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Poetic License: Political Education in Hobbes's Translation of Homer's *Iliad*

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Abstract: Although it is largely overlooked, Thomas Hobbes spent the final years of his life translating Homer's epic poetry. Despite an overwhelmingly popular extant English edition of the *Iliad* by George Chapman, Hobbes chose to proffer his own account, often taking great liberties with the source material. Juxtaposed against Chapman's translation, we see that Hobbes implicitly critiques the political philosophy it commends—a philosophy which disrespects kingly power, misunderstands sovereign authority, and abdicates human virtue. Hobbes sees these elements as corrupting the poetic imagination of England, precipitating much of the unrest we see in the seventeenth century. In correcting and reframing these tales for a new world, Hobbes provides a moral scaffolding for his political philosophy through one of the most widely read classical texts of his time.

Introduction

Thomas Hobbes, best known for his philosophic treatises, also spent much of his life reflecting on the works of the ancients. His career is bookended by attempts to translate seminal Greek texts into the common tongue.[1] However, these translations—particularly those of Homer—are often overlooked, perhaps because Hobbes himself appears to dismiss them as superficial amusement.[2] Despite the fact that he spends his final years compiling these works (translating the *Odyssey* in 1673 and the *Iliad* in 1676), in his *Essay concerning the Virtues of an Heroic Poem*, Hobbes writes: "But howsoever I defend Homer, I aim not thereby at any reflection upon the following Translation. Why then did I write it? Because I had nothing else to do. Why

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[1]Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War* in 1629 and Homer's *Iliad* in 1676.
[2]Alicia Steinmetz, "Hobbes and the Politics of Translation," *Political Theory* 49, no. 1 (2021): 84.

publish it? Because I thought it might take off my Adversaries from shewing their folly upon my more serious Writings, and set them upon my Verses to shew their wisdom."[3] We might compare this demurring to the more bombastic self-promotion that litters *Leviathan* ("it may be profitably printed, and more profitably taught in the Universities")[4] and pass over Hobbes's flirtation with epic poetry.

Of course, the Malmesbury philosopher is known for his sarcasm. Closer inspection will find that his translations of Homer reflect pointed departures from the source material, a point forcefully made by A. P. Martinich.[5] While the major beats of the epics remain intact, Hobbes exercises significant poetic license that stretches the limits of faithful translation, liberally interpreting words and phrases, and omitting key passages that might reframe the nature and motivation of characters and action. Eric Nelson suggests that such reassessments of a source text under the guise of translation is not unprecedented in Hobbes, seen especially in his Latin edition of *Leviathan*.[6] Only a careful reader would notice the discrepancies, which may be precisely Hobbes's point. Of the handful of scholarly voices who have taken these works seriously, the consensus is summarized by Nelson that "Hobbes's *Iliads and Odysses of Homer* are a continuation of *Leviathan* by other means."[7]

While the moral conclusions drawn from the amended tales reinforce the political doctrines found in his philosophic treatises, this claim does not go far enough to highlight why Hobbes would choose to engage in this particular enterprise, as opposed to any other that might similarly reiterate his conclusions. When developing his philosophy of social contract, Hobbes was

[3]Thomas Hobbes, "To the Reader: Concerning the Vertues of an Heroique Poem," in *Translations of Homer*, vol. 1, *The Iliad*, ed. Eric Nelson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), xcix. While Hobbes's claims are often ironic, his contemporaries would frequently adopt the disposition he expresses above. "The best that his critics would say about his interest in Homer is that it kept him out of mischief." Samuel L. Mintz, *The Hunting of Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 19.

[4]Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1994), 496. See also Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 31.41: "I recover some hope that, one time or another, this writing of mine may fall into the hands of a sovereign who will consider it himself (for it is short, and I think clear) … and by the exercise of entire sovereignty in protecting the public teaching of it, convert this truth of speculation into the utility of practice."

[5]A. P. Martinich, "Hobbes's Translations of Homer and Anticlericalism," *The Seventeenth Century* 16, no.1 (2001): 147–57.

[6]Eric Nelson, "Translation as Correction," in *Why Concepts Matter: Translating Social and Political Thought*, ed. Martin J. Burke and Melvin Richter (Leiden: Brill, 2012). See also Steinmetz, "Hobbes and the Politics of Translation."

[7]Eric Nelson, general introduction to *Translations of Homer*, in *Iliad*, xxii. See also Andrea Catanzaro, *Politics through the "Iliad" and the "Odyssey": Hobbes Writes Homer* (New York: Routledge, 2019); Conal Condren, "The Philosopher Hobbes as the Poet Homer," *Renaissance Studies* 28, no. 1 (February 2014): 71–89.

careful to stress the importance of ongoing assent via civil religion as a sort of "prelude to law"[8] to supplement the formal institutions of political life. The Homeric myths, and especially their translation into the common language, were, as Anthony Welch has argued, central to the moral and political imagination of the age.[9] In correcting and reframing these tales for a new world, Hobbes provides a moral scaffolding for his political philosophy through one of the most widely read classical texts of his time. Further, as I show, his translations presume to remedy a pernicious disposition presented by the contemporary alternative. Such a project is not accidental but essential to Hobbes's broader enterprise of reshaping the political landscape of the modern world.

The foundation for this argument is Nelson's exhaustive scholarship.[10] He meticulously addresses the history of the translations' publication, contemporaneous reception, and major deviations from the Greek source material to highlight that they present an implicit philosophy consistent with Hobbes's broader oeuvre. Andrea Catanzaro has continued this thread.[11] Both draw their conclusions by comparing Hobbes to the original Greek, calling attention to major discrepancies between the source text and Hobbes's reinterpretation. Other studies assess these works with regard to their merit as translations in terms of their fidelity and readability.[12] Such scholarship has drawn attention to these overlooked works in Hobbes's oeuvre, but has thus far neglected to frame his translations specifically in the context of his poetic climate, such that we can understand the necessity of his response. I am less interested in Hobbes's disagreements with Homer than in his goals for effecting political change via public sentiment in his own time. I focus on the way that Homer was presented to seventeenth-century English readers and propose that we compare Hobbes's renderings to those translations

[8]Plato, *The "Laws" of Plato*, trans. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 722d.

[9]Anthony Welch, "Epic Romance, Royalist Retreat, and the English Civil War," *Modern Philology* 105, no. 3 (February 2008): 570–602.

[10]Eric Nelson, ed., *Translations of Homer*, vol. 1, *The Iliad*, and vol. 2, *The Odyssey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[11]Catanzaro, *Politics through the "Iliad" and the "Odyssey."*

[12]Jerry L. Ball, "The Despised Version: Hobbes's Translation of Homer," *Restoration: Studies in English Literary Culture, 1660–1700* 20, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 1–17; G. B. Riddenhough, "Thomas Hobbes' Translations of Homer," *Phoenix* 12, no. 2 (Summer 1958): 58–62; Jessica Wolfe, "Hobbes's Homer and the Idols of the Agora," in *Homer and the Question of Strife from Erasmus to Hobbes* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015); Conal Condren, "The Philosopher Hobbes as the Poet Homer," *Renaissance Studies* 28, no. 1 (February 2014): 71–89; Paul Davis, "Thomas Hobbes's Translations of Homer: Epic and Anticlericalism in Late Seventeenth-Century England," *The Seventeenth Century* 12, no. 2 (1997): 231–55; Martinich, "Hobbes's Translations of Homer and Anticlericalism."

readily available to his contemporaries. These translations help to form the poetic understanding of ordinary English citizens upon which rest the formal institutions of sovereign power.[13] As Nelson notes, there was no dearth of options for the English reader of Homer, with one translation published within ten years of Hobbes's own attempt.[14] Yet Hobbes clearly felt a lacuna in the available offerings, which he was suited to fill. If, as Quentin Skinner argues, "having initially abandoned rhetoric in favor of science, [Hobbes] eventually sought to found his civil science on combining them,"[15] the late-period translations of Homer should reveal his appreciation for poetic force, consistent with the philosophy of his later works.

I limit the scope of this project to Hobbes's translation of the *Iliad*, a work which is preeminently political in nature and whose cast of characters underscores the essential Hobbesian point I make here. I compare Hobbes's translation of the *Iliad* to the seminal 1598 translation by George Chapman, with which Hobbes seems to be most familiar.[16] According to H. C. Fay, "Chapman's position as the greatest translator of Homer lasted for a century" until he was usurped by Alexander Pope.[17] It was Chapman, remarks Nelson, "more than any other figure, who grafted onto Homer the political agenda which Hobbes took it upon himself to excise."[18] Chapman's dominance as the English translation of Hobbes's time makes him the obvious alternative to Hobbes's own project, and the particular lens that Chapman applies to Homer reinforces the urgency of Hobbes's emendation. To Hobbes, Chapman's sanguine attitude towards democratic forms blinds him to the perils of presenting such a potent tale in a mode that could undermine England's fragile political legitimacy.

I begin by outlining Hobbes's overarching critique of the classical tradition, calling attention to how he perceives the uncritical reception of Greek culture as a major risk to political legitimacy. This provides context for his more substantive deviations from Chapman's translation of the *Iliad*. To the extent that there is difference, I show that Chapman exacerbates many of the concerns that Hobbes raises: a disrespect for kingly power, a misunderstanding of the sovereign office, and an abdication of human virtue to fortune. The popularity of Chapman's presentation of Homer poses an existential threat to

[13]For a robust exploration of Hobbes's relationship to poetry throughout his works, see Timothy Raylor, "Hobbes on the Nature and Scope of Poetry," in *The Oxford Handbook of Hobbes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 603–23.

[14]Nelson, *Iliad*, xxvi.

[15]Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 12.

[16]Nelson, *Iliad*, xxvi.

[17]H. C. Fay, "George Chapman's Translation of Homer's 'Iliad,'" *Greece & Rome* 21, no. 63 (1952): 104. Chapman's translation was later immortalized in John Keats's sonnet, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer."

[18]Nelson, *Iliad*, xxx.

Hobbes's political project, which requires a particular moral disposition within which to germinate. No other scholar has so carefully considered Hobbes's translations in the context of his contemporaries, and my work highlights the distance between their implicit assessment of human nature and prescriptions for good government.

Hobbes's Critique of Antiquity

As is well known, Hobbes regards himself as a developer of new modes and orders, correcting the false, misleading, or imprecise teachings of the past with a knowledge grounded in science and experience. He attaches much of the blame for political unrest to an uncritical reliance on the authority of the ancients.[19] Refusing to adopt similar appeals in his own work, Hobbes writes:

> That I have neglected the ornament of quoting ancient poets, orators, and philosophers, contrary to the custom of late time, whether I have done well or ill in it, proceedeth from my judgment. … There is scarce any of those old writers, that contradicteth not sometimes both himself and others; which makes their testimonies insufficient. … Though I reverence those men of ancient time, that either have written truth perspicuously, or set us in a better way to find it out ourselves; yet to antiquity itself I think nothing due. For if we will reverence the age, the present is the oldest. … But if it be well considered, the praise of ancient authors, proceeds not from the reverence of the dead, but from the competition, and mutual envy of the living.[20]

Hobbes is less interested in faithful transmission of ancient wisdom than in using ancient forms to assuage modern ills. Antiquity ought not be valued without first proving its worth, and he will go on to highlight several destructive elements of ancient culture that have worked to corrupt the modern mind. Kody W. Cooper rightly notes that Hobbes's criticism of ancient philosophers is primarily directed to their "*followers* downstream, who merely repeat their doctrines without critically reflecting on the meaning of the words they are repeating."[21] Hobbes alleges that ancient authors unduly favor popular government and its corollary institutions, all the while

[19]Scholars often highlight the disjunct between Hobbes and his predecessors, with particular reference to his apparent antagonism toward ancient philosophy. See Devin Stauffer, *Hobbes's Kingdom of Light* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Alan Ryan, "Hobbes's Political Philosophy," in *Cambridge Companion to Hobbes*, 208–45; Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963); Robert P. Kraynak, "Hobbes on Barbarism and Civilization," *Journal of Politics* 45, no. 1 (February 1983): 86–109.

[20]Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 495.

[21]Kody W. Cooper, *Thomas Hobbes and the Natural Law* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018), 14, emphasis original.

undercutting narratives of human greatness and ultimately human agency. He worries that these ideas have taken hold of the contemporary imagination and have insinuated themselves into its core institutions.

The Nature of Sovereignty

Foremost of these persistent ostensible corruptions is a sympathy for democratic forms. Men's proclivity to favor truths that coincide with preference is exacerbated by that "lust of the mind" to pretend certainty where there is none.[22] Hobbes argues that we prefer settled answers to questions and those truths which most comport with our benefit to those which may unmoor our ways of life. This offers heavy weight in favor of received tradition, regardless of its merit. Those who lived under popular states "were taught (to keep them from desire of changing their government) that they were freemen, and all that lived under monarchy were slaves."[23] This prejudice was deeply embedded in the civil religion of ancient political communities:

> And therefore the first founders and legislators of the commonwealths among the Gentiles, whose ends were only to keep people in peace, have in all places taken care: first, to imprint in their minds a belief that those precepts which they gave concerning religion might not be thought to proceed from their own device, but from the dictates of some god … that their laws might the more easily be received. … Secondly, that they have had a care to make it believed that the same things were displeasing to the gods which were forbidden by the laws.[24]

While Hobbes may praise the political cunning of those who reinforce their power, we now find ourselves bound by their convenient fictions. Ancient "wisdom" teaches us to be discontent with established monarchical power and assures happiness in anarchy, veiled as popular modes.[25] Careless translators may reproduce or even reinforce these democratic biases, rather than considering whether the accounts serve the contemporary reader. Hobbes seems to worry about a malformed understanding of popular government as a system of unrestrained liberty, coupled with the false assumption that all undemocratic forms lack legitimacy. He reiterates this concern in *Behemoth*, where reflecting on the causes of Civil War in England, he notes that

[22]Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 6.35; chap. 12.4.

[23]Ibid., chap. 21.9. See also Thomas Hobbes, *Behemoth*, ed. Paul Seaward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 137.

[24]Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 12.20.

[25]Hobbes allows for democratic government, properly conceived, as a legitimate expression of sovereign power. Ibid., chap. 19.1. For an analysis of how Hobbesian philosophy might be incorporated into a democratic regime, see Thomas R. Pope, *Social Contract Theory in American Jurisprudence* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

> there were an exceeding great number of men of the better sort that had been so educated, as that in their youth hauing read the bookes written by famous men of the ancient Græcian and Roman Commonwealths concerning their Policy and great actions, in which books the popular gouernment was extolled by the glorious name of Liberty, and Monarchy disgraced by the name of Tyranny, they became thereby in loue with their formes of gouernment. And out of these men were chosen the greatest part of the House of Commons, *or if they were not the greatest part, yet by the aduantage of their eloquence were alwaies able to sway the rest.*[26]

Such is the rhetorical power of these accounts that even in their derivative form, readers learn how to offer empty yet enchanting speeches. The tumult arising from these vain hopes and false promises leads Hobbes to write that "there was never anything so dearly bought, as these western parts have bought the learning of the Greek and Latin tongues."[27]

As presented, these democratic forms substitute institutions and offices for the individual virtue of the sovereign. When all men are equal, those who make a claim to stand above the fray find themselves quickly brought low.[28] In reading the records of Greeks and Romans, Hobbes notes that one is captivated by reports of tyrants dominated by hubris and their just downfall. It is easy to long for the democracy of Athens or the republican forms of Rome. We "imagine [the prosperity of the ancients] not to have proceeded from the emulation of particular men, but from the virtue of their popular form of government."[29] Hobbes, on the other hand, suggests that "without the help of a very able architect," the edifice of the political community would quickly unravel.[30] Those ancient writers "make it lawful and laudable for any man to [kill their kings] provided, before he do it, he call him a tyrant. For they say not *regicide*, that is, killing of a king, but *tyrannicide*, that is, killing of a tyrant is lawful."[31] Because the power lies with the office itself, there is no reason to hesitate substituting officers whenever it seems convenient.[32] Such a disposition is remarkably dangerous for the political environment of the seventeenth century. Hobbes concludes his critique of antiquity with the speculation that "I cannot imagine how anything can be more prejudicial to a monarchy than the allowing of such books to be publicly read *without present applying such correctives of discreet masters as are fit to take away their*

[26]Hobbes, *Behemoth*, 110, emphasis added.
[27]Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 21.9.
[28]Ibid., chap. 13.1.
[29]Ibid., chap. 29.14.
[30]Ibid., chap. 29.1. See also his account of why "no great popular commonwealth was ever kept up" at ibid., chap. 25.16.
[31]Ibid., chap. 29.14, emphasis original.
[32]*Behemoth*'s Third Dialogue provides ample examples of the hazards of indiscriminate substitutions.

venom."[33] This sort of corrective seems precisely the balm that he intends to apply with his reimagining of the ancient tales.

Human Agency

A shift away from individual greatness to lawfulness and complaisance ultimately encourages an abdication of human agency. When all have become ordinary, the extraordinary must find its account outside of man. Hobbes contends that the religion of the ancients is disposed to do just this, leading men to believe that "there is almost nothing that has a name that has not been esteemed amongst the Gentiles, in one place or another, a god or devil, or by their poets feigned to be inanimate, inhabited, or possessed by some spirit or other."[34] Fortune and misfortune were so beyond man's agency that they "ascribed divinity and built temples to mere accidents and qualities."[35] Even those elements distinctly associated with human virtue—our intellectual capacity and desires—were seen to be governed by ineffable forces: "They invoked also their own wit, by the name of *Muses*; their own ignorance by the name of *Fortune*; their own lust by the name of *Cupid*; their own rage, by the name *Furies* … insomuch as there was nothing which a poet could introduce as a person in his poems, which they did not make either a god or a devil."[36] Fate was thus wholly beholden to the unaccountable and unknowable whims of the gods.[37] Hobbes worries that this overreliance on fortune has worked to Hellenize the Christianity of his time.

The Divine

Much of *Leviathan* is devoted to Hobbes's argument that his political teaching is consistent with, and necessarily flows from, orthodox Christian doctrine. Given his unusual theological positions,[38] it is important for him to demonstrate that any variance with his teaching is a syncretic adoption of pagan traditions. He must show that the common teaching regarding the divine has been corrupted, which in turn perverts the political ontology of the age.[39] He

[33]Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 29.14, emphasis added.
[34]Ibid., chap. 12.13.
[35]Ibid., chap. 12.16.
[36]Ibid., emphasis original.
[37]Remarkably, Hobbes will ascribe the echoes of this very omnipotence to his sovereign, replacing the transcendent with the immanent. *Leviathan*, chap. 18.5–6; chap. 29.6, 9.
[38]Examples include the claim that God is corporeal (chap. 12.7), that justice only exists within civil society (chap. 13.13), and that Moses is a personification of God (chap. 16.12).
[39]Hobbes suggests that the "Spiritual Darkness" of his time has been caused by (1) abusing scripture through ignorance, (2) "introducing the demonology of the

attributes the corruption of Christian religion by its assumption of Greek philosophy primarily to its Thomistic roots in Aristotle.[40] Aristotle is blamed for the development of the school of philosophy referred to as "metaphysics" (or "books of supernatural philosophy").[41] As Hobbes grounds his thought strictly in the material, this abstraction from the natural world is an abstraction from reality. A fully consistent account of the world would not differentiate between rules governing the natural and those the supernatural.

Hobbes cannot eliminate his society's reliance upon ancient civilizations. As he grudgingly acknowledges, reason and argument can only go so far to influence the trajectory of human behavior.[42] Therefore, for all of his criticism of the misappropriation of antiquity, he must in some way work within the framework he has been given. In reading Hobbes's translations of Homer, we should look for ways in which the extant translations exacerbate the problems he alludes to, while his own offer an alternative consistent with his broader philosophy. All texts lend themselves more naturally to some readings than others, and a faithful rendering of Homer may lean towards the populist disposition of democratic governance. Similarly, all translators bring to bear their own paradigms and commitments when selecting and re-presenting a text. The dominant English rendering offered by Chapman's *Iliad* may be closer to the original meaning of the Homeric text, but such fidelity to the source is immaterial to Hobbes, who emphasizes that Chapman's work reinforces the most troubling elements of ancient political thought while ignoring the political necessities of his own age. Each aggravating component (the nature of sovereignty, human agency, and the divine) is reproduced in Chapman's *Iliad* and must accordingly be corrected by Hobbes's reframing of the text for the contemporary English reader.

Hobbes's Deviations from Chapman

The Nature of Sovereignty

The *Iliad* opens with a challenge to the authority of the preeminent Achaean general, thus affording an immediate opportunity to consider the nature of sovereign power, legitimacy, and dissent. Agamemnon and Achilles find themselves at odds over Apollo's challenge to their κλέος, or eternal renown.

heathen poets" (belief in incorporeal substances governing nature and the actions of men), (3) mixing Greek philosophy and religion with Christianity, and (4) adopting false or uncertain traditions. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 44.3.

[40]See Leo Strauss, *Hobbes's Critique of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 56.

[41]Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 46.14. See also Hobbes, *Behemoth*, 161–64.

[42]Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 5.5.

The action is initiated by the problem of scarcity—especially regarding human glory—and the question to be resolved is the proper distribution of honor among men of preeminence. Even in the epic's opening lines, we see distance between Chapman and Hobbes's assessment of the issue:

> C: Achilles' banefull wrath resound, O Goddesse, that imposed / Infinite sorrows on the Greekes, and many brave soules losd[43]

> H: O Goddess, sing what woe the discontent / Of *Thetis* Son brought to the Greeks, what Souls / Of *Heroes* down to *Erebus* it sent[44]

Chapman translates μῆνιν as "banefull wrath," reflecting Achilles's response to an injustice that precipitates "infinite sorrows." The tragedy that befalls the Greeks is connected more to the injustice done to Achilles than to the man himself. Hobbes emphasizes the woe itself and the deliberate choice of Achilles who spawns such affliction from sheer "discontent." The reader's perception is that Achilles is merely frustrated with a decision that misfavors him, rather than that he has been done any grievous injustice. As Hobbes will note in *Leviathan*, it is impossible for a sovereign to do injustice to another, as the sovereign is himself the standard of justice within the political community.[45]

Chapman (following Homer's lead) does not position Agamemnon as Achilles's sovereign, as each are rulers in their own right—Agamemnon of Mycenae and Achilles of the Myrmidons. Hobbes consistently disguises this fact by touting Agamemnon as "king" and the other Achaeans as "princes."[46] In his verse summary of book 1, Chapman writes "Alpha *the prayer of Chryses, sings: / The Armie's plague: the strife of Kings.*"[47] Note that he understands the entire challenge of the *Iliad* to be a contest between those of equal authority.[48] Chapman uses the unique epitaph "king of men" to refer to Agamemnon, but does so to highlight his martial, rather than his political, authority. Chapman emphasizes that this rule comes from the fact that Agamemnon "doth boast the mightiest Emperie / Of all our armie" (C 1.85), while Hobbes suggests that Agamemnon is he "Who is of all the Army most obey'd" (H 1.90). In Hobbes's account, Agamemnon is not only the preeminent general of the Achaean forces, but their sovereign.

[43]George Chapman, *Chapman's Homer: The Iliad* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), book 1, line 1. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

[44]Hobbes, *Iliad*, ed. Nelson, book 1, line 1. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

[45]Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 18.6.

[46]As Nelson notes, Hobbes declines to translate "king" when we see Agamemnon behaving badly or demonstrating weakness in his *Iliad*. Nelson, *Iliad*, 14n28.

[47]Chapman, *Iliad*, 23.

[48]As one other representative example, C: "The Jove-kept kings, about the kings all gatherd…" (2.381); H: "And then the Princes…" (2.385).

This command is never questioned by Hobbes, nor is it ever a thing to be forfeited:

> C: [Agamemnon to Ajaxes] Nay, I disclaime all my command of you; Your selves command with such free minds and make your souldiers shew As you nor I led, but themselves. (4.300)

> H: O *Ajaxes* expect not I should bid You hearten up your Army for the fight; 'Tis done so well already there's no need. (4.269)

When this sovereignty might be shared, Hobbes offers a reading that solidifies the authority of Agamemnon:

> C: [Calchas] made suite to all, but most to the Commands / Of both th'Atrides, who most rulde (1.15)

> H: Unto the Princes all [Calchas] made his request; / But to the two *Atrides* chiefly prays, / Who of the *Argive* Army were the best (1.19)

Hobbes not only hides the fact that other Greeks possess rule (albeit to a lesser degree), but ascribes to Agamemnon and his brother the title "best" (ἄριστος)—a term usually reserved in Homer for Achilles. This virtue is clarified throughout the *Iliad* as we see Agamemnon's skill accentuated to befit his office:

> C: Then not asleepe nor maz'd with feare … / You could behold the king of men; but in full speed he goes / To set a glorious fight on foote. (4.236)

> H: And *Agamemnon's* virtue now was seen. / He did not at their coming sleep or start, / But speedily prepared for the fight, / And of a Chief Commander did the part. (4.212)

Agamemnon's virtue comes at the expense of Achilles, whose divine parentage stands to resist merely mortal power. While Achilles's nymph mother Thetis cannot be excised from the text, Hobbes takes every opportunity to downplay his connection to the gods. This begins in the first lines and continues throughout:

> C: Betwixt Atrides, king of men, and Thetis' godlike Sonne. (1.6)

> H: King *Agamemnon* and *Achilles* stout. (1.6)

"God-like" is used 23 times in Chapman (8 referencing Achilles) and only 5 times in Hobbes (3 referencing Achilles, yet 2 of which are by Ulysses and Priam to flatter him into compliance). Hobbes clearly prefers a more humanist description of heroes.

Agamemnon's legitimate rule over the Greeks is threatened not only by Achilles but by his questionable decisions. The action of the *Iliad* is initiated by divine punishment of the Greeks, due in part to Agamemnon's stubborn refusal to return Chryseis, daughter of Apollo's priest. Chapman paints

Agamemnon as headstrong and needlessly cruel—a realization that Agamemnon himself comes to understand over the course of the text:

> C: The Generall … viciously disgrac'd / With violent termes the Priest, and said: 'Doterd. … Her thou seekst I still will hold mine owne / Till age defloure her. In our court at Argos (farre tranferd / From her lov'd country) she shall plie her web, and see prepard / (With all fit ornaments) my bed.' (1.24)

> H: And with sharp language from the Fleet him sent; / Old man. … Your Daughter shall to *Argos* go far hence, / And make my Bed, and labour at the Loom. (1.28)

When passages would directly place blame on Agamemnon, Hobbes more broadly targets abstract injuries committed by the Greeks:[49]

> C: [The plague] is for his Priest empire'd / By Agamemnon, that refused the present he preferred / And kept his daughter. This is cause why heaven's farre-darter darts / These plagues amongst us. (1.89)

> H: 'Tis not neglect of Vow or Sacrifice / That doth the God *Apollo* thus displease; / But that we do his Priest to much despise, / As not his Child for ransome to release. (1.93)

Each of these themes comes together in the following passage:

> C: To this replied the swift-foote God-like sonne / Of Thetis thus: 'King of us all, in all ambition / Most covetouse of all that breathe, why should the great-soul'd Greekes / Supply thy lost prise out of theirs? Nor what thy avarice seekes / Our common treasury can find.' (1.119)

> H: This said, *Achilles* to the King reply'd, / *Atrides*, that on booty have your eye, / You know divided is. (1.119)

In these lines, Achilles's divinity is overlooked, Agamemnon's kingship is firmly established by the omniscient narrator, the criticism of Agamemnon's character is subdued, and Agamemnon seeks "booty" broadly, rather than the rightful private property of another. Throughout his translation, Hobbes portrays the king as justified in his claims and Achilles as the primary offender.

Having been deprived of his rightful prize,[50] Agamemnon finds his authority further undermined by Achilles's refusal to be ruled. This is a direct challenge to Agamemnon's sovereignty:

> C: [Agamemnon speaking of Achilles] All would in his power hold, all make his subjects (1.285)

[49]Other examples include H 1.383 and H 2.340.
[50]Hobbes is explicit in this language of "right" at H 1.135.

> H: But [Achilles] amongst us thinks he ought to raign, / And give the Law to all as he thinks fit. (1.272)

This affront to sovereign authority is a major theme of Hobbes's revision, as it exacerbates the license alluded to in his critique of the ancients. While much of Chapman's *Iliad* reflects on the capricious nature of the powerful, Hobbes emphasizes the hazard risked by those who do not duly respect the commands of the king.

Chapman's Homer portrays kings as corrupted by their power. When Calchas first confronts Agamemnon, he expresses trepidation, framing kings as those who irrationally and single-mindedly seek revenge against their inferiors (C 1.74). Hobbes's Calchas is merely apprehensive about upsetting the "best" of the Greeks (H 1.81). Chapman's Achilles refers to Agamemnon as a "subject-eating king" which Hobbes ignores, instead highlighting that rule is founded on consent.[51] Should all power corrupt, as Lord Acton famously suggested, and Chapman's Homer seems to affirm, then we should be extraordinarily wary of kings. We would instead emphasize forms of government where those in power are checked by institutions, such as modern liberal democracies.

Curiously, Hobbes instead implies something more akin to an argument for Divine Right. When Ulysses attempts to dissuade the Achaean forces from abandoning their conquest in book 2, he waxes philosophic on the special relationship between the kingship of Jove and mortal kings. While Chapman's Ulysses grants that sovereign power has been gifted by Jove, Hobbes takes this further and posits that kings rule on behalf of Jove (C 2.174; H 2.182). They possess not only his power, but his voice. For this reason, kings are those "to whom high *Jove* committed has the Law / And Justice left to his distributing."[52] This novel addition to the Greek suggests that there is not a higher standard of law or justice than the dictates of the king and that the gods will not second guess his decisions. The Hobbesian sovereign has been authorized by his subjects to speak on behalf of the divine, articulating the will of God because he collects the will of the commonwealth under the law of nature.[53] The sovereign possesses this

[51]C 1.229; "But fools they are that are ruled by you" (H 1.219).

[52]H 2.174; compare to C 2.166: "he is kept of Jove and from Jove likewise spring / His honors…"

[53]"For there is no covenant with God but by mediation of somebody that representeth God's person, which none doth but God's lieutenant, who hath the sovereignty under God." Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 18.3. "I conclude, therefore, that in all things not contrary to the moral law (that is to say, to the law of nature) all subjects are bound to obey that for divine law which is declared to be so by the laws of the commonwealth. Which is also evident to any man's reason; for whatsoever is not against the law of nature may be made law in the name of them that have the sovereign power; and there is no reason men should be the less obliged by it when it is propounded in the name of God." Ibid., chap. 26.41.

right exclusively as his subjects have abdicated their interpretive right under the social contract.[54]

These elements culminate in the following passage by Nestor:

> C: Atrides, give not streame / To all thy power, nor force his prise, but yield her still his owne, / As all men else do. Nor do thou encounter with thy crowne, / Great sonne of Peleus, since no king that ever Jove allowd / Grace of a scepter equals him. Suppose thy nerves endowed / With strength superior, and thy birth a verie Goddesse gave, / Yet he of force is mightier. … [To Agamemnon] King of men, / Command thou then thy selfe. (1.272)

> H: *Atrides*, take not from him, though you can, / The Damsel which the *Greeks* have given him. / Forbear the King (*Pelides*.) For the man / Whom *Jove* hath crown'd is made of *Jove* a limb. / Though you be strong, and on a Goddess got, / *Atrides* is before you in command. / *Atrides*, be but you to peace once brought. (1.261)

While Chapman attributes rightful ownership of Briseis to Achilles, Hobbes simply suggests that she has been given and that Agamemnon can take her away. Chapman's Nestor cautions Achilles against crossing the king due to his "force," which may rival that of a goddess-born. Hobbes instead suggests that Achilles's divine parentage is not sufficient to contravene the "command" of one who is a "limb" of Jove. Finally, Chapman's Nestor ironically must patronize Agamemnon to "command thou then thy selfe," while Hobbes's merely encourages him to seek peace (which is of course the first and fundamental law of nature).[55] The textual adjustment is a remarkable adaptation of Hobbes's own advice for good counsel in *Leviathan.* Nestor, speaking from long experience,[56] offers clear and dispassionate direction[57] with ends and interests "not inconsistent with the ends and interest of him he counselleth."[58]

The Divine

If kingly rule is an extension of Jove's authority, then we must ask how the two relate during the *Iliad*'s many moments of conflict between men and the gods (and among the gods themselves). Homer's epic portrays the gods as active participants in mortal affairs, saving their favorites, influencing human decisions, and changing the tide of battle. Yet for all

[54]"Another doctrine repugnant to civil society is that *whatsoever a man does against his conscience is sin* … because the law is the public conscience, by which he hath already undertaken to be guided." Ibid., chap. 29.7 (emphasis original).

[55]Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 14.4.

[56]Ibid., chap. 25.13.

[57]Ibid., chap. 25.12.

[58]Ibid., chap. 25.11.

their power and passion, the will of the gods remains disguised from the mortals involved. When a plague threatens to destroy the Achaean army, its cause remains mysterious until finally the prophet Chalcas reluctantly discloses the truth. To know the will of the gods is to know the order of the universe and Hobbes, favoring reason over revelation, is remarkably distrustful of the *Iliad*'s prophetic utterances.[59] Even Chalcas's initial prophecy is rejected by Hobbes's Agamemnon as a mere contrivance to usurp his authority.[60] The ambiguous nature of prognostication is compounded when Jove sends a false dream to Agamemnon in book 2. To this event, Hobbes adds a piece of narration chiding any man who would aspire to discern the will of the gods:

> H: And the King / Believ'd it as an Oracle, and thought / To take *Troy* now as sure as any thing; / Vain man presuming from a Dream *Jove*'s will. (2.30)

In *Leviathan* he writes that "from this ignorance of how to distinguish dreams and other strong fancies from vision and sense did arise the greatest part of the religion of the gentiles."[61] And, with less reverence, that "to say [God] hath spoken to [a man] in a dream is no more than to say he dreamed that God spake to him, which is not of force to win belief. … So that though God Almighty can speak to a man by dreams … yet he obliges no man to believe he hath so done to him that pretends it, who (being a man) may err, and (which is more) may lie."[62]

Given this skepticism of nocturnal inspiration, it is perhaps surprising that Agamemnon's vision is unquestioned by those he rules. Nestor, touted for his wisdom and discernment, remarks that "This Dream had it been told b' another man, / Feigned and foolish would have seem'd to me. / But since the King is the'Author (if we can) / Let us persuade the people to take Arms" (H 2.70; compare to C 2.65). His account reiterates Hobbes's own mistrust of dreams, while reinforcing the overwhelming prerogative of the sovereign. Unlike Chapman, Hobbes highlights Agamemnon's position as "king" as the decisive element of trust. Further, in referring to Agamemnon as the dream's "author," Hobbes alludes to his doctrine of sovereign authority which personifies and therefore acts on behalf of the political community. Authors act by authority, such that they bind their constituent parts (in this case, subjects

[59]Ibid., chap. 32.9. Kinch Hoekstra emphasizes the lengths to which Hobbes goes to disentangle the apocalyptic predictions of his time which saturated the minds of those possessing political power. Kinch Hoekstra, "Disarming the Prophets: Thomas Hobbes and Predictive Power," *Rivista di Storia della Filosofia* 59, no. 1 (2004): 97–153.

[60]H 1.104. Chapman's translation notes that the prophecy is undesirable, but there is no suggestion that it is false (C 1.103).

[61]Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 2.8.

[62]Ibid., chap. 32.6.

such as Nestor and the Achaean forces).[63] It is the sovereign's right to make war and peace, as he shall think it best, and citizens have abdicated their individual wills to his judgment.[64]

Hobbes sees the division of theological and political power as one of the primary hazards of the modern world and uses his philosophy to bring these two realms of life together, such that the sovereign is preeminently suited to speak with God's voice.

> For when Christian men take not their Christian sovereign for God's prophet, they must either take their own dreams for the prophecy they mean to be governed by, and the tumor of their own hearts for the Spirit of God, or they must suffer themselves to be led by some strange prince or by some of their fellow subjects that can bewitch them … into rebellion … and by this means destroying all laws, both divine and human, reduce all order, government, and society to the first chaos of violence and civil war.[65]

In aggregating the collective will of the people, the sovereign is positioned to convey an orderly expression of divine judgment, avoiding the fragmented and factious lens of individual citizens. Their support for his interpretive authority is the foundation of the social contract upon which Hobbes rests political legitimacy.

This is emphasized in Hobbes's decision to shift "vows" and "oaths" into "contract" (C 3.285; H 3.258). While vows indicate a direct connection between the individual under oath and a supernatural judge, contracts are immanently human. They highlight the ongoing and interested consent of the parties involved and the role of reason in directing human affairs.[66] "'Tis good for both that makes a Contract bind," remarks Hobbes's Menelaus (H 3.108). Consequently, oaths are meaningless in a Hobbesian framework: "It appears also that the oath adds nothing to the obligation. For a covenant, if lawful, binds in the sight of God without the oath as much as with it; if unlawful, bindeth not at all, though it be confirmed with an oath."[67] With Hobbes's ontology, human reason assessing human interest is sufficient to govern the actions of men. To the extent that the gods speak, they speak through the lips of the sovereign, whose human authority gives weight to the enervated divine.

Human Agency

The unquestioned authority of the king may seem to come at the expense of liberty. However, Hobbes appears to position his philosophy as expanding human agency. As a material determinist, he posits that in some fashion, all of

[63]Ibid., chap. 16.4.
[64]Ibid., chap. 18.12; chap. 17.13.
[65]Ibid., chap. 36.19.
[66]Ibid., chap. 14.5.
[67]Ibid., chap. 14.33.

our actions are circumscribed; but this is only an intellectual truth. Practically, we feel and behave as though we are free. Unfortunately, we are extraordinarily bad at exercising this liberty without the support of others in such a manner that we attain our desires. The social contract is designed to give man greater expression of his freedom, within the bounds of law. We substitute an impotent and unlimited license for meaningful ordered liberty. In following a sovereign, we are giving force to the instrument which facilitates our own flourishing. For this to work, we must emphasize reason and human choice, showing individuals that it is in their interest to accede to short-term annoyances for long-term benefit.

The Greek reliance on Fortune, overturning the best laid plans of men, destroys this delicate narrative. When the might of the gods is incontestable, their will unknowable, and their actions capriciously intruding on mortal affairs, there is not much space for human operation. The glory of the individual is subsumed into the divine power that is really at work. One of the major themes of the *Iliad* is the invisible conflict between the gods that seems to supersede the physical battle between the Greeks and the Trojans. Humans are occasionally given the opportunity to resist the gods (Diomedes's assault on Aphrodite and Ares; Achilles's struggle with Scamander), but these conflicts only occur due to some divine allowance.

In recasting the relationship between men and the gods, Hobbes cannot ignore their presence or operation in the story. Instead, he softens the fatalism inherent in their activity.

> C: [Jove speaking of his will] Irrevocable, never fails, never without the rates / Of all powers else: when my head bowes, all heads bow with it still / As their first mover, and gives power to any worke I will. (1.509)

> H: A Nod from me is an unfailing token. (1.500)

There is a diminished emphasis on both the power and involvement of the gods. As the *Iliad* opens and the narrator speculates on how it all began, Chapman asks, "What God gave Eris their command, and op't that fighting veine?" (C 1.7). Hobbes merely wonders, "But who was he that made them first fall out?" (H 1.8). The root of our glory and strife need not be divine. The gods, particularly Jove, still will, but that will may be contravened.

> C: [Agamemnon] Since Phoebus needs will force me from Chryseis, she shall go (1.185)

> H: For after I have sent away *Chryseis*, / And satisfi'd the God (1.178)

When Chapman's Jove "commands" Agamemnon, Hobbes's merely "bids" (C 2.8; H 2.7). There is room for human choice, even amid such powerful forces.

Because Hobbes's *Iliad* deemphasizes the role of the gods in human choice and action, and because the sovereign personifies divine will among men, the virtues and vices of the Olympians matter far less for framing a vision of the good life.[68] Instead, we must look to the heroes for inspiration. Of these, Hobbes's Agamemnon (and those loyal subjects who follow him) offers a consistent and plausible account of human virtue within a political community.

When he must decide between his prize and his people, Agamemnon consistently favors the latter. Confronted with the reality of Apollo's plague, he returns Chryseis with minimal protestation. A similar choice is made to return Briseis when Achilles's stubborn refusal to fight threatens Achaean victory. Unlike Achilles, Agamemnon presents consistent leadership bolstered by the endorsement of those he rules. He is restrained and rational in crisis—which is not to say that he is not self-interested. Instead, in stark contrast to the leader of the Myrmidons, his self-interest does not come at the expense of the common good.[69] Even Agamemnon's initial commandeering of Briseis establishes necessary authority and a unified power structure among the Greek forces. Those indiscretions which Agamemnon might express in unseemly words or deeds in other translations are quietly excised. Any potential virtues in Homer overlooked by Chapman are polished like statues by Hobbes.

Agamemnon's renewed moderation operates squarely within Hobbes's conception of human virtue.[70] He understands his limits, as well as the scope of political action. And unlike Achilles, Agamemnon is able to rule both his people and himself by prioritizing reason over passion.[71] This single change in the character of the ruler transforms the whole community under him. Having mastered the political order within the city of his soul, Agamemnon is now prepared to address the needs of the broader polis, offering a model for his people to follow. Achilles, on the other hand, is never able to temper his passion and pride such that his great strength is of any benefit. It is only when he finally submits to Agamemnon's rule that his might can be turned to productive use for the Achaeans.

[68]Hobbes downplays their excesses, but the Olympians remain questionable figures in his account.

[69]For further discussion of Hobbes's consideration of political virtue among the ancients, see Chris Campbell, "The Rhetoric of Hobbes's Translation of Thucydides," *Review of Politics* 84, no. 1 (2022): 1–24. Campbell argues that Hobbes's translation of Thucydides rhetorically positions Pericles as an exemplary sovereign educator, while Alcibiades, unable to unite his interest to that of the city, is cast as a failed sovereign. Pericles's virtue of self-interest directed to the public good is later mirrored in his Agamemnon. Similarly, one can see an affinity between the selfish yet individualized orientation of his Alcibiades and his Achilles.

[70]Peter Hayes, "Hobbes's Bourgeois Moderation," *Polity* 31, no. 1 (Autumn 1998): 53–74.

[71]For Hobbes, "rage" is a form of madness. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 8.19.

Conclusion

Chapman's Homer helped form the bedrock of English poetic imagination in the seventeenth century, upon which its notions of political legitimacy rest. However, it was a foundation so tethered to the proclivities of its source material that it failed to meet the needs of the time. As Donald Smalley observes, "It was with an almost religious attitude that Chapman regarded his original."[72] On the eve of unprecedented political disorder, Chapman offered a narrative which accentuated the vices of the powerful, the impotence of the many, and the justice of passionate armed defiance.[73] His presentation of Homer in English transposed the poet's beauty in a manner accessible to the public for the first time, but it also reinforced its latent biases.[74] Hobbes identifies this danger and works to set it aright. He is well aware of the power and potential of common-language translations, having seen the impact (for good or ill) of his own works published in the popular tongue.[75] This poetic climate, offering the context within which Hobbes sets his own work, has been overlooked by scholars and helps us to understand precisely why Hobbes might choose to offer his own translations.

The reconstitution of the English poetic tradition is essential to Hobbes's overarching political project, reestablishing an appropriate moral framework for his theories of sovereignty, human agency, and contract. As I have shown, his implicit critique of Chapman is designed to reassert a new foundation for political imagination that avoids Chapman's democratic excess while enlarging space for individual virtue and statesmanship. "We are apt to think of a civilization as something solid and external, but at bottom it is a collective dream," writes Michael Oakeshott, as he considers Hobbes's ambitions. "And the substance of this dream is a myth, an imaginative interpretation of human existence, the perception (not the solution) of the mystery of human life. The office of literature in a civilization is not to break the dream, but perpetually to recall it, to recreate it in each generation, and even to make more articulate the dream-powers of a people."[76] This literary inheritance cannot be simply

[72]Donald Smalley, "The Ethical Bias of Chapman's 'Homer,'" *Studies in Philology* 36, no. 2 (April 1939): 170.

[73]For more on Chapman's broader democratic impulse, see John Huntington, "Virtues Obscured: George Chapman's Social Strategy," *Criticism* 39, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 161–84.

[74]Christine Sukic, "Ample Transmigration: George Chapman, English Translator of Homer," *Études anglaises* 60, no. 1 (2007): 3–14.

[75]Noting the impact of translation on the public: "For after the Bible was translated into English, euery man, nay euery boy and wench that could read English, thought they spoke with God Almighty and vnderstood what he said." Hobbes, *Behemoth*, 135.

[76]Michael Oakeshott, "*Leviathan*: A Myth," in *Hobbes on Civil Association* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1975), 159–60.

received and passed along without consideration—such is Hobbes's complaint regarding the reception of the ancients. For Hobbes, it is in the reflective recollection and ultimately the recreation of our founding myths that we come to direct our political destiny.