

FEMALE TRANSLATORS OF GREEK DRAMA

PRINS (Y.) *Ladies' Greek. Victorian Translations of Tragedy*. Pp. xx + 297, ills. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017. Paper, £24.95, US\$29.95 (Cased, £62.95, US\$75). ISBN: 978-0-691-14189-3 (978-0-691-14188-6 hbk).

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At the outset of this review I am going to be upfront: *Ladies' Greek* is an exceptional piece of work. Deftly written, insightful and expansive, the book demonstrates P.'s excellence as a scholar. P. has produced more than outstanding scholarship, though: her series of encounters with archival materials and the lives and works of past women they represent is both compelling and moving. I will confess that the book took some time to get through, but that is chiefly because I found myself re-reading some of the passages again and again as one might do a great piece of literature; as, in fact, I often find myself doing with the prose of Virginia Woolf, one of the ladies whose experience with Greek P. so masterfully and sensitively illuminates.

Alongside Woolf, there are discussions on a number of prominent figures from the worlds of scholarship and literature: the eminent Jane Harrison features on several occasions, as do H.D. and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. P. also shines a light on some lesser known women, whose experiences with Greek are remarkable either because they influenced the likes of Woolf or Harrison, or because they provide a fascinating insight into the complex ways in which Greek mediated between gender and society in the lives of these nineteenth- and twentieth-century individuals. These range from the work of Janet Case, Woolf's Greek tutor, to the theatrical endeavours of Eva Palmer Sikelianos. P.'s overarching project is to explore the phenomenon of the 'Woman of Greek Letters' that emerged in the nineteenth century, 'a generic figure mediating between classical literature and its popular reception, between the professionalization of philology and the popularization of classics, between classical literacy and the common reader' (p. xi). It is, as P. describes it, a 'recovery project' with a 'genealogy in feminist literary history' (p. xii), arguing that 'nineteenth-century women writers turned to tragedy in particular as a literary genre for the performance of female classical literacy, dramatizing the encounter with Greek letters as a scene highly charged with eros and pathos' (p. xii). Significantly, the book is not about professional philology, but rather about women who turned to translation 'in order to perform other ways of "knowing" and "doing" Greek' (ibid.).

The performance metaphor runs throughout the different chapters, with P. examining the scenes of various women's encounters with Greek. The stage properties are the archival materials that testify to these encounters – manuscript drafts, photographs, notebooks, letters, marginalia – with P. carefully framing her discussions, so that we are made witness to her own experiences in the archive. There is a palpable sense of her own encounters illuminating the encounters of past women. The strategy might sound like an excuse for anecdote, but far from it. It is both highly effective and scholarly rigorous, transforming what might be a rather dry exercise into a vivid succession of case studies that pay equal attention to affect and performativity as they do to literary analysis. The cyclical, reoccurring themes and figures that come and go throughout the chapters add to this, and the result is – to follow P.'s cue of scenes and performances – like a five-act drama charged with its own eros and pathos, each act adding new layers to the unfolding story even as they revisit the layers that have already been set down.

The through-lines of each 'act' are translations – as well as transcriptions, transliterations and transformations – of one particular tragedy by various English and American

women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After an extensive preface and introduction in which P. lays out the broad context of Victorian Hellenism against which the book is set and some of the crucial aspects of *Ladies' Greek* that is invariably written 'upon the margins' (p. 8), the chapters explore *Agamemnon*, *Prometheus Bound*, Sophocles' *Electra*, *Hippolytus* and *Bacchae*, with *Antigone* discussed in the postface. Each chapter is richly detailed in its close consideration of not only these tragic texts in various states of translation and performance, but also the lives that intersected with and were deeply influenced by them. It is hard to single out highlights when the work is so consistently high quality, but one of the most simultaneously moving and fascinating sections is P.'s explication of the 'Cassandra effect' – 'a moment when English seems as foreign as Greek, and perhaps even barbaric when compared to Greek', revealing 'the nakedness of language itself in its most material form as a mere concatenation of sound or letters without signification' (pp. 53, 55). P. demonstrates how the effect was 're-enacted in the theater of Woolf's *Agamemnon* notebook', before going on to trace the resonances of Cassandra in Woolf's life and prose, arriving at the conclusion that 'we should read Cassandra's twittering as the translation of a mad spell simultaneously into and out of the experience of reading Greek' (p. 56). It poignantly and persuasively illustrates the strange and wonderful spell Greek cast over the lives of Woolf and the other women explored in the book – not only a scholarly pursuit, but also a passion that shaped and reshaped their creative selves.

While the work on Woolf, Barrett Browning and other noted authors is a dominant feature of the volume, the scope of the book goes beyond literary experience and practice described through the metaphor of performance. P. also takes an extended look at theatre performances, with her chapter on *Bacchae* going even further in its discussion of performative means of an embodied identification with Greek. Here she argues that the maenad became a model for women to enact 'the increasing mobility of "the new woman" in the early twentieth century', becoming an 'embodiment of women's movements' in transatlantic culture (p. 202). Although P. is not the first to note that maenads became a metaphor for first-wave feminism in the nineteenth century, her reading of the way in which a number of women practised the metaphor as a kinaesthetic experience of Greek is revelatory – it expands the possibilities for thinking through Classical transmission that goes beyond the page, the library and the academy. As such, one of the few criticisms I have of this extraordinary book is that P. does not connect her conclusions, even if only briefly, to the wider context of how and why Greek tragedy was being performed in the period.

Nevertheless, the volume is a triumph. As a feminist act of recovery, it represents a crucial step forward in expanding the ways in which women's historical engagement with Greek is understood. Of course it still wrestles with all the difficulties that face any recovery project, and as such it is perhaps helpful to conclude by considering Barrett Browning's metaphor for the value of translation: a mirror that being held in "different lights by different hands" ... [refracts] the light of the original text in such a way that "both the English reader and the Greek poet are benefitted" (p. 69). P. suggests that this has 'the radical implication that the original may only be readable as a refraction' (ibid.). In the same way, the volume provides a series of refractions that allows lives, works and passions to be read and thus recovered in a project that cannot recreate the past but can significantly expand our understanding of it. It is as beautiful and remarkable as the glowing comments from the likes of H. Foley and S. Goldhill on the back cover promise it to be, and an absolute must-read for all those who want to get a more complete picture of how the Classical world circulates through modern cultures.

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