

John Ogilby's translation of the *Odyssey* is especially notable for its superb production; he insisted on the best paper, type, and engravings, which positioned his book in the spheres of polite learning and patronage.

Homer. John Ogilby, translator. *Homer his Odysses translated, adorn'd with sculpture, and illustrated with annotations, by John Ogilby...* London: Printed by Thomas Roycroft for the author, 1665. 6 1/4 inches (160 mm), [7], 366 pp.; [24] leaves of plates.

“Many-minded Homer” (in Yeats’ phrase) had seven rival birthplaces—somewhere, sometime in the 8th century B.C. Twenty-five hundred years later, his 17th-century Scottish translator John Ogilby (1600–1676) had at least as many careers and changes of mind. By turns, he was dancing-master, courtier, theatrical impresario, poet, translator, cartographer, and publisher. Ogilby had the invaluable gift of always landing on his feet. As his contemporary John Aubrey observed, “He had such an excellent inventive and prudentiall witt, and master of so good an addresse, that when he was undon he could not only shift handsomely (which is a great mastery), but he would make such rationall proposalls that would be embraced by rich and great men, that in a short time he could gaine a good estate again, and never failed in anything he undertooke but allwayes went through with profits and honour.”

Long before the appearance of the Homer here reproduced, he had moved to Ireland (1633) to become Master of the Revels under Viscount Wentworth, and to establish the first theatre in Ireland, in Dublin in 1637. Even after his return to London, Ogilby returned regularly to Ireland on theatrical affairs. Appointed His Majesty’s Cosmographer in 1671, he devoted his last years to a series of atlases, most notably his *Britannia* (1675), a road-atlas of 100 strip-maps, a scheme that was as old as the Peutinger Table of Roman roads, but which anticipates aspects of global positioning, providing a graphic version of the talking TomTom, as it coaches a driver from point A to point B.

Ogilby’s career as a translator began in 1649 with a version of Virgil. An Aesop followed two years later, then more Virgil (1654 and 1658), the *Iliad* (1660) and this *Odyssey* (1665). The versatile Ogilby was a quick study: he came to his classical learning

astonishingly late. According to Aubrey, he was in his forties when he began to learn Latin, and in his early fifties when he turned to Greek. Of course it was not necessary in those days to have extraordinary proficiency in the classics in order to translate effectively. The most celebrated and influential translation of Plutarch (Shakespeare's source for his Roman plays) was made by Sir Thomas North not from the original Greek but from Jacques Amyot's French translation. And Ogilby had several predecessors in the modern languages on which to model himself. By the early 17th century, several books of the *Odyssey* could be read in French or German, and the complete works were available in Italian and in English—George Chapman's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were published in 1611 and 1614 respectively, giving John Keats something to "look into" two centuries later.

Ogilby's translations were especially notable for their superb production. He insisted on the best paper, type, and engravings. So perfectly did his books position themselves in the web of polite learning and patronage—portraits and dedications abound—that it hardly mattered that Ogilby had a tin-ear. His readers were in search of other things. Indeed, the note on the flyleaf of this copy (**Spread 2**) neatly illustrates the interests of the average 17th-century reader:

Penelope had 108 suitors p.4

The game of Penelopen(g)

Turning to the splendid marginal note at **Spread 12**, we learn that the suitors formed two teams of 54 players, kicking (or throwing) their balls at a "Penelope" figure, in a symbolic or proleptic partouze. What appears to be an early case of post-game hooliganism on **Spread 187** is simply Odysseus restoring the *status quo ante* by slaughtering both teams. Other noteworthy plates include the bewitched big-cats of Circe at **Spread 81**. The translator's own personal relations to the two Homeric epics are transparent. There was nothing heroic or militaristic about Ogilby: he was no Achilles. But the much-traveled and ever-resourceful translator must surely have responded with cordial fellow-feeling to the exploits and character of the wily voyager Odysseus, triumphing (like himself) over every adversity.