***The Odyssey* Lesson Plan 2**
Translation and *The Odyssey*
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Overview:
This lesson will ask students to consider how the translator's choices influence the way readers understand *The Odyssey*. The lesson will open with a class discussion of the tone of the translation before moving into a brief lesson on translation studies. The class will end with an activity that asks students to compare an excerpt from Wilson's translation of *The Odyssey* with a corresponding excerpt from Robert Fagles' translation. For this lesson, it may also be helpful to ask students to read Wilson's "Translator's Note" on pages 81-91.

This lesson includes information from Books 1-14 and is best suited for the second day of teaching *The Odyssey*.

Objectives:
By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

1. Identify the different equivalencies that translators may choose to prioritize and articulate how those choices may shape a translation
2. Compare 2 different translations of *The Odyssey* and discuss how the translators' choices changed the experience of reading the translated text

Class Structure:
10 minutes: Framing activity

- Present students with the following excerpts (all are the opening lines to different translations of *The Odyssey*).

> **Passage A**
> The man for wisdom's various arts renown'd,
> long exercised in woes, O Muse! resound;
> who, when his arms had wrought the destined fall
> of sacred Troy, and razed her heaven-built wall (Pope, 1726)
>
> **Passage B**
> Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns…
> driven time and time again off course, once he had plundered
> the hallowed heights of Troy. (Fagles, 1996)
>
> **Passage C**
> Tell me about a complicated man.
> Muse, tell me how he wandered and was lost
> when he had wrecked the holy town of Troy (Wilson, 2018)

- Ask students what the three passages have in common and where the passages differ. Use students' answers to spark a discussion of the importance of translators' choices

15 minutes: Introduction to translation studies

- Remind students that they are reading a *translation* of a very old text, and that a translator must make certain authoritative calls on how to portray a text. Ask students what they think a good translation *should do*. If possible, list their answers on the board.
- Point out that translation is sometimes seen as a simple task: "Translation has been perceived as a secondary activity, as a 'mechanical' rather than a 'creative' process, within the competence of anyone with a basic grounding in a language other than their own; in short, as a low status occupation" (Bassnett 13).
    - Ask students how they think of the task of translating.
- Translators often try to keep their works as close to the original as possible, but doing so requires making decisions about what features of the original text to prioritize keeping similar. Bassnett identifies four types of equivalencies in translation, which cannot all be prioritized (Bassnett 33)
    - *Linguistic equivalence*: word for word translation
    - *Paradigmatic equivalence*: equivalent elements of grammar
    - *Stylistic equivalence*: functional equivalence of elements in both original and translation aiming at an expressive identity with an invariant of identity meaning
    - *Textual equivalence*: equivalence of form and shape
- Provide students with specific context about Wislon's translations:
    - *The Odyssey* in its original form is written in dactylic hexameter, six-footed lines that consist primarily of spondees (two long syllables [– –]) or dactyls (one long syllable followed by two short syllables [–◡◡]). Dactylic hexameter is the conventional meter for archaic Greek verse as well as Latin epics.
    - Wilson's translation uses iambic pentameter (five-footed lines consisted of a unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable [◡–]) because "it is the conventional meter for English narrative verse—the rhythm of Chaicer, Shakespeare, Milton, Byron, Keats, and plenty of more recent anglophone poets" (82).
    - Wilson has also kept the same number of lines as the original to match its pacing.
    - Provide students with this passage from Wilson's "Translator's Note." "Like many contemporary translation theorists, I believe that we need to rethink the terms in which we talk about translation. My translation is, like all translations, an entirely different text from the original poem. Translation always, necessarily, involves interpretation; there is no such things as a translation that provides anything like a transparent window through which a reader can see the original…I have taken very seriously the task of understanding the language of the original text as deeply as I can, and working through what Homer may have meant in

archaic and classical Greece. I have also taken seriously the task of creating a new and coherent English text, which conveys something of that understanding but operates within an entirely different cultural context," (88-87)

- Return to the students' list of what a good translation should do. Ask them which expectations may be at odds with one another. Ask what they would prioritize if they were translating something. Finally, ask them what they think Wilson's translation of *The Odyssey* might be prioritizing.

15 minutes: Small-group close reading of a passage from Wilson's translation of *The Odyssey* in preparation for comparing scene in another translation

- Place students in group of 3-4 and have them reread Odysseus and his crew's return to Circe's island:

> When Dawn came,
> born early, with her fingertips like petals,
> I sent my men to Circe's house, to bring
> the body of the dead Elpenor. Quickly
> we chopped the wood and at the farthest headland
> we held a funeral for him, and wept
> profusely, crying out in grief. We burned
> his body and his gear, and built a mound,
> and dragged a pillar onto it, and fixed
> his oar on top—each ritual step in turn.
> Circe, the well-groomed goddess, was aware
> that we were back from Hades, and she hurried
> to meet us with her slaves. They carried bread
> and meat and bright red wine. She stood among us,
> and said,
>
> 'This is amazing! You all went
> alive to Hades—you will be twice-dead,
> when other people only die one time!
> Eat now, and stay here drinking your wine all day.
> At dawn, sail on. I will explain your route
> in detail, so no evil thing can stitch
> a means to hurt you, on the land or sea.'
>
> I am a stubborn man, but I agreed,
> so there we sat and feasted on the meat
> and strong sweet wine until the sun went down.
> When darkness fell, the men slept by the ship.
> Then Circe took my hand, and led me off
> apart from them, and questioned me in detail.
> I told her everything. (Wilson 301-302; 12:7-35)

- Ask students to answer the following questions:

- What happens in this scene?
- Describe the key players? Who are they? How are they described? How do they interact?
- What is the tone of this scene? What are some specific words or phrases that helped you determine the tone?
- How would you describe the language of this passage?

15 minutes: Small-group close reading of a passage from another translation

- Present the small groups with the same passage as translated by Robert Fagles:

> As soon as Dawn with her rosy-red fingers shone again
> I dispatched some men to Circe's halls to bring
> the dead Elpenor's body. We cut logs in haste
> and out on the island's sharpest jutting headland
> held his funeral rites in sorrow, streaming tears.
> Once we'd burned the dead man and the dead man's armor,
> heaping his grave-mound, hauling a stone that coped it well,
> we planted his balanced oar aloft to crown his tomb.
>
> And so we saw to his rites, each step in turn.
> Nor did our coming back from Death escape Circe —
> she hurried toward us, decked in rich regalia,
> handmaids following close with trays of bread
> and meats galore and glinting ruddy wine.
> And the lustrous goddess, standing in our midst,
> hailed us warmly: 'Ah my daring, reckless friends!
> You who ventured down to the House of Death alive,
> doomed to die twice over — others die just once.
> Come, take some food and drink some wine,
> rest here the livelong day
> and then, tomorrow at daybreak, you must sail.
> But I will set you a course and chart each seamark,
> so neither on sea nor land will some new trap
> ensnare you in trouble, make you suffer more.
>
> Her foresight won our fighting spirits over.
> So all that day till the sun went down we sat
> and feasted on sides of meat and heady wine,
> and then when the sun had set and night came on
> the men lay down to sleep by the ship's stern-cables.
> But Circe, taking me by the hand, drew me away
> from all my shipmates there and sat me down
> and lying beside me probed me for details. (Fagles 248; 12:8-38)

- Ask students to answer the following questions in their small groups:

    - What happens in this scene?
    - Describe the key players? Who are they? How are they described? How do they interact?
    - What is the tone of this scene? What are some specific words or phrases that helped you determine the tone?
    - How would you describe the language of this passage?

20 minutes: Class Discussion

- Bring the class back together, and ask them the following questions:
    - What changes between Wilson and Fagle's translations?
    - Are there any major differences in what *happens* in the scene between the two translations?
    - How does the tone differ between translations?
    - How does the language differ between the translations?
    - In what ways are these two texts equivalent? [It may be useful to remind students of the equivalencies covered at the beginning of class]

Additional discussion questions, if time allows:

- Which path does Odysseus choose between Scylla & Charybdis? Why? What are the consequences?
- What happens when Odysseus finally returns to Ithaca at the end of Book 13? If this is a story of homecoming, why does the story continue? What do you think *The Odyssey* still needs to resolve?
- It takes Odysseus 10 years to return to Ithaca from Troy. How did he spend those years?

Sources:

Bassnet, Susan. *Translation Studies*. 3rd ed. Routledge, 2002.

Fagles, Robert, translator. *The Odyssey*. By Homer. Penguin, 1997.

Pope, Alexander, translator. *The Odyssey*. By Homer. Bernard Lintot, 1725.

Wilson, Emily, translator. *The Odyssey*. By Homer. Norton, 2018.

Wilson, Emily. Translator's Note. *The Odyssey*, by Homer, translated by Wilson. Norton, 2018, pp. 1-79.