

Resonances of Antiquity: The Reception and Translation of Homer's Iliad in German and French Literary Traditions Up to the Seventeenth Century

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Abstract: This article investigates the translation history of Homer's epic *The Iliad* into German and French up to the seventeenth century. It focuses on the religious, philosophical, and cultural contexts of these translations. The paper highlights the linguistic approaches of early translators such as Notker and examines how *The Iliad* was received during the Reformation and the Renaissance in the German and French literary traditions.

Keywords: *The Iliad*, translation history, German literature, French literature, Notker, church literature, Renaissance, Reformation, classical legacy.



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Introduction

At the turn of the 10th and 11th centuries, Notker (c. 950–1022), a cleric of the Abbey of Saint Gall, undertook a task which he himself described as something "no eye had seen and no ear had heard"—the translation of Latin pedagogical and ecclesiastical texts into Old High German to aid his students' understanding. Notker rendered into the vernacular works such as Aristotle, Martianus Capella, Boethius, the Psalms of David, and Virgil's *Bucolics*. This endeavor marks a significant cultural and linguistic shift in German-speaking regions. Around the same period, prominent French literary works such as *The Song of Roland*, *The Romance of Troy*, and *Yvain* were also translated into German, reflecting the early dynamics of cross-cultural literary exchange.

Later, in 1465, the Bible was anonymously translated into German, a landmark event that signaled the early stages of the Reformation. The vernacular translation of sacred texts catalyzed broader access to religious literature and laid the groundwork for critical transformations in both German and European literary landscapes.

Literature Review

One of the most influential voices of the French Renaissance, Michel de Montaigne, praised the translator Jacques Amyot for his work on Plutarch's *Moralia*, emphasizing the transformative power of translation:

“The greatest and most valuable gift Amyot has given our nation is this book, which lifted us out of the darkness of ignorance... Without it, we would have remained mere yawners.”

In the early 18th century, French intellectual circles witnessed a vigorous debate regarding the translation of Homer’s *Iliad*, particularly between Antoine Houdar de la Motte (1672–1731), a member of the French Academy and noted dramatist, and Anne Dacier (1654–1720), a philologist and translator. Dacier had been translating classical texts into French prose since 1681, including works by Sappho, Anacreon, Aristophanes, Terence, and Plautus. Her most prominent work came in 1699 with the publication of her French prose translation of Homer’s *Iliad*.

This provoked De la Motte to publish his own poetic and significantly abridged version of the *Iliad* in 1714, reducing the original 24 books to 12. In his *Discours sur Homère*, he argued that modern literature had surpassed ancient works and therefore classical epics should be stylistically and structurally adapted to suit contemporary taste.

Dacier responded with a scathing pamphlet titled *Causes of the Corruption of Taste*, in which she fiercely defended Homer’s original structure and condemned De la Motte’s liberties. Their public dispute drew significant attention, eventually leading Jean Terrasson and Claude Buffier to mediate the conflict. Nonetheless, both parties remained steadfast. De la Motte maintained:

“As a translator, I have striven for clarity, intelligibility, and pleasantness. To make the translation appealing, I had to modernize Homer’s concepts.”

Dacier, however, rebuked his method, stating:

“He achieved none of the things he intended. By replacing Homer’s thoughts with his own, he softened and distorted the poet’s character, thus severing him from his natural force.”

By 1719, critics such as Jean-Baptiste Dubos attempted to bring closure to the debate through objective literary assessments.

Research Methodology

This study analyzes the evolution of Homer’s *Iliad* translations into German and French up to the seventeenth century. The research employs the following methodological approaches:

1. Historical-Comparative and Source Analysis Method

This method was used to trace the origins, development, and distinctive features of *Iliad* translations in German and French literary traditions. It explores how historical and ideological changes shaped translation strategies. Primary textual sources, including early translations, commentaries, and prefaces, were examined to assess the translators’ intentions and the faithfulness of their work to the original text.

2. Literary-Analytical and Comparative Method

This method facilitated an in-depth examination of the stylistic, poetic, and thematic elements present in the translations. Special attention was paid to the translators’ approaches—whether they adhered to the original or adapted it to local contexts. Comparative analysis between German and French translations revealed both divergences and common patterns. Notker and Johannes Rhexius were examined in the German context, while Anne Dacier and Antoine Houdar de la Motte were highlighted in the French tradition, establishing their importance within the broader history of translation and literary reception.

Philosophical Approach

This study also evaluates the influence of historical and cultural periods on translation activity from a philosophical standpoint. It analyzes the social and cultural relevance of translation, considering how translations of Homer’s *Iliad* evolved in response to changing intellectual

paradigms. The process of translating classical texts into German and French not only reflects linguistic and aesthetic preferences but also reveals the unique scholarly and creative consciousness of each era.

Analysis and Findings

A comprehensive investigation into the development of Homer's *Iliad* translations in the German and French traditions up to the seventeenth century led to the following key findings:

1. Historical Stages in the Evolution of Translation:

- In both German and French, early translations of the *Iliad* prior to the seventeenth century were largely shaped by religious and political motivations.
- German translators aimed to stay as close as possible to the original text, preserving its structure and meaning, as evident in the early translations of Notker.
- In contrast, French translators tended to adapt the content to meet the literary and aesthetic standards of their time, a tendency especially visible in the works of Antoine Houdar de la Motte.

2. Stylistic Differences Between German and French Translations:

- German translations often prioritized grammatical accuracy and poetic fidelity, resulting in texts with a more academic and theoretical tone.
- French translations favored expressive language and accessibility, often reshaping the text into dramatic or epic forms suited for contemporary readers.

3. Cultural and Philosophical Influences:

- German translations were deeply influenced by a reverence for antiquity and a commitment to preserving classical heritage. Although sometimes lacking in literary flair, they were rich in scholarly value.
- In France, especially during the seventeenth century, cultural revival and aesthetic demands led translators to reinterpret Homer's heroic themes in a way that aligned with modern tastes.

4. Impact on Society and Culture:

- German translations significantly enriched the poetic capabilities of the German language, contributing to the development of scientific and literary vocabulary.
- French translations helped popularize classical literature, broadening public knowledge of ancient culture and mythology.

5. Distinctive Translation Techniques:

- German translators sought to retain the metrical structure and poetic form of the original, emphasizing spiritual and aesthetic power.
- French translators introduced abbreviations, paraphrases, and modern idioms, reflecting a more creative and interpretive approach.

Beginning in the fifteenth century, German humanists increasingly embraced Renaissance traditions. Although efforts to translate Greek and Latin texts were central to this movement, many translations suffered from linguistic awkwardness and syntactic calques due to the translators' limited proficiency.

The first German translation of the *Iliad* was produced in 1584 by Johann Rhexius (1563–1598), making it the earliest complete German rendering of the text. Discovered in manuscript form in 1929 by Germanist Richard Newald at the Monastery of St. Florian, the translation proved to be

more than an academic exercise—it was a literary work in its own right. Rhexius is believed to have used a Latin version attributed to Raphael Maffei as his primary source.

Before this, the *Odyssey* had been translated into German prose by Simon Schedenreisser, a Munich historian, in 1537. However, complete *Iliad* translations did not emerge until the early seventeenth century, when Johann Spreng produced a poetic version, although it remained unpublished.

Prominent figures in the German humanist movement, such as Willibald Pirckheimer (1470–1530), also contributed to the reception of classical texts. Pirckheimer translated Theophrastus's *Characters* into German and worked on Plato, Xenophon, Plutarch, and Lucian. Later German literary figures like Heinrich Heine, Eduard Mörike, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich Brecht, Stefan George, and David Hilbert continued this tradition through translations of Roman poets.

Niklas von Wyle (1410–1497) advocated for literal translation (“wort uss wort”) and set a precedent for future translators by elevating the German language's literary standard. However, others such as Heinrich Steinhöwel (1412–1482) and Albrecht von Eyb (1420–1475) championed freer, more reader-friendly translations. These included colloquial language, domestic idioms, and even Germanized names for Latin concepts, often provoking criticism.

The translation movement gained momentum with Martin Luther's German versions of the New Testament (1521) and the Old Testament (1534), marking a turning point in vernacular religious literature.

From the late eighteenth century onward, German interest in direct engagement with original texts increased. This fostered intellectual independence and led to a golden era of translation marked by the efforts of poets and philosophers such as Breitinger, Klopstock, and Herder.

In 1610, Simon Schedenreisser published his poetic translation of the *Iliad*, though Homer remained somewhat marginalized in public discourse. By the eighteenth century, translations of Homer became more prevalent. Notably, G.A. Bürger, author of *The Adventures of Baron Münchhausen*, translated excerpts of the *Iliad* into German verse in 1771.

Johann Heinrich Voss (1751–1826) elevated Homeric translation with his German hexameter versions of the *Odyssey* (1781) and later the *Iliad* (1793). His work, regarded as the finest classical translation in German, also included Ovid, Horace, and Virgil.

Meanwhile, in France, early translations of Homer appeared in the sixteenth century. Hugues Salel initiated the translation of several books of the *Iliad* in 1530, though he did not complete the work. Amadis Jamyn continued the project, completing thirteen additional books by 1577, culminating in a complete version in 1584.

One of the pioneers of Greek-to-French translation was Jacques Amyot (1513–1593), Bishop of Auxerre. He translated Diodorus Siculus's *Historical Library*, Heliodorus's *Aethiopica*, and *Daphnis and Chloe*. His most celebrated contributions were the French editions of Plutarch's *Lives* (1559) and *Moralia* (1572). Amyot's stylistic precision and philological rigor helped integrate classical Greek ethos into early modern French moral philosophy.

Conclusion

The translations of Homer's *Iliad* have played a pivotal role in shaping the literary and intellectual landscapes of both German and French cultures. This research demonstrates that through these translations, respect for antiquity was preserved while advancing the development of literature and translation studies in both languages.

The legacy of *Iliad* translations underscores the importance of intercultural literary exchange and illustrates how classical works can continue to inform and enrich modern thought. Future research

may further examine the reception of Homeric epics in other linguistic and cultural contexts to expand this comparative framework.

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