
Why another translation of the *Odyssey*? Whitaker’s joins at least two other recent translations on the groaning shelf of *Odysseys* in English that have come into existence since Chapman’s (1614-15), each with a claim to uniqueness. Most recent are Emily Wilson’s (2017) ‘first translation by a woman’, and Antony Verity’s (2016) prose version that purposely preserves original line divisions.1 So, why another and what distinguishes it from its predecessors? Whitaker’s is expressly termed ‘a Southern African Translation.’ Why?

Translation theory is a fairly recently codified enterprise, but its practice is older than Livius Andronicus. The first question a translator must decide on, is: Should a translation be literal or free? The French scholar Meschonnic called for the ‘dignity of translation’ to be enhanced through a conscious distancing between the original and the translation, a retention of a certain ‘foreignness’ in the new text in the target language.2 There are many theories of translation that lie elsewhere on the line between two opposing trends: *adequacy* (equivalence to the source text, as with Verity’s new translation, cited above) or *fluency and naturalness*. Eugene Nida coined the terms ‘formal equivalence’ (a source-text-oriented approach) and ‘dynamic equivalence’ (a target-text- or reader-oriented approach).3 Simply put, these extremes ignore either the writer or the reader. The purpose of a translation very largely guides the degree of literalness (source-text-orientation) or adaptation to the target culture (reader-orientation) that a particular translator will adhere to.

Whitaker translates certain Homeric concepts with words and expressions taken from a variety of Southern African indigenous languages, including Afrikaans. He explains in his thorough ‘Preface’ (pp. 9-14) what his purpose was with his use of the multilingual origins of the South African English dialect. His ‘tribal’ vocabulary shows that we should not imagine Bronze-age Greek ‘kings’, as the equivalents of modern-day ‘royalty’ but rather as tribal chiefs such as the famous nineteenth-century king, Shaka Zulu. This was also the translator’s intention in his earlier, widely acclaimed ‘Southern African’ version of the *Iliad*.4 These borrowings show us a picture of a Homeric world that Whitaker, rightly, envisages as closer to the pre-colonial and pre-technological world of early, indigenous South Africa than the urban sophistication of modern cities and modern royalty (such as still survive in the Northern hemisphere). Whitaker’s approach is hence clearly reader-oriented. Yet his use of the South African English vernacular that features these terms serves partly to convey to his non-South African readership a certain degree of ‘strangeness’ that places Homer at a distance from their modern world. Thereby he succeeds in producing a text that is both reader-oriented and text-oriented.

Most of Whitaker’s ‘tribal words’ fit into the Greek context perfectly: *induna* (headman, officer under a chief), *amakhosi* (chiefs and headmen collectively), *impi* (army or regiment of warriors). Whitaker’s translation, therefore, tries to show that, although his modern readers come from a very different milieu than the Homeric, there are still, today, people living very much as did the Homeric heroes; that there are, in other words, aspects within which ancient Greek and modern African cultures coincide. These include a strongly patriarchal ethos, use of javelins for hunting, use of herbal remedies and potions by a ‘traditional healer’ (termed a *sangoma* or *inyanga*), also the custom that the exploits of the chiefs are praised in song by an *imbongi* (praise singer, bard), and the paying of a bride-price by the prospective bridegroom to his bride’s father. The word *lobola* for this unfamiliar (to modern, non-South African readers) concept (the opposite of a ‘dowry,’ ) enriches our international vocabulary of exact Homeric equivalents. In a more rural, tribal context, such payment today still can comprise cattle; even in a modern, urban African context, the practice is usually maintained: here the younger man pays the elder not in cattle, but in cash, especially if the prospective bride is well-educated. This is what the suitors were repeatedly urged to pay over to Penelope’s father in order to ensure her engagement to one of them. Homeric similes that refer to wild animals fit easily into the ‘African’ context. More strikingly charming is Whitaker’s translation of a simile (5.329f.) featuring a comparison of the wind that lashes

---


Odysseus' raft with 'a summer north wind blow[ing] rolbosse (tumbleweeds) about the veld (open countryside).'</p>

All such and other words which may be unfamiliar to non-South African readers, are explained in an extensive Glossary (pp. 517-22), listing altogether 69 words and expressions from, beside Afrikaans (or Dutch), various African languages: Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, Tswana, even Swahili (justifying Whitaker's subtitling of the work as a 'Southern African translation', as opposed to 'South African' one. Assegai for a short spear has an Arabic-Berber origin, justifying our even thinking of the work as an 'African' translation. Whitaker's provision of a guide to pronunciation of these borrowed words is both ingenious and useful. His rendition of the rather heavy Afrikaans double ‘-oo’ in the words kloof and disselboom by means of insertion of an extra syllable (klőo-uhf and dissilboom-um) is commendably exact.

What else makes Whitaker's translation 'South[ern] African'? His 'tribal' vocabulary, as demonstrated above, and certain borrowings from Afrikaans (or Dutch) and, to a lesser degree, Portuguese, have all become established as South African English. It must, however, be remembered that South African English features geographical variations: the 'Cape Town English' usage is not necessarily the same as that of Johannesburg or Durban and may differ in the words borrowed and their employment within speech. What may seem slightly strange to a Capetonian may be common currency in a different South African English milieu. Whitaker started his academic career at the University of the Witwatersrand; his English and his manner of borrowing from Afrikaans probably reflect that. Whereas I would hesitate to use the English past tense '-ed' with an Afrikaans word such as braai (to roast over charcoal, to barbecue), he is happy with frequent use of 'braaied'. Also unfamiliar to me is his 'English' past tense of the eminently useful Afrikaans word skep, which has no single English word as equivalent. It means to dip a small cup or spoon into a bowl of liquid or food, to serve it. So, even though I would never say 'They skepped the wine and handed the cups around for all to drink,’ vel sim., in other parts of the country this form may be familiar. Those are my only quibbles. However, expressions such as 'I trekked away' or 'they outspanned the oxen' occur in my personal idiolect. A familiar South African word is bergie, for a homeless person or a 'rough sleeper.' With these and other Afrikaans loan-words, there are a few hybrids, compound words consisting of a local prefix and a Standard English suffix, such as vlei-grass or vlei-lands (a vlei, pronounced flay, is a marsh).

Simple English words can sometimes be invested with a particularly South African flavour in their usage. The Afrikaans for 'keepi ng satisfied' is paai. The semantic field of paai is, however, very broad, and includes the sense 'to lull.' Use of this English verb is in South Africa affected by its Afrikaans meaning, to include the idea of 'allaying suspicion'. Hence, at 19.151, Whitaker has Penelope tell Odysseus 'For three years I lulled and tricked the Achaians' (p.421). Another typically South African colloquial usage is to address an older woman as 'mama' as a sign of respect. Hence Eurykleia is consistently addressed as 'mama' by members of Penelope's household.

Another category of 'Southern Africanisms' is the use of certain formulae (again an Homeric touch) that have been translated from various African languages into apparently standard English, but which retain a certain typically 'Southern African' flavour. Examples (also explained in the Glossary) are the greetings 'Go well!' and 'Stay well' that are used reciprocally when two people part their ways. Another typically South African word is braai, which has no single English word as equivalent. It means to dip a small cup or spoon into a bowl of liquid or food, to serve it. So, even though I would never say 'They skepped the wine and handed the cups around for all to drink,’ vel sim., in other parts of the country this form may be familiar. Those are my only quibbles. However, expressions such as 'I trekked away' or 'they outspanned the oxen' occur in my personal idiolect. A familiar South African word is bergie, for a homeless person or a 'rough sleeper.' With these and other Afrikaans loan-words, there are a few hybrids, compound words consisting of a local prefix and a Standard English suffix, such as vlei-grass or vlei-lands (a vlei, pronounced flay, is a marsh).

Simple English words can sometimes be invested with a particularly South African flavour in their usage. The Afrikaans for 'keepi ng satisfied' is paai. The semantic field of paai is, however, very broad, and includes the sense 'to lull.' Use of this English verb is in South Africa affected by its Afrikaans meaning, to include the idea of 'allaying suspicion'. Hence, at 19.151, Whitaker has Penelope tell Odysseus 'For three years I lulled and tricked the Achaians' (p.421). Another typically South African colloquial usage is to address an older woman as 'mama' as a sign of respect. Hence Eurykleia is consistently addressed as 'mama' by members of Penelope's household.

Another category of 'Southern Africanisms' is the use of certain formulae (again an Homeric touch) that have been translated from various African languages into apparently standard English, but which retain a certain typically 'Southern African' flavour. Examples (also explained in the Glossary) are the greetings 'Go well!' and 'Stay well' that are used reciprocally when two people part their ways. Another is 'great place' for the homestead (rather than 'palace') of a chief. The Afrikaans for 'waking up,' 'getting out of bed,' is staan op. Whitaker several times tells us that characters 'stood up,' 'getting out of bed,' is staan op. Whitaker several times tells us that characters 'stood up,' where the context is arising from bed. Interestingly, Whitaker does not attempt to render the formulaic 'winged words' in any other format. At 19.29, Telemachos' words retain the literal English translation and 'remain unwinged'.

All translators of poetry are confronted by the question of whether to strive for metrical equivalence or not. Translating poetry is complex: should the exact metrical pattern be maintained, or another metre feature a six-beat line, Whitaker's line-for-line verse

---


equivalents largely keep to a fairly loose and adaptable five-beat verse pattern. Some verses begin on a stressed syllable, others stress the final syllable. Because of this adaptability, Whitaker's English prosody works: words retain their natural stress in whatever part of a verse they occupy. The verse reads easily without any jarring feel of metrical coercion. I found Whitaker's flowing poetry easy to read, and after a few sessions with his Odyssey at bed-time, at least twice I found myself dreaming in verse.

Finally, a useful Introduction (pp. 17-86) offers, first, a book-by-book overview of the epic, followed by discussion of the characters of Odysseus and Penelope; next, an identification of major themes in the Odyssey, including inter alia the twin themes of suffering and empathy. Orality and literacy are discussed in terms of the portrayal of bardic activity within the epic, rather than as the 'Homeric question'. Whitaker's thoughts on translation and an explanation of his methods round off the Introduction. A glossary of 'Major names in the Odyssey' (pp. 526-32) is provided with a pronunciation guide, which usefully renders syllabic ‘e’ as ‘ë’, to ensure that it is not assimilated into the syllable preceding it (as in the name Kirkë).

African Sun Press is to be congratulated on a magnificent publication. Black glossy-matt interleaving (featuring headings in white) enables readers at a glance to identify the separate parts of the epic, and, incidentally, to compare the length of various books (Book 4 shows up as by far the longest). Very subtly, the black and white glossy cover features only the name 'Odyssey' in red, balanced by a small representation of a lonely ship on a vast, tranquil sea, with, also in red, the tiny head of a Southern African Kudu (Tragelaphus Strepsiceros, a large antelope) with its characteristic spiral horns. Kudos to the production team! Whitaker's Southern African Translation is a beautiful book to possess – and, of course, to enjoy!

Jo-Marie Claassen
University of Stellenbosch.