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The second English epic

by [Donald Lyons](#)

Review of Alexander Pope's translation of *The Iliad* edited by Steven Shankman

Swift led a campaign for subscriptions to it and Dr. Johnson loved it, Pope's translation of *The Iliad of Homer*, calling it "a performance which no age or nation can pretend to equal" and "the greatest version of poetry which the world has ever seen." Richard Bentley famously sneered; Blake hated it. In our day, Harold Bloom has called Johnson's verdict "scandalous overpraise of a version now dead for nearly all of us" and engages in his familiar neo-Freudian voodoo about Johnson's being "too good a son to his poetic father Pope" by refusing to slay him. Today, Bloom's report of the death of Pope's *Iliad* looks as exaggerated as his supporting jargon looks absurd. For Penguin Classics has splendidly decided to commemorate their fiftieth anniversary by publishing a remarkable edition of Pope's *Iliad*.

The editor, Steven Shankman, is the author of *Pope's Iliad: Homer in the Age of Passion* (1983). He has given us a sensibly chosen text: that of 1743, the last to have been revised by Pope himself. In an appendix, Professor Shankman collates all earlier editions (for, it seems, the first time). Save for decapitalizing nouns that are not proper nouns, the editor does not modernize Pope's meticulous punctuation or use of italics for proper nouns. "This Penguin paperback," says Professor Shankman, "is a direct descendant of the pocket editions ultimately favored by Pope"—that is, by 1741, when Pope hoped his book would be bought by "the Many."

This edition presents, for the first time in paperback, all of Pope's notes, giving us "the opportunity to listen to one poetic genius commenting at length on the work of another." Wisely, the editor prints them as endnotes after each book. The pages are thus uncluttered with the kind of pedantic undergrowth that Pope himself ridiculed in the typography of *The Dunciad*. The notes themselves are not, however, pedantic discussions of rare grammatical forms, varying shapes of helmet, or the precise location of such and such a river; they are not, that is, philological but literary-critical. Pope is concerned with the moral qualities of Homer's characters and with the poetical strategies of Homer's language. In fact, his decision to concentrate on the epic's "poetical qualities" of "unequal'd fire and rapture" amounts to a revolutionary opting for literary criticism and against pedantry. The one partial exception here is the frequent citation in the notes (always translated by Mr. Shankman) of Homeric echoes in later epics. This 1,212-page book concludes with three eighteenth-century indices to the poem—one of Persons and Things, one of poetical tropes, one of Arts and Sciences—and a glossary of difficult or changed terms, together with definitions, often from Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary*. The whole feast dumped so devourably on our tables is surely the publishing event of 1996.

We live today in a Silver Age of Homeric translation, a time when a crowd of fine verse-makers has

turned its hands to clear, strong, and close versions that aim for simplicity of diction and rhythmically flexible lines. Writers such as Richmond Lattimore, Robert Fitzgerald, and Robert Fagles have done readable and moving *Iliads*. There is a scene in book three where Aphrodite has whisked poor Paris out of the battle and into Helen's bedroom. Helen greets him sarcastically and Paris responds. Here is Fagles:

But Paris replied at once to Helen's
challenge:
"No more, dear one—don't rake me with
your taunts,
myself and all my courage. This time, true,
Menelaus has won the day, thanks to
Athena.
I'll bring him down tomorrow.
Even we have gods who battle on our side.
But come—
let's go to bed, let's lose ourselves in love!
Never has longing for you overwhelmed
me so,
no, not even then I tell you, that first time
when I swept you up from the lovely hills
of Lacedaemon,
sailed you off and away in the racing deep-sea
ships
and we went and locked in love on Rocky
Island . . .
That was nothing to how I hunger for you
now—
irresistible longing lays me low!"
He led the way to bed. His wife went with
him.

That this diction ("I tell you . . .") falls flat rather than flies is obvious. The winged oomph of Eros is limply wanting. No reader would think himself in the immediate presence of a great English poet. In the age of Dryden and Pope, however, and perhaps only in that age, the way to become a great poet was seen as going through the task of Englishing the classical epic. One's own verse—*Absalom and Achitophel*, say, or *The Rape of the Lock* or *The Dunciad*—was as often as not the by-product or echo, half-serious or half-satiric, of the great work of Englishing the antique text. Pope spent the better part of his twenties and early thirties with Homer, and the task formed him as a poet. Here is his attempt at the Paris passage:

The Prince replies; Ah cease, divinely fair,

Nor add reproaches to the wounds I bear;
This day the foe prevailed by *Pallas*' power;
We yet may vanquish in a happier hour:
There want not gods to favour us above;
But let the business of our Life be Love:
These softer moments let delights employ,
And kind embraces snatch the hasty joy.
Not thus I lov'd thee, when from *Sparta*'s

shore

My forc'd, my willing heav'nly prize I bore,
When first entranc'd in *Cranaë*'s isle I lay,
Mix'd with thy soul, and all dissolv'd away.
Thus having spoke, th' enamour'd *Phrygian*

boy

Rush'd to the bed, impatient for the joy.
Him *Helen* follow'd slow with bashful

charms,

And clasp'd the blooming Hero in her arms.

This is doubtless an unfair comparison, for the advantages owned by the earlier poet, possessed of a diction at once erotic and elegant, are overwhelming. Fairer to pick a scene of war. Here is Fagles's Achilles, furious at the death of Patroclus, mercilessly having at the Trojans:

Achilles now
like inhuman fire raging on through the
mountain gorges
splinter-dry, setting ablaze big stands of
timber,
the wind swirling the huge fireball left and
right—
chaos of fire—Achilles storming on with
brandished spear
like a frenzied god of battle trampling all he
killed
and the earth ran black with blood.

Thundering on,
on like oxen broad in the brow some field
hand yokes
to crush white barley heaped on a well-laid
threshing floor
and the grain is husked out fast by the
bellowing oxen's hoofs—

so as the great Achilles rampaged on, his
 sharp-hoofed stallions
trampled shields and corpses, axle under his
 chariot splashed
with blood, blood on the handrails sweeping
 round the car,
sprays of blood shooting up from the stallions'
 hoofs
and churning, whirling rims—and the son
 of Peleus
chariotearing on to seize his glory, bloody filth
splattering both strong arms, Achilles'
 invincible arms—

The scale is more evenly balanced here. Fagles knows how to shape strong rhythms (“big stands of timber”) to express horror and mess. There is musical subtlety and variety in, for example, the different placements of “blood”: “and the earth ran black with blood ... with blood, blood on the handrails ... sprays of blood shooting up from the stallions’ hoofs.” This is a Homer who has read his Pound. Here is Pope:

As when a flame the winding valley fills,
And runs on crackling shrubs between
 the hills;
Then o’er the stubble up the mountain flies,
Fires the high woods, and blazes to the skies,
This way and that, the spreading torrent
 roars;
So sweeps the hero thro’ the wasted shores.
Around him wide, immense destruction
 pours,
And earth is delug’d with the sanguine
 show’rs.
As with autumnal harvests cover’d o’er,
And thick bestrown, lies *Ceres’* sacred floor,
When round and round, with never-weary’d
 pain,
The trampling steers beat out th’unnumber’d
 grain.
So the fierce coursers, as the chariot rolls,
Tread down whole ranks, and crush out
 Heroes souls.
Dash’d from their hoofs while o’er the dead

they fly,
Black, bloody drops the smoaking chariot
dye:
The spiky wheels thro' heaps of carnage tore;
And thick the groaning axles dropp'd with
gore.
High o'er the scene of death *Achilles* stood,
All grim with dust, all horrible in blood:
Yet still insatiate, still with rage on flame;
Such is the lust of never-dying Fame!

This, clearly, is a Homer who has read his Milton (“thick bestrown”; “High o’er the scene”). Pope achieves much tough power here, as with the sonic patterns of “black, bloody drops” and the delayed internal assonance of “smoaking” and “groaning” and the near-echo of “thick” coming in the same place the next line after “spiky.” The majestic tableau, complete with moral, of the last two couplets is impressive and is called painterly by Pope himself. That the end-stopped couplet, with its sealed decorum and drive toward satisfying sense, misses something wild and terrible in Homer is perhaps felt by all readers. But who would think Pope or anybody could finally catch Homer in a bottle? Pope’s surprising triumph was (with Milton and Dryden behind him) the elaboration of a diction capable of a coherent and consistent and convincing representation of Homer. To savor Pope at his best—over a longish gallop—I suggest reading the last book of the *Iliad*, where Priam journeys at night to Achilles to beg for his son’s body. It is pathetic and tragic like few things in literature, and Pope is up to it.

How many epics in English are really worth sitting down and reading through? Few, for it is not at bottom a form native to English. After Milton, there is, I suppose, *The Faerie Queene* and *The Prelude* and *Don Juan*. By the time of the Romantics, though, the epic becomes something else, something leading to Whitman and Pound. It is already, in fact, becoming schizophrenic, becoming self-consciously literary, in Pope—a poet whose subversions of epic, *The Rape of the Lock* and *The Dunciad*, and whose poem of belief, *The Essay on Man*, are much better known than, but are incompletely appreciable without, his Homer. Pope did everything for Homer but believe in him. For this reason alone the grimly seventeenth-century, believing Milton goes deeper. Not to speak of Dante.

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