat line. He has also provided line numbering which corresponds to the Greek text,⁴ and has generally bypassed the familiar Latinate forms of names in the poem, preferring instead to transliterate the Greek names directly, in an attempt to 'establish a direct southern African reception for the *Iliad*' (p. 65).

In the introduction to her recent poem *Memorial* (2011), an adaptation and translation of sections of the *Iliad*, the award-winning British poet Alice Oswald states, 'This is a translation of the *Iliad*'s atmosphere, not its story' (2011: 1). In many ways, this is the same approach that informs Whitaker's intellectual project. His translation of the *Iliad*, although faithful to the original text, could also be read as an adaptation of Homer's poem in the tradition of previous adaptations of Homeric epic by such writers as Christopher Logue and Derek Walcott, and his choice to render Homer into Southern African English might just evoke the *Iliad*'s atmosphere more than a Standard English translation could.⁵ In relation to this kind of translation and adaptation, and its 'widespread' application in English poetry, Stephen Harrison writes,

This 'democratization' of classical literature through widely available translations and other forms of diffusion has been matched by increasing interest in classical material from left-leaning and/or experimental writers, who might previously have been deterred by the canonical and establishment status of Latin and Greek. It has . . . raised subversive issues of class, colonialism, and gender in order to challenge traditional classics as a perceived preserve of elite culture. (2009: 3)

Whitaker's Southern African English translation certainly has done this simply by transplanting Homer into the Highveld.⁶

Notes

1 Merrill, R. 2007. *The Iliad of Homer*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press; Jordan, H. 2008. *Homer, The Iliad*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press; Verity, A. 2011. *Homer, The Iliad*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Mitchell, S. 2011. *Homer, The Iliad*. New York: Free Press; McCrorie, E. 2012. *Homer, The Iliad*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press; Muirden, J. 2012. *The Iliad: A new rendering in heroic verse*. Rewe: Westfield Books. One of the standard English translations of the twentieth century, still in popular use, is Richmond Lattimore's 1951 edition, which was recently updated with a new introduction and notes by Richard Martin (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011). For translations of Homer before 2000, see Young, P. H. 2003. *The Printed Homer: a 3,000 Year Publishing and Translation History of the Iliad and Odyssey*. Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland & Co.

2 There is at least one previous 'South African' translation of the *Iliad* to my knowledge, in the form of an Afrikaans translation done by J. P. J. Van Rensburg in 1952, *Homerus: die Ilias uit die oorspronklike Grieks vertaal* (Stellenbosch: Pro Ecclesia Drukkery).

3 See, for example, Bhabha, H. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.

4 The Greek text used by Whitaker is the Oxford Classical Text of D. B. Munro and T. W. Allen (3rd edition, 1920), with only minor changes (66), and he has therefore retained the *Doloneia* (Book 10), removed by M. L. West in his edition of the text, which was followed by, and hence missing from, Stephen Mitchell's recent translation of the poem.

5 Logue's adaptations of the *Iliad* have taken the form of a series of verse 'reworkings': see *War Music* (1981), *Kings* (1991), *Husbands* (1994), *All Day Permanent Red* (2003) and *Cold Calls* (2005). *Omeros* (1990) offers a radically postcolonial refiguring of Homer's *Odyssey*, by Walcott, the Caribbean Nobel prize winner.

6 The 'Highveld' is a partially-translated word from the Afrikaans language and refers to the central inner plateau of South Africa, which is mostly open pastoral land.

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Yaron Matras

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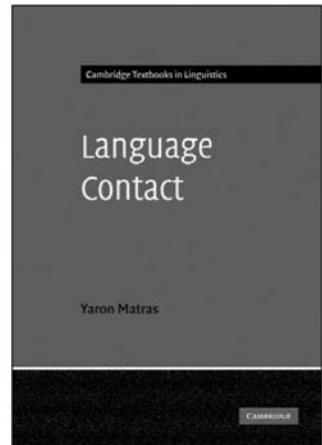
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