

**AN
ODYSSEY
FOR
OUR
TIME**



Emily Wilson's translation of Homer's epic has become a surprise sensation, a once-in-a-generation transformation of how English readers encounter one of the most iconic characters in all of literature. Fellow classics professor (and *Odyssey* aficionado) Peter Struck has some questions for her.

Edited by Trey Popp

Only once in a generation—if that often—do news editors find themselves wrestling for eyeballs with headlines about a 3,000-year-old poem. But the last months of 2017 saw just such a frenzy. “Historically, men translated the *Odyssey*,” teased *Vox*, going full Upworthy in a bid for clicks: “Here’s what happened when a woman took the job.” NPR opted for a more allusive tack: “Emily Wilson’s *Odyssey* Scrapes the Barnacles Off Homer’s Hull.” The *New York Times Magazine* spilled nearly 5,000 words about “The First Woman To Translate the *Odyssey* into English,” crediting the Penn classics professor with giving the epic a “radically contemporary voice”—while the newspaper’s Book Review section lauded “A Version of Homer That Dares to Match Him Line for Line.”

Winning plaudits everywhere from *The Atlantic* and *The New Yorker* to *Boing Boing* and the *Financial Times*, Emily Wilson’s *Odyssey* has become a literary event of rare magnitude in the classical realm. It’s won over some critics with its metered verse—a departure from the 20th-century status quo. Others have praised its unflinching use of the word *slave* to describe characters soft-pedaled as *handmaid* or *nurse* in other versions. Still others have acclaimed its contemporary diction, stylistic diversity, and swift pacing.

When asked for her opinion of the epic’s iconic titular character—whom her translation variously describes as “sharp-witted,” “long-suffering,” “godlike,” “the lord of lies,” and above all “a complicated man”—Wilson strikes a playful note.

“Being a translator is like being Odysseus,” says the native Briton, who encountered Homer in the original Greek as a high-school student and joined Penn’s faculty in 2002. “It’s a process of constantly telling somebody else’s story, being somebody else, being in disguise—but then maybe also a true self can come out through the lies. And I definitely feel that way in my own life—and specifically in the process of being a writer/poet/translator: that it is me and it isn’t me. And you can’t necessarily tell, because I’m going to try and outwit you.”

PHOTOGRAPH BY CANDACE DICARLO



Wilson is not the only classicist on campus with a deep devotion to the *Odyssey*. Peter Struck has kindled a lasting affection for the epic in the hearts of hundreds of Penn undergraduates—and thousands more who have taken his beloved class via Coursera [“Peter Struck’s *Odyssey*,” May|June 2017]. He calls Wilson’s translation an “outstanding achievement”—though he wasn’t initially sure whether he would shift his long-standing loyalty to Robert Fagles’ translation in his class syllabus. In January, the *Gazette* convened a conversation between Wilson and Struck about Homer’s epic and Wilson’s interpretation of it. The professors didn’t need any help creating a lively exchange—but associate editor Trey Popp couldn’t refrain from springing a question on each of them at the end.

Their conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

ADVENTURE AND NOSTALGIA

STRUCK: So it took Odysseus 10 years to get home. How long did it take you to translate?

WILSON: Well, I’ve been thinking about Odysseus for 20 years. But translating it took five years of intensive work.

STRUCK: Can you talk about your first connection to Homer? When did you first make a link?

WILSON: I was Athena in an elementary school play. That was my first experience with the story. It was really fun, and that made me want to read the kids’ adaptations of Greek myth.

STRUCK: What was the play?

WILSON: *The Odyssey*.

STRUCK: And you were Athena! Wow—so you were onstage the whole time!

WILSON: I was onstage the whole time. It was awesome. I had this tinfoil helmet thing ... it was great. And the headmaster was the Cyclops. So, as is the case for most kids’ adaptations, most of it was the wanderings—because the monsters and the witches are much more fun. We had Calypso’s Island with calypso music, and everybody was doing limbo dancing. Part of the appeal of the poem is that you have all these crazy, funny, interesting places where things are different—and power relationships are different. So here’s the headmaster lying down, and we get to gouge his eye out! Obviously that was part of the appeal. And part of the appeal also for me, as a kid, was thinking about how it’s a story about being lost—and supposedly about home, but the home parts are boring, at least in the kids’ version. So the sense of alienation, which I definitely had—though I wouldn’t have called it that when I was eight—it spoke to that.

STRUCK: Right. The dislocation of Odysseus as a hero is something that becomes more clear, I think, the more you work on the *Odyssey*. Books nine through 12—where all the adventures happen—it’s not all that much of the epic.

WILSON: It’s very little, yes.

STRUCK: And it’s compressed—you can’t believe that the Sirens only get, you know, 20 lines.

WILSON: I know, I know. It’s so disappointing!

STRUCK: In the opening books Odysseus is just sort of far away [while the narrative focuses on Penelope and Telemachus]. And then when he gets back to Ithaca and wakes up in Book 13, things take a really much slower pace all of a sudden.

WILSON: Very slow. And also, he’s usually somebody else, right? I mean, he’s dislocated in a geographical sense in the wanderings. But then once he’s back in Ithaca, he’s not Odysseus for most of the time; he’s in hiding in multiple disguises.

STRUCK: Right. And the slow path that he makes back toward the center of his home—first into the outskirts of his household, and then to have the audience with Penelope inside the household, and then finally getting into his bedroom—these are all pieces of a kind of concentric circle as Odysseus is making his way closer and closer to the center of what he’s all about.

WILSON: Exactly. So, *nostos* [homeward journey] isn’t just achieved by geography, it’s achieved by relationships. It’s achieved by each step in the series of recognitions. You’re right: there are concentric circles going in. There are the recognitions with slaves, and then recognitions with Telemachus, and recognitions with Penelope. But then we also have Book 24: So the circle goes out again, as well. And I think there’s also a question of, should it really end—as some of the ancient critics said—with Book 23, when he’s back at the center? Is that the full achievement of *nostos*? Or does it not actually end until he’s back home in his identity as a military warrior, and he’s slaughtering more people—and that’s when he’s fully at home as himself? Or is it when he’s back with his father in the orchard? These multiple closures, I think, are fascinating. It suggests there were these multiple moments at which homecoming happens, and could continue to happen.

STRUCK: And the ending point really will change how you cast back your mind on the whole of it. Do you think 24 belongs there, or are the ancient critics right that maybe it should have ended at 23?

WILSON: I now feel much more strongly than I used to that Book 24 belongs. I remember when I first read the poem—or maybe it was the second or third time—being super disappointed by the ending.

STRUCK: It’s so tidy at the end of 23!

WILSON: It wraps up so nicely. It’s what you expect. But the more time I spend with this, the more I think: No, it does make sense. I mean, so much of the poem is about all the different selves that he is, and all the different possible turns, and also about his addiction to inhabiting multiple different personae. And he can’t stop doing that—even when it’s clearly sadistic to Laertes. [When Odysseus finds his father, aged with grief over the loss of his son, Odysseus at first pretends

to be someone who had encountered Odysseus long before—a ruse that drives Laertes to tears.]

STRUCK: It *is* sadistic to Laertes, isn't it?!

WILSON: And it's completely in character.

It's completely within the range of things he'd done before.

STRUCK: I had no way of making sense of that until you just framed it that way. Of course: It *is* sadistic. But it's Odysseus being this shape shifter, inhabiting multiple personalities. This is just what he does.

WILSON: And also, going on to the very end, we were told in Line 2 that he sacked Troy; right? He's the city sacker. And he's going to keep on sacking cities—even if it's his own. That's also essential to his many *tropoi* [turns]; right? You've seen several different behavior patterns. You've seen the impulse to hide, the impulse to reveal himself and reveal his own name. We've seen the desire to test, the desire to shape-shift and be Proteus, then the desire to slaughter, the desire to be known and to be unknown. I mean, I think those things are apparent contradictions, but there's multiple different binaries at multiple points in the poem. And it's not as though Book 24 suddenly introduces these binaries.

LANGUAGE AND INFLUENCES

STRUCK: Had you always had in the back of your mind that you might translate the *Odyssey*?

WILSON: No. I wouldn't have done it if I hadn't been asked. It's a huge amount of work. And if there hadn't been a market for it and somebody who wanted it, then I wouldn't have done it.

STRUCK: So tell me how that worked.

WILSON: I have been connected with W.W. Norton for a long time, because I'm the editor of Volume I of the World Literature Anthology. And Norton was looking around for a new translation of the *Odyssey*, partly because it cost them so much money to put it into the anthology—they had to pay money to another publisher. So they were looking for more in-house translations. What I gather is that at the very early stages they were also very aware of the phenomenon of the Seamus Heaney *Beowulf*, which was a bestseller. They thought maybe the way to do this was to pair a scholar with a sort of capital "P" poet. And I didn't want to be the secre-

“The English of 50 years ago isn't closer to Homeric Greek than the English of now.”



tary scholar. I have poetic ambitions, too. And I'm very relieved that Pete Simon managed to persuade his colleagues that I could do the whole thing. And I love that I got to write the introduction and do all the translation, that I had all this control.

STRUCK: When did you decide that you were going to go with verse?

WILSON: I wasn't going to do it if it wasn't verse. I can't stand it that most translations of metrical classical poetry are nonmetrical. I think it's lazy. And I think it's something which we've sort of got accustomed to as the norm: it's laid out like verse, but the person hasn't necessarily thought all that hard about rhythm, and we just accept that. I don't think that's the way it should be.

STRUCK: So you're making a decision that that's really important, while at the same time sacrificing the latitude that it would give you not to have metrical verse. But to you it was never even a question.

WILSON: No. I mean, it was obviously a decision to use pentameter, which is a shorter line than the original. And there's a paired decision not to expand. Most translations are much longer than the original, because there's always the temptation that this word could mean X and Y and Z, so we just plunk down

X and Y and Z. [Robert] Fagles' translation is much, much longer than the original because he very often translates one word by five words. I don't do that. That requires this discipline. And I think it's worth it because the pacing is so much faster. And the pacing is crucial.

STRUCK: So when you're looking at other translations out there, are there ones that you would call out as being particularly good, and others that are particularly not good?

WILSON: I'm being very politic about all this. All I'm going to say is that I love [George] Chapman, [who translated the *Odyssey* in 1616]. And I don't like archaism—I think the assumption that you get closer to archaic Greek by using archaic English doesn't actually follow at all. The English of 50 years ago isn't closer to Homeric Greek than the English of now. I also don't like an expansive style or a bombastic style. I wanted to create an English Homer that would have stylistic variety—that could be sort of ordinary sometimes, or funny sometimes, or whimsical sometimes, as well as sometimes being grand or heroizing. I think it is only part of what the Greek is doing.

STRUCK: When we were coming up, 30 or 40 years ago, the translation that we always read was [Richmond] Lattimore [1965]. And Lattimore has a stentorian kind of tone. He captured the grandeur very well, but there are other aspects to the register of Homeric Greek.

WILSON: I actually don't read Lattimore as all that grand—because his management of the line is so awkward. It's very, very foreignizing. I mean, it's very odd, stilted English. I read it as weird. It's almost weird in a way that, if you're a struggling student, and you're writing out a translation, that turns out weird English. And obviously his Greek is better than that, but he's capturing something of that experience of reading the language and not knowing it very well, right? And that's part of why people like it, I think.

STRUCK: I think probably it is ... I've heard other poets and translators talk about having some verse in the back of their mind—Shakespeare, the King James Bible—some poet that's left such a mark on them that it informs the way that they're doing their own work. Is there something like that for you?

WILSON: I wouldn't say there's a single individual. I was certainly conscious that I'm creating an English epic, and I don't want it to be Miltonic. I spent years and years reading Milton. I adore Milton. But I'm not aiming for the sublime in every line. I very much don't want to do that. What I've just said about stylistic variety is very, very important for me. So I guess I could give you sort of a list: Browning, Byron, Tennyson, Frost, and also some parts of Shakespeare. Shakespeare isn't always densely metaphorical. The conversational parts of Shakespeare I think give some kind of model for how iambic pentameter can sound very much like ordinary speech and still be marked as verse.

STRUCK: What was the very hardest passage to translate?

WILSON: I tried to block out these horrible memories ... I would say in general it got easier as I went on. In the first year or two of the project, it just took forever because I hadn't quite understood what the voice was, what the style was, and I could easily spend weeks on a single set of three lines. And that just happened much less as I went on. But the first year it was struggle, struggle, struggle all the time.

STRUCK: When you hit your stride, were you doing a set amount every day?

WILSON: Even towards the end I would be constantly unrealistic: I'm going to do 50 lines today. And then I would get stuck on one word, and that one word would take me a week. Even at the very end of the project that continued to happen. None of these words have an exact correspondence in English. And thinking through not just what am I doing with this word, but what am I doing with this passage, what am I doing with this character, what am I doing with the point of view, and have I fully thought through where this character is now and whether the narrative is looking through this person's eyes

or that person's eyes?—all that kind of thing was at stake, as well as the level of word choice.

STRUCK: In the tools that you put to use, was there one—like the lexica, or other translations, or commentaries or scholarly work—that you found surprisingly helpful?

WILSON: I didn't look at other translations while I was working on it because I knew that it would either influence or counterinfluence; or I'd sort of see, "Oh, I've been struggling with this problem all week, and that's the solution that Lattimore came up with—so I now either can't do that, or I'm going to feel like I'm stealing if I do that." So I just deliberately didn't look at any translations.

STRUCK: Right.

WILSON: I did look at commentaries. I did of course look at dictionaries to try and have a sense of this word in different places in Homer and then different places in later Greek, if it was necessary to try and figure out all that. I hadn't realized that I would spend as much time looking at English thesauruses as I did, just to figure out what exactly is the range in English for words for *cognition*, say, or, given the meter of a particular line, are there any three-syllable words for *swooping*?

STRUCK: I ran into your term of a description of Odysseus by Calypso as a *scalawag*. Marvelous word. And there's lots of other pleasures.

WILSON: Thank you. I think it's also one of the rewards for having what is in some ways a fairly stark style. Because of the constraints that I put about myself, sometimes it's a fairly unmarked kind of language. But that means that, when there *is* a word that stands out, it really stands out. Like a *scalawag* is going to totally stand out because for the most part I'm not using grand vocabulary words or foreignizing words or archaic words all the time. And if you do that—if everything is weird language—then you don't feel the shock of a particular word being different. Whereas if not everything is weird, you notice when it is weird.

DO CLASSICISTS NEED TO GET WOKE?

STRUCK: In previous interviews about successful translations, I've almost never seen an interviewer ask the translator, "What's it like to be a man translating the *Odyssey*?" You seem to be the only translator who has a gender.

WILSON: Yes. Well, no—Sarah Ruden [who translated *The Aeneid* into English in 2009] also had a gender.

STRUCK: Oh, Sarah Ruden had a gender?

WILSON: She mostly had Quakerism. But she also had a gender. I think Quakerism was actually a sort of code for being female in her case. Her Quakerism was really played up in a way that Stanley Lombardo's Buddhism was never played up. [Lombardo translated the *Odyssey* in 2000.] And it's sort of interesting, because Buddhism is not code for being a man, whereas Quakerism is quite code for being a woman.

STRUCK: Interesting.

WILSON: But you're absolutely right. I certainly think that everybody should be aware in general about how a translator's interpretive framework and social identities—which aren't just about gender, but gender's one of the things they're about—are going to affect your work in all kinds of ways. Your scholarly work, your writing work, and your translating work are all going to be impacted by different histories, including what you've read and also who you are in terms of different social identities. And I think it's a serious problem that people don't think about gender *for men* in terms of their work. I wrote a piece in the *New York Review of Books* this month—it was kind of a hatchet job, not just about a particular individual, but using a hatchet job on that individual to show how this guy's unquestioned gender biases were having a problematic impact on how he was translating Hesiod.

STRUCK: Using my undergraduates as a proxy for kind of a general, non-specialist view of the field, I find that there's sometimes a perception that we, studying these old materials that sometimes get locked onto by conservative social elements, we must need some sort of help to start to see these things in a more "woke" way. And I'm at pains to point out that we've gone through this—that in the last 20 years there's been a real change in the way people have understood these questions.

WILSON: I think the state of translation is much less woke than some other segments within classical studies. I think the fact that many translators are outside the academy actually has a negative impact in terms of how much a questioning, critical awareness of social issues and cultural issues plays out in the translations that the non-specialists and the undergraduates read, such that it perpetuates a behind-ness [among] people who aren't reading the most up-to-date commentary and the most up-to-date scholarship. I mean, in a way it's disappointing that I had to be the first person to say, "The slaves in the *Odyssey* are slaves." I don't think that's a surprise if you work on the *Odyssey*. Just as I don't think it's a surprise to Homerists that the representation of gender in the *Odyssey* is complex—that there are all these different gender roles in the depiction of female goddesses and female slaves and female elite women, this whole range of different social roles. We don't have to simplify all that to: This [one particular thing] is what being female was like in archaic Greece. But a lot of translations do much more of that simplifying than the scholarship does.

STRUCK: And the translations—honestly, Fagles' is almost 20 years old.

WILSON: It's from 1996. So, more like 20 years.

STRUCK: Things were different in the field.

WILSON: I read a review from *The New Yorker* of Fagles' when it first came out. It was by Garry Wills, and it was saying how wonderful that finally we've got a politically correct *Odyssey*: it's so wonderful that Fagles is able to celebrate heteronormative

marriage! He didn't use those terms. But the thrust was that it's celebrating marriage, so women will be happy with this.

STRUCK: Oh, my gosh.

WILSON: You would think that by the mid-'90s that wouldn't necessarily be the way people would think about things. But there it was.

FOREIGNERS AND MANNERS

GAZETTE: Emily, you talked in your introduction about the *Odyssey* being largely concerned with the duties and dangers involved in welcoming foreigners into your home. I wonder how your own experience of being a traveling stranger—or of being a host—has informed your reading of the *Odyssey*.

WILSON: I feel like I've been asked so much about being a woman and so little about being an immigrant. And being an immigrant is super important for this poem. And the whole question of living in a country that's not mine—where I speak sort of your language but also sort of not ... In terms of my life experience, I've had to adjust to multiple different homes and different family setups and cultural setups.

GAZETTE: We're also in an era of global exchange and new forms of interpersonal interaction. Which raises a question about social manners—another recurrent theme in the *Odyssey*. As you dove down not only into the epic but into the whole historical context in which it was produced, were there customs and ways of behaving that made you think: *That would be a nice thing to revive?* Or, alternatively, *Thank god that that doesn't exist anymore?*

WILSON: I think the openness to somebody who shows up at your door in need—that you should let them in first before you ask questions—it would be nice if there was more of a sense among political leaders that that might be a way to go. I mean, just personally, I sometimes feel the pressure of "How are you doing?" as a greeting, as opposed to "You must need a bath. Let me get you a drink." You know? The norm of *xenia* is that you first provide for the person, and then you don't have an actual substantive conversation until you're sure they're feeling okay.

GAZETTE: Interesting.

WILSON: I don't think that's going to change. But that is an attractive flipping of the way we do it. If somebody enters your home, you probably are going to offer them a drink or something, but you're not necessarily going to avoid asking questions until you're sure that they're fully comfortable.

GAZETTE: Though there are places in the world that still adhere a little more closely to that idea of hospitality.

WILSON: Yes. Our culture is much more cross-questioning, I think, than many cultures around the world in terms of hospitality.

GAZETTE: Peter, I don't want to put you on the spot—but when I ran into you on campus and broached the idea of a conversation between you and Emily, you were enthusiastic. Then,

as we continued to talk, you said, “I’m not sure if I’ll use her translation in my class. I’m not sure if it’s suited to my own purposes.” But later we were conversing by email, and you said, “Now I’ve decided that Emily’s translation is what I’m going to use.” The two of you have just talked about the way non-specialists and undergrads encounter the story, and I think you’re beloved for the introduction you give Penn students to the *Odyssey*. Why did you change your mind?

STRUCK: I think my own understanding of the *Odyssey*—the commitments that I have to this or that insight that the *Odyssey* provides us—I hadn’t noticed how much they’ve been shaped by Fagles’ version of the *Odyssey*. So I was attached to some of those. And when I first talked to you, Emily’s translation had just come out, and I hadn’t read it. So I thought, how am I going to give up on Fagles? I just couldn’t really quite imagine what it would be. Then, when I started reading, it was so obvious to me that of course we’re going to use this. It does mean a different kind of experience. Emily’s is a different kind of *Odyssey* than Fagles’ is. And I think the differences are all in a positive direction of a rich understanding of the text. I don’t want to put this in Emily’s mouth, but I think of translation as kind of like raising a child. You need to be with the thing a long time to understand it. You’re bringing out what’s in it. And it still is “it”—but it needs nurture to become “it” in this time. And the *Odyssey*’s true self, I think Emily has figured out a way of reviving and making it—not new exactly, but better than previous versions.

WILSON: I’m curious what the students think of it. Have you talked to them yet?

STRUCK: There’s a mix. I’ve done this. So, Lombardo uses a lot of energetic contemporary English. And you’re not shy about using energetic contemporary English. The question I get when I use Lombardo is: Well, can’t we read something that’s closer to the original?

WILSON: Right.

STRUCK: And so I do get some of those reactions to your translation, too: “It’s so readable. I love it. I do wonder what the original was like.” And I’m like, “Well, you should read the Greek, then.”

WILSON: Yes, right. The Greek is pretty readable, too.

STRUCK: Exactly! So I say to them, Homer’s own language was not foreign to his audience. He’s speaking in multiple registers, some of which will sound colloquial to those nearby him, some of which will sound grand, some of which will sound petty ... and Wilson’s translation produces a contemporary English way of doing that. Contemporary American English has a certain way of being grand, a certain way of being direct, a certain way of being conversational. And when Homer is that way in Ancient Greek, in order for a translator to be faithful to what the Greek is about, they need to enter into all those different registers. So just because it seems immediate to you, and there’s

no distance between you and the words on the page, that’s fine! I mean, you’re closer to the experience.

WILSON: It’s like there’s a desire to be alienated—a desire to have a translation which you won’t quite understand, and that that will make you feel somehow closer to a language you don’t know.

STRUCK: I think the *Odyssey* could be a useful tool in trying to figure out this desire to be alienated.

WILSON: For sure! A desire to be in a place that’s not your home.

STRUCK: Yes. The English word *nostalgia* is built on *nostos*. And of course nostalgia is an ephemeral desire to have something that was never really there in the first place. Well, *nostos* is, in a way, Odysseus. I think that the story helps pull out the nostalgia aspect of what a *nostos* is all about—it’s not a final state of homecoming.

WILSON: No. It depicts this process of recognition, and alienation, and recognition as an ongoing process.

STRUCK: And it happens in the opening lines of the epic: this great wandering creature who’s trying hard to get home, but he’s in a state of wandering. I’ve looked to the *Odyssey* to speak to this ongoing sense of dislocation, which I think is really important about being human. Human in a sense that my dog is never confused about why she’s here. Never! She is obviously purposefully here to kill squirrels and chase birds and eat what she does. Self-consciousness is a bit burdensome. And it is dislocating. And I think that the self-consciousness that is characteristic of us as a species, I read onto this Homeric quality of Odysseus being constantly dislocated. I think we are in some core way dislocated because of our self-consciousness. But I wonder if you would go that far.

WILSON: Well, I always get suspicious when people want to draw a sharp line between us and dogs, us and other species, and say: *This* is the essential thing about humans. I’m thinking about both my own dog—who seems completely out of it and alienated from everything and has a lot of cognitive decline, so he’s alienated for sure—and I also think about Argos in the *Odyssey*: that passage about Odysseus’s dog, who’s been waiting for him for the past 20 years. We have the inset narrative about how, when he was younger, Odysseus used to take him out hunting, and he would have the best nose ... He was the best hunting dog, but now he’s there in the dung heap. And it’s not entirely clear: Is this the dog’s point of view? It’s pretty close to the dog’s point of view! The dog is alienated. The dog is supposedly at home—yet not at home, because his master’s not at home. And it seems to me that the poem is interested in that as the dog’s experience, too. It’s not just the humans’ experience. Obviously there aren’t that many dog characters. But insofar as there is a developed animal character...

STRUCK: He’s dislocated.

WILSON: He’s dislocated, too.