

Chapmaniac Colin Burrow

A review of CHAPMAN'S HOMER: THE 'ILIAD' by George Chapman, ed. Allardyce Nicoll, Princeton, 1998; and CHAPMAN'S HOMER: THE 'ODYSSEY' by George Chapman, ed. Allardyce Nicoll, Princeton, 2001

If Homer had walked the English soil in 1597 he would have felt that he had lived in vain. At that date no English poet had a substantial knowledge of either the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. Although the statutes of grammar schools made proud boasts that Greek was studied in the higher forms, it's likely that by the end of the 16th century only a handful of schoolchildren could read more than a few lines of Homer in the original. Those who fancied themselves as scholars could cite the odd tag from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (Odysseus's assertion 'let there be one king' was a favourite), but even literate people would have had only a general idea that the *Odyssey* was about a magical journey home and that the *Iliad* was about war. The few who actually read Homer at this time tended to read Latin translations, such as those by Eobanus Hessus and Lorenzo Valla. These translations made Homer look familiar. They often quoted or adapted lines from Virgil when they translated sections of Homer which Virgil imitated, so that Homer appeared inextricably fused with a Latin tradition that was part of the life blood of English readers. Even writers who wanted to be thought of as classicists usually needed a Latin crib to help them through Greek poetry in this period. Ben Jonson, who famously drew attention to Shakespeare's 'small Latine, and lesse Greeke', probably got most of what he knew of Homer from an anthology of Greek verse which had a Latin translation facing each page.

The only English language verse translation of Homer before 1598 would have made Homer, or anyone with an ear, groan. Arthur Hall, from Grantham in Lincolnshire, had trundled out ten books of the *Iliad* in flat, heavy fourteeners in 1581. Hall did not work from the Greek, or even from the Latin, but from Hugues Salel's French translation, which was in turn translated from a Latin version. Hall, a political conservative who wished to see the power of Parliament limited, regarded the *Iliad* chiefly as a poem about political obedience: the rage of Achilles at Agamemnon's confiscation of the slave girl Briseis is not portrayed as the righteous anger of someone wronged by an overlord, but as the destructive pique of a rebellious subject. 'Let us obey that king, whome *Jove* hath set here in his place,' Hall insists.

In 1598 things were to change. George Chapman, known chiefly as the author of a handful of comedies and a couple of punishingly obscure poems, printed the first instalment of his translation of Homer. This was to become Chapman's most extended labour - for more or less the next twenty years he worked obsessively at it - and his best and best-known work. Chapman's Homer appeared sporadically in sections, as he found time and inspiration to work on it, and patrons to support it. Seven books of the *Iliad* appeared in 1598. These were rendered in the long, sometimes lumbering fourteeners that Chapman claimed was the right form for so massive a poem. In 1608 he augmented the seven books to 12, and by 1611 he had completed the whole *Iliad*. At this point he set about adding notes to the translation. He also rewrote his original versions of the two first books and made revisions to the other sections. In the following years he laboured over the *Odyssey*, which he translated into wildly asymmetrical and violently enjambed heroic couplets. He worked at enormous speed: 12 books were probably ready by 1613, and the *Odyssey* was completed between 1614 and 1615. Around 1616, Chapman's printer pieced together a complete folio edition of Homer from oddments of earlier editions, proudly called *The Whole Works of Homer*. The project was so long in the making that it outlived two of its patrons. The martial Earl of Essex, to whose 'Achilleian vertues' the 1598 *Seaven Bookes* were dedicated, and the model, in part, for Chapman's Achilles, was executed in 1601 after his ill-fated rebellion against Elizabeth I; Henry, Prince of Wales, the dedicatee of the *Odyssey*, died in 1612 at the age of 18. Chapman kept plugging away.

The extended genesis of Chapman's Homer is one of its defining and most frequently neglected features. Many modern translations try to appear as though they were produced in a single instant of scholarly insight. Chapman's version is quite different. Like Christopher Logue's violent adaptations of the *Iliad*, it testifies to a lifetime's battle with thoughts and afterthoughts, a continual argument between the translator's own preoccupations and his sense of what is distinctive to Homer. Chapman's project took 18 years to complete, a period in which he grew bored, ran short of time, changed his mind, changed his patron, had moments of inspiration and phases of weariness. We know this because he tells his readers that it is happening. Time features almost as another character in his translation, and is frequently alluded to in the marginal commentary. Shortage of time meant that Chapman did not revise, or perhaps even seriously think much about Books 7-10 of the *Iliad*, and that he did not manage to write a 'commentarius' on Books 4-12. The second half of that poem, he insists repeatedly, was the part which saw the spirit of Homer fully enter him, and in his marginalia and prefatory material he hurries his readers on to this section, as he too 'haste[s], sure of nothing but my labour'. He recognised that he was producing a patchwork-quality Homer, and he tells his readers so. Chapman's translation is above all a *work*, a time-bound, growing and sprawling labour.

The effort involved in importing Homer into English is registered and transmitted to its readers partly by means of Chapman's frequent use of mammoth portmanteau words ('hony-sweetnesse-giving-minds'; 'Fate-borne-Dogs-to-Barke'). These words force English to emulate Greek compound adjectives, and are often accompanied by marginal notes which fulminate against the feebleness of French and Latin translations that have lamely missed the point of the Homeric epithets that Chapman attempts to re-create. The pressure of time on the translation, and the late nights and lamp-oil of Chapman's effort, are registered in a note which confesses that Book 12 of the *Odyssey* was the work of only 12 days. (Thomas Phaer had made similar boasts about his speed as a translator of Virgil in the 1550s.) These features make Chapman's Homer a work to live with: the translator tells you which books he has on his desk and where he thinks they are wrong. He tells you when he's tired or rushed, and apologises for the less good bits. There are certainly more 'accurate' translations of Homer, if accuracy is taken to mean the deliberate suppression of the presence of the translator, but there are none so honest about the fact that sometimes translations take fire and sometimes they misfire. No, 'this is not Homer,' as Matthew Arnold complained, since it frequently adds phrases and whole lines to Homer and sometimes simply gets him wrong; but for Chapman, translation is a dialectic between one life, one civilisation, and another.

Chapman came to believe that 'of all bookes extant in all kinds, Homer is the first and best.' By 'the first' he meant that it matters that Homer was the primary poet from whom all other poets derive, and that the Latin versions of Homer, which assimilated him into subsequent literary traditions, were bad guides to the origin of all writing: 'Homer's poems were writ from a free furie, an absolute and full soule - Virgil's out of a courtly, laborious and altogether imitatorie spirit.' This realisation came late on in the project: in 1598 he had been quite happy to translate similes from the *Iliad* in ways that show Virgil's influence. By 1611 he had removed these Latin moments, and in the process toned down several passages from the 1598 version which were probably aimed to appeal to the rebellious Earl of Essex. Intemperate and outspoken, Chapman began a campaign in the notes to his translation against fools like Scaliger who thought that Homer was inferior to Virgil.

It might seem that Chapman's growing wish to free Homer from Latin versions, and from contamination by subsequent imitators, has something in common with the aim of modern translators, most of whom seek to suppress their own concerns in order to present an 'authentic' version of their original. Chapman's approach to translation is more complex, and more distinctively early modern than this. It is a product of the gloriously haphazard nature of classical

learning in the Renaissance. Classical literature was not generally studied in this period as a manifestation of past forms of life and thought, as it often is in Classical Civilisation courses today. It could provide exempla for present action; but more than that, what you read and how you read it was part of who you were, and could be used to illustrate the kind of person you wished to be. There is a manuscript miscellany in the Bodleian (Rawl. Poet. 142) which shows the chaotic interplay of past and present in this period. It begins with a few pages of advice on the best way to keep fighting cocks in prime condition: they thrive when fed on 'cock manchett' made from 'wheatmeal half a peck, oatmeal flour as much', and they fight better if you lick their heads. A few pages later there is a helpful glossary, Greek into Latin, of some of the hardest words in Homer. The glossary shows no interest in cultural differences between England and Homeric Greece. It just gives simple Latin equivalents for some hard Greek words, which are followed by advice for curing sick cows. The anonymous compiler of this manuscript may have come home from a hard day at the cockpit to read how Homer's fighting cocks kept themselves at the peak of fitness by eating 'flesh of high horned beeves, and drinking cups full crownd', or about other mysterious Homeric dishes which always seem to involve so much spitting and folding of fat. For this compiler, reading Homer was part of life rather than a piece of cultural archaeology.

Chapman, similarly, was not primarily interested in reconstructing the culture of archaic Greece; his reading of Homer was intricately intertwined with his own changing preoccupations. He does sometimes show an interest in the 'otherness' of Homeric society, but these moments are seldom exactly what they seem. His marginal notes often berate Homer's translators for missing a linguistic point, though Chapman also makes mistakes, in part because of his conviction that he understood Homer's world better than his predecessors. So, when the glossators on Chapman's desk thought the phrase *eustrophon aoton* ('well-twisted plucked wool') referred to a woollen sling, Chapman, who was convinced slings were not used in Homeric warfare, feigns incredulity: 'and when saw any man slings lined with wooll? To keepe their stones warme? Or to dull their deliverie?' This is great stuff, and is the original of the scholarly sarcasm that was perfected a century later by the great Cambridge classical scholar Richard Bentley. But it suggests that Chapman was less motivated by a desire to understand Homeric society in itself than to insist to his vernacular readers that he alone was the truest and best interpreter of Homer. Chapman got it wrong here, as he often does: scholarly opinion now believes that Homer is indeed referring to a sling woven of wool. But as a rhetorical performance the note is a superb illustration of how an ideal of fidelity to the customs of a past society can, in fact, be used to boost the reputation and develop the persona of a translator. Chapman's Homer is a work in which the singularity of Homer is used partly to establish the singularity of Chapman.

Few people now have read the whole thing, and only Chapmaniacs like me would deny Matthew Arnold's stricture that it is marred by 'Elizabethan fancifulness'. But Chapman's idiosyncratic translation needs and deserves to be defended against this charge. It is the perfect antidote to a timid, reverent and excessively archaeological attitude to Greek literature. Chapman almost certainly believed that his translation had been inspired by the spirit of Homer, and, presumably, that his many expansive paraphrases and circumlocutions reflected what Homer had dictated to him as he slumbered. In 1609, after about a decade at work on his translation, Chapman recorded that the spirit of Homer appeared to him 'on the hill/Next Hitchins left hand'. Homer's ghost describes how he 'inuisible, went prompting thee,/To those fayre Greenes, where thou didst english me.' It's hard to believe that the ghost of Homer would have chosen Hitchin, Hertfordshire, as his chosen place for a return to earth. But this image of Homer's ghost strolling through the English fields does convey how simultaneously strange and familiar the ancient world was to Chapman (Hitchin's website, hitchin.net, fails to mention what must be the town's greatest, perhaps its only, claim to literary fame). Homer, the first and best, was also in direct communication with this miraculously batty translator.

Chapman does more than show off in his Homer. He enables his readers to perceive that the Homeric poems are interesting not simply because they illustrate the alienness of archaic society, but because of the way in which they present human shocks and surprises, events which are as surprising now as they probably were to those for whom Homer, or the group of artists known as Homer, composed his poems (or his and her poems, if Samuel Butler's improbable claim that the *Odyssey* has an authoress has any truth in it). These unexpected moments are legion, and their sheer oddity leaps out from the page however often one reads them. The poet of the *Iliad* excels at making familiar things turn suddenly strange. The moment at the very end of *Iliad* 19 when Achilles' horses warn him that 'God and a man must give thee overthrow,' or the moment when the 'blacke whirlpits, vast and deepe' of the river Xanthus rise up in horror at Achilles' slaughter of the Trojans, show things that are impossible being forced to happen because of the violence of Achilles' revenge. It is the surprising twist that war brings to the domestic - horses compelled to speak, rivers resisting rivers of blood - which makes Homer repeatedly shocking. Just at the point that one thinks complacently that one has grasped most of the conventions of 'heroic society', a moment of sudden departure makes one feel all at sea again. A Homer who can walk through the fields of Hitchin is just the right sort of Homer to catch those moments when a familiar place or scene is transformed into something uncanny.

It is a shared taste for these surprising twists that marks both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as the products of, if not the same poet, then of a very similar relationship between poet and audience. This poet, or these poets, knew what their audiences expected and how to unsettle those expectations. The most striking instance of Homer's exploration of the emotional effect of poetry also shows an acute interest in how familiar tales can have unexpected effects. In Phaeacia Odysseus hears the bard Demodocus sing about the sack of Troy. His response is not to feel pride or simple sorrow. Instead he weeps like a woman. In Chapman's version this extraordinary moment goes like this:

And as a Ladie mournes her sole-lov'd Lord,
That, falne before his Citie by the sword,
Fighting to rescue from a cruell Fate
His towne and children, and in dead estate
Yet panting seeing him ...
Lies on him, striving to become his shield
From foes that still assaile him, ...
... for all which the Dame
Eates downe her cheekes with teares, and
feeds life's flame
With miserable sufferance: so this King
Of tear-swet anguish op't a boundlesse spring.

Similes work best when they generate an initial bewilderment before allowing a sense of kinship to grow between their two elements; otherwise they risk losing the element of unlikeness that gives the likeness its point. 'Why is this humdrum thing being compared with that non-humdrum thing?' they invite their listeners to ask, before setting up a kinship between tenor and vehicle which pulls both of them slightly askew. What makes this simile of Odysseus and the weeping woman not just a pretty good piece of writing but the greatest simile I could imagine being written is that it is about a shocking affinity between doing and suffering, and it makes its readers feel that shock. The perplexity that comes from a simile is used to illuminate the perplexity of witnessing extreme suffering: you just can't quite accept that the much-enduring, many-wiled Odysseus could cry as though his world were at an end because of a poem. And at first you can't quite see how he could be like a woman whose husband has been killed in battle.

Odysseus' tears, which he hides beneath his cloak, affect the other auditors of Demodocus' story in much the same way that they affect the reader. No one in the Phaeacian court knows that Odysseus is Odysseus, and for everyone there, including himself, his tears at the tale of Troy are

a surprise. The impression created by mapping this incomprehension onto the double-take that the simile forces on its reader or auditor is strange. But it is not strange because Homer was writing or singing some 2700 years ago. It is strange because he is a poet who repeatedly forces on his readers unexpected conjunctions and recalibrations of the expected and the unexpected. This interest in the surprises that can lurk within domestic and familiar things runs through the *Odyssey*. When Odysseus has returned home and killed his wife's suitors he is not accepted by Penelope until he describes how his bed was hewn from an unmoveable olive tree at the heart of his house. This domestic centre of the whole poem is at once unshakably rooted in the ground and utterly extraordinary: if any other archaic hero had had a bed of this kind, Penelope's test of her husband would have been pointless. In Homer, homeliness and utter unexpectedness often converge: 'For in the fixure of the Bed is showne/A Maister-peece, a wonder.'

'Fixure' and 'wonder': the pairing of epithets marks out Chapman's own poem. His Homer is what Homer should be: at once quirkily arresting and homely. Keats had it about right:

Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken ...

This is the most wondering tribute which any English poet has paid another. Praise of Milton or Shakespeare tends to begin from a platform of veneration and sage familiarity; but Keats's praise is an honest confession that Chapman's Homer opens out a whole new world. It is a particularly acute form of praise because it points to Chapman's greatest strengths: the expanse of the sea, the alien air, the planet which 'swims' into Keats's ken, all suggest that there is an elemental power to this translation. Chapman's greatest moments are elemental in a very precise sense: he is at his best when dealing with one or other of the four elements, particularly when those elements are running out of control, tempting Chapman to run out of control with them. The finest of these elemental moments occur in the section of the *Iliad* translated after 1608, at a point when Chapman believed that he was inspired by Homer. One of the best is itself a passage about inspiration. In *Iliad* 15, when Hector is inspired by Apollo to burn the Greek ships, the breath of the god blows up fire in the spirit of the hero, and the hero himself inspires his men to even greater heat:

Then on the ships all Troy,
Like raw-flesh-nourisht lions, rusht, and
knew they did imploie
Their powres to perfect Jove's high will, who
still their spirits enflam'd.

The flames begin as Apollo 'stird / (With such addition of his spirit) the spirit Hector bore / To burne the fleet, that of itself was hote enough before'. Breathed on by the spirit of the god, Hector's 'eyes were overcome with fervour and resembl'd flames'. Hector seems to be flammable enough to make the Greek ships ignite without the use of firebrands. For sheer energy and vehemence the episode is without equal in English translations from Greek.

The other great high-watermark of Chapman's elemental writing is the wrecking of Odysseus on the shore of Phaeacia, which is suffused with the hero's weariness ('the sea had soakt his heart through'), as well as the vigour of the elements: 'He heard a sound beate from the sea-bred rocks / Against which gave a huge sea horrid shocks, / That belcht upon the firme land weedes and fome'. When Chapman is at his best, as here, his instinctive syntactic inversions co-operate with elemental forces: the 'sea' (a wave) is the thing giving the rocks a pounding, but Chapman's involuted syntax lets wave and rock for a moment pound each other, as they seem to on stormy shores.

It is not just turbulent water that brings out Chapman's best. Calm waters also inspire limpid beauty, as when he describes Neptune skimming the waves with speed in *Iliad* 13:

From whirlpits every way
The whales exulted under him and knew
 their king: the Sea
For joy did open, and his horse so swift and
 lightly flew
The under-axeltree of brass no drop of water drew.

This passage shows what Homer did for Chapman. His own poems (and many of the speeches of the heroes in his plays) repeatedly threaten to lose themselves in abstract speculation and syntactic involution. Homer allows Chapman to be aerial and to skim the waves, but also gives him a material foundation in the axle which floats above the water, heavy matter lifting itself towards air. It is true, as Arnold protests, that Chapman cannot capture Homer's 'simplicity' (although this is a quality that Arnold greatly exaggerates). But the interaction between solid Homeric objects and a style that wants to fly into abstraction generates a poem of continual, mobile energy, which works its way between matter and spirit.

For all its pyrotechnics and hydrotechnics, Chapman's Homer also has more homely virtues. It can stump up a plain phrase ('Simois, ho brother,' cries the river Xanthus). It can be as beguilingly smooth as Pope (well, almost), as when Penelope says to Odysseus: 'Your meane appearance made not me retire,/Nor this your rich shew makes me now admire.' And it can twinkle with puns: 'Rosie Aurora rose; we rose too.' But above all it is the work of a playwright (probably now the least appreciated playwright of his age), who knew that if speeches do not have meanings to particular addressees they could not hope to be read or understood. This leads Chapman to appreciate Homer's theatrical skill and social tact as no other English translator has done. He catches the flirtatious exchange between the princess Nausikaa and her father with a delicious lightness of touch. His version makes it quite clear that both characters know that Nausikaa wants to wash her clothes in order to win herself a husband. But it does so with a real delicacy - a delicacy that makes Joyce look just plain crude for changing Homer's princess into Gerty MacDowell, the dreamy teen who reads girls' magazines in *Ulysses*. These moments of tact are only slightly marred by Chapman's eagerness to tell his readers in the marginal notes that he alone among translators has noticed something subtle going on. He is also convinced, to the point of near-obsession, that Homeric people have individual characters - or as he puts it in Chapmanese, that 'this never-enough-glorified Poet (to vary and quicken his eternal poem) hath inspired his chiefe persons with different spirits.' He is so sure that Homer represents Menelaus as a dim cuckold that he adds rather too many marginal notes to remind us of the fact. But his portrait of Juno's chill malice is superb: 'She laught, but meerly from her lips.' Chapman's Homer becomes at times a character writer, similar to the contemporaries of Chapman who imitated the *Characters of Theophrastus* to create types of greed, folly or voluptuousness. But he is also a dramatist with a keen ear for the propriety of particular words to particular speakers.

All of this makes Chapman great. He is not quite as great as Keats says he is, though. Looking into Chapman's Homer evokes the excitement of encountering a poet who is reaching for something just beyond the range of what can be said. But if you read the whole thing right through, then the translation begins to feel less like a voyage over strange seas and more like a bumpy ride on choppy waters, with moments of stomach-leaving-behind excitement amid passages which are quite becalmed. The one actually disappointing section of the work is the second half of the *Odyssey*, which was translated in some haste, and with little sympathy, probably in the years 1611-15 (the precise chronology is a little uncertain here). Chapman's *Odyssey* as a whole has less of the frenzied enthusiasm which runs through his *Iliad*, largely because he had a rather simple view of the later poem. For Chapman, the *Iliad* was a lot of things at once: it was partly a poem written to encourage the martial Earl of Essex, partly a poem about

inspiration and martial frenzy, and partly an opportunity to display Chapman's transcendence over his rival European translators. All of this gave him reason to be animated in almost every section of it. He believed that the *Odyssey*, on the other hand, was chiefly an allegory of the 'mind's inward, constant and unconquered Empire'. Odysseus's arrival home meant that he had achieved the goal of a good man, which is to have his mind free of passions. In this interpretation Chapman was influenced by the neo-stoic writers whom he was reading through the second decade of the 17th century. There are a few moments when this allegorised reading makes good sense, as when Odysseus's companions gorge themselves on the Oxen of the Sun and their leader does not. But when Odysseus is wily, mendacious, or shows inexplicable reserve, Chapman just isn't very interested in what is happening because these aren't qualities he wants to see in his hero. Through the arrival at Ithaca, and into the gruesome slaughter of the maids who have made up to the suitors, Chapman is going through the motions, able to suggest an affinity between the growing virtue of Telemachus and that of Chapman's new patron, Henry, Prince of Wales, once in a while, but in general writing as though the spirit of Homer which had visited him at Hitchin had now departed. There are good moments even in this final section: Chapman's awareness of how speeches can indirectly address their audiences' concerns enables him to convey something of the veiled intimacy between Odysseus and Penelope which seems to predate the moment when Penelope finally and openly recognises her husband. But it's likely that if Keats had looked in detail at this part of Chapman's Homer he would have been a shade less awed.

However, the fiery surges of Chapman's warriors in the *Iliad*, the heave and crash of his seas in the early books of the *Odyssey*, the sidelong beauties of his marginal notes, and the zealous fury of his denunciations of rival translators, all make this reprint of Allardyce Nicoll's gently modernised edition of Chapman's Homer a work to be admired, bought, even read right through. The new prefaces by Garry Wills add little to Nicoll's original, level-headed and accurate introductions, and do not always acknowledge, as they should, that there are still things which ought to be done with Chapman that Nicoll did not do. There is no help here in identifying the many moments when Chapman spins freely away from his originals on frolics of his own, and some readers will find it frustrating that his Latin glosses are not translated into English. But a full edition of Chapman's Homer, which charted his quirks, his darting movements between his reference works and his original; which unpacked his lexical innovations (many of which are not recognised by the OED), and which mapped the extraordinary voyage he took from the moment he first looked into Homer to the completion of the magnificent folio volume of *The Whole Works of Homer*, would be a vast labour, and a work for a decidedly minority interest. This cheap reprint of a scarce and very good edition of a great work is a thing to be welcomed.

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