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Review of Mandelbaum's Odyssey of Homer

Paula Saffire

Butler University, psaffire@butler.edu

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REVIEWS



The Odyssey of Homer. By ALLEN MANDELBAUM, trans.
Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1990. Pp. vii and
527. Cloth. NP.

Mandelbaum's translation of the *Odyssey* is, in a word, superb. It is studded with dazzling choices of the perfect word or phrase, to say nothing of an occasional rhyme or burst of alliteration, so that the reader goes on—as Homer's listener once did?—with the delightful expectancy of sudden treasure. In addition Mandelbaum's translation is, like Homer's Greek, absolutely, limpidly clear. The latter makes it unique among translations of Homer and hailed by students. While Fitzgerald's translation is at times more graceful and more memorably phrased, Mandelbaum's flows faster: in an age where students' reading skills are declining, this can make the crucial difference.

Mandelbaum's greatest gift is in his choice of highly charged, specific words—ape, connive, raucous, squalid, lithe (of ships), ravenous, obscene, concoct, hoodwink—words which are mildly surprising and vivid beyond the Greek they translate, which helps compensate for the many times English offers only words lacking the Homeric vigor. While Mandelbaum's success with rhyme is mixed—some rhymes please; others jar or distract—his alliteration works far better. Sometimes alliteration is used for the sheer, irresistible pleasure of it—"fools, they foiled" (1.7-8)—other times to represent sound effects in the Greek—"weep and wrothe" for 10.499 *klaiôn te kulindomenos te*, "fond and fragrant, sweet and soft" for Athena's mockingly rhymed report of Calypso's wheedling words, 1.56 *malakoisi kai haimulioisi logois*. Finally, there is a loving, leisurely attention to detail, so that this reviewer pictured, as never before, door fasteners, stitched bags, mast sockets, and jar-lids.

Mandelbaum has five-stress lines, much briefer than Homer's, which serves the rapid flow but prevents any line-to-line correspondence. He is willing to translate a single word or brief phrase with an entire line when need be—for example, "when he transgressed the boundaries that fate and reason set" for 1.34 *huper moron* (which Fitzgerald translates, awkwardly, "for his double portion")—or he will reduce a phrase to a word if he has found the single right one—Elpenor is "not too alert," 10.553 *oute phresin hêisin arêrôs*. Some items of translation are questionable—for example, the (mischievously?) provocative "Eurymachus, whose darling he'd become" for "whom he loved above all" (17.257), or the limiting and disappointing "as swift as a sea eagle" for "in the likeness of a sea eagle" (3.372), which does not allow readers to wonder at Athena's mysterious departure. Also, globally, one might challenge Mandelbaum's policy of translating formulaic utterances with variations—"unrelenting mind" and "tenacious soul" for *hon megalêtora thumon*, "prudent, shrewd," "wise and sharp," "careful, wise," "wise, precise," and so on, all for *pepnumenos antion êuda* of Telemachus' reply.

On the whole, Mandelbaum's choices are sound. One cannot but be grateful for an *Odyssey* that is both rapid and enchanting. It is the obvious translation for students, and a bargain at its current paperback price.

PAULA REINER
Butler University