Of all our modern poets, Mr. William Morris is the one best qualified by nature and by art to translate for us the marvellous epic of the wanderings of Odysseus. For he is our only true story-singer since Chaucer; if he is a Socialist, he is also a Saga-man; and there was a time when he was never wearied of telling us strange legends of gods and men, wonderful tales of chivalry and romance. Master as he is of decorative and descriptive verse, he has all the Greek’s joy in the visible aspect of things, all the Greek’s sense of delicate and delightful detail, all the Greek’s pleasure in beautiful textures and exquisite materials and imaginative designs; nor can any one have a keener sympathy with the Homeric admiration for the workers and the craftsmen in the various arts, from the stainers in white ivory and the embroiderers in purple and gold, to the weaver sitting by the loom and the dyer dipping in the vat, the chaser of shield and helmet, the carver of wood or stone. And to all this is added the true temper of high romance, the power to make the past as real to us as the present, the subtle instinct to discern passion, the swift impulse to portray life.

It is no wonder then the lovers of Greek literature have so eagerly looked forward to Mr. Morris’s version of the Odyssean epic, and now that the first volume has appeared, it is not extravagant to say that of all our English translations this is the most perfect and the most satisfying. In spite of Coleridge’s well-known views on the subject, we have always held that Chapman’s Odyssey is immeasurably inferior to his Iliad, the mere difference of metre alone being sufficient to set the
'Stand off I bid you, damsels, while the work in hand I take,
And wash the brine from my shoulders, and sleek them all around.
Since verily now this long while sweet oil they have not found.
But before you nought will I wash me, for shame I have indeed,
Amidst of fair-tressed damsels to be all bare of weed.'
So he spake and aloof they set them, and thereof they told the may,
But Odysseus with the river from his body washed away
The brine from his back and his shoulders wrought broad and mightily;
And from his head was he wiping the foam of the untold sea;
But when he had throughly washed him, and the oil about him had shed
He did upon the reftament the gift of the maid unwed.
But Athene, Zeus-begotten, dealt with him in such wise
That bigger yet was his seeming, and mightier to all eyes,
With the hair on his head crisp curling as the bloom of the daffodil.
And as when the silver with gold is overlaid by a man of skill,
Yes, a craftsman whom Hephaestus and Pallas Athene have taught
To be master over masters, and lovely work he hath wrought;
So she round his head and his shoulders shed grace abundantly.
It may be objected by some that the line
With the hair on his head crisp curling as the bloom of the daffodil,
is a rather fanciful version of
οἶλος ὁρε κόμας, ἴδωνθεν ἄθει ὀροθας; 1
and it certainly seems probable that the allusion is to the dark colour of the hero's hair; still, the point is not one of much importance, though it may be worth noting that a similar expression occurs in Ogilby's superbly illustrated translation of the Odyssey, published in 1665, where Charles II's Master of the Revels in Ireland gives the passage thus:
Minerva renders him more tall and fair,
Curling in rings like daffodils his hair.
No anthology, however, can show the true merit of Mr. Morris's translation, whose real merit does not depend on stray beauties, nor is revealed by chance selections, but lies in the absolute rightness and coherence of the whole, in its purity and justice of touch, its freedom from affectation and commonplace, its harmony of form and matter. It is sufficient to say that this is a poet's version of a poet, and for such surely we should be thankful. In these latter days of coarse and vulgar literature, it is something to have made the great sea-epic of the South

1 His hair flowed down like the hyacinthine flower.

native and natural to our northern isle, something to have shown that our English speech may be a pipe through which Greek lips can blow, something to have taught Nausicaa to speak the same language as Perdita.

Mr. Morris's second volume brings the great romantic epic of Greek literature to its perfect conclusion, and although there can never be an ultimate translation of either Iliad or Odyssey, as each successive age is sure to find pleasure in rendering the two poems in its own manner and according to its own canons of taste, still it is not too much to say that Mr. Morris's version will always be a true classic amongst our classical translations. It is not, of course, flawless. In our notice of the first volume we ventured to say that Mr. Morris was sometimes far more Norse than Greek, nor does the volume that now lies before us make us alter that opinion. The particular metre, also, selected by Mr. Morris, although admirably adapted to express 'the strong-winged music of Homer,' as far as its flow and freedom are concerned, misses something of its dignity and calm. Here, it must be admitted, we feel a distinct loss, for there is in Homer not a little of Milton's lofty manner, and if swiftness be an essential of the Greek hexameter, sententiousness is one of its distinguishing qualities in Homer's hands. This defect, however, if we must call it a defect, seems almost unavoidable, as for certain metrical reasons a majestic movement in English verse is necessarily a slow movement; and, after all that can be said is said, how really admirable is this whole translation! If we set aside its noble qualities as a poem and look on it purely from the scholar's point of view, how straightforward it is, how honest and direct! Its fidelity to the original is far beyond that of any other verse-translation in our literature, and yet it is not the fidelity of a pedant to his text but rather the fine loyalty of poet to poet.

When Mr. Morris's first volume appeared many of the critics complained that his occasional use of archaic words and unusual expressions robbed his version of the true Homeric simplicity. This, however, is not a very felicitous criticism, for while Homer is undoubtedly simple in his clearness and largeness of vision, his wonderful power of direct narration, his wholesome sanity, and the purity and precision of his method, simple in language he undoubtedly is not. What he was to his contemporaries we have, of course, no means of judging, but we know that the Athenian of the fifth century B.C. found
him in many places difficult to understand, and when the creative age
was succeeded by the age of criticism and Alexandria began to take the
place of Athens as the centre of culture for the Hellenistic world,
Homerian dictionaries and glossaries seem to have been constantly
published. Indeed, Athenaeus tells us of a wonderful Byzantine blue-
stocking, a précieuse from the Propontis, who wrote a long hexameter
poem, called Mnemosyne, full of ingenious commentaries on difficulties
in Homer, and in fact, it is evident that, as far as the language is con-
cerned, such a phrase as 'Homerian simplicity' would have rather
amazed an ancient Greek. As for Mr. Morris's tendency to emphasise
the etymological meaning of words, a point commented on with some-
what flippant severity in a recent number of Macmillan's Magazine,
here Mr. Morris seems to us to be in complete accord, not merely with
the spirit of Homer, but with the spirit of all early poetry. It is quite
true that language is apt to degenerate into a system of almost algebraic
symbols, and the modern city-man who takes a ticket for Blackfriars
Bridge, naturally never thinks of the Dominican monks who once had
their monastery by Thames-side, and after whom the spot is named.
But in earlier times it was not so. Men were then keenly conscious of
the real meaning of words, and early poetry, especially, is full of this
feeling, and, indeed, may be said to owe to it no small portion of its
poetic power and charm. These old words, then, and this old use of
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poetic power and charm. These old words, then, and this old use of
words which we find in Mr. Morris's Odyssey can be amply justified
upon historical grounds, and as for their artistic effect, it is quite
excellent. Pope tried to put Homer into the ordinary language of his
day, with what result we know only too well; but Mr. Morris, who
uses his archaisms with the tact of a true artist, and to whom indeed
they seem to come absolutely naturally, has succeeded in giving to his
version by their aid that touch, not of 'quaintness,' for Homer is never
quaint, but of old-world romance and old-world beauty, which we
moderns find so pleasurable, and to which the Greeks themselves were
so keenly sensitive.

As for individual passages of special merit, Mr. Morris's translation is
no robe of rags sewn with purple patches for critics to sample. Its real
value lies in the absolute rightness and coherence of the whole, in the
grand architecture of the swift, strong verse, and in the fact that the
standard is not merely high but everywhere sustained. It is impossible,
however, to resist the temptation of quoting Mr. Morris's rendering of
that famous passage in the twenty-third book of the epic, in which
Odysseus eludes the trap laid for him by Penelope, whose very faith in
the certainty of her husband's return makes her sceptical of his identity
when he stands before her; an instance, by the way, of Homer's won-
derful psychological knowledge of human nature, as it is always the
dreamer himself who is most surprised when his dream comes true.

Thus she spake to prove her husband; but Odysseus, grieved at heart,
Spake thus unto his bed-mate well-skilled in gainful art:
'O woman, thou sayest a word exceeding grievous to me!
Who hath otherwhere shifted my bedstead? full hard for him should it be
For as he went as he were, unless softly a very God come here,
Who easily, if he willed it, might shift it otherwhere.
But no mortal man is living, how strong soe'er in his youth,
Who shall lightly hale it elsewhere, since a mighty wonder forsooth
Is wrought in that fashioned bedstead, and I wrought it, and I alone.
In the close grew a thicket of olive, a long-leaved tree full-grown,
That flourished and grew goodly as big as a pillar about,
So round it I built my bride-room, till I did the work right out
With ashlar stone close-fitting; and I roofed it overhead,
And thereto joined doors I made me, well-fitting in their stead.
Then I lopped away the boughs of the long-leaved olive-tree,
And, shearing the bole from the root up full well and cunningly,
I planed it about with the brass, and set the rule thereto,
And shaping thereof a bed-post, with the wimble I bored it through.
So beginning, I wrought out the bedstead, and finished it utterly,
And with gold enwrought it about, and with silver and ivory,
And stretched on it a thong of oxhide with the purple dye made bright.
Thus then the sign I have shown thee; nor, woman, know I aight
If my bed yet bideth steadfast, or if to another place
Some man hath moved it, and smitten the olive-bole from its base.'

These last twelve books of the Odyssey have not the same marvel of
romance, adventure and colour that we find in the earlier part of the
epic. There is nothing in them that we can compare to the exquisite
idyll of Nausicaa or to the Titanic humour of the episode in the
Cyclops' cave. Penelope has not the glamour of Circe, and the song of
the Sirens may sound sweeter than the whizz of the arrows
of odysseus as he stands on the threshold of his hall. Yet, for sheer intensity of
passionate power, for concentration of intellectual interest and for
masterly dramatic construction, these latter books are quite unequalled.
Indeed, they show very clearly how it was that, as Greek art developed,
the epos passed into the drama. The whole scheme of the argument,
the return of the hero in disguise, his disclosure of himself to his son,
his terrible vengeance on his enemies and his final recognition by his
wife, reminds us of the plot of more than one Greek play, and shows us what the great Athenian poet meant when he said that his own dramas were merely scraps from Homer’s table. In rendering this splendid poem into English verse, Mr. Morris has done our literature a service that can hardly be over-estimated, and it is pleasant to think that, even should the classics be entirely excluded from our educational systems, the English boy will still be able to know something of Homer’s delightful tales, to catch an echo of his grand music and to wander with the wise Odysseus round ‘the shores of old romance.’

52. Mowbray Morris, unsigned article, Quarterly Review
October 1888, clxvii, 407–8

In the course of an article on Matthew Arnold, the critic took the chance to condemn Morris’s Odyssey in Arnoldian terms.

Mowbray Morris (1847–1911) was a man of letters and editor of Macmillan’s Magazine.

It is impossible to read these passages without one’s thought straying for a moment to one who has violated these first principles, as they may be called, of Homeric translation more persistently and notoriously than did any of the translators from Chapman downwards who are reviewed in these Lectures. By this clumsy travesty of an archaic diction, Mr. William Morris, in his translation of the Odyssey, has overlaid Homer with all the grotesqueness, the conceits, the irrationality of the Middle Ages, as Mr. Arnold justly says that Chapman overlaid him; but with this difference, that this grotesque manner was natural and common to the Elizabethan writers, and to Chapman in particular; with Mr. Morris it is but an extreme form of that affectation which plumes itself on despising the thoughts, manners, and needs of its own time, and is, in effect, the most odious shape that false culture can assume. And thus, in spite of his own genuine poetical faculty,—and in what measure this is, or at least was, his, every one knows who has read his beautiful and noble Epic of Jason—and in spite of some really fine and vigorous passages, where his sense of poetry and his own good sense have triumphed for a time over the ignoble fetters imposed on them, Mr. Morris has only succeeded in producing the most signal monument of the eccentricities and caprice of an age so fruitful in both.

53. Edward Dowden: ‘Mr. Morris has found a faith’
1888

Dowden (1843–1913) was Professor of English Literature at Trinity College, Dublin. He contributed frequently to the Academy. In Transcript and Studies (1888) he included an article ‘Victorian Literature’ in which he expressed relief that Morris had escaped from his ‘unheroic melancholy’ into faith—even if in Socialism.

Rossetti escaped from reality to romance, yet at a serious cost; and the life which should have been so full and joyous to the end was saddened and turned awry. He escaped through his imagination from a world of turmoil and dust, of strife and greed, of commerce and manufacture, of vulgar art and conquering science; he escaped for there was little in him of the passion of the reformer to overcome his repugnance, and bid him stand fast and do battle with the world. Mr. William Morris, as seen in his earliest volume of poems—a volume full of beauty and strangeness—might appear to have much in common with Rossetti.