

Translation as Position: Emily Wilson's Translation of the *Odyssey*^(*)

Dalia Youssef Said Aly

الباحثة: داليا يوسف سعيد على
طالبة دكتوراه – قسم اللغة الإنجليزية- كلية الآداب- جامعة القاهرة
الدكتور: لبنى عبد التواب يوسف
أستاذ- قسم اللغة الإنجليزية- كلية الآداب- جامعة القاهرة

Abstract:

Been translated over and over into countless languages. Emily Wilson's translation of the *Odyssey* published in 2017 created a sensation for being the first translation of the classic epic into English by a woman. Wilson's version is different from the previous translations, all by men, in important respects such as references to slavery especially in relation to women. This article argues that the linguistic choices that Wilson made and which eventually made her translation stand out are not related to her gender as a translator, but are rather related to the way she positions herself in relation to the language and culture of both target and source texts. The present article uses feminist translation as a critical approach to explore the cultural and linguistic dynamics at work in Wilson's version. Sample extracts are provided to demonstrate the difference in translation based on the difference in position.

KEY WORDS: feminism, translation studies, the *Odyssey*, Emily Wilson, slavery, gender.

^(*) Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts Volume 84 Issue 2 January 2024

المخلص:

لطالما كانت هوية ريتشارد مورفي الأيرلندية موضع تساؤل من قبل العديد من النقاد. لقد وضعوه بين تقليدين أدبيين متصادمين، ألا وهما الأيرلندي والإنجليزي، بسبب أصله الأنجلو أيرلندي. ومع ذلك، فإن التقدير العادل لأعمال الشاعر يوضح ولائه لوطنه الأم. يركز شعر مورفي بشكل متواصل على استعادة الماضي الأيرلندي واستكشاف تراثه الأصيل. ولقد تم توظيف *سيده البيت* في الدراسة الحالية للتحقق من دقة هذا الرأي. لذلك فإن البحث يتناول هذه القصيدة في ظل مستويين من المعنى. الأول ذو توجه شخصي ضيق يتعلق برثاء جدته وسرد سماتها الشخصية المميزة. وبالتعمق أكثر تحت هذه الرسالة السطحية، تكشف المناقشة النقاب عن سلسلة من الرموز. الوظيفة الأساسية لتلك الرموز هي إظهار العواقب الوخيمة للتاريخ الاستعماري للجزيرة، ومن خلالها يحاول الشاعر أيضا الخوض في التراث والتقاليد الثقافية الأيرلندية المفقودة. من بين العديد من الرموز التي تظهر في سياق أحداث القصيدة، يُلاحظ كيف استخدم الشاعر خواتم الزفاف والكوليرا والشخصيات الأدبية الأيرلندية كرموز تشير على التوالي إلى التراث الغالي الأيرلندي، وشرور الاستعمار الذي مزق بلاده، والشخصية المتفردة للتاريخ الأدبي الأيرلندي. ومن ثم، فإن الهدف من هذا البحث هو الكشف عن إحدى روائع مورفي من خلال العدسة الرمزية لإبراز الهوية الأيرلندية الصادقة للشاعر وتسليط مزيداً من الضوء على إخلاصه لأبناء وطنه. ومن خلال الاضطلاع على الدراسات التي تناولت شعر مورفي نقدًا وتحليلًا، يمكن القول أنه على عكس دواوينه الشعرية الأخرى، لم تشهد هذه القصيدة الطويلة استقبالا نقدياً ملحوظاً. وبناء على ذلك، فإن تناولها بالدراسة والتحليل في هذا البحث يسهم في التقدير الأدبي للشاعر الأيرلندي. وفي هذا الإطار سيتم شرح استخدام الرمزية في القصيدة شرحاً وافياً بعد عرض الأجزاء الثلاثة للمرثاة كما استخدمها مورفي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ريتشارد مورفي، سيده البيت، الشعر الأيرلندي، التاريخ

والهوية الأيرلندية، الاستعمار

Ever since its publication in 2017, Emily Wilson's translation into English of Homer's *Odyssey* has caused a storm of discussion. Though Wilson is not the first woman to translate the *Odyssey* at all, she is the first woman to translate it into English. The fact that she is a woman attracted a lot of attention because, for centuries, only men translated the *Odyssey* into English. She made headlines like *Vox's* "Historically, men translated the Odyssey. Here's what happened when a woman took the job" (North), *New York Time Magazine's* "The First Woman

to Translate the 'Odyssey' Into English" (Mason), *Bookstr's* "Say Hello to the First Woman to Translate the *Odyssey* into English" and *Harvard Gazette's* "Woman Scholar's Take on the *Odyssey*" (Rodríguez). These are just a few examples. The headlines' focus on the gender of the translator is apparent in the repetitive use of the word "woman" in every one of them. This raised an important question: should the gender of the translator matter? This paper argues that what makes Wilson's version unique, or at least different, is her *position* towards the text rather than her gender. Particular emphasis is laid on the case of Penelope's twelve maids as a model of how position shapes translation.

Behind every translation is a reading of the text that shapes and colors this translation. The translator's understanding of and interaction with the text and its original language guide their linguistic and stylistic choices. Earlier theories of translation worked by the principle of equivalence/sameness which perceives language as transparent. According to this principle, translation is a direct transference of meaning between two languages. The translator, accordingly, automatically replaces words in the source text with their equivalent in the target language. More recent theories acknowledge the fact that the process of translation is not that simple and direct because language itself is not transparent. Translation then becomes a process of reconstruction of meaning where the translator "creatively intervenes" (Godard et al, 48) rather than automatically transfers. This creative intervention by the translator means that meaning in the translated text is consciously built through a series of choices and decisions. This is what makes various translations of the same text possible and valid to different degrees. The variations stem from the translator's understanding of both the original text and its language, as well as the translator's linguistic and cultural context which form the translator's position. What is Wilson's position, then?

- WHO IS EMILY WILSON?

Emily Wilson is a Professor of Classical Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. She was born in 1971 in Oxford, England, to a family well-established in academia. Her mother, Katherine Duncan-Jones, was a Shakespeare specialist at Oxford, and her mother's mother was "an authority on the poetry of Andrew Marvell" at Birmingham (Mason). Wilson graduated from Balliol College, Oxford, in 1994, got her master's degree in English literature 1500–1660 in 1996, and her Ph.D. in classical and comparative literature at Yale University in 2001. Her dissertation was awarded the Charles Bernheimer Prize of the American Comparative Literature Association. In 2006, Wilson became a Fellow of the American Academy in Rome in Renaissance & Early Modern scholarship, and in 2020, she joined the Booker Prize judging panel. Wilson is also a book reviewer for *The Times Literary Supplement*, the *London Review of Books*, and *The New Republic*, and the classics editor for *The Norton Anthology of World Literature* and *The Norton Anthology of Western Literature*. Until 2017, Wilson was a distinguished professor of classics. Then suddenly with the publication of her translation of the *Odyssey*, she became an overnight sensation and made history by being the first woman to translate this huge classic.

But Wilson's task was not easy, not when she first embarked on it, and not even after she finished it. In her interview with Wyatt Mason for *The New York Time Magazine*, Wilson described an academic context where translation is regarded as less important than research and writing. She said that this is due to the fact that her fellow colleagues assumed that in translation:

you're going to be communicating with the masses, which is less important than being innovative within your field. And even though I think translation is a way

of being innovative within your field, my colleagues don't see it that way (Mason)

For Wilson, then, translation is an act of communication as well as innovation. In fact, innovation is indispensable in all literary translation. What makes Wilson's translation of the *Odyssey* innovative in the field of the classics is the way she deconstructs and reconstructs the original text in a totally new light while translating it. It is not a question of honesty or cultural appropriation. It is a question of revealing layers of meaning that have been buried under a huge number of translations almost none of which managed to articulate. This is especially true with regards to practices like slavery and honor-crimes that were camouflaged by a target-text culture and social system that simply allowed them to go unnoticed. For Wilson, neutral labels for such practices only serve to linguistically hide them further which prevents any moral condemnation on part of the reader. This only leads to appropriating such practices and passing them as acceptable. The next section uses the theory of Feminist Translation to analyze how Wilson's linguistic choices reflected her position.

- FEMINIST TRSNALTION

One of the best approaches to Wilson's project is Feminist Translation. Language is and has always been a site for feminist activity through writing, rewriting and translation. After all, a fundamental aspect of Feminism is to "(re)claim language to deconstruct patriarchy." (Irshad and Yasmin, 1). But for long periods of English history women were not allowed to actively participate in the cultural life or the literary scene especially through writing. When England came out of the dark ages and witnessed the wide-scale Renaissance, women found in translation a gateway to getting involved in the cultural life without having to clash with the patriarchal values of the time (Krontiris, 1992). Translation was "a

permissible form of public expression” (Simon, 2) for women because it was thought to be inferior to writing; a second-hand re-production of the original. Gradually, the scene started to become more welcoming to women as authors in addition to translators. Women were allowed to publish their work without having to use aliases.

Then in the 1970s and 1980s, in Quebec, Canada, a group feminist critics and writers started a female-affiliated linguistic system that "dismantled patriarch language, and made women linguistically visible." (Irshad and Yasmin, 1). This system worked by analyzing the way the gendered identity is constructed through language and it sought to create alternatives which would liberate women from having to depend on a language replete with patriarchy to express themselves.

This system was also culture-conscious in relation to both writing and translation. Like writing, translation is also open to the tensions in the culture which are reflected in the text. Thus, it came to define translation as "a process of mediation which does not stand above ideology but works through it." And this is where translation meets feminist thought (Simon, 7). Feminist translation is aware of the translator as rewriting a text not in void but within an intricate web of tensions. Translation then becomes "a re-writing that always implicates the translator's subjectivity" (Yu, 1). This means that the female translator makes a statement about her position through the choice of which works to translate, and how to translate them. Unlike traditional translation studies, feminist translation theory requires the female translator to be in "a dominant position" (Sun, 276). This dominance does not mean pulling the text's meaning in one direction or another to suit a feminist ideology, it means providing "a new way of translating gender issues." (Sun, 277). This new way aims at exposing and marking gender tensions in an effort to combat them by making them more visible. It, then, allows the translators, through

language, to "alter expressions of domination, whether at the level of concepts, of syntax or of terminology" (Simon, 8). In brief, women have used translation to create communication networks in support of progressive political agendas and the renewal, through deconstruction and reconstruction, of literary traditions (Simon, 2). In addition, the translator is no longer regarded or encouraged to be invisible in the sense of a transparent tool of linguistic transfer. He/she is now aware of their work being a reproduction rather a copy in a different tongue. Wilson is upfront in challenging this older attitude and does not shy away from emphasizing the presence of a sense of craftiness in her translation:

There is often a notion, especially in the Anglo-American world, that a translation is good insofar as it disguises its own existence as a translation; translations are praised for being "natural." I hope that my translation is readable and fluent, but that its literary artifice is clearly apparent.
(Wilson, 80)

Here, Wilson is positioning differently in relation to a tradition whose criteria mark invisibility as a virtue. Since translation is now understood as creative intervention or conscious reconstruction, the translator should not hide his craftiness.

But this is not the only way Wilson is reacting to the previous translations of the *Odyssey*. Wilson started to handle the *Odyssey* not as a literary text that she simply wishes to translate, but as a literary text that "has through translation accumulated distortions that affect the way even scholars who read Greek discuss the original" (Mason). This awareness on Wilson's part of previous misinterpretation and/or mistranslation, deliberate or not, is the motive behind the changes she made in her version. But this kind of revision is not foreign to translation in general, and literary translation in particular. What

makes Wilson's of vital importance is that her revision targets an issue of timeless importance and relevance namely, power relations and the role of language in constructing and deconstructing them. Here, Wilson's practice is fundamentally feminist, and feminism is an attitude, a value system that even male translators and authors can adopt. It is about justice and equality to all, not just for women by women. In the introduction to *Feminist Translation Studies*, Olga Castro and Emek Ergun state that translation is at the center of feminist politics; translation understood not as a direct, straightforward process, but rather as

an important means of producing identities, knowledges and cross-cultural encounters [...] translation (as a feminist praxis) is embraced as a tool and model of cross-border dialogue, resistance, solidarity and activism in pursuit of justice and equality for all. (Ergun and Castro, 1)

This is what translation does for Wilson. In her candid interview with Wyatt Mason for *The New York Times*, she describes her struggle with the shortsighted criteria by which her text is expected to be judged in the field of classics. These criteria stem from the dated understanding, or, as Wilson puts it: “a simple and fundamental misunderstanding” of translation as an act of simply finding a word with the same meaning in the target language. Going against what the dictionary says is wrong, and if you do so, “you have to add a footnote explaining why, which means that pretty much every line has to have a footnote” Wilson said (Mason). This seems to be a matter of common sense. One would think that translation studies are already well beyond having to justify not depending on the dictionary. But Wilson's case proves that this is not the case, at least not with the classics. Wilson said in the interview that she needs to come up with a better answer to her tight classicist reviewers because she expects them to have “a loud voice” (Mason) that is, to accuse her of straying from the original.

Wilson knows where this comes from, though. The classical criteria of evaluating translation that her nay-sayers adopt are in themselves biased. The reference here is to Matthew Arnold's "On Translating Homer" where he defined a set the criteria for the good translator of Homer:

To be rapid.

To be plain and direct both in thought and expression.

To be noble (simply another word for classy, dignified language).

Mason points out that this is the criteria against which almost every translation of Homer was examined, but Wilson is not convinced (Mason). And the reason Wilson is not persuaded is because for her, these criteria simply serve to mark a "boys' club":

I think it's all to do with a particular notion of aesthetics and class, the whole 'plainness and nobility.' It's about noblesse oblige and you're going to be the kind of gentleman who's going to have gone to Rugby and that will be the kind of language that we speak: the classy kind of language. And projecting all of that back on to the classics. This is what 'sweetness and light' is. It's describing a boys' club. I think it's very interesting that's still with us
(Mason)

What Wilson is describing here is a case of male-domination in the Classics scene - "gentleman", "boys' club" - that defines for the translator the appropriate language - "the kind of language that we speak" - and try to pass that as an inherent aspect of texts of antiquity - "projecting all of that back on to the classics". It is the male scrutinizing gaze positing as the criterion. Wilson is responding to this domination by reclaiming her authority as a translator in choosing

the language she finds suitable not for herself as a female translator because that would only emphasize the "boys' club" as The Norm from which she is deviating, but the language suitable for the text based on her professional, expert reading.

To recap, the key words that the present paper uses in its analysis of Wilson's text are position and visibility. Position is defined as the translator's stand towards the text. Wilson's stand towards the *Odyssey* is one of suspicion and condemnation of the gender/class biases in the text, and of the criteria that has for long been imposed on translations of the *Odyssey*. This stand is dictated by her temporal cultural and academic location, not necessarily by her gender. She is translating for a new audience. Critics agree that The *Odyssey* "creates important ambiguities about whether enslaved women have the power to resist sexual assault" (Kamen, 15). So, Wilson's discomfort is not new. Her achievement, as the next section attempts to show, lies in reflecting this moral dilemma in her translation through style and lexical choices.

Visibility is related to position in that the translator does not try to hide his/her presence in the translated text but rather emphasize both their craftiness and their own approach to the text and its language. If every translation is a reading of the original text on part of the translator, then there is no point in pretending that meaning is automatically transferable. This also does not clash with the notion of honest transfer. To be visible does not mean to change the meaning of the original text, but to phrase it in a way unique to and reflective of the translator's position.

- THE CASE OF THE MIADS:

Wilson's feminist position is reflected in two important stylistic features:

First, opting for a simpler, contemporary level of language in contrast to the grand, noble, gentlemanly language of the previous translations, in part to “invite readers to respond more actively with the text,” (Wilson, 56) as she writes in a translator’s note. Wilson did that to show that “stylistic pomposity” is itself “un-Homeric” (Wilson, 56). But the more important reason for this article is that “Impressive displays of rhetoric and linguistic force” may elicit admiration but they certainly “tend to silence dissent and discourage deeper modes of engagement.” (Wilson, 56). She wanted to strip the basic plot of any linguistic make up and present it bare to allow for a better, neutral moral and literary judgment. She also shifts the beat from the conventional Greek dactylic hexameters to the conventional English iambic pentameter.

Second, by insisting on words like “slave” instead of the misleading “maid” to describe the household servants. In her essay “Slavery and Sex in the *Odyssey*”, Wilson says that her main objective in translating the *Odyssey* is to demonstrate that, contrary to what is indicated in any contemporary critical discussion, “Homer’s depictions of the enslaved are significantly less clearly autonomous, especially with regard to the sexual autonomy of the enslaved women” (Kamen, 15). The reference is to the twelve maids who were murdered by Odysseus upon his return as a punishment for what he claimed to be their immoral/sexual conduct with the suitors who gathered at his estate asking for Penelope’s hand in marriage since, after 20 years of absence, Odysseus was thought to be dead. Penelope, the archetypal loyal wife, wanted to delay her choice of a suitor to the longest possible period of time. One of her schemes to do so was to make twelve of her youngest and prettiest maids entertain the suitors. As slaves, the maids were accessible to the suitors on all levels, forced sex and harassment included. Wilson, then, is not automatically adopting certain linguistic choices because she is a female translator. She is choosing the linguistic forms that would do justice to a group of

women who fell victim to both class and gender bias. This is how feminist translation functions at best. It resists by unraveling layers of tensions/injustices in the text and framing them linguistically that is, red flagging them. The photo below gives a hint. In her hand-written notes (figure 1), obviously a planning phase, Wilson changes the word "maids" to "slaves" in the title.

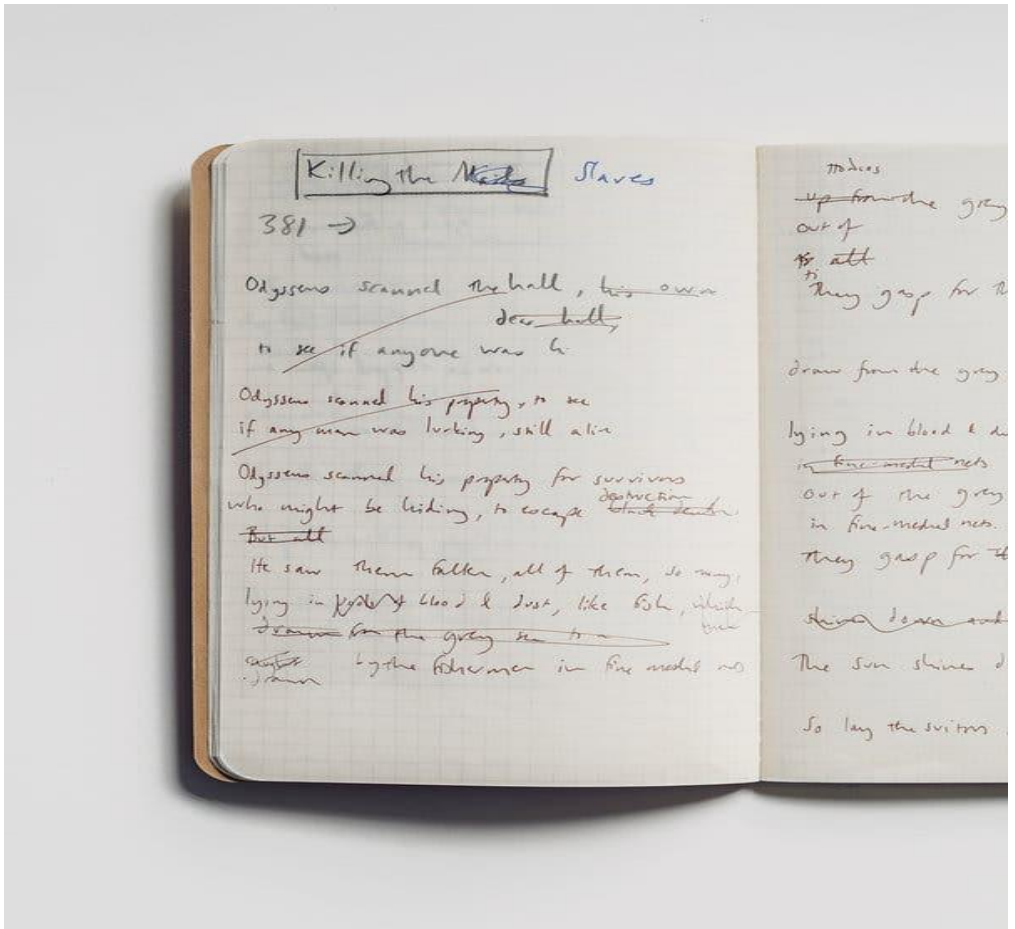


Figure 1: Some of Wilson’s notes while translating the *Odyssey* (Notice changing “maids” to “slaves”)

The simple change has drastic aftermath. This one word "slaves" summarizes the status of the young girls: they are women at the bottom of the social hierarchy which means that they are under two forms of domination: class and gender. Maids are hired staff but slaves are owned. Being a maid or even a servant is job and implies agency. Being a slave means being denied all agency. Slaves can only obey orders, and here lies the moral dilemma in the epic for Wilson. If the slaves were ordered by Penelope to keep the suitors busy and distracted, obviously through physical pleasure, why were they punished so brutally while Helen and the goddesses were not punished for the same kind of conduct? Even without Penelope's knowledge, how far could the maids have resisted the suitors without being punished for disobedience one way or another. This is how feminist translation functions.

Through her lexical choices, Wilson managed to present her deconstructive reading of the epic and frame the gender and class tensions. According to her, "If you're going to admit that stories matter [...] then it matters how we tell them, and that exists on the level of microscopic word choice" (Mason). A few examples can serve to show the difference in the representation of the maids between Wilson and some of the previous translators, the words of interest are underlined and marked in italics:

Odysseus
told his beloved nurse, "Now bring me fire
and sulfur, as a cure for evil things,
and I will fumigate the house. And call
Penelope, her slaves, and all the slave girls
inside the house." (Wilson, 462)

He told Eurykleia:

"Bring me

Brimstone and a brazier – medicinal

Fumes to purify my hall. Then tell

Penelope to come, and bring *her maids*.

All *servants* round the house must be called in." (Fitzgerald, 424)

But the king turned to devoted Eurycleia, saying,

"Bring sulfur, nurse, to scour all this pollution –

Bring me fire too, so I can fumigate the house.

And call Penelope here with *all her women* –

Tell *all the maids* to come back in at once." (Fagles, 379)

Bring brimstone, the cure of evil, goodwife, bring fire unto me,

That I the house may hallow, then bid thou Penelope

That now she get her hither, and *her handmaidens* withal

Yea, speed hither *all the women that serve in our house* and hall
(William, 415)

As shown in these samples, while Fitzgerald, Fagles and William chose words like "maids", "handmaidens", "servants" or simply the generic "women", Wilson chose "slaves" and "slave girls". Implied in Wilson's labelling the maids as "slaves" is a condemnation of Odysseus because he murdered them for deeds that were assigned to them and they had no power to refuse or oppose.

- RESULTS AND CONCLUSION:

The fact that a certain practice was not regarded as morally wrong in an earlier period of time should not stop us from saying that it was. This is especially true in the case of a text with the size and the impact of the *Odyssey*, a milestone of world literature with constant presence in both our subconscious minds and the conscious cultural productions of today. While remaining faithful to the original text, translators can always choose, through language, to convey the meaning with a moral coloring. To continue to translate and read texts like the *Odyssey* while ignoring the social structure replete with discrimination is to risk the reader internalizing such values as acceptable and normal simply because of the matter-of-fact style they are presented in. This will make similar contemporary practices less visible and hence less open to resistance. This is why Wilson insists on making these structures "more visible in our analysis of ancient literature and the ancient world" so that we can "create more critical distance and resistance to their contemporary analogues" (Kamen, 18)

When the *Odyssey* was first composed, the language itself lacked the words to rightly describe the discrimination-based relations. This is understandable because the society was not aware of itself being based on a morally questionable value system. No concept, no words for it. Today, however, we are aware of such concepts and so we have the words: gender/social discrimination, rape, murder, slaves. Consequently, these names should be applied to incidents in the text where they apply but have not been called so before.

In brief,

- 1- Emily Wilson did not translate the *Odyssey* differently because of her gender but because she positioned herself differently culturally and linguistically in relation to the original text.
- 2- This answers the question raised at the beginning of the present paper, should the focus on Wilson's being a woman have any

implications in relation to her translation? No. Feminism is not restricted to female authors or translators. It is a position that resists bias.

- 3- That a translator starts from a different position should not jeopardize his honesty towards the original text in any sense. After all, language is not transparent; there are always different shades and layers of meaning accompanying different word. The translator only chooses what he/she regards as the appropriate "coloring". This is interpretation rather than intervention.

WORKS CITED

- Ergun, E., & Castro, O. (2017). *Feminist translation studies: Local and transnational perspectives*. Routledge.
- Fagles, R. (Trans.). (1999). *Homer: The odyssey*. Penguin.
- Fitzgerald, R. (Trans.). (2007). *The Odyssey*. Vintage Classic.
- Godard, B. et al. (2022). *Translation, semiotics, and feminism selected writings of Barbara Godard*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Irshad, I., & Yasmin, M. (2022). Feminism and Literary Translation: A Systematic Review. *Heliyon*, 8(3).
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e09082>.
- Kamen, D., & Marshall, C. W. (2021). In *Slavery and sexuality in classical antiquity*. essay, The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Kamen, Deborah, et al. "Slavery and Sex in the Odyssey." *Slavery and Sexuality in Classical Antiquity*, The University of Wisconsin Press, 2021.
- Krontiris, T. (2005). Translation as appropriation: Vassilis Rotas, Shakespeare and Modern Greek. *Shakespeare Survey*, 208–219. <https://doi.org/10.1017/ccol0521850746.020>
- Mason, W. (2017, November 2). *The first woman to translate the 'Odyssey' into English*. The New York Times. Retrieved March 22, 2023, from
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/02/magazine/the-first-woman-to-translate-the-odyssey-into-english.html>
- Morris, W. (1904). In *The Odyssey of Homer done into English verse*. essay, Longmans, Green, and Co.
- Naranjo, S. (2018, November 20). *Say hello to the first woman to translate 'the Odyssey' into English*. Bookstr. Retrieved April

22, 2023, from <https://bookstr.com/article/say-hello-to-the-first-woman-to-translate-the-odyssey-into-english/>

North, A. (2017, November 20). *Historically, men translated the Odyssey. here's what happened when a woman took the job.* Vox. Retrieved April 1, 2023, from

<https://www.vox.com/identities/2017/11/20/16651634/odyssey-emily-wilson-translation-first-woman-english>

Rodríguez, G. (2015). 'close as a kiss': Gyn/affection in Margaret Atwood's the penelopiad. *Amaltea. Revista De Mitocrítica*, 7, 19–34. https://doi.org/10.5209/rev_amal.2015.v7.47697

Simon, S. (1996). In *Gender in translation: Cultural identity and the politics of transmission*. essay, Routledge.

Sun, R. (2021). Feminist translation: Translator's subjectivity, strategies and influences. *Journal of Higher Education Research*, 2(5). <https://doi.org/10.32629/jher.v2i5.488>

Wilson, Emily (trans.). (2018). In *The odyssey: Translated by Emily Wilson*. essay, W. W. Norton & Company.

Yu, Z. (2015). *Translating feminism in China: Gender, sexuality and censorship*. Routledge.

Zelnick-Abramovitz, R. (2018). Greek and Roman terminologies of slavery. *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Slavery*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199575251.013.41>