
THEATERREZENSION

Poetry in Performance *Almeida Greeks The Odyssey by Homer**

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The growing scholarly interest in performance studies within Classics has done much to re-emphasise the fact that many ancient masterpieces were originally created for appreciation not by lone individual readers but by spectators at a performance. Homeric epic is among the *loci classici* for such performative considerations. Performed by travelling poets for at least two hundred years before it was written down, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* continued to be recited well into the Hellenistic and imperial eras, with a vibrant tradition of public rhapsodic competitions and *homēristai* shows attested as late as the second century AD.

The Almeida's live reading of the *Odyssey* sought to recapture some of this original recitative power. The event marked the final instalment of the "Almeida Greeks" festival, which between May and November last year staged productions of the *Oresteia*, the *Bacchae* and *Medea*, and hosted a series of accompanying talks and discussions – such as 'From Dionysus to Dawkins', and 'Oedipus Explored' featuring Classics-Professor Edith Hall and Psychoanalyst Dr. David Bell. In August the series moved from the tragic stage to the epic word: Homer's *Iliad* was read in full, in translation, by more than sixty artists before an audience at the British Museum, and was watched by more than fifty thousand people as it was live-streamed online.

On Thursday 12th November, it was the *Odyssey's* turn. From 9am to 9pm (or "Eos: Dusk til Dawn" as the programme described it) an army of famous actors and artists including Simon Russell Beale, Miranda Richardson and Sir Ian McKellen read Homer's sequel in Robert Fagles' translation, more than 12,000 lines of verse, live-streamed from unusual and iconic locations across London. Such 'long haul' readings are experiencing something of a renaissance in popular culture. Discussing the inspiration behind these events, the Almeida's artistic director Rupert Goold pointed to durational works by performance artist Marina Abramovic (such as her *512 Hours* at the Serpentine Gallery in 2014), and Dermot O'Leary's 24-hour dance for Comic Relief. Last autumn the National Theatre of Wales staged a full version of Christopher Logue's poem *War Music*, which audiences could watch either over four separate evenings or in an eight-hour run-through.

* 12th November 2015, Almeida Theatre, UK. 4th International Festival of Greek Drama

Recently Melville's *Moby-Dick* has been read, complete, in Liverpool and London. And last month, to mark the poignant, posthumous publication of Seamus Heaney's translation of *Aeneid* VI, poets such as Simon Armitage, Matthew Hollis, Tom Paulin and Jo Shapcott read extracts of the work at the British Library; and Sir Ian McKellen narrated the verses in full on Radio 4's Book of the Week.

Despite such precedents, however, when it comes to the production of ancient works for modern audiences, in general the rule still holds that the more 'dramatic', the better. Theatrical productions of Greek tragedy reach for increasingly elaborate modern re-settings: Aeschylus' *Persians* at the National Theatre in 2010 took place in a village built for military exercises in the Cold War, and the Almeida's own version of Aeschylus' trilogy was replete with visual and verbal modern references; to *House of Cards*, *Macbeth*, the conflict in the Middle East, and at one point even Gilbert and Sullivan. Cinematic adaptations seem to work on the premise that the more blood, guts, gore and glitter one can throw at an ancient work, the more entertaining it will become. The recently-commissioned BBC series based on Homer's *Iliad*, and costing c. £2 million per episode, launched with the aim of "rivalling *Game of Thrones*" in size, scale, and special effects.

So the Almeida's Homer readings were, compared to the festival's more 'conventional' tragic productions, something of a risk. Would people come? Would they – could they – remain engaged? The huge success of the *Iliad* recital has proven that this model could work. But the innovations behind the *Odyssey* reading brought fresh hazards and complications. Rather than being delivered *in situ* (on the 'stage' of the British Museum), this performance embarked upon its own mini-*Odyssey* around the city of London. Professor Simon Goldhill began the marathon, walking into the Almeida theatre reading the opening lines of the proem in Greek. Mid-way through book two, the show was on the move: Kate Fleetwood donned a high-visibility jacket and declaimed her passage whilst walking through the streets of Islington. When Telemachus set off in a chariot from Pylos to Sparta, Bertie Carvel hopped into a black cab and headed into the city. For Odysseus' stormy sea adventures, the performers and live audience were carried in a boat along the Thames. Juliet Stevenson read the cyclops episode from – where else? – a capsule in the London Eye. We then returned, like Odysseus, to our 'home' in Islington, with the Ithaca books beginning in the Town Hall and concluding in a 'secret location' – the old concrete shell of the Islington sorting office, now a building site, derelict and atmospheric, as the suitors were slain and the king returned to his throne.

The steps in this geographical tango were only announced on the day. Audiences could either move with the 'cast' through London, try to meet them at certain locations, or follow them online, via the video link and twitter feed or at the 'watching hub' in the theatre foyer. As an ensemble production, the sheer number of readers and places involved meant that opportunity for run-throughs and practices was limited: this was a show that would only come together in the moment of its performance.



Figure 1

This ambitious model, of ‘wandering poets’ declaiming on the move, both gave rise to the greatest successes of the day, and caused its most significant problems. On the positive side, the use of multiple locations was as clever as it was bold. After all, whilst the main action of the *Iliad* is concentrated on the plains of Troy, the *Odyssey* is self-consciously multifarious in its use of space. The dizzying movement between land and sea, palace and Pylos, earthy farmers’ huts and ethereal enchanted islands is central to the magic of the poem. Injecting a sense of this movement into an otherwise static recital, and encouraging the audience to make connections between the external locations and the internal settings of the poem (the ‘Eye’ and the cyclops; Islington and Ithaca; the Thames boat and Odysseus’ raft) was an ingenious move. Who says that you have to re-create the Cold War or reference *House of Cards* to achieve an inventive ‘adaptation’? For this *Odyssey*, London was turned into the stage, and the mapping of the text onto the city, in those moments, enriched our appreciation of both.

In the same spirit, the technique carried over from the *Iliad* recital of dividing up the text into a host of different readers (fifty-eight in total) produced great energy and impact. The overall effect of multiple performers taking over from one another in turn cannily evoked (whether consciously or not) the ancient rhapsodic technique of ‘capping’, whereby competing rhapsodes ‘answered’ one another as they performed their sections of verse. In London as in antiquity, Homeric performance was a culminating, kaleidoscopic experience. This plethora of readers also produced a variety of ‘responses’. All performance is, of course, an act of interpretation, and each artist’s delivery of his or her passage revealed their personal take on the text; idiosyncratic and impressionistic – even instinctive, due to the very short rehearsal times involved. It was fascinating to see how such distinguished performers responded to the nuances of the poem.

One of the highlights for me was Sir Ian McKellen’s gentle waking of Odysseus from



Figure 2

his slumbers on the shore of Ithaca, which captured so beautifully the confusion, wonder, panic and warmth in the hero's gradual realisation that he is home. Scott Handy, who took over from Sir Ian, was equally engaging as he moved us into a more light-hearted, comic mode. Reading the exchange between Odysseus-the-beggar and Eumaeus (*Odyssey* 14) his 'rustic' rendering of the swineherd's lines – in the sing-song accent of a country-farmer – riffed pleasingly on the tone of Fagles' translation ("what's got into yer head, that crazy plan to mingle w'the mob of suitors?"). After the shift from Town Hall to building site, Andrew Scott made the audience laugh and shudder as the action careered towards the slaughter of the suitors; whilst Lia Williams, channelling the menacing threats of Pallas Athene, narrated the closing battle with a quiet intensity that thrilled us into rapt silence.



Figure 3

That said, the day was not without its frustrations. The multiple locations, whilst creating a major part of the event's allure, also made it disjointed and difficult for an

audience literally and virtually to follow. For the would-be live listeners in London, the last minute announcement of the programme and subsequent timing delays made it hard to know where the performance was at any given time. Far from the romantic image of a mass audience on the move, traversing London with the performing poet, the reality was a much less convivial process of queues and confusion; waiting outside the Town Hall in the cold, hoping that the ship would sail in soon. The online streaming was presumably intended to circumvent this problem. Unfortunately, this suffered from frequent technical glitches. The sections read on the double decker bus were almost incomprehensible to those watching online, cutting out every few minutes, and Lia Williams' powerful delivery of the final verses was nearly lost to the audience in the foyer due to a prolonged stint of buffering. These slip ups, negotiated in good grace by the production team, had a certain charm and humour. As one audience member commented afterwards, there was a sense in which such moments of confusion "humanised" the production, and contributed to the spontaneous, unpredictable energy of the day. I could not help but feel however that part of the thrill of such marathon readings is the opportunity for the audience to 'be there' for the duration; to listen – either in person or online – continuously and intensely, as the hours melt away and captivated attention veers towards borderline discomfort and back again. The frequent changes of location, and the inevitable technological hiccups that accompany filming 'on the move', cut this experience up into chunks; and the breaks and jolts punctured just some of the magic that would have come with hearing the *continuous* epic song.

In the same way, the multiplicity of readers, whilst providing a stimulating range of responses, also produced a disparity in listening experience; particularly since some readings simply worked better than others. Jessica Brown Findlay's recital showed her nerves; and consequently some of the emotional subtleties of her passage, which included the touching and telling moment of Eumaeus laying down a cloak for the beggar, fell flat. Jeremy Irvine veered too far the other way, over-acting where the text called for restraint. As he narrated the suitors' response to Telemachus' return, his distortion of the cautious speech of the 'good suitor' Amphinomus into a boisterous battle cry meant that the sensitivities of this intriguing character were not quite communicated to the audience.

Despite such minor shortcomings, there is no doubt that this will be remembered as a unique and exhilarating performance experience. Rupert Goold and his team deserve plaudits for the scale and ambition of their vision, a spoken rhapsody which succeeded above all in reminding us how powerful recitative readings can be. Stripped of all trappings of theatricalisation, Homer's *Odyssey* came to life in London, and was made relevant to a new audience in all of its long, formulaic splendour. Amidst the modern landscape of London and the technological pizzazz of live-streaming, the event therefore did have something essentially ancient at its core. It offered a taste of what it would have been like to hear epic poetry narrated aloud, by travelling poets and competitive bards, in

a diverse performance experience sometimes preened, sometimes clumsy, which left an audience with the sounds of the song ringing in their ears, and its words dancing before their eyes.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR Emma Greensmith is in the second year of her Ph.D. at the University of Cambridge, where she is working as part of the AHRC Collaborative Research Project *Greek Epic of the Roman Empire: A Cultural History*. She is writing her thesis on the reception of Homer in Imperial Greek Epic, focusing on the *Posthomerica* of Quintus Smyrnaeus (an Iliadic *sequel* from the 3rd century AD). She is particularly interested in the poetics of impersonation, the construction of epic authorial identity, and the cultural politics of imitation.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: Stanley Tucci in front of the London Eye, © Manuel Harlan.

Figure 2: Ian McKellen reading from in the town hall's council chamber, © Manuel Harlan.

Figure 3: Ian McKellen, © Manuel Harlan.