

# Emily Wilson's Translations of The Iliad and The Odyssey, and Walter J. Ong's Thought

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Article abstract

In the first part of my article, I highlight the work of the American Jesuit Renaissance specialist and cultural historian and pioneering media ecology theorist Walter J. Ong (1912-2003; Ph.D. in English, Harvard University, 1955) of Saint Louis University. In the second part, I discuss the classicist Emily Wilson's translations of The Odyssey (2018) and The Iliad (2023).

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Emily Wilson's Translations of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, and Walter J. Ong's Thought

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**Abstract:** In the first part of my article, I highlight the work of the American Jesuit Renaissance specialist and cultural historian and pioneering media ecology theorist Walter J. Ong (1912-2003; Ph.D. in English, Harvard University, 1955) of Saint Louis University. In the second part, I discuss the classicist Emily Wilson's translations of *The Odyssey* (2018) and *The Iliad* (2023).

The years of my undergraduate studies (1962-1966) at Jesuit institutions of higher education included the years in which the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) in the Roman Catholic Church took place in Rome. Vatican II introduced the use of the vernacular languages in the celebration of the Mass worldwide – and brought an end to the custom of abstaining from eating meat on Fridays. On a more technical level, Vatican II downgraded a wee bit the most-favored status of the philosophy and theology of St. Thomas Aquinas (1225?-1274) in the worldwide church in the twentieth century up to that time – including in the undergraduate curriculum at the Jesuit institutions of higher education that I attend from the fall semester of 1962 through the end of the spring semester of 1966. The philosophy and theology of St. Thomas Aquinas had enjoyed their most-favored status in the twentieth century up to then because of Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879).

Between the fall semester of 1962 and the end of the spring semester of 1964, I attended Rockhurst College (now Rockhurst University) in Kansas City, Missouri. I had grown up in Kansas City, Kansas, my mother's hometown. In the fall semester of 1964, I transferred as a junior planning to major in English to Saint Louis University, the Jesuit university in the City of St. Louis, Missouri. (I minored in philosophy.) Consequently, I was told to see the head of the Department of English, the American Jesuit priest Father Maurice B. McNamee, S.J. (1909-2007), for academic advising. Father McNamee advised me to take Father Walter J. Ong's course Practical Criticism: Poetry. Over the years, I took five courses from Father Ong (1912-2003).

Over the years, I also took one course from Father McNamee. In any event, many years later, I read McNamee's concise book *Honor and the Epic Hero: A Study of the Shifting Concept of Magnanimity in Philosophy and Epic Poetry* (1960).

In his characteristically concise way, McNamee (pp. 170 and 178n.14) discusses the spirituality of St. Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556), the founder of the Jesuit order (known formally as the Society of Jesus) and the author of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola, and of *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, and of thousands of letters giving spiritual advice. To this day, I admire the concision of McNamee's compendious 1960 survey book *Honor and the Epic Hero*.

Unfortunately, the American Jesuit theologian Barton T. Geger in his new 2024 critical edition of *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* is not familiar with McNamee's 1960 book. However, in the "Index of Topics" in Geger's 2024 critical edition (pp. 577-621), we find the following entries that are related to themes McNamee discusses in his 1960 book: Ambition/ambitioning (p. 578), Honor(s) divine and worldly (p. 597), and Magnanimity (p. 602).

For a study related to McNamee's 1960 study, see Robert Faulkner's 2008 book *The Case for Greatness: Honorable Ambition and Its Critics*. Unfortunately, Faulkner is not familiar with McNamee's 1960 book.

Recently I thought about McNamee's 1960 book when I read about the British-American classicist Emily Wilson's 2023 translation of the Homeric epic *The Iliad* – one of the epic poems discussed by McNamee at length (for specific pages references, see the entries on Achilles and on *The Iliad* in the "Index" [p. 183 and 187, respectively]).

In 2018, Emily Wilson (born in 1971; Ph.D. in classical studies, Yale University, 2001) of the University of Pennsylvania published her translation of *The Odyssey* – another epic poem discussed by McNamee at length (for specific pages references, see the entries on Odysseus and on *Odyssey* in the "Index" [p. 188]). Emily Wilson

was the first woman to translate *The Odyssey* into English. Consequently, her translation was widely publicized at the time. See, for example, Wyatt Mason's lengthy article "The First Woman to Translate *The Odyssey* into English: The classicist Emily Wilson has given Homer's epic a radically contemporary voice" (dated November 2, 2017) in *The New York Times Magazine*:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/02/magazine/the-first-woman-to-translate-the-odyssey-into-english.html?hpw&rref=magazine&action=click&pgtype...>

In Mason's article, he reports on his conversation with Emily Wilson in her office at the University of Pennsylvania. Among other things, they discuss her rendering of the Greek word *polytropos* to characterize Odysseus – in the invocation of the Muses at the opening of *The Odyssey*. Wilson says, "'The prefix *poly* means 'many' or 'multiple.' *Tropos* means 'turn.''" She renders this Greek word as "complicated." Odysseus as the complicated man.

However, toward the end of Mason's article, she says, "'If I was really going to be radical, I would've said *polytropos* means 'straying' and *andros* – 'man' the poem's first word – means 'husband,' and I could've said, 'Tell me about a straying husband.' And that's a viable translation.

Now, Ong somewhere notes that Odysseus is a trickster figure. Trickster figures are common in folklore. Now, Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette discuss trickster figures in their 1990 book *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover: Rediscovering the Archetypes of the Mature Masculine*, they discuss the four archetypes of the mature masculine that they name in the main title of their book. However, for each of the four archetypes of the mature masculine, they also discuss two immature forms (see pp. 16-17 for a schematic illustration of the four mature forms and the eight immature forms). For the Magician archetype of the mature masculine, the two immature forms are The Know-It-All Trickster form and The Dummy (see p. 17). In their schema, Odysseus represents The Know-It-All immature form of the Magician archetype of the mature masculine.

Now, the classicist Gregory Hays of the University of Virginia also mentions the untranslatable Greek word *polytropos* and Emily Wilson's rendering of it in his review of her 2018 translation of *The Odyssey* titled "A Version of Homer That Dares to Match Him Line for Line" (dated December 5, 2017) in *The New York Times*:  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/05/books/review/odyssey-homer-emily-wilson-translation.html?ribbon-ad-idx=5&rref=books&module=Ribbon&versio...>

A version of his review of her translation of *The Odyssey* was also published in *The New York Times Book Review* as "A complicated Man" (dated December 10, 2017, p. BR24).

However, Emily Wilson is not the first woman to translate *The Iliad* into English, and her 2023 translation has not been as widely publicized as her 2018 translation of *The Odyssey* was. Even so, I would call your attention to Judith Thurman's wide-ranging interview with Emily Wilson titled "Mother Tongue: Emily Wilson makes Homer modern" (dated September 11, 2023) in *The New Yorker*:

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/09/18/emily-wilson-profile>

In it, among other things, Emily Wilson says, "'Any woman who has lived with male rage at close range has a better chance of understanding the vulnerability that fuels it than your average bro. She learns firsthand how the ways in which men are damaged determine their need to wreak damage on others.'

"This insight, [says Thurman,] and the lucidity Wilson brings to it, may be the greatest revelation of her *Iliad*. The poem's machismo has often bored or estranged me, and, in more grandiloquent translations, its heroes' mindless bloodlust obscured the pathos of boys and men who are shamed literally to death by weaknesses that they've been bred to suppress. Her plainsong conveys the tragedy of their bravado, and, listening to her voice, I felt it for the first time."

Judith Thurman's reflection here calls to mind the bravado of former President Donald Trump. For an insightful profile of Trump, see the American psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Justin A. Frank's book *Trump on the Couch: Inside the Mind of the President* (2018). For critique of Emily Wilson's 2023 translation of *The Iliad*, see Graeme Wood's article "What Emily Wilson's *Iliad* Misses: Her new translation is inviting to modern readers, but it doesn't capture the barbaric world of the original" (dated October 2, 2023) in *The Atlantic*:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/11/emily->

Even though Woods discusses other translations of *The Iliad*, he does not credit any translation with “captur[ing] the barbaric world of the original” – which seems to imply that we should read the original Greek to understand the barbaric world represented in *The Iliad*.

In any event, Emily Wilson is widely enough known and distinguished enough for *Wikipedia* to have an entry about her:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emily\\_Wilson\\_\(classicist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emily_Wilson_(classicist))

Now, in Ong’s course Practical Criticism: Poetry, he assigned us certain chapters to read in his wide-ranging 1962 book *The Barbarian Within: And Other Fugitive Essays and Studies* (Macmillan). He put the book on reserve in the library so that we could check it out and read the assigned selections. But I bought the book at the campus bookstore – and proceeded to read not only the assigned selections but other selections as well.

Incidentally, Ong’s 1962 title essay “The Barbarian Within: Outsiders Inside Society Today” (pp. 260-285) is reprinted in *An Ong Reader: Challenges for Further Inquiry*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (2002, pp. 277-300).

In Ong’s 1962 title essay, he says, “The original barbarian was the man who could not speak Greek. *Barbaros* is seemingly an echoic word, imitating the supposed sound of strange tongues – the Latin *balbutiare*, to stammer, appears to have similar roots” (Ong, 1962, p. 265).

In Emily Wilson’s “Introduction” to her 2018 translation of *The Odyssey* (pp. 1-79), she also makes the point that to the Greeks, barbarians were non-Greek speakers – people of other civilizations (p. 17).

Now, I first heard of Albert B. Lord’s 1960 book *The Singer of Tales* and Eric A. Havelock’s 1963 book *Preface to Plato* from Ong. I bought those two books at the campus bookstore, but I do not remember exactly when I first read them. Each of them advances the work of Milman Parry (1902-1935).

Ong’s concise reviews of those two books are reprinted in *An Ong Reader: Challenges for Further Inquiry*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (2002, pp. 301-306 and 309-312, respectively).

Ong never tired of referring to Lord’s 1960 book and Havelock’s 1963 book. See the “Index” in Ong’s 1977 350-page collection *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (pp. 343-352) for specific pages references to Lord (p. 347) and Havelock (p. 346) – and for specific page references to Homer (p. 346), *The Iliad* (p. 346), and *The Odyssey* (p. 348).

Ong also discusses the work of Milman Parry in his 1982 book *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (pp. 6, 11, 18-28, 58-59, and 65; for specific page references to Homer, see the “Index” [p. 198]).

In Emily Wilson’s “Introduction” in her 2018 translation of *The Odyssey* (pp. 1-79), she discusses the work of Milman Parry and Albert Lord (see esp. pp. 9-10).

Drawing on the work of Milman Parry, Richmond Lattimore (1906-1984) attempted to the best of his ability to capture the formulaic expressions of the Greek in his English translations of *The Iliad* (1951) and *The Odyssey* (1967).

In any event, the classicist Eric A. Havelock is also the author of the 1978 book *The Greek Concept of Justice: From Its Shadow in Homer to Its Substance in Plato* and of the 1982 collection *The Literate Revolution in Greece and Its Cultural Consequences*.

Now, I was so impressed by Ong as a teacher that I also bought his massively researched 1958 book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Reason to the Art of Reason* at the campus bookstore – and I read it one summer, even though at this remove in time I do remember exactly which summer. Peter Ramus (1515-1572) was the prolific French Renaissance logician and educational reformer and Protestant martyr who was the subject of Ong’s doctoral dissertation in English at Harvard University.

In my *OEN* article “Walter J. Ong’s Philosophical Thought” (dated September 20, 2020), I have discussed Ong’s philosophical thought in his massively researched 1958 book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue*: [https://www.opednews.com/articles/Walter-J-Ong-s-Philosophi-by-Thomas-Farrell-Communication\\_Communications\\_Communications\\_Consciousness-200920-664.html](https://www.opednews.com/articles/Walter-J-Ong-s-Philosophi-by-Thomas-Farrell-Communication_Communications_Communications_Consciousness-200920-664.html)

In any event, I was taking a graduate course from Ong in the fall semester of 1967 when his book *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* was published. It is the expanded version of Ong’s 1964 Terry Lectures at Yale University.

Now, in the summer of 1971, with Father Ong's permission, I unofficially audited his interdisciplinary graduate course on Polemic in Literary and Academic Tradition: An Historical Survey. In that course, Ong worked up the material that he later presented in his 1979 Messenger Lectures at Cornell University – the published version of which is his 1981 book *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality [Gender], and Consciousness*.

Because Ong himself in the title of his interdisciplinary graduate course refers to Polemic in Literary and Academic Tradition, I should point out here that Ong discusses polemic extensively in his 1967 seminal book *The Presence of the Word* (for specific page references, see the entry on Polemic in the "Index" [p. 354]; for specific page references to Homer, see the "Index" [p. 350]).

In any event, I mentioned above the article that Judith Thurman published in *The New Yorker* (dated September 11, 2023) about her conversations with Emily Wilson. In it, Thurman quotes what she refers to as Wilson's insight: "'Any woman who has lived with male rage at close range has a better chance of understanding the vulnerability that fuels it than your average bro. She learns firsthand how the ways in which men are damaged determine their need to wreak damage on others.'"

Tragically, what Wilson here refers to as male rage is related to the spirit of what Ong refers to in his 1981 book as male agonism (i.e., male contesting behavior). Of course, the spirit of male agonism is not always darkened by male rage.

I also mentioned above Maurice B. McNamee's 1960 book *Honor and the Epic Hero*. In it, he discusses the structure of the pivotal meditation on the Two Standards in St. Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* (standardized paragraph number 136-147). The two standards are Christ and Satan. By meditating on the standard of Satan, the Christian meditator presumably tries to understand how he or she may be damaged – so as to presumably learn how to avoid what Wilson refers to as the "need to wreak damage on others" through rage. Please don't misunderstand me here. I am not implying that this meditation of the Two Standards always and everywhere works for all Christian meditators who make it, so as to enable them to overcome whatever impulses they may have "to wreak damage on others" through rage. I am merely claiming that the meditation of the Two Standards is structured to encourage the Christian meditators to become more reflective about themselves. In any event, the meditation on the Two Standards is structured in a way that encourages what Ong in his 1981 book refers to as the spirit of agonism (contesting) in one's own psyche.

In addition, I mentioned above Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette's 1990 book *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover: Rediscovering the Archetypes of Masculine Maturity*. In it, they posit that each of the four healthy forms of that archetypes of masculine maturity named in the main title of their book is also accompanied by two "shadow" forms. In my estimate, the meditation on the Two Standards in St. Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* (standardized paragraph numbers 136-147) is designed to help Jesuits and other male Christian meditators learn how to access the optimal form of the masculine Warrior archetype in the male psyche. (Christ represents the optimal form of the King archetype. In Catholicism, Christ is referred to as Christ the King.)

Now, we may wonder about Ong's own spirit of agonism (contesting). One expression of it occurs in a 1971 published interview with Ong that is reprinted in *An Ong Reader: Challenges for Further Inquiry*, edited by Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (2002, pp. 79-109). In it, Ong says, "I hit Saint Louis University when St. Louis Thomism rose to its first crest, quite vigorously historical and structurally sensitive in the hands of the good teachers. What I learned studying philosophy at Saint Louis University [1938-1941] made my work on Ramism possible and has given me a permanent edge over many colleagues around the world. The advantage of the kind of philosophical training we [Jesuit seminarians] were given was that if you got it, if you studied it, you knew the central intellectual tradition of all Western culture.

"But you didn't really know that was what it was unless you knew a lot of things outside of philosophy too. So you had something that was a wonderful tremendous asset, provided you could open it up. That's just what many people then failed to do. Others succeeded. Today philosophy is beautifully open here [at Saint Louis University], and I think strong at the same time" (p. 98).

In a somewhat lengthy review also reprinted in *An Ong Reader* (pp. 69-77), Ong also discusses St. Louis Thomism (p. 75).

As part of Ong's lengthy Jesuit formation, he studied both Thomistic philosophy and Thomistic theology. However, he did not identify himself publicly as a Thomist. Rather, he characterized his own thought as phenomenological and personalist in cast. In the subtitle of my introductory-level survey of Ong's life and eleven of his books and selected articles in the book *Walter Ong's Contributions to Cultural Studies: The Phenomenology of the Word and I-Thou Communication* (2000), I have honored both the phenomenological and the personalist cast of Ong's thought. My book was awarded the Marshall McLuhan Prize for Outstanding Book in the Field of Media Ecology, conferred by the Media Ecology Association in June 2001.

Now, a further word is in order here about what Wilson says about how rage in the male psyche – and in the female psyche as well, I would say -- can engender damaging behavior in the person who becomes enraged. In my estimate, such rage is engendered in the damaged human psyche by what John Bradshaw refers to as shame in his pioneering book *Healing the Shame That Binds You* (expanded and updated 2nd edition, 2005; orig. ed., 1987).

Now, also in Emily Wilson's "Introduction" to her 2018 translation of *The Odyssey*, she has a perceptive discussion of one episode in *The Odyssey* that is related to McNamee's theme of *Honor and the Epic Hero*. She says, "After this climactic moment, the ship – the last left from Odysseus' fleet – sails directly on to Thrinacia, the island of the Sun God (Helius), and is becalmed there. Supplies dwindle and the men grow hungry. While Odysseus is absent, taking a nap in a cave, the men kill and eat the Cattle of the Sun, although they know it is forbidden. This monstrous choice is made for understandable reasons: the men are hungry and desperate, and they choose to risk the anger of the gods rather than endure the pain and slow humiliation of death by starvation" (p. 27). She then quotes Eurylochus' speech to the men, urging them not to worry about the Sun god's response. Then she says, "The language is inspiring, as if from a rousing battle speech. We may well wonder what exactly is wrong with Eurylochus' suggestion. The episode hints at an important idea in the poem: that the willingness to die for honor, which is value so highly on the battlefield, is not always useful in these strange new worlds. The poem shows us the rewards that come to the 'much-enduring' or 'long-suffering' protagonist through his willingness to wait for the right moment to act, without ever giving up the goal. Moreover, the determination of this crew member to eat even forbidden foods, and to drink even 'the sea,' represents a kind of self-assertion that is out of keeping with his place both in society and in the narrative. He is usurping the leadership role of Odysseus.

"This act of forbidden consumption is a terrible mistake, which condemns the men to death and deprives them of their chance of getting home. Helius, the Sun God, responds to the eating of his cattle as if the men had taken a bite out of the god himself, and Zeus backs him up by drowning them all. Eating is important in *The Odyssey*, and eating the wrong things in the wrong way results in violence or death" (pp. 27-28).

Now, in Emily Wilson's "Translator's Note" in her 2023 translation of *The Iliad* (pp. lxi-lxxv), she says, "I first began reading Homer in high school, early in my study of ancient Greek. I liked *The Odyssey*, but I loved *The Iliad* with a passionate devotion. I have now lived with this poem for some thirty-five years – rereading it, teaching it in the original and in various translations, and, now, rendering it into English. For the past six years, I have worked intensively on this translation. But even now, when I turn back to lines I have read hundreds of times already, I find that the raw power of the Greek still startles me, like Athena suddenly tugging Achilles by the hair to stop him in his tracks. Often, I am unable to read without goose bumps, tears, or both.

"Human mortality is at the center of it all. I know of no other narrative that evokes with such unflinching truthfulness the vulnerability of the human body. Yet *The Iliad* also makes the whole world feel gloriously alive. . . . We hear many voices: almost half the poem consists of direct speech, and richly varied personalities are audible in the distinct ways each character talks" (p. lxi).

Subsequently, she says, "There is nothing like *The Iliad*. No translator, including me, can fully replicate all the poetic, dramatic, and emotional effects of the Greek. . . . I began with sound. . . . Non-metrical renditions of Homer do not provide the auditory experience of immersion in a long narrative poem, where the immutable pattern of sound is omnipresent as the waves beating against the shore. I wanted to honor the poem's oral heritage with a regular and audible rhythm, and with language that would, like the original, invite reading out loud, and come to life in the mouth" (p. lxii).

For a study of the historical development of silent reading, see Paul Saenger's 1997 book *Space Between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading*.



Now, in Emily Wilson's "Introduction" in her 2023 translation of *The Iliad* (pp. xi-lix), she discusses the epic's hero Achilles and honor (extensively (pp. xxvii, and xxix-xxxiv). In the subsection titled "Conflict and the Norms of War" in her "Introduction" (pp. xxvi-xxix), Emily Wilson says, "The work of war entails a constant struggle to gain glory or a win (*kudos*) and an opportunity to boast (*euchos*), which must be achieved by outdoing fellow warriors on the battlefield, gaining both glory and the material wealth that comes from slaughtering, stripping, and humiliating the enemy. The more people you kill, the greater the triumph. An individual fighter gains an *aristeia* ('bestness' – a period of extraordinary military success) when he robs numerous opponents of their lives, their weapons, and their honor, and thus shows himself the 'best' among his peers. Warriors compete against not only their enemies but also, simultaneously, their own comrades, who are their rivals for the title of 'best' (*aristos*).

Subsequently, she says, "The warrior's glory (*kleos*) is created by his community. People honor and praise the most successful fighters as if they were gods, and their names are remembered and handed down in songs such as *The Iliad* itself. The yearning for greater and greater honor drives the hero to ever-greater demonstrations of his own superiority. And yet the values and practices of the community also provide checks of the warrior's yearning for success at any cost" (pp. xxvii-xxviii). Subsequently, she says, "*The Iliad* shows what happens when all these social norms are violated, and fighters push for victory at any cost" (p. xxviii).

In the subsection titled "The Code of Honor" in her "Introduction" (pp. xxix-xxxiv), Emily Wilson says, "Elite fighters always have 'excellence' (*arete*), because of their skill in fighting and their noble birth. But they also aspire to the highest possible social status – a position that always depends on the opinions and actions of others. Honor is often acquired through material possessions – and these things can be lost or taken away. A 'trophy' or 'prize of honor' (*geras*) is a piece of important property, awarded to the most successful or honorable warriors once a battle is won. These trophies include the most highly valued women enslaved after the sack of a city or settlement. . . . Briseis, awarded first to Achilles and then seized by Agamemnon, is such a trophy" (p. xxx).

"Status is also built out of language (*kleos*, a noun cognate with the verb *kluo*, 'to hear': fame or glory is the result of tales told and heard). Warriors are inspired to fight by the promise of praise and memory in stories like the poem itself" (p. xxx). As you can see, Emily Wilson has much of value to teach us in her 2023 translation of *The Iliad*.

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