

Return from Troy – interview with Hugh Lupton and Daniel Morden

Interviewer: Daniel, Hugh, you've just been recording the Odyssey for us, and I wondered: how have you turned that complicated Odyssey that's in a book into a story that you tell?

Hugh: Well, it's a process really of finding pictures, seeing the story as a sequence of pictures, one picture following another, and the words wind in and out of the pictures. So, as you're working on a story, some bits fall away because you can't quite see them; some bits become clearer, and you find yourself making your own particular journey through the story.

Interviewer: And of course, Daniel, this story's been told for over 3000 years. It was written down about 2700 years ago. How have you tried to keep that ancient feel to the Odyssey?

Daniel: Well, we've tried to keep a lot of details that come from the original story, but we've also tried very hard to make it into a told tale. We want it to have the sense of something that's happening right now, in front of the audience, that it isn't something we're reading when we're recording it, we're trying to tell it to the microphone as we would tell it to an audience, in the hope that that will make it more exciting to listen to. So, it's quite a long process to record it, because we make a lot of mistakes: as we're telling the story, we're kind of searching for the right words to use, to make it as exciting as we possibly can. And of course this story, whilst it was written down, before it was written down, it was mainly just told from person to person. So we're returning it to its original, ancient beginnings.

Interviewer: And is there anything about the language that you use, or the patterns in which you tell, that is Homeric or Ancient Greek?

Daniel: Yeah, Homer uses certain phrases again and again across the story, and we try and use those phrases: for example, if we refer to the goddess Athene, the goddess of war and wisdom, we always call her "Owl-eyed Athene", which is the way Homer refers to her in the original text. And we like that because, as Hugh mentioned just now, we try and concentrate on images in the story so that, as you're listening to the story, you can see a picture in your mind's eye. So the idea of a goddess with the eyes, not of a human being, but the eyes of an owl, is a wonderful image. So we try and draw back on those

Homeric descriptions. And likewise, for example in the blinding of the Cyclops, a lot of the descriptions, a lot of the details, come from an original written source: the descriptions of the Cyclops, the things he says to the people – the trick, for example, is straight out of Homer, the idea of him calling himself 'Nobody', and the Cyclops saying "Nobody has blinded me!", that comes straight out of the Homeric story. So it's wonderful, because it's a 0-year-old trick that still works even now and entertains an audience even today.

Interviewer: And of course, if you read out the Odyssey, it would take forever – it's actually a very long story in the written version – so as well as deciding, as you just described Dan, what you've included, what have you left out? Hugh, have you had to leave bits out of the original?

Hugh: Yes, we have. The original is a little bit complicated because it starts off with Odysseus' son going off in search of his father, and then it tells the story of how Odysseus starts to make his journey back to Ithaca, and then at a certain point Odysseus stops and tells his story to King Alcinous. And we thought that the story would be simpler if it goes in a straight line, if the timeline through the story is one event that follows another event that follows another event that follows another event in kind of a straight line. So we've pared back, we've cut out some of that journey of Odysseus' son and some of that early part of the story, and we add it a bit later on so that things happen in their proper time, as they would in someone's life. So, yeah, we've reconstructed it a bit. And one or two of the islands as well – there are lots and lots of islands – there are one or two islands that we've cut out because we wanted the really exciting adventures to keep people gripped.

Interviewer: It is the story of Odysseus, basically, the Odyssey, and I wondered: you've been sort of living with Odysseus, both of you, for quite a while, and I wondered what you thought of him?

Daniel: Well Odysseus is very much liked by the goddess Athene. And Athene is the goddess of wisdom, as well as war, and Odysseus is a very interesting character because he differs from a lot of the Greek heroes in that he has to use his wits. He uses his cleverness to overcome problems as often as he uses his strength. So he's a fascinating character because he can outwit a giant rather than trying to kill the giant. He uses his brain in a very creative way, so he's an exciting character to spend a lot of time with, to tell the story of, because of his cleverness.

Hugh: And I think one of the interesting things about the Odyssey, the story of Odysseus after the Iliad, is that, in the Iliad, everybody is at the mercy of the gods and goddesses whereas, in the Odyssey, you have Odysseus using his wits, using his cleverness, to make his own journey, get out of scrapes himself. He's not so much at the mercy of the gods and goddesses, he's making his own passage through life, and it's kind of a shift in the way people understand human life, I think.

Interviewer: We know that Homer's great stories of the Iliad and this story, the Odyssey, were performed by storytellers like yourself at grand events in Ancient Greece, there were feasts and festivals and storytelling competitions. This is a question for both of you, I just wondered if you ever wonder what it might have been like, really, to have been a storyteller in Ancient Greece – or anywhere else, really, for that matter.

Hugh: Yes, well, storytellers throughout history have been treated in different ways in different places, in some places, in Ireland, Ancient Ireland, storytellers were very, very high-status people – not much short of some of the kings – very, very highly regarded; at other times, in other places, they've been little more than beggars. It's difficult to know – I don't know – what their status was in Ancient Greece, but we have some clues from Demodocus, who's the storyteller at the court of King Alcinous at the beginning of the story of the Odyssey, and he seems to be quite highly regarded: the king brings him in as an entertainer for this guest who's just been feasted and feted. And Demodocus begins to tell his story and of course Odysseus, when he hears the story, begins to cry. So I don't know, it seems that a storyteller, if he was any good, would have been treated pretty well in Ancient Greece.

Daniel: What I like about the story is that, over and over again in the original book, the warriors cry. So when Odysseus loses some of his men after they've been eaten by the dragon Scylla, they all sit there crying on the ship. And I love the idea that the storyteller would have stood up before an audience of hardened warriors and soldiers and started to tell a story and tears would have coursed down their cheeks and dropped from their beards. I love the idea of these old, battle-hardened warriors who are so moved in the story by the death of the dog, for example, that they start crying themselves.

Hugh: Another thing that a storyteller would've done would've been to sing the praises of whoever it was that they were staying with, or whoever it was that was keeping them

and feeding them. And they would've had to know all the history of the family of the person who was looking after them and sing the praises of his father and his grandfather and his great-grandfather and all the stories and the battles that they might have been associated with. So a storyteller would have had to be a historian as well as someone who knew the tales.