

Achilles: Losing the Divine in Translation

By Memphis Mallory

Gaziantep Zeugma Museum Achilles mosaic in 2011 2092 (Dosseman, 2011). CC BY-SA 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons

Introduction

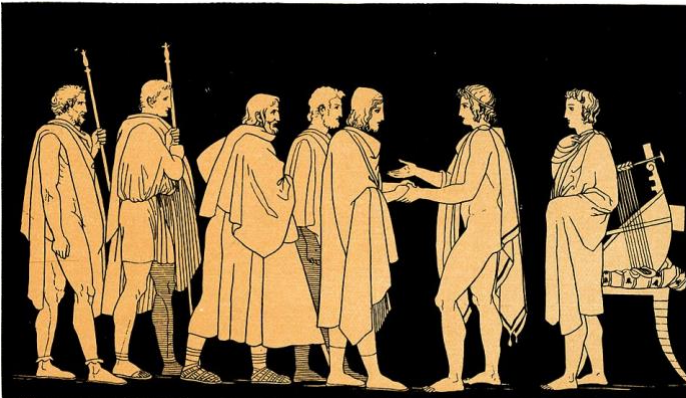
Achilles is the principal character of one of history's most influential poems, Homer's *Iliad*. Through inspired adaptations in art, literature, architecture, film, and music, the story of Achilles and his overpowering rage has persisted for millennia. In fact, there have been over 100 English translations of the *Iliad* written over the course of the last 400 years (CN). However, each translator has endured countless obstacles in translating the *Iliad*. The Homeric epics are written in dactylic hexameter, a poetic meter that utilizes six sets of stressed syllables to create a line. This rhythm is notoriously difficult to maintain in English, with there only being a few poets (such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow) who have used it in their works. The difficulties of dactylic hexameter are only exacerbated when it must be translated from ancient Greek. Likewise, translators face the challenge of translating a story written in 8th-century B.C.E. Greece. This involves not just the translation of the

source text, but also the social and cultural aspects of the ancient Greek language. This demands an interdisciplinary approach, allowing the subject of Achilles's divinity and its representation to be properly explored.

This paper combines theoretical and methodological frameworks from sociolinguistics, cultural anthropology, and traductology. This paper will also serve to establish a foundation that can be further explored by subsequent research, such as cross-lingual examinations of Homeric translations. For the purposes of this paper, however, the three English translations are used to study the character of Achilles and how the language of the *Iliad* creates a divine persona for him. It also examines the extent to which translations diminish Achilles's divine nature, because the same connotations present in the original poem cannot be communicated in modern English. The loss of cultural meaning in translation is

inevitable, so it's necessary to apply sociolinguistic and cultural analyses to these works to gain a better understanding of the character of Achilles, the great warrior whose rage and grief drive the story of Troy.

Translation is transformation, and so despite the best efforts of translators and philologists, there is an inevitable separation between the culturally laden connotations of a source text and its translations. Naturally, this issue becomes even more limiting when a translator must rely on historical, linguistic, and archaeological reconstructions of a culture through interpretations of artifacts and features, rather than personal experience and immersion. Therefore, it becomes necessary to examine how translations of the *Iliad* do not accurately convey critical aspects implied in the original Greek. To accomplish this, this paper examines how the Greek words *μῆνις* (*mênis*), *δῖος* (*dîos*), and *θεοείκελος* (*theoíkelos*) are translated by three different classicists, who have rightfully distinguished themselves either for their fidelity to the Homeric Greek of the *Iliad* or for their poetic structure and flow. With these key examples from Richmond Lattimore, Robert Fagles, and Emily Wilson's translations, this paper seeks to further understand how modern English translations do not fully adapt the divine characterization of Achilles that is expressed in the Homeric Greek.



μῆνις

The very first word of the *Iliad*, *μῆνις* (*mênis*) establishes the central theme of the story. The entire narrative begins with it; it drives Achilles' actions in nearly every instance, and its uniquely divine connotation sets Achilles apart from other characters like Agamemnon and Odysseus. In English, it is often translated as some variation of "anger", although that does not capture the implication present in the original Greek (Muellner 2005). Instead, *μῆνις* describes an overwhelming, god-like wrath that is as powerful as it is destructive. Achilles is the only mortal character in the Homeric epics to be described with *μῆνις*. In every other instance, it refers to the vengeful wrath of gods with the power to flood cities and send plagues to armies.

The exact etymology of *μῆνις* has not been found yet, but it is a possible cognate of the Vedic Sanskrit word *मन्यु* (*manyú*), which is translated as "zeal" or "anger" (Muellner 2005). Despite the etymological context, this word has been the subject of much academic inquiry and debate. Thus, for the purposes of this paper, its cultural and linguistic meaning will be compared to the implications inherent in a few of its English translations. Firstly, there is Richmond Lattimore's 1951 translation, where he translates the concept of *μῆνις* as simply "anger". He translates it this way consistently throughout the text, regardless of whether it refers to Achilles or one of the Olympians. "Anger" is a perfectly fine word, and it does convey the basic emotion that underlies *μῆνις*, but it does not capture the intensity and brutality that *μῆνις* entails. Aubrey Armbruster described *μῆνις* as something that "shows the breakdown of the cosmic hierarchy that separates gods from men, and men from animals... Achilles' *menis* has blurred the distinction between all three.". Does a word like "anger" truly deliver the same emotional impact to an

English-speaking audience? One could argue that the simplicity of the translation is its strength, that “anger” conveys a more primal, base emotion. However, μῆνις is also applied to the wrath of the gods. In Lattimore’s translation, the μῆνις of the gods is translated as either “anger” or “wrath”. Therefore, it is most likely that the initial premise is more correct. While Lattimore has an excellent degree of fidelity to the original Greek text, his translation of μῆνις does not communicate the social and cultural connotations of the original word.

Then there is Robert Fagles’ translation of the *Iliad*. Praised for its poetic structure, Fagles’ translation takes an interesting approach to its first line. He begins his version with “Rage - Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus’ son Achilles,”. To maintain the narrative significance of the language of the opening line, which begins with μῆνις, Fagles puts “rage” at the forefront of his text. This decision certainly improves the accuracy of Achilles’ characterization. By prioritizing the emotional significance of the original syntax, Fagles communicates Homer’s presumed intention in a poetic and stylistic way. However, “rage” does not have a religious or god-like connotation either. It is certainly a more intense and evocative choice than “anger”, but it does not convey a deep-seated, overwhelming hatred that blurs the natural order of the world. Like Lattimore’s, Fagles’ translation is a wonderful work that unfortunately does not translate the underlying divinity of μῆνις for its audience.

Finally, we have Emily Wilson’s translation of the *Iliad*, published in 2023. This translation has garnered widespread praise for its fidelity to the Greek language, poetic style, and readability. She decided to translate Achilles’ μῆνις as “cataclysmic wrath”. This translation is interesting for a few reasons. First, Wilson chooses to break the first line of the *Iliad* into two to maintain the iambic pentameter she uses.

While this is not a line-to-line translation like Lattimore’s, it prioritizes the “cataclysmic wrath” the story is centered around. Functionally, it establishes that the μῆνις of Achilles is the story’s theme, much like Fagles’ translation did. Furthermore, translating it as “wrath” invokes a more religious connotation than “anger” or “rage” in English-speaking readers, due to the influence of Christianity and the concept of wrath as a sin. Adding “cataclysmic” to the line also translates the idea that this particular kind of anger is something with the potential to be unimaginably catastrophic. Of course, μῆνις cannot be perfectly translated into English because the concept is so culturally specific and separated from English speakers that translators cannot bridge that gap. However, Emily Wilson does a spectacular job at conveying the idea that Achilles is a warrior with a divinely dangerous wrath in her translation.

δῖος and θεοείκελος

Homer also utilizes epithets in his poetry. The constant repetition of parentage, characteristics, and accomplishments makes it easier for performers to memorize their verses and for audiences to identify the important information regarding characters. Two epithets used for several characters in the *Iliad*, Achilles included, are δῖος (*dîos*) and θεοείκελος (*theoeikelos*). The semantics and identified etymologies of these words will be quickly discussed. Beginning with θεοείκελος, this word simply means “godlike” (Liddell, et al. 1940). This word does not really have a culturally specific connotation that makes it untranslatable; it refers to things and people that are divine or semi-divine in nature or appearance. As such, it is translated as “godlike” by Lattimore, Fagles, and Wilson. It may not be the subject of extensive inquiry, especially not in this paper, but it is important to note the consistent and

accurate translation of θεοείκελος into English. The repeated use of this word implies that any translation that may not convey Achilles as a semi-divine warrior as fully as it could is not doing so out of a desire to un-deify Achilles. The natural shortcomings of translation may change the narrative characterization of Achilles, but that does not mean it is a purposeful transformation, nor does this paper seek to imply so.



Other than that, the semantics and translation of δῖος (*dīos*) is of strong interest. Similar to θεοείκελος, it denotes a person as being like a deity. Derived from the Proto-Indo-European word *diygos*, this word is laden with religious connotations. In the Romance language family, it evolved into the Latin *Deus*, which in turn became *Dios* in Spanish, *Dieu* in French, *Dio* in Italian, and *Deumnezeu* in Romanian. In Portuguese, it is still *Deus*. The Greek word has a variety of translations into English, such as divine (Liddell et al. 1940), heavenly, belonging to Zeus, and belonging to heaven (Beekes 2010). There are two English translations of the word that this paper will examine. First is the translation that Richmond Lattimore and Robert Fagles applied to Achilles, most notably at the end of the first stanza of Book One. They both translated δῖος as “brilliant”. Emily Wilson translated this term as “glorious” instead. These translations do convey the nobility and beauty of Achilles, the hero and leader of the Myrmidons. However, they do not come close to the idea that Achilles is “heavenly” or

“divine”, as a more direct translation would state. Due to the difference in sociolinguistic communication between Homer’s Greek and modern English, there is a loss of cultural and emotional meaning in English translations of the *Iliad*. This is manifested especially in the partial mischaracterization of Achilles, who is interpreted far differently by modern audiences due to the transformations that result from the processes of translation.

Final Remarks

Richmond Lattimore, Robert Fagles, and Emily Wilson have all rightfully distinguished themselves as excellent translators of the Homeric epics. Each of their translations, with their respective strengths and weaknesses, bring exciting perspectives to a poem written millennia ago. However, the nature of translation requires that cultural and linguistic meaning must be lost to some degree. Exploring these losses through their impact on specific characters, like brilliant Achilles, deepens our understanding of how the process of translation affects literary works. While Achilles’ character is not entirely stripped of the divine nature intertwined in the very language used to describe him, modern English translations do not accurately convey the linguistic intricacies of the ancient Greek language. This results in the depiction of Achilles as a warrior, king, leader, murderer, and more, but it robs the character of the divine overtones that are present throughout the original narrative. Humanistic inquiry, especially that which focuses on traductology and sociolinguistic anthropology, provides an avenue through which new perspectives on Achilles’s reception in the modern world can be explored. Translation is transformation, so even though translations bridge the gap between ancient Greek and modern English-speaking audiences, the impact of translation on the interpretations of

characters like Achilles deserves exploration. This line of inquiry is enriched through the incorporation of different theoretical principles taken from traductology and sociolinguistic anthropology, which bring the cultural intricacies of the original Homeric Greek into greater focus.

Bibliography

Armbruster, Aubrey. "Translations of *Menis* in 21st century literary adaptations of the Iliad." University of Tartu, 2016.

Beekes, R. S. P., and Lucien van Beek. *Etymological dictionary of Greek*. Leiden: Brill, 2010.

Clark, Frank Lowry. *A Study of the Iliad in Translation*. University of Chicago Press, 1927.

Dickinson, G. Lowes. *The Greek view of life*. Routledge, 1958.

Fagles, Robert, trans., Homer, *The Iliad* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 1.1-8.

Hack, R. K. (1929). Homer and the Cult of Heroes. *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, 60, 57–74.

Ilyas, Sobia. "The parameters of poetry translation: A stylistic analysis of the linguistic and literary techniques used in the translations of the Odyssey and the Iliad." *The Journal Of Humanities and Social Sciences (JHSS)* (2022).

Knox, Bernard. "Achilles." *Grand Street* 9, no. 3 (1990): 129–50.

Lattimore, Richmond, trans., *The Iliad of Homer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).

Liddell, Henry George, Robert Scott, H. S. Jones, and R. McKenzie. *A Greek and English Lexicon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940.

Montanari, Franco, Ivan Garofalo, Daniela Manetti, Madeleine Goh, Chad Matthew Schroeder, Gregory Nagy, Leonard Muellner, and Rachel Barritt-Costa. *The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek*. Leiden: Brill, 2018.

Muellner, Leonard Charles. *The anger of Achilles: Mēnis in Greek epic*. Cornell University Press, 2005.

Parry, Adam. "The Language of Achilles." *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 87 (1956): 1–7.

Parry, Adam. "Language and characterization in Homer." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 76 (1972): 1-22.

Sale, William. "Achilles and Heroic values." *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 2, no. 3 (1963): 86-100.

Santos, Erika Rose B., Ma Angelica Manicdao Marin, Jayson Malanao Bautista, and Ramil G. Ilustre. "Sociolinguistics as a Crucial Factor in Translation and Analysis of Texts: A Systematic Review." *International Journal of Translation and Interpretation Studies* 2, no. 1 (2022): 91-97.

Wilson, Emily, trans. *The Iliad*. (WW Norton & Company, 2023)

ΙΛΙΑΣ
 Μῆνιν ἄειδε, θεὰ Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος
 οὐλομένην, ἣ μυρ' Ἀχαιοῖς ἄλγε' ἔθηκε,
 πολλὰς δ' ἰφθίμους ψυχὰς Ἄϊδι προΐαψεν
 ἡρώων, αὐτοὺς δὲ ἐλώρια τεύχε κύνεσσιν
 οἰωνοῖσι τε πᾶσι· Διὸς δ' ἐτελείετο βουλή·
 ἐξ οὗ δὴ τὰ πρῶτα διαστήτην ἐρίσαντε
 Ἀτρεΐδης τε ἀναξ ἀνδρῶν καὶ δῖος Ἀχιλλεύς.