

Homer Burlesqued and Bowdlerized

Parody of Homeric epic is in a sense as old as Homeric epic itself is: the fight between the tramp, Irus, and Odysseus in his disguise as a beggar at *Od.* 18.42-107 is itself a fine comical counterpart to the conventional scenes of single combat in the *Iliad*. Parody of epic has long been popular; the *Batrachomyomachia* is a full-fledged travesty of the *Iliad*. Great texts seem to withstand infinite abuse; indeed some of them almost invite it. The *Iliad* is a case in point.

The eighteenth century seems to have been something of a high point for Homeric travesty; Thomas Bridges published a burlesque translation of the *Iliad* in 1762, which was immediately popular and sold well enough to have been reprinted in 1764, 1767, 1770, 1792, and 1797.

After a gap of a century or so, this lively work mysteriously found its way to the Philadelphia offices of Gebbie and Co., publishers. The publisher found it necessary to insert a note at the beginning of the volume, explaining just what had been done to change the text and why. Yes, the work is “valuable, humorous, and excellent,” but “because of its wanton vulgarity in many places, it has been allowed to drop out of print.” But now, changes have been made by one George Smith, B.A., and the result has been a salutary shift “from Bridges’ studied obscenity to decent diction.”

There are, however, passages that even Mr. Smith cannot seem to render pure enough for an 1889 Philadelphia audience, and so he has resorted to the use of starred lines for places where even a paraphrase might seem too offensive. In addition, he has indicated where he has been forced to change a word by putting his own contribution in italics. He writes, somewhat disingenuously, that the original, far from having suffered in the process of purification, actually seems to have been improved.

The net effect of this preface, especially for potential readers who had not seen the obscene Bridges version (now, as the editor notes, rare and expensive), is to make this book seem far spicier than either the uncomplicated and hearty vulgarity of Bridges text or the simple frankness of his Greek original. The starred lines leave a space that is aching to be filled, and the prurience of the reader’s imagination will be the only limiting factor for what will be mentally supplied for these gaps. Similarly sinister are the italics that mark a passage that has been altered. Passage so typographically marked naturally call attention to themselves. When an end-rhyme provides a clue, the italics virtually coerce readers to make their own unsavory textual emmendations.

An example would be the following two lines:

Latona’s son, with fiery locks

Amongst them send both plagues and *knocks*.

The learned reader can be expected to supply for “*knocks*,” “*pox*.” The very learned reader might well also mourn the missing alliteration that would have adorned the original Bridges text.

This is not true Bowdlerization, but rather its inverse: while pretending to clean up a text, George Smith is actually sexualizing it. While declining to provide readers with actual pornography, Smith offered instead, a strong temptation to mentally re-write his work, and so supply their own.