

Ευχάριστα Επίκαιρα Νέα, Some Welcome News

Article author: Dr. Mersina Papantoniou*.

It was with a great sense of anticipation, that we attended one of the closing sessions of the Sydney Writers' Festival (SWF), 2018. Priority was to hear from the legendary, Emily Wilson, Professor of Classics, Penn State University regarding her ground-breaking translation of Homer's, *The Odyssey*. The auditorium was almost full, with over 500 people intently hearing Prof. Wilson interviewed by ABC presenter, Jennifer Byrne. It was indeed pleasing to recognise Dr. Efrosini Deligianni, head of Greek Studies, (UNSW) and Mrs. Sophia Ralli-Catharios within the audience.

What most noticeable was that the majority attending this session were predominantly Anglophones, teachers and students who were studying *The Odyssey* as a set-text. Indeed, what was being considered was Epic Poetry, one of the great and second oldest standard works adopted by Western Literature, *The Iliad* being the oldest.

The Odyssey was written down it is estimated around 8th century BCE and there is much discussion whether Homer wrote it at all?

What is clear is that our inherited masterpiece has come out of a successive generational, oral tradition, before the Greek language was even written down.

Odysseus is considered as being 'polytropos', meaning one that turns easily, *but also* 'polymetis', which means 'cunning', 'skill', or 'scheming'. 'Metis', (a Titan goddess, who was Mother of Athena, and swallowed whole by the god, Zeus). Her name describes 'plotting that serves self-interest', unlike the word 'wisdom', «σοφία» that implies a 'moral form of intelligence'. The goddess Athena herself, describes Odysseus as:

"No man can plan and talk like you,
and I am known among the gods for insight
and craftiness." (Book 13, 298-300)

What was most notable from the interview, was that the author/translator chose to keep to the same line length as in the original text (Αρχαία Ελληνικά). This was in complete contrast to the regularly-used Robert Fagles English-language translation (1996). Prof. Wilson considered his translation «too long, verbose» in her Interview.

In her translation, she wanted to transmit the power and pace of the historically performed work, adding further drama and agency to the unfolding story. The original 12,110 lines have been written in dactylic hexameter, that features syllables, emphasized on the second beat to a group of 6 syllables. She spoke to the audience using the language, Greek Αρχαία explaining the use of the meter in performing the ancient poetic text. The audience were all at once enthralled and hanging off Wilson's every word.

Epic poetry in this manner existed to be performed and sung. The poem itself features 2 bards, blind Demodocus in the home of King Alcinous, of the Phaeacians at Scheria (modern day, Corfu). Secondly, Phemius the bard of Ithaka, singing and entertaining the suitors within Odysseus's palace. Who among other things are courting his long-suffering wife Penelope whilst the absent King is waylaid in his adventures. First in his deployment to the Trojan War and then the episodic sojourn home.

The epic tale captivates the imagination, signalling encounters such as:

The giant, Polyphemus (the son of Poseidon), the huge Laestrygonians, the whirlpool Charybdis or the six-headed monster Scylla, (thought to be the straits of Messina, Sicily) that gulps men whole. Odysseus, discusses matters with Ancient Greece's fallen heroes from the Underworld. The story lines also feature the gender fluidity of the military Goddess Athena (also known as the Goddess of Wisdom) protectress/patron of the ancient City-state. She reveals herself being transformed sometimes into a woman, sometimes a man, or as a goddess using strategy.

During the interview, I begged to differ regarding, Jennifer Byrne

(the Interviewer) applying an 'intersectional feminist analysis' in regards to son Telemachus. In him, telling off his Mother Penelope for not agreeing to his plans not once by twice in the work. As one questioner later correctly pointed out, this ancient society had come from matriarchy to patriarchy (given the state of the various tribes). To put on a contemporary label in this instance, didn't negotiate the anthropological tribal entities of such a society, within what is agreed during the Archaic period.

Here a contemporary label, discussing the Telemachus/Penelope encounter was somewhat misapplied I thought.

My question from the floor regarding the Calypso, Kirke encounters of Odysseus was well answered. I find these mythical characters still send shivers through men and women alike. Calypso a mythical female goddess (whose ancient name means 'to conceal'), can satisfy the lust of men, including great sex whilst keeping Odysseus for seven years. However, she finally relents and lets Odysseus go, back to his homeland:

Acknowledging the edict sent from Zeus,
the goddess [Calypso] went to find Odysseus.
She found him on the shore. His eyes were always
tearful; he wept sweet life away in longing
to go back home, since she no longer pleased him.
He had no choice. He spent his nights with her
though she still wanted him. By day he sat
out on the rocky beach, in tears and grief,
staring in heartbreak at the fruitless sea. (Book 5, 149-158), from
the E. Wilson translation (2018), parentheses my own.

Along with Kirke the sorceress, who can change men into animals, or as Prof. Wilson remarked: «into perhaps who they really are», has engaged the imagination of millenia. As well as the inordinate female power such nymphs, goddesses wield. For some these mythical constructions raise, archetypes that present uncomfortable fear and loss of control. This is especially highlighted from the foremost Psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud remarking:

«What do women want?»

Prof. Emily Wilson apart from being the first woman to translate and publish the translation of «The Odyssey», as a tenured professor spent 5 years of her life, translating into (post) modern English language, writing, re-drafting and drafting again the ancient work. For us, brought into the contemporary with the rhythmic urgency that was composed from within the origins of the work. *The Odyssey* has captivated audiences throughout the ages, *this is not just* yet another translation.

This great achievement has been described as a "cultural landmark" in Western literature. Those of us that attended her session at the SWF had the privilege of sharing in this great feat of endurance.

But wait there's more . . .

Her next project as announced, will be *The Iliad*,

I for one cannot wait.

Dr. Mersina Papantoniou,
would like to gratefully, acknowledge and thank the Organisation for Greek and Cypriot Women, Australia, OEEGA in receiving their recent award, 2018.

She was recognised for her contribution in the fields of the Performing Arts, having studied/performed through the School of Drama, alongside NIDA, (UNSW), her Masters Thesis regarding an analysis of the Australia's historical aspects of migration and in her contemporary Social Policy Analysis of Multiculturalism, from her Ph. D thesis, (Macquarie University, 2017).

* Dr. Mersina Papantoniou B.A. (Hons.), M.A., Ph. D.,
Centre for the History of Christian Thought and Experience (CTE),
Macquarie University, NSW. 2109 Australia