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THE METRE OF HOMER AND HIS ENGLISH TRANSLATORS.

The difficulties which the English poet who attempts to translate Homer encounters are legion. No one man has surmounted all; that we cannot expect, for after all it is impossible to translate poetry, and the Homeric epics offer special difficulties. One of these is the difficulty of the metre, which is one of the greatest charms of Homer's poetry. How is it to be reproduced?

What English metre will represent the Greek hexameter, that wonderful metre which is capable of infinite variety, that can rise to any height, burn with all fury, storm with all rage, and can stoop to the simplest speech without approaching prose, that can whisper and that can thunder? What English metre corresponds to this? The natural answer is—the English hexameter, and no less authority than Matthew Arnold upholds it as the proper metre for translating Homer. But despite his arguments we cannot but recognize that hexameter measure is the nearest measure to prose in English, while in Greek it is the most unlike prose. Many translations of Homer have been made in this measure, but none have gained popularity. Listen to Simcox:

“But when the hosts advancing met in the midst of the
champaign,
Then together were dashed shields, spears, and the
strength of heroes.”

Where is Homer's rapidity?

“Dactyls call'st thou them? God help thee, silly one.”

No long poem in English hexameters has ever been successful, if we except *Evangeline*, and here the slow and almost monotonous movement is suited to the quiet sadness of the poem. True, Arnold, Kingsley and Tennyson have given us some short passages of superior beauty in hexameters, but after all it is but measured prose, and becomes tiresome. Too much attention must be given by the reader to placing the stresses correctly. The English language is not suited to dactyls; we speak in iambics, and very few of our poetical words (*i.e.* Anglo-Saxon words) are dactylic. Let us say with Tennyson—

“These lame hexameters, the strong-winged music of
Homer!

No—but a most burlesque barbarous experiment.
When was a harsher sound ever heard ye Muses of
England?

When did a frog coarser croak upon our Helicon?
Hexameters no worse than daring Germany gave us,
Barbarous experiment, barbarous hexameters.”

The metre of Pope's brilliant translation, if his poem can be called a translation, is the rhyming couplet, iambic pentameters. Such a measure is eminently suited to his epigrammatic and compact style, and it is used with fine effect in his *Essay on Criticism*, but every-

one will agree that the couplet causes a balancing of expression in the two lines of which it consists, that is totally foreign to Homer's style. Prof. Newman, on the theory that the *Iliad* was merely a collection of ballads, translates Homer in a ballad metre without rhyme:

“Achilles
Afar from his companions sat in loneliness and weeping,
On shingles of the hoary brine, at depths of purple gazing.”

This is terribly sing-song, something like Yankee Doodle, someone has suggested. Blackie goes further, he puts in the rhyme:

“But now the hosts together rush, and each and each assail,
And buckler upon buckler rang, and hurtled mail on mail,
And might of man did might oppose, flashed spear to
spear and rang
The war-cry loud and shrill, and shield met shield with
brassy clang.”

A critic puts it well, “The valor of Diomedes in a rattling ballad metre is a symphony of Beethoven on a barrel-organ.” The metre of Chapman, the Elizabethian poet, who has given us such a spirited version of Homer, greatly resembles the ballad metre of Blackie; and we cannot but be reminded of Macaulay's *Horatius* as we read him. His metre has all the rapidity of Homer's, but none of its majesty and none of its nobleness. But I do not think any of us believe in the ballad theory. Homer is more like Milton than a balladist.

After all, rhyming Homer in any manner is like rhyming a tragedy of Shakespeare; it is as bad as rhyming Milton, and we all condemn Dryden for his abominable taste when he rewrote *Paradise Lost* in rhyme.

What metre then shall the translator of Homer use? Most of the successful versions of recent times have been written in English heroic blank verse, and this metre, in my opinion, will best represent the Greek hexameter. True, Cowper's verse is very cumbersome and slow, Derby's very unmusical, and Bryant's is at times very like prose. It is Tennyson I think who has shown the capabilities of heroic blank verse. With him it is always musical and majestic, and has the true Homeric ring. He uses it with great variety too, in the sweet sadness of “Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,” in the descriptive beauty of “*Oenone*,” in the bold narrative of his *Idylls of the King*, and in the splendid rapidity of the battle scene in the fifth canto of *The Princess*. Tennyson's metre comes nearest to Homer, and he uses it in two short passages which he has translated from the *Iliad*. Would he had continued and finished all Homer! For such is the beauty of these passages, and such the tone of his *Idylls*, especially *Morte D'Arthur* in which there is much more than the “*faint* Homeric echo,” he has claimed for it, that we can safely say that he would have reproduced Homer better than any who have yet done so.

NAUGHTY THREE.