

BOOK REVIEW

Ladies' Greek: Victorian Translations of Tragedy. *Yopie Prins*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017. Pp. ix+297.

I never asked my mother why she chose to study Greek all through her high school and college years. Erasmus Hall was the only public high school in New York that offered Greek (along with Latin); the classics departments there and at the women's college she later attended were large, and many of her instructors were female. Yopie Prins's *Ladies Greek* puts my mother's experience in the 1920s and early 1930s into the much larger context of a nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women's romance with the study, translation, and performance of Greek, especially the tragedies. Now as I turn over the pages of my mother's copy of Sophocles's plays, in Greek, with their interlinear, penciled translations in her familiar hand (and occasional marginal notations in Greek script), or take up the crumbling newspaper review she saved from the 1931 Vassar College production, in Greek, of Euripides's *Hippolytus* (directed by Hallie Flannagan, who went on to head the WPA Theater Project) and come across her name, these documents of personal history resonate with Prins's pleasure in the material traces of just such experiences by women known and unknown, as she encountered them hunting through archives in England and the US.

Prins reproduces, for example, the thirteen-year-old Elizabeth Barrett Barrett's holograph "First Greek Ode May 4th, 1819 To Summer"; a page from Virginia Woolf's "Agamemnon Notebook" (with English and Greek texts, in her hand, on facing pages); the back cover of Annie Adams Fields's Massachusetts diary for November 1865, where she has copied out the letters of the Greek alphabet; photographs and programs from Girton College (Cambridge) and Smith College productions of *Electra* in Greek in

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1883 and 1889; and typewritten notes and drawings showing chorus members how to move for a 1935 production, directed and choreographed by Eve Palmer Sikelianus, of *The Bacchae* at Bryn Mawr College. As Prins suggests, a fascination with the literality of Greek letters as well as the attraction of their resistance to translation prompted new ways of knowing (and not knowing) Greek for women who were presumed capable only of “Lady’s Greek, without the accents” (as a scornful Romney tells Aurora Leigh, in Barrett Browning’s 1859 long poem *Aurora Leigh* [2.76–77]). These women studied Greek not (or not just) with a scholar’s concern for accents and grammar but as the stimulus to invention, translating Greek into verse and on the stage, where the charged (sometimes erotically charged) relation of women to Greek is explored not only in writing but through the vocal and physical gestures of the body. The traces of their fascination with inscribing, translating, and performing Greek is now, as Prins concludes, our own romance with a still largely unexplored archive.

Prins has been the pioneer in this archive, working on her project since the 1990s, and in the meantime has published enough of her finds that others have begun to follow her lead. Isobel Hurst, *Victorian Women Writers and the Classics: The Feminine of Homer* (Oxford University Press, 2006), Caroline Winterer, *The Mirror of Antiquity: American Women and the Classical Tradition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), Tracy Olferson, *Women Writers and the Dark Side of Late-Victorian Hellenism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), and Helene Foley, *Reimagining Greek Tragedy on the U. S. Stage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), to name just a few, have already built on Prins’s earlier work in her prizewinning study, *Victorian Sappho* (Princeton University Press, 1999), and essays on other aspects of ladies’ Greek appearing between 1991 and 2010. Prins’s book, then, might be said in yet another sense to be at once the mother and the daughter of the story of she tells here. Though her first two chapters on Woolf and Barrett Browning cover some ground that may be familiar, her decision to focus the book on translations and performances of selected tragedies allows her to reflect illuminatingly on the particular experience of Woolf and Barrett Browning translating *Prometheus Bound* and *Agamemnon*, respectively, while comparing their efforts with those of their female teachers and contemporaries on the page and stage. Subsequent chapters on *Elektra*, *Hippolytus*, and *The Bacchae* (especially the first and last) provide the opportunity for one of Prins’s most original contributions, her account of amateur performances by women that became a way of learning Greek shared among women’s colleges in the UK and the US.

Much of *Ladies’ Greek* is less a literary study than a historical account, carefully documented, of women’s study of Greek tragedy in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This might have been a somewhat dry and sometimes repetitive story. But Prins has a gift for wordplay and

turns of phrase (and for turning those phrases inside out or the other way around to bring out new meanings) that can open up new speculative possibilities as we ask why women were so attracted to learning Greek, even though that particular device can occasionally wear thin. In conjunction with the tantalizing reproductions of pages that seem still to bear the marks of the writers' imaginative investments in their subjects, however, Prins's verbally playful speculations work to make this not a dry-as-dust story but something of a historical romance—a romance of the archival scholar, then and now, where we too are invited to play in the archive.

There are intriguing pages on the particular appeal of the *Agamemnon*'s Cassandra (with her stuttering, untranslatable cry, "otototoi") and *Prometheus Bound*'s Io (turned into a cow, her inarticulate suffering too became an object of identification for would-be women translators and poets) in Woolf's, Barrett Browning's, and their contemporaries' translations of those plays. Io and Cassandra are not the female characters—Clytemnestra or Medea or Antigone—who have attracted most of the attention in second-wave feminist scholarship (and George Eliot, whose interest in Antigone has been much written about, plays only a minor role in Prins's book). There is also one excellent chapter on *Hippolytus* in the hands of poet and translator A. Mary F. Robinson and, a few years later, poet H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) that takes full advantage of Prins's own sure knowledge of Greek and English metrics (and her experience as a translator) to show how H.D. in particular translated a Greek into an innovative English metrical dance of feet. Robinson and H.D., as Prins shows, were actually less interested in Phaedra, the tragic heroine of the play, than in Hippolytus, the chaste hunter and androgynous devotee of Artemis—a striking subject, indeed, in H.D.'s many poems based on the play, as it must have been for a women's college performance where both the women's and the huntsmen's choruses were played—and danced—by women.

Here as throughout this important study, Prins shows us that we have been too hasty in our belief that the Barrett Brownings, the Woolfs, the Robinsons, and the H.D.s were isolated, exceptional instances of women who learned Greek. "More than a private passion," Prins emphasizes, "this desire for Greek was part of a collective identification with Greek letters that Anglo-American women recirculated" for their own purposes (25). I may never know why my mother studied Greek, but I know that she was not alone.

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