

# LITERATURE OF Greece AND Rome

TRADITIONS IN WORLD LITERATURE



LITERATURE OF

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Greece AND Rome

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# INTRODUCTION

## CLASSICAL LITERATURE AND THE WORLD OF TODAY

*John Lewin*

Looking at today's world, we become aware of what seems a desperate flight from the past. "It was good enough for Grandfather," (or even Father) is no longer an adequate reason for the maintenance of any value. New developments in science change our picture of reality from day to day; historical events flip everything upside down. (Since the Vietnam War, how many perspectives have changed?) In art, in "popular culture," the cry is "Are you with it?" whatever "it" happens to be at the moment.

Under such circumstances, the past and anything *of* the past begin to seem unreal, irrelevant. In many respects this is healthy: a neurotic, after all, is a person who is compulsively bound to past reaction-patterns, most of which are not only irrelevant and unrealistic but stultifying and wildly destructive. But a neurotic is not only not free to escape from the past; he is also not free to use its positive elements creatively in the present.

In the context of the present essay, this obviously leads to the question: what is the value, what is the relevance, of classical literature in our own time and situation? We know the textbook answer: a "classical" work is "classical" because of its universality, because what it says and how it says it speak to people of all times and places. There are other arguments, but most of them can be reduced to the dubious proposition, "It's good for you"—dubious because we have come to distrust the prescriptions handed out so arbitrarily by various authority-figures: parental, educational, religious, military, political, artistic, and scientific. Our judgment on a writer is pragmatic: a writer establishes a rapport or doesn't—speaks to me or talks at me. Edward Albee, we may say, is speaking to us: what he says and how he says it come out of an involvement with our own time and situation. We'll grant that Aeschylus (again for instance) was doing the same for his own time; still three facts remain. First, most of us—the present writer included—will be able to read a vast number of "classical" writers only in translation; and a writer's use of his or her own language (or in a few cases an adopted one, for example, Nabokov and Conrad) is an indispensable element of the writer's artistry. Second, no good writer starts out with the conscious idea of "producing a classic"; he or she writes for human beings in a specific time and situation, and much that was of concern *then* is not of concern *now*, or has been superseded by other concerns. Whole areas of commonly shared response might be touched off by the stimulus of a single name, a symbol or phrase: "Hiroshima," "Kennedy," or even "Pentagon" can evoke a reaction in us that will not

be experienced (or not to the same degree) by audiences of a millennium from now. Third, the form of expression used by a writer of another time and culture—how the writer says what he or she says—is likely to be full of artistic conventions which now seem unbearably artificial and obscure.

These are formidable barriers to approaching a classical author. Why, then, bother?

The world of Greek and Roman civilization from which “classical” literature arose was full of currents which run through our own age: in Greece there was the agonizing conflict between old and new value-systems, between “the light of the mind and the voices of the blood.” In Rome there was the strange sense of inner decay that we see arising in a nation which has attained to a position of supreme world power. In both there was a vivid sense of the reality of the body, of the inscrutability of fate, and of the *immediacy* of life, into which we have found ourselves shaken today after centuries of smug belief in the “spirit” and in “Universal Order.”

The world from which classical literature sprang was called the “pagan world.” Today we are said to be moving into a “new paganism.” But one of the outstanding features of the Renaissance, the “rebirth” of the individual and the development of new social forms to replace the repressive and superstitious patterns of medievalism, was a renewal of interest in the literature of the classical, or pagan, world. Perhaps something similar is occurring today. Certainly a “rebirth” of some kind is in order. The only alternative, as our contemporary writers have not ceased to assure us, is death.

In the seventh century the city of Alexandria was conquered by the Moslems. Alexandria had the finest library in the ancient world. What should be done with it? the Caliph Omar was asked, and he wrote: “The contents of those books are in conformity with the Koran or they are not. If they are, the Koran is sufficient without them; if they are not, they are pernicious. Let them, therefore, be destroyed.” And so they were, and humanity was a little poorer.

Today, of course, we need not burn books: we can ignore them. The point is that, whatever fundamentalists claim, the Koran is the product of a mind and a heart (or several of them) as is the Bible, as is the *Iliad*, as is the *Oedipus* or the *Metamorphoses* or Edward Albee’s *The American Dream* or Saul Bellow’s *Herzog*. And no individual vision of reality can replace another: Homer and Sophocles and Ovid can give us excitement and insights that Albee and Bellow cannot, and vice versa. And getting used to the formal conventions of “classical” writers does not really require much more effort than coming to terms with the seemingly “formless” conventions of contemporary authors.

We come, then, to the question of translation. The wrong translator of a work in a foreign language, like the wrong teacher or actor of Shakespeare, let us say, can turn wine into water with appalling

thoroughness. Here pragmatic judgments are very much in order. Whether or not a translator has a Ph.D. in classical literature is largely irrelevant. It is not enough to turn Greek or Latin words into their nearest English equivalents. The translator, like the teacher, like the actor, should have an intuitive, empathetic understanding of the wordless thought—and feeling—processes that must have gone on in the mind of the original author *in order* for them to be articulated in the words and images the author chose to use. The translator, having re-created these in his or her own mind, must then express them in new language. He or she must, therefore, be able to write *English* prose, poetry, or dramatic speech exceedingly well: clearly, beautifully, excitingly. A translator must, occasionally, make changes in emphasis, by condensation or even (more dangerously) by expansion, according to his or her own judgment of what is “relevant” (or universal) and what has ceased to be so. He or she must love, appreciate, understand, but not slavishly worship.

It will be seen that a large element of subjectivity enters into this, and an equally large element of presumption. Here we tread the fuzzy boundaries between “a translation of X,” “an adaptation of X,” and “an original work based on X.” One of the best discussions of this issue is by D. S. Carne-Ross, in an article called “Translation and Transposition.” After quoting from Christopher Logue’s version of Book XXI of Homer’s *Iliad*—one of the most brilliant, gutsy, excitingly alive renderings ever made of a piece of classical literature—Carne-Ross says:

If you say that this isn’t translation at all, but paraphrase, a new poem suggested by Homer, I can only repeat the sentence from Dudley Fitts which I quoted just now—“I have simply tried to restate in my own idiom what the Greek verses have meant to me”—and ask what the translation of poetry can be if it is not the re-creation in a new language, by whatever means are open to the translator, of an equivalent beauty, an equivalent power, an equivalent truth.

The melancholy fact remains that a huge amount of classical literature in translation appears to have been done by machine, or by scholars whose veneration for their subject has caused them to repress any relish they might have taken in it, or in their own mother tongue. The result is like nothing so much as painting by the numbers, and the apathy it provokes is understandable.

There is, on the other hand, the occasional temptation for the translator or adapter, in making the “changes of emphasis” mentioned above, to simply expurgate something in the content of the original which goes against his or her temperament and convictions. If only, one thinks, Aeschylus had not delivered himself of the rather shabby advice that aggressive impulses should be taken out on strangers rather than fellow citizens! But there it is, and it is a matter for the translator or adapter’s own conscience to wrestle with. Perhaps the high pedestal of “classicism”

itself prevents us from regarding even the greatest writers as human beings with whom we are free to disagree. It may be that, exciting though we may find Edward Albee, we feel free to differ with him intellectually or artistically without burning or ignoring his books because Albee is not (or not yet) an author of “classical” status.

An essay of this nature may seem to be making the point, “Everyone *should* read and like classical literature.” This is nonsense. Not everyone is going to read and like *contemporary* literature, because if it is of any artistic quality it will, even if enticingly violent and sexy, make certain demands on us, require us to meet it halfway. Anything done purely for commercial purposes will make no demands; it will be simple and safe; it will operate by a formula designed to please everybody; it will not be the voice of a complex individual speaking from his heart. We must put up with a great deal of obscurity and apparent formlessness from contemporary authors in order to come to their vision of the life of men. Similarly, we must recognize that classical authors did not value compression as highly as we do in an age of capsule news, digests, and obsession with rapid change. A work of art was a great tree that sank its roots among mud and stones and dung and rotting corpses and grew into branches, leaves, and flowers, not a missile on a launching-pad. A translator practiced in contemporary literary techniques can sometimes give us the best of both worlds—richness and directness.

## READING TRANSLATIONS

Since every language is a unique and complex structure of sounds and meanings, translation cannot be a simple matter of substituting a word from one language for a word in another. When a work of literature is being translated, the challenge is even greater. In that case, the translator must attempt to create something that is both faithful to the work in the original language but also reads well in the language into which the work is being translated.

At the top of page xi is a passage from Book 22 of Homer’s *Odyssey* in the original Greek. Three English translations follow. The first was done in the early 1700s by the English poet Alexander Pope, who created translations of Homer that remained standards throughout his century. The other two translations were done in the recent past by Americans, Robert Fitzgerald and Robert Fagles.

This passage from the *Odyssey* describes how the goddess Athene (“Pallas”) assists the hero Odysseus in killing his enemies (“the suitors”) by waving the *aegis*, a snake-fringed shield that causes those who see it to run mad with terror.

δὴ τότε Ἀθηναίη φθισίμβροτον αἰγίδ' ἀνέσχευ  
 ὑψόθεν ἐξ ὀροφῆς· τῶν δὲ φρένες ἐπτοίηθεν.  
 οἱ δ' ἐφέβοντο κατὰ μέγαρον βόες ὡς ἀγελαῖαι·  
 τὰς μὲν τ' αἰόλος οἶστρος ἐφορμηθεὶς ἐδόνησεν  
 ὥρη ἐν εἰαρινῇ, ὅτε τ' ἥματα μακρὰ πέλονται.  
 οἱ δ' ὥς τ' αἰγυπιοὶ γαμψώνυχες ἀγκυλοχεῖλαι,  
 ἐξ ὀρέων ἐλθόντες ἐπ' ὀρνίθεσσι θόρωσι·  
 ταὶ μὲν τ' ἐν πεδίῳ νέφεα πτώσσουσαι ἵενται,  
 οἱ δέ τε τὰς ὀλέκουσιν ἐπάλμενοι, οὐδέ τις ἀλκὴ  
 γίγνεται οὐδὲ φυγὴ· χαίρουσι δέ τ' ἄνδρες ἄγρη·  
 ὡς ἄρα τοὶ μνηστῆρας ἐπεσσύμενοι κατὰ δῶμα  
 τύπτων ἐπιστροφάδην· τῶν δὲ στόνος ὤρνυτ' ἀεικῆς  
 κράτων τυπτομένων, δάπεδον δ' ἅπαν αἵματι θύε.

### ALEXANDER POPE (1726)

- Now *Pallas* shines confess'd; aloft she spreads  
 The arm of vengeance o'er their guilty heads;  
 The dreadful *Aegis* blazes in their eye;  
 Amaz'd they see, they tremble, and they fly:  
 5 Confus'd distracted, thro' the rooms they fling,  
 Like oxen madden'd by the breeze's sting,  
 When sultry days, and long, succeed the gentle spring.  
 Not half so keen, fierce vulturs of the chace  
 Stoop from the mountains on the feather'd race,  
 10 When the wide field extended snares beset,  
 With conscious dread they shun the quiv'ring net:  
 No help, no flight; but wounded ev'ry way,  
 Headlong they drop: the fowlers seize the prey.  
 On all sides thus they double wound on wound,  
 15 In prostrate heaps the wretches beat the ground,  
 Unmanly shrieks precede each dying groan,  
 And a red deluge floats the reeking stone.



## ROBERT FITZGERALD (1961)

At this moment that unmanning thunder cloud,  
the aegis, Athena's shield,  
took form in the great hall.

- And the suitors mad with fear  
5 at her great sign stampeded like stung cattle by a river  
when the dread shimmering gadfly strikes in summer,  
in the flowering season, in the long-drawn days.  
After them the attackers wheeled, as terrible as falcons  
from eyries in the mountains veering over and diving down  
10 with talons wide unsheathed on flights of birds,  
who cower down the sky in chutes and bursts along the valley—  
but the pouncing falcons grip their prey, no frantic wing avails,  
and farmers love to watch those beaked hunters.  
So these now fell upon the suitors in that hall,  
15 turning, turning to strike and strike again,  
while torn men moaned at death, and blood ran smoking over the  
whole floor.

## ROBERT FAGLES (1996)

- And now Athena, looming out of the rafters high above them,  
brandished her man-destroying shield of thunder, terrifying  
the suitors out of their minds, and down the hall they panicked—  
wild, like herds stampeding, driven mad as the darting gadfly  
5 strikes in the late spring when the long days come round.  
The attackers struck like eagles, crook-clawed, hook-beaked,  
swooping down from a mountain ridge to harry smaller birds  
that skim across the flatland, cringing under the clouds  
but the eagles plunge in fury, rip their lives out—hopeless,  
10 never a chance of flight or rescue—and people love the sport—  
so the attackers routed suitors headlong down the hall,  
wheeling to the slaughter, slashing left and right  
and grisly screams broke from skulls cracked open—  
the whole floor awash with blood.

## THE DELPHIC ORACLE

Delphi, the most celebrated sanctuary in ancient Greece, was located on the lower slopes of Mount Parnassus. The Greeks believed the spot to be the center of the earth, saying that Zeus had released two eagles, one from the east and one from the west, and flying toward each other they had met there. The site was originally sacred to the earth-goddess Gaea (jē' ə).

The Greeks told the story of a monstrous serpent, Python, who guarded the spot. The god Apollo came to Delphi, slew Python, and established his oracle there. An *oracle* is a shrine where prophecies, believed to be of divine origin, were delivered. There were a number of oracular shrines in the Greek world. Apollo was called *Pythian* in memory of his deed. The priestess of Apollo who gave the oracle was called the *Pythia* or the *Pythoness*. The Delphic oracle was consulted on a variety of questions, both private and public.

Those who wished to consult the oracle first performed the rite of purification and sacrificed to Apollo. Precedence among pilgrims was generally determined by lot, although occasionally granted as a privilege. A male priest, the sole attendant of the Pythia, related the questions and interpreted the answer. The priestess, seated on the sacred tripod, gave the oracle while in a frenzied state. How this condition was induced is not completely clear. Excavation at Delphi has shown as improbable the theory that the priestess inhaled vapors issuing from a hole in the earth. Such practices as chewing laurel leaves and drinking the water from the Castalian spring that flowed near the sanctuary, may have helped induce a prophetic state, but the major cause was probably the priestess' own complete faith in the power of the god to speak through her. The influence of Delphi, felt throughout the entire Mediterranean world for several centuries, began to decline from the fourth century B.C. onward. The sanctuary was finally closed by the Christian emperor Theodosius in A.D. 390.

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# Literature of Greece





# AESCHYLUS

(525–456 B.C.)

Generally regarded as the “father of tragedy,” Aeschylus was probably the first dramatist to grapple with the painful and unanswerable questions of human life and to create characters who were grand in their suffering. He also transformed Greek stage productions from simple choruses with a leader to genuine dramas involving character interaction, dialogue, scenery, costumes, and heroic action. Aeschylus wrote about 90 plays, of which only 7 survive. His most famous work is probably the *Oresteia*, a trilogy (series of three literary works) consisting of the *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Furies*. This trilogy appears here in an adapted form under the title *The House of Atreus*.

One of the most enduring myths of all time, the story of the downfall of the House of Atreus has been the subject of dramas and stories for over 25 centuries. Agamemnon, who led the Greeks against Troy, belonged to this famous family, as did his brother Menelaus, the husband of Helen. A curse seemed to hang over the family for several generations, a curse that started with an atrocious act committed by Agamemnon's great-grandfather Tantalus. When Tantalus was invited to dine with the gods, he killed and cooked his only son, Pelops, and served him for dinner. Realizing that the dish contained human flesh, the gods restored Pelops to life and devised a hideous punishment for his father. Tantalus was placed in Hades with a pool of water at his feet and luscious fruit trees over his head. Whenever he bent down to drink, the water drained away, and whenever he reached for fruit, the wind blew it just beyond his grasp. Thus he stood forever, thirsty and hungry in the midst of plenty.

Pelops had two sons, Atreus and Thyestes, who also brought disgrace to the family. Thyestes fell in love with Atreus' wife, and Atreus retaliated by killing Thyestes' two small children and serving them to their father to eat. Thyestes was powerless to take revenge, since Atreus was king. However, Atreus' children were doomed to suffer for this crime.

The curse created by the murders and cannibalism of previous generations descended full force on Atreus' son Agamemnon, who is the subject of the first play in this trilogy. As commander of the Greek army, Agamemnon had sought advice from a seer named Calchas about a problem that arose as his fleet of ships was sailing to Troy. A strong north wind had stranded the ships near the coastal town of Aulis. The seer Calchas told Agamemnon that he must sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia to the goddess Artemis in order to get the ships moving again. Agamemnon finally agreed to kill his daughter, an act that enraged his wife Clytemnestra and turned her thoughts toward revenge. After the sacrifice of Iphigenia, Agamemnon set off for Troy, where he fought valiantly for 10 years, at last returning home as a conquering hero.

As the play *Agamemnon* opens, the Greek army is returning from Troy, and Agamemnon is awaited by a crowd of townspeople who are eager to honor him. Clytemnestra has brooded for 10 years planning her revenge on her husband with her new lover, Aegisthus (the son of Thyestes). The events that follow are viewed differently by different writers throughout the ages. Some writers depict Clytemnestra as a vengeful monster, while others see her deeds as the justified acts of a grieving mother. ■