

2019

## Interview with Professor Emily Wilson

Grayson Kennedy  
*Bucknell University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/humanities-review>

Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Kennedy, Grayson (2019) "Interview with Professor Emily Wilson," *The Humanities Review*: Vol. 2 , Article 4.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/humanities-review/vol2/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Bucknell Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Humanities Review by an authorized editor of Bucknell Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [dcadmin@bucknell.edu](mailto:dcadmin@bucknell.edu).

## An Interview with Professor Emily Wilson

Grayson Kennedy

*Professor Emily Wilson, author of the first known English translation by a woman of Homer's The Odyssey, visited Bucknell University on Friday, September 7, 2018 to present "Translating The Odyssey Again: Why and How." I had the privilege to interview her for The Humanities Review after she presented a talk for undergraduate Classics majors in the Bucknell Humanities Center.*

**Kennedy:** Why did you translate The Odyssey?

**Wilson:** I was asked to do it. I decided to do it after looking more closely at other translations, because I wanted to do something authentic with the original that was different than other translations. I realized that the majority of contemporary translations are in free verse, and I wanted instead to use a pentameter because I thought the rhythm, the meter, of the original was so important. I wanted to do more to maintain the pace of the original, so I chose to translate it in the same length as the original in terms of lines. I found many other translations to be stilted or archaizing. There is a tendency in translations to make the original work more pompous than it really is, and more one voiced, only focusing on one character's perspective.

**Kennedy:** How long did it take you to translate the whole text?

**Wilson:** Five years.

**Kennedy:** Did you ever get sick of it?

**Wilson:** I got stuck a few times

**Kennedy:** I'm sure!

**Wilson:** Yeah, I didn't get sick of it, but I certainly got stuck, particularly in the beginning. There were many times where I'd get to a passage and I'd think, "Ok. This is very easy Greek, I know what it means—but I have no idea how to convey this in the same mood or style as the original."

**Kennedy:** What did you personally gain from translating The Odyssey?

**Wilson:** It was a lot of fun and very, very interesting because I didn't do it primarily for me [*pause*] it's really for people who haven't read the original. I think that reading translated literature is a necessity for the world. I feel grateful to translate languages I don't know because it broadens my horizons. So I see it as a necessity in terms of global communica-

tions.

**Kennedy:** Are you aiming primarily toward writing for scholars, or really anyone who wants to read or learn about *The Odyssey*?

**Wilson:** I think really for anybody, especially because there's already an existing market for at least American and British high school students who are being "forced" to read it, or for college classes. I hoped I would manage to create a translation that would feel enjoyable enough that students, as well as anyone wanting to read *The Odyssey* for pleasure, could be engaged.

**Kennedy:** Is translation, in fact, the quintessential poetic mode?

**Wilson:** I'm not sure if I would say poetic. I would say that translation makes you focus on writing as a craft. In a translation you're making up the words. The thing the text says is already there, and your job is to make up completely different words. So there's a focus on the craft of writing, the craft of creating passages, sentences and lines and phrases in a very different way.

**Kennedy:** Do you think it is necessary to translate works in the language of every new century? For example, an eighteenth century translation of the *Odyssey* wouldn't work for twenty first century students

**Wilson:** It depends on the reader. I personally don't see the point of translating, let's say Shakespeare, if you're a native english speaker.

**Kennedy:** I remember, when I first read Shakespeare in sixth grade, the text came with lines translated in modern english phrases. Do you think that is necessary?

**Wilson:** No, I think that it's counterproductive. I think the point of reading old prose is to have the ability to read fluently in the original language. I think not all old texts necessarily need a translator. I think that being a translator is a writerly craft, not just about understanding the language.

**Kennedy:** As a translator, did you ever feel invisible, or did you feel empowered by your work?

**Wilson:** There's a lot of discussion in translation theory about whether or not it's a translator's duty to hide themselves. I agree that there's a neglect towards translation ... but I don't think that totally foreignizing texts is the solution. People tend to assume that ancient history is unreadable, and if this is reinforced by the translation, it doesn't actually teach you anything about why, for example, everyone in antiquity liked Homer. I've had a range of different feelings about empowerment and not-empowerment.

**Kennedy:** Professor Wilson, thank you so much for your time.

**Wilson:** Thanks for having me.

## Notes

1. Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Emily Wilson (New York: W. W. Norton, 2017).
2. Emily Wilson, interview with the author, September 7, 2018, Bucknell University, Lewisburg, PA.