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A Comparison of Translations of *The Iliad*

Fagles, Fitzgerald and Lattimore’s translations of *The Iliad* vary widely in diction, effectively altering the resulting imagery and tone of the passage when interpreted by the reader. In this excerpt from book sixteen, Zeus is conflicted about saving Sarpedon from his unfortunate fate in the Trojan War. The array of details of Hera’s response as translated are crucial for understanding the morality of the action in question.

The passage begins with Hera responding to Zeus’s question of whether to rescue Sarpedon. In both the translation by Fitzgerald and by Lattimore, Hera merely “answered him” (16.439) but in the translation by Fagles, Hera “protested strongly.” (16.512) This slight difference creates a major change in tone as the reader interprets this conversation between the two gods. By using the term protested, Hera is represented as more alarmed and advocates strongly against this proclamation. This is further followed by Hera continuing, “what a curious thing to say.” (16.513, Fitzgerald) “what sort of thing have you spoken?” (16.440, Lattimore) and in Fagles version, “what are you saying?” (16.523, Fagles) In Fitzgerald’s version, the word curious gives the reader the impression that Hera is not very concerned and even surprised by Zeus’s expression of emotional attachment for his son. In contrast, Fagles portrays her as perturbed by the idea and eager to make her case against sparing Sarpedon. How this initial reaction from Hera is represented is significant because the more extreme response from her implies the weighty and precarious implications of what Zeus is suggesting. To ineffectively relay this quote would compromise understanding of the moral quandary presented.

The translations by Fagles and Lattimore explain “he [Sarpedon] is mortal and doomed” (16.524, Fagles) (16.441-442, Lattimore) to live out his destiny. Fitzgerald refrained from using the word mortal in his interpretation, and instead called him “A man who is born to die” (16.514) In the former versions, the meaning of the diction employed is, in essence, the same as the latter, and yet Fitzgerald’s wording is in a blunt and simplified manner that encourages reflection upon what it means to be a Greek hero and make the ultimate sacrifice, an action not even the gods can take.

Lattimore uses very straight forward, plain language referring to this leg of the Trojan War as “the strong encounter” (16.447) which maintains his lofty and civilized perspective on events. In comparison, Fitzgerald names it “the rough battle” (16.524) allowing for some sensory information for the audience to consider. A picture begins to form in the mind’s eye of a difficult scene on the battlefield. Fagles is perhaps the most descriptive in his translation, calling the event in which Sarpedon is struck down “the heavy fighting” (16.531) and “the brutal onslaught” (16.536). Fagles manages to keep the denotation of the sentiment the same but give the audience a stronger image of the violence and horrific interactions of war. This makes it the most enticing and conducive to understanding for its audience and therefore most effective.

Hera takes care to warn Zeus of the ramifications of severing Sarpedon from his ill fate; “You will inspire lethal anger in them all.” (16.534, Fagles) This line evokes the idea of inevitable war between the gods, causing death and destruction as denoted by the term lethal, all over the actions of Zeus. “You will waken grim resentment among them.” (16.449, Lattimore) This version has milder language, insinuating the gods would be bitter but not quite provoked into action against Zeus. Lattimore’s interpretation elucidates an impression that the morality of the decision to keep Sarpedon alive will not be met with resistance or entitlement to exercise the same privilege. In the third translation Hera remarks that, “…immortals; you’ll infuriate these.” (16.522, Fitzgerald) The gods will not just be angry, they will be infuriated, a much more passionate response; closer to the way Fagles presented the matter. It is important for the audience to understand why this kind of anger would deter Zeus from pursuing the matter further, as he would not want to be responsible for them fighting amongst each other and the resulting mayhem. If every god was to come to the aid of their children to attempt to rescue them from their fate, the sacrifice they made would not be so admirable and heroic. To receive this message from the text is directly determined by the diction chosen by the translator. In this particular instance, Fagles is most successful in this endeavor.

In the final lines of the passage, Hera tells Zeus to orchestrate a proper burial for his son, “With full royal rites, with mounded tomb and pillar. / These are the solemn honors owed the dead.” (16.542-543, Fagles) Comparatively, Lattimore transcribes, “With tomb and gravestone. Such is the privilege of those who have perished.” (16.457) The difference between the denotation of honor and privilege is rather stark. To be honored at a funeral is to be remembered and regarded with respect, while simply having a tomb and gravestone labeled as a privilege is for it to be a special right. This version seems to romanticize the death of the fallen hero, as if this privilege is exactly what one hoped to eventually achieve. In Fitzgerald’s adaptation, Hera concludes her response by saying, “With tomb and stone, the trophies of the dead.” (16.530) This rendition perfectly embodies the Greeks abundant pride and glory placed in their fallen heroes, as they go off and risk everything to fight to lay claim to women and land and riches, not to mention fame, and when they meet their end their tomb and stone are the only trophies left. This description leaves the strongest impression upon the reader and ties back into the themes of morality and heroism.

Although these three adaptations of Homer’s *Iliad* are not too different from one another at first glance, the distinctive style and diction of the individual translators had a large impact on the message discerned from the text because of the shift in tone or the imagery it evoked. The small changes in each version of the passage contribute to the level of understanding of Zeus’s dilemma. With deep analysis of the stronger imagery and meticulous wording, full comprehension of the text can be achieved.

Works Cited

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