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Racism and the *Odyssey*: Translating the Colour of Odysseus' Skin

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Abstract

This article makes two arguments: (1) a *specific* argument about two passages in the 16th and 19th songs of the *Odyssey*; (2) a *general* argument about the dangers involved in translations of classical texts. In the specific argument it is shown that translators have (with a single exception) distorted Greek terms for skin colour, and, by doing so, they enable racist agendas to gain support from their translations. The general argument is that in questions that are the subject of controversy and discussion in the 21st century translators of classical texts have to be careful to recognise their own preconceptions and prejudices to ensure that the translations are not used for detrimental purposes.

Keywords: Homer, *Odyssey*, Translation, Racism, Colour

Introduction

The purpose of this article is *not* to engage in discussions à la the Black Athena-debate or anything similar. Nor do I wish to determine the skin colour of the ancient Greeks. Although it may sound strange for an article with a title such as the present one, these questions are irrelevant. What I want to examine is how modern translators handle Greek terms, phrases and texts that are important for controversial modern discussions and problems; in the present case, I am focusing on terms that are relevant for the racist use of classical Greece.

The discussions about the skin colour of the Greeks have acquired importance in the 20th and the 21st centuries in the sense that some racist agendas are based on the claim that the Western European and American civilisations are built on ancient Greece. Proponents of such agendas are convinced that the Greeks were white

and considered themselves part of a white civilisation.[1] However, it is clear from scholarly work that the question would *not* have been important to most Greeks, and the ancient texts show that they did not consider themselves white skinned; in fact, "race" was not a topic for discussion, and the differences of ethnic groups certainly were not thought to be based on skin colour. This is an important point that must be stressed when the texts are transmitted to readers in the modern era in which skin colour is part of racist arguments and is thus part of conceptions of racism.

Therefore, it is crucial that we are conscious of our preconceptions when we as scholars introduce the texts to the world through modern *translations*. Obviously, translations will always, to some extent, reflect the culture into which they are introduced; this is not controversial. But when people are already using specific ancient texts as tools to prove points or support specific agendas, we need to be careful that we do not distort the content as the result of our own preconceptions; at least we need to acknowledge explicitly that we are transferring subjects that are culturally different into our own time. This is particularly true in the case of topics that are controversial in the 21st century, different forms of discrimination being the most obvious ones. Translators of ancient texts are often not conscious of the problems.[2]

1. Conception: Ancient Greeks on Colour

This first section of the article is a brief account of a number of problems in the 20th- and 21st-century reception of ancient sources. I focus attention on some of the best known sources of transmission,

[1] See Zuckerberg (2018) 6.

[2] Whitmarsh (2018) is, in some respects, similar to the present article, and Dee (2003-2004) analyses the relevant passages, including the ones from the *Odyssey*, for a better understanding of the white-black distinction in Antiquity. However, neither of them focuses on *translations* as a main problem.

that is, movies and series televised and broadcast by major media and streaming services such as BBC and Netflix. The article is also part of a recent wealth of publications on the topic of colour, on race and racism in antiquity and beyond, and on modern use and abuse of this period for a number of purposes.[1]

The ancient Greeks (in broad chronological terms) thought that men had to be not-fair-skinned in order to be considered active and engaged, whereas women should be white-skinned to show that they were virtuous and often staying indoors performing domestic chores.[2] A man was supposed to interact with other men, do physical exercises, wage war, etc., whereas a woman had to keep out of sight as much as possible and interact primarily with her kin, slaves and (female) friends. This description is superficial—and does not apply universally—but it is generally correct, and it is sufficient to serve my purpose: the differences in skin colour—both among the individual men and between man and woman—involve no discussions or conceptions about race; the phenomenon described is a simple, physical reaction to the sun and air important to the conception of human beings in general. That is, the *natural* colour of one's skin is unimportant. It may be—as some scholars have argued—that the seeds of racism were sown in ancient Greece, but this is not clear; as stressed above, the tendency is not towards anything resembling 21st-century racism.[3] A number of ancient sources (albeit Roman) show that the proverbial expression "whether black or white" was used to indicate that one does not

[1] See the recent Derbew (2022) and McCoskey (2022) with bibliographies.

[2] See Irwin (1974) 129-35.

[3] For the discussion, e.g. Snowden (1948); Snowden (1970); Snowden (1983); Isaac (2004); Isaac (2006); Eliav-Feldon & Isaac & Ziegler (2009); Jablonski (2012); McCoskey (2012); Seth (2020); Derbew (2022); McCoskey (2022). For some of the central ancient texts, see Kennedy & Roy & Goldman (2013).

really care whether it is one or the other,[1] and reflects the ancient view beautifully. The important ethnic distinction was the one that separated Greeks from everyone else: Greeks and βάρβαροι.

Contrary to this attitude, the discussion of skin colour is, to a 21st-century reader, usually *either* a question of natural skin colour *or* a physical reaction to one's natural skin colour, and in most cases the "skin colour" will refer to the former. The history and connotations of the term "race" make it a bad tool for establishing reasonable distinctions between human beings, but, of course, 21st-century racism has to be recognised as a phenomenon built on some kind of conception of race, and it is certainly based to a large extent—and, in many instances, *primarily*—on the colour of the other's skin.[2] As e.g. Zuckerberg shows, many kinds of discrimination have been claimed to find support in the ancient sources.[3]

One of the things that is abundantly clear from Zuckerberg's work is how important the natural skin colour of ancient heroes is to modern racists.[4] Of course, there is a long history of "whitewashing" in movies, and, to the best of my knowledge, the differences in looks when white actors are involved trigger few or no questions, comments or harsh criticism. For instance, it has caused no great anger or uproar that Helen, played by actress Diane Kruger, had light hair in the movie *Troy* (2004), while the Helen of the BBC series *Troy: The Fall of a City* (2018), portrayed by Bella Dayne, had dark hair. Nor has it seemed important to audiences that Brad Pitt hardly looks like Achilles would have looked, just as Sean Bean and Joseph Mawle are both very unlikely to look like a truly Homeric Odysseus. Ajax looking much like a caveman in the 2004-movie may

[1] See Dee (2003-2004) 157 for references (Catullus, Cicero, Apuleius and Jerome).
[2] For a discussion of identifying color with race, and colorism with racism, see e.g. Harpalani (2015); Dixon & Telles (2017).
[3] Zuckerberg (2018).
[4] See, e.g., her introduction: Zuckerberg (2018) 1-10.

have drawn some degree of dissatisfaction, but not the kind of resentment that a fan of this hero, the second best of the Achaeans, would have liked.

Things are different in *Troy: The Fall of a City*. In this series the roles of many heroes and gods are played by people of colour, and this has elicited a stream of comments and attacks, not only by Alt-Right racists, but also by people who considered it factually incorrect to portray the Greeks and their gods as black-skinned. Achilles in particular, played by actor David Gyasi, enraged a number of people and prompted them to criticise not only the BBC's and the director's choice for the part, but also Gyasi himself for accepting the role.[1] Similarly controversial would be the character Zeus, played by Hakeem Kae-Kazim. In the case of Zeus' skin colour we may even cite not only the general opinion but a prominent scholar who refers to "black Zeus" in a different context while discussing the nature of a particular Greek play:

> Did the black Zeus actually appear on stage, or was his visit simply related? Carden is inclined to think that he did appear, and adds 'A black Zeus would be startling in a tragedy—this must be a pointer to some sort of satyr-play'.
>
> In all this I agree with Carden. But the argument must be taken further. Surely a black Zeus, whether he appeared on stage or not, would be startling enough even in a satyr-play.[2]

Seaford argues, then, that it would have been strange ("startling") for the Greek audience in the theatre to see a black Zeus on stage. In fact, this seems to reflect the above-mentioned scholarly view

[1] I am not going to cite here the despicable comments that are easily found e.g. on Twitter (renamed "X" in 2023) and elsewhere.
[2] Seaford (1980) 24.

based on 20th-century preconceptions of the significance of skin colour, not the views of 5th- and 4th-century Greeks. As we have seen, the audience would hardly have been disturbed.

Finally, a similar discussion has arisen even more recently when Netflix released *Queen Cleopatra* (2023). Cleopatra was portrayed by Adele James, a woman of colour, and the episode drew the anger of many people, including prominent archaeologist and former Minister of Antiquities, Zahi Hawass, who insisted that Cleopatra was light-skinned, not black. Furthermore, attempts were made by a lawyer, Mahmoud al-Semary, to block access to Netflix in Egypt due to the allegedly distorted representations.[1]

It would be a category error if I were to compare Seaford and Hawass directly with the Alt-Right movement: it is decidedly a misrepresentation of the facts to use them to make the same point. The former are serious and distinguished scholars seeking the truth, whereas the Alt-Right proponents have political and racist agendas that are, of course, completely different.[2] In addition to the argument that contemporary Greeks have lighter skin, the racist view seems generally to be based on a "syllogism" (!) like the following: (1) European civilisation (and, by extension, American civilisation) has its origin in ancient Greece; (2) European civilisation is a white civilisation; (3) therefore, the Greeks were white. It is very important to the Alt-Right and other racists that this is so, and therefore they consider it crucial that the most important figures of ancient Greece are not presented as black-skinned.

It is well-known that many Greek terms for colour signify differently than terms in modern English (and other) languages do, and

[1] See https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-65322821 (accessed September 26, 2023). See also Banker (2020) for an analysis of the Egyptian as well as the Greek positions in a digital age. On Greeks and Ethiopians, see Snowden (1997).
[2] For a description and an analysis of the Alt-Right movement, see Hawley (2017).

perception of colours has been a topic of research in classical studies.[1] Nietzsche stated the problem in a famous aphorism, entitled *Farbenblindheit der Denker*, in *Morgenröte*, in which he even (unwittingly) included a problem concerning human skin colour:

> Wie anders sahen die Griechen in ihre Natur, wenn Ihnen, wie man sich eingestehen muß, das Auge für Blau und Grün blind war, und sie statt des ersteren ein tiefes Braun, statt des zweiten ein Gelb sahen (wenn sie also mit gleichem Worte zum Beispiel die Farbe des dunklen Haares, die der Kornblume und die des südländischen Meeres bezeichneten, und wiederum mit gleichem Worte die Farbe der grünsten Gewächse und der menschlichen Haut, des Honigs und der gelben Harze: so daß ihre größten Maler bezeugtermaaßen ihre Welt nur mit Schwarz, Weiß, Rot und Gelb wiedergegeben haben),—wie anders und wie viel näher an den Menschen gerückt mußte ihnen die Natur erscheinen, weil in ihrem Auge die Farben des Menschen auch in der Natur überwogen und diese gleichsam in dem Farbenäther der Menschheit schwamm! (Blau und Grün entmenschlichen die Natur mehr, als alles andere.)[2]

Exactly how the ancient Greeks' perception of colour differs from ours, and in what way this is important in how we each view the world, may be a matter for discussion, albeit one that cannot be settled with certainty. It is, however, beyond dispute that there *is* a difference, and that it is not a trivial one. In fact, this is a general point about cultures and languages in general. The matter is expressed clearly by Sassi:

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[1] See Irwin (1974) and Sassi (2015), and the easily accessible Sassi (2017).

[2] Nietzsche (1954 [1881]) 1221. See also Eco (1985), a remarkable piece that takes its point of departure from Aulus Gellius' *Noctes Atticae* II.26, in which Gellius discusses different colours and compares the Greek and Latin words signifying these.

> [T]he common view held by the scholarship on color vision today is that every culture has its own way to name and categorize colors, which is not determined by the anatomical structure of the human eye (which is uniform), but by the fact that different ocular areas are stimulated, and do trigger different emotional responses, according to different *cultural* contexts. In short, humans cross-culturally tend to react differently to different wavelengths.[1]

In the case of ancient Greece, modern scholars generally agree that some nouns and adjectives—e.g. ξανθός, κυάνεος and χλωρός—are particularly difficult for us to grasp and handle. However, μέλας is not one of the most difficult ones. It denotes "black" or "(very) dark", although some dictionaries have included "brown" or "tanned" when the text concerns skin colour, based apparently on the passage from Homer that I will examine below.[2] Even when it refers to "wine" or "blood", the meaning is clearly "*very* dark". This means that we can most likely accept references to people, who are designated by the term μέλας and its cognates, as indicating black or very dark-skinned, and what is said about them can then determine whether or not this particular feature plays a large part in the perception of these people. Furthermore, we are allowed to accept things said about people who are *obviously* dark-skinned as evidence.

A comprehensive examination of such sources is far beyond the scope of this article. Instead, I will merely illustrate my point with two examples, which show in the first case that people of colour can

[1] Sassi (2015) 263.

[2] Liddell & Scott & Jones' dictionary (s.v. μελαγχροιής): "black-skinned", with the added meaning of "sunburnt persons", but with obscure references. Similarly, the Danish dictionary by C. Berg has "af mørkebrun", that is, "of dark-brown", without references, but clearly based on the Homeric passages that I discuss below. Diggle's has "dark-skinned" and "swarthy", and Liddell & Scott's intermediate dictionary (s.v. μελαγχροιής) has only "black-skinned".

be described in exceedingly positive terms without much reflection, and in the second case that the colour white is not better than black and vice versa.

(1) One may look first to Herodotus for important insight. Talking about an embassy sent by the Persian king, Cambyses, he writes:

> Οἱ δὲ Αἰθίοπες οὗτοι ἐς τοὺς ἀπέπεμπε ὁ Καμβύσης λέγονται εἶναι μέγιστοι καὶ κάλλιστοι ἀνθρώπων πάντων.[1]

Clearly, the Greeks generally conceived of the Ethiopians as dark-skinned people, and the attributes μέγιστοι καὶ κάλλιστοι ἀνθρώπων πάντων are, to put it mildly, strong evidence that black skin does not mean inferior people. It is tempting also to refer to Homer himself and the fact that in the very first song of the *Iliad* the gods visit the "blameless Ethiopians" (ἀμύμονας Αἰθιοπῆας).[2]

(2) In the more complicated case of philosophy, we have a number of texts, e.g. (Ps.-)Aristotle in *Physiognomonics*:

> Οἱ ἄγαν μέλανες δειλοί· ἀναφέρεται ἐπὶ τοὺς Αἰγυπτίους, Αἰθίοπας. οἱ δὲ λευκοὶ ἄγαν δειλοί· ἀναφέρεται ἐπὶ τὰς γυναῖκας. τὸ δὲ πρὸς ἀνδρείαν συντελοῦν χρῶμα μέσον δεῖ τούτων εἶναι.[3]

Here black/dark and white/light are identical in the sense that an excess of either of them leads to cowardice. Neither of them is by definition better than the other.[4] The middle between black and white is the colour that leads to courage, and is thus a kind of golden middle.

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[1] Herodot. *Hist*. III.20.

[2] Hom. *Il*. I.423-24.

[3] (Ps.-)Arist. *Physiogn*. 6, 812a13-15.

[4] See Jablonski (2012) 110-11.

One could make this the beginning of a thorough investigation, sifting through the passages in which we find colour terms, some of them supportive, some apparently contradicting the view presented above. Much work has already been done, and it would be ridiculous to base a substantial argument on two passages. However, for the present purpose we need only to note that it is impossible to say with any degree of certainty, based on the available evidence, that the Greeks valued one particular skin colour above all others; there is nothing in the texts even resembling modern racism. Also, we do not need to discuss what the actual colour of the skin was for specific individuals and people. We can simply state that the sources indicate that skin colour is not a central phenomenon in the Greek *conception* of other human beings, and to the extent that *colour* was important to the Greeks, skin colour was not an issue. Thus, in accordance with the quotation from Sassi above, the colour "black" triggers "different emotional responses, according to different *cultural* contexts". In this case, we have the culture of ancient Greece on the one hand and (broadly) that of Western Europe and the US on the other.

The important thing in the context of the present article, is that these facts will have to be reflected in scholarly presentations of the Greeks and Greek culture to a broader audience, in particular in translations.

2. Translation: The Skin Colour of Odysseus and Greek Heroes[1]

Unfortunately, racists will often find support for their views if they read the classics in *translations*, not least because of the translations of terms of colour in important passages of Greek writers. Most viewers of *Troy* and *Troy: Fall of a City* will have read little or no text

[1] For a brief analyses of the two passages from the *Odyssey* below, see Dee (2003-2004) 161-62. All quotations from the *Odyssey* are from West's edition.

in the original Greek and must rely on translations of Homer and other relevant sources, if they are to understand the original texts on which their comments are ultimately based.[1]

The case of one of the major heroes is telling. In the *Odyssey* the protagonist's appearance varies considerably throughout the story due to his ill fate at sea. He is, of course, a hero by nature, and as such he is necessarily handsome—or even beautiful in the complicated vocabulary of terms for beauty in Homer.[2] But as a man who has been battered by the gods and strange creatures, his natural beauty is not always visible and needs sometimes to be restored. A case in point is found in the 16th song of the *Odyssey*:

> ἦ, καὶ χρυσείηι ῥάβδωι ἐπεμάσσατ' Ἀθήνη·
> φᾶρος μέν οἱ πρῶτον ἐϋπλυνὲς ἠδὲ χιτῶνα
> θῆκ' ἀμφὶ στήθεσσι, δέμας δ' ὤφελλε καὶ ἥβην,
> ἂψ δὲ μελαγχροιὴς γένετο, γναθμοὶ δ' ἐτάνυσθεν,
> κυάνεαι δ' ἐγένοντο γενειάδες ἀμφὶ γένειον.[3]

Odysseus being a hero, it is only natural that Athena is responsible for this "restoration", and thus the result is beyond dispute: whatever Athena does to him will obviously make him beautiful, and the readers and listeners are in no position to question this.

With his restored attributes, Odysseus is now μελαγχροιής, and had this not been a Greek hero, the most obvious translation would

[1] In the following, I include a number of Danish examples from the two translations in use: Chr. Wilster's from 1837 and Otto Steen Due's from 2002. I have not included translations in major languages other than English. In the case of smaller languages like Danish, dubious translations can be very harmful, since readers have few chances of comparing the texts with other interpretations/translations. However, English translations, being (internationally) accessible to more people, are perhaps potentially even more harmful.

[2] Shakeshaft (2019).

[3] Hom., *Od*. XVI.172-76.

have been "black-skinned" or "dark-skinned". However, both Danish translations have "brown" ("brun" in Danish, the older form "brunladen" in the older one), which in Danish will mean "tanned". Obviously, this is not a case of overt racism in an attempt to cover up the "real" text, but it *is* based on pervasive, contemporary preconceptions about the ancient Greeks and about *their* conception of the importance of skin colour. English is no different in this regard. The following table lists a number of English translations:[1]

Translator	**Year**	**Translation**
Green	2018	swarthy
Wilson	2018	tanned
Whitaker	2017	colour came back to his flesh
Verity	2016	dark complexion
Powell	2015	suntanned
Mitchell	2013	tan
Kline	2004	his colour returned
McCrorie	2004	dark
Lombardo	2000	tanned
Fagles	1996	ruddy tan
Murray & Dimock	1995	dark of colour
Mandelbaum	1990	bronzed
Lattimore	1965	dark colour[2]
Fitzgerald	1961	ruddy with sun

[1] The list is far from complete. It includes only the most recent translations, and some of the older translations that have been—and are—in general use.
[2] Lattimore has "black" for κυάνεαι in the same passage. It is, of course, unproblematic for a white man to have a black beard.

The approach is clear: in most of these translations Odysseus is explicitly restored to a *tanned* colour, not to any natural colour. Even the few translations that have "swarthy"[1] or "dark" avoid referring explicitly to this as his *natural* skin colour, and not a single translator uses "black". They never include the word "skin", and with the single exception of Verity there is no indication that this has been a consideration at all. So, only a single translator dares to bring out the most obvious potential of the word and describe Odysseus as naturally dark-skinned. Instead, based on the text, we are likely to make the assumption that Odysseus is simply white, but the Greek wording shows that his skin could not be λευκός by nature. The commentator Eustathius was right about this.[2] In fact, as Dee has shown, it is unlikely that the ancient Greeks would have referred to themselves as λευκοί, even if skin colour *had* been important.[3]

The point about modern preconceptions is further demonstrated by some of the commentaries in general use. For instance, a much used commentary has the following text on μελαγχροιής:

> **μελαγχροιὴς:** the only case in Homer, with the possible exception of xix 246, where a person is said to have a sunburnt complexion.[4]

It is not at all seen as a possibility that Homer is referring to natural skin colour. One should note here that the commentators mention a possible exception (treated below), but they are not suggesting an

[1] By itself "swarthy" is clearly ambiguous. Thus, Green uses this term for Odysseus, whereas Fagles uses the same word for Eurybates.

[2] Eustath., *Comm. ad Homeri Odysseam* (ad *loc.*): μελαγχροιὴς δὲ ἱστορεῖται νῦν φύσει εἶναι ὁ Ὀδυσσεύς. διὸ καὶ τλήμων ἦν. στερεότερα γάρ, φασι, τὰ μέλανα τῶν σωμάτων, ὡς τὰ λευκὰ εὐπαθέστερα.

[3] Dee (2003-2004).

[4] Heubeck & Hoekstra (1989) 273.

alternative translation; they are only indicating that there may be another passage in which "sunburnt complexion" is correct.

In another well-known English commentary, W.B. Stanford translates "his skin Bronzed", and is perplexed, not by the possibility of a black-skinned Odysseus (which he does not even consider), but by the fact that the Homeric passage describes Odysseus' beard as κυάνεαι.[1] This is problematic, Stanford asserts, since Odysseus' hair is elsewhere described with the word ξανθός,[2] and this term Stanford takes to mean simply "auburn".[3] Thus, he finds it difficult to square κυάνεος and ξανθός, and clearly things would have been even more complicated, if he were to conceive of the skin colour as naturally black. If one goes back even further in the scholarly tradition, one is likely to find, in commentaries on the *Odyssey*, a view that is similar to the one described in section 1 above as distinguishing men acting properly from women acting properly. E.g.:

> μελαγχροιὴς (vgl. μελανόχροος τ 246) bezeichnet die bräunliche Gesichtsfarbe des kräftigen, viel im Freien lebende Mannes.[4]

As above, the reference to the 19th song is interesting. For it can be proved that modern translations of Homer's μελαγχροιής are based on prior assumptions about the appearance of Odysseus, not on solid evidence. Here I will take a simple approach by comparing the ways scholars have handled the passages in the 16th and the 19th songs respectively.

The picture of the passage from the 16th song that emerged from the discussion above is clear. In the 19th song of the *Odyssey* we are

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[1] γενειάδες in Stanford and West; ἐθειράδες in the OCT.

[2] Hom., *Od*. XIII.399.

[3] Stanford (1962, vol. II) *ad* XVI.175-6.

[4] Faesi (1860) *ad* XVI.175. So also Russo & Fernandez-Galiano & Heubeck (1993) 90, cited below. Chantraine (1968-1980) 680 (s.v. μέλας) also makes this connection

introduced to Eurybates, a kind of servant (herald) who is one of Odysseus' favourite companions, and the translators react very differently to the description than they did in the former passage. The Greek text is as follows:

> [...] καὶ τόν τοι μυθήσομαι, οἷος ἔην περ.
> γυρὸς ἐν ὤμοισιν, μελανόχροος, οὐλοκάρηνος·
> Εὐρυβάτης δ' ὄνομ' ἔσκε· τίεν δέ μιν ἔξοχον ἄλλων
> ὧν ἑτάρων Ὀδυσεύς, ὅτι οἱ φρεσὶν ἄρτια ἤιδει.[1]

μελανόχροος is synonymous with μελαγχροιής, as commentators and dictionaries seem to agree, but in this case the two Danish translators do indeed use "black"[2] instead of "brown". The English translations act similarly:

Translator	**Year**	**Translation**
Green	2018	dark of complexion
Wilson	2018	black skin
Whitaker	2017	black complexion
Verity	2016	dark-complexioned
Powell	2015	dark complexion
Mitchell	2013	dark complexion
Kline	2004	dark-skinned
McCrorie	2004	dark complexion
Lombardo	2000	dark skin
Fagles	1996	swarthy

[1] Hom., *Od*. XIX.245-48.

[2] The Danish word is "sort" which is identical to "black". The older translator (Wilster, 1837) uses the term "sortsmudset", which is obsolete in the sense that many will nowadays regard it as a racist word.

Murray & Dimock	1995	dark of skin
Mandelbaum	1990	dark skin
Lattimore	1965	black-complexioned
Fitzgerald	1961	dusky

Several commentators run into problems here. In their analysis of the passage in the 16th song, Heubeck & Hoekstra seem to say that the passages in the 16th and the 19th songs indicate the same colour (see quotation above). The next volume of the *Odyssey*-commentary (written by Russo, Fernandez-Galiano and Heubeck) is explicit in the comment on the latter passage:

> **μελανόχροος, οὐλοκάρηνος:** 'dark-skinned' must mean the same as μελαγχροιής applied to Odysseus at xvi 175 (when Athena restores his handsome appearance), denoting the ruddy tan natural to men who spend much time out of doors (cf. Ar. *Ec.* 385—7,428, for the unmanly pallor of the women disguised as men). The combination with οὐλοκάρηνος, however, may point to a specific combination of physical traits, 'dark-skinned' and 'woolly-headed', that are meant to suggest an African type, generally thought of as 'Ethiopian' in antiquity. See F. Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), 101-2, 122, 181.[1]

However, the commentators are unwilling to draw the logical conclusion. Even though they claim that μελανόχροος "must mean the same as μελαγχροιής", they immediately propose that οὐλοκάρηνος indicates "an African type", thus stressing a suggested difference between Odysseus and Eurybates; for they would hardly describe Odysseus in such words. This understanding of οὐλοκάρηνος is not new; Snowden took it for granted 30-40 years

[1] Russo & Fernandez-Galiano & Heubeck (1993) 90.

earlier in a paragraph entitled "The Greek Attitude Toward the Negro" and continued to do so in his *Before Color Prejudice*.[1]

Similarly, the already mentioned German commentary by Faesi refers to Herodotus in an attempt to prove that Homer means to specify people from the South, but Faesi furthermore states that the terms also indicate age:

> οὐλοκάρηνος, bei Herodot οὐλόθριξ, das natürlich krause Haar des Südländers bezeichnend. [...] Alle drei [that is, γυρὸς ἐν ὤμοισιν, μελανόχροος, οὐλοκάρηνος] sind ἅπαξ εἰρ. μελανόχρ. und οὐλοκ. dienen zugleich zur Altersbestimmung, [...].[2]

This argument which proposes that the hair is a significant part of the interpretation is, to the best of my knowledge, the only reason that may possibly be adduced for the differences in translation of μελαγχροιής and μελανόχροος. Faesi may be referring to passages, in which Herodotus describes Egyptians and Ethiopians,[3] and Snowden points, for instance, to Diodorus Siculus' description which seems to use this particular feature as indicating an Ethiopian.[4] However, at least three counterarguments can be produced:

(1) The commentators have already themselves stated that the terms in the two passages carry the same meaning, and the arguments on the respective passages in the 16th and the 19th songs seem

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[1] Snowden (1948) 37; Snowden (1983) 56.

[2] Faesi (1860) *ad* XIX.246.

[3] Herodot., *Hist*. II.104: μελάγχροές [...] καὶ οὐλότριχες; *Id*. VII.70: οἱ δ' ἐκ τῆς Λιβύης οὐλότατον τρίχωμα ἔχουσι πάντων ἀνθρώπων. On Herodotus' descriptions of blackness with particular reference to the first of these passages, see also Samuels (2015).

[4] Diod. Sic. III.8.2: πλεῖστοι δὲ τούτων καὶ μάλισθ' οἱ παρὰ τὸν ποταμὸν οἰκοῦντες ταῖς μὲν χρόαις εἰσὶ μέλανες, ταῖς δὲ ἰδέαις σιμοί, τοῖς δὲ τριχώμασιν οὖλοι.

to contradict each other in both the English and the German commentaries: you cannot claim that they mean the same while at the same time referring the latter to an "African type".

(2) Both men are natives of Ithaka, and Eurybates is also characterised by the adjective Ἰθακήσιος, which would seem strange if he were actually African.[1]

(3) οὐλοκάρηνος does not necessarily indicate an "African type", but may equally well signify the hair of Greek heroes or gods as seen on statues. Furthermore, Homer himself uses οὖλος to describe Odysseus' hair,[2] so the word actually supports the claim that Odysseus and Eurybates have similar appearances. "Woolly" (οὖλος) and the different composites simply do not necessarily indicate anything about foreignness or the colour of one's skin.[3] Therefore, the references to Herodotus and Diodorus prove nothing. Stanford translates μελανόχροος as "swarthy-skinned", and does not comment on the term. He does, however, spend time on οὐλοκάρηνος and refers to Hayman, who compares this hair with "Greek male statues (*e.g.* the Hermes of Praxiteles, the Agias of Lysippus, or the Piombino Apollo".[4]

The result of this is clear: although there is room for identical translations of the two passages, Odysseus is *only once* (by Verity) represented as *naturally* dark-skinned, whereas Eurybates is almost *always* described as *naturally* black- or dark-skinned in the translations. In the case of Odysseus, the translators do not mention the word "skin", whereas either "skin" or "complexion" is used by al-

[1] Hom., *Il*. II.184.

[2] Hom., *Od*. VI.229-31: τὸν μὲν Ἀθηναίη θῆκεν Διὸς ἐκγεγαυῖα // μέζονά τ' εἰσιδέειν καὶ πάσσονα, κὰδ δὲ κάρητος // οὔλας ἧκε κόμας, ὑακινθίνωι ἄνθει ὁμοίας. The similar text in *Od*. XXIII.158 has been questioned by some scholars.

[3] See also Irwin (1974) 114.

[4] Stanford (1962, vol. II) *ad*. XIX.246.

most all translators in the Eurybates-passage. All this hardly mattered to the Greeks, but the modern reactions to unexpected portrayals of Greek heroes, as shown above in the discussion of movies and series, prove that it is an important consideration when translating the Greek epics and other ancient texts. And even if it did matter to the Greeks, and if the argument of my first section was thus wrong, it still cannot validate the different translations that are based on preconceptions. The general reader of existing Danish and English translations will therefore be misdirected to the point where the translations can be used to support a racist agenda, allegedly based on classical sources, even though this is not, of course, the purpose of the translators.

A final table summarising and comparing the different translations of the passages illustrates the point:

Translator	**16th song: Odysseus**	**19th song: Eurybates**
Green	swarthy	dark of complexion
Wilson	tanned	black skin
Whitaker	colour came back to his flesh	black complexion
Verity	dark complexion	dark-complexioned
Powell	suntanned	dark complexion
Mitchell	tan	dark complexion
Kline	his colour returned	dark-skinned
McCrorie	dark	dark complexion
Lombardo	tanned	dark skin
Fagles	ruddy tan	swarthy
Murray & Dimock	dark of colour	dark of skin
Mandelbaum	bronzed	dark skin
Lattimore	dark colour	black-complexioned

Fitzgerald	ruddy with sun	dusky

Conclusion

Based on the discussion above, there are no valid reasons why the Greek gods and heroes cannot be portrayed by both light-skinned and dark-skinned actors. James Dee reached an almost identical conclusion about the relative irrelevance of skin colour, and his worries and views on the importance of classicists considering their approach to the topic are also the same, albeit without focusing on translation.[1]

Translators may well be one of the major problems when we unconsciously retain the distinction black-white as meaningful. When two people from Ithaka, described in the original Greek by adjectives of identical meaning, are "made" black (Eurybates) and "tanned" (Odysseus) respectively, and the former is a servant, the latter a great hero, we have reiterated a modern prejudice and stereotype.

Thus, David Gyasi and Brad Pitt can portray Achilles just as much as Diane Kruger and Bella Dayne can both play Helen despite their different hair colour. As a matter of fact, in the context of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* hair is much more important than skin colour, and this is the only reason I can think of why David Gyasi portraying Achilles might be a problem: Gyasi has *no* hair in his role as Achilles! Thus, he cannot make an offering of his hair at the funeral of Patroclus, and *this* would be much more important in the Greek conception of Achilles than the colour of his skin.

[1] Dee (2003-2004) 165: "One of our tasks as classicists is to remind today's students—and the public at large—that, even though some people cling with irrational fervor and violence to the notion of a 'white race,' it is an idea which has no historical or scientific basis."

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