

## BOOK REVIEW

Yopie Prins. *Ladies' Greek: Victorian Translations of Tragedy*. Princeton, 2017.

Yopie Prins' long-awaited book, *Ladies' Greek*, is a very welcome contribution to the field of classical reception and the history of women's education in the US and England. "Lady's Greek" was originally a disparaging term for a kind of genteel amateurism: the phrase comes from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's autobiographical verse novel, *Aurora Leigh*, where the young idealistic heroine's cousin mocks her attempts to produce Greek verse without the accent marks that were *de rigueur* for proper (masculine) philological study. Prins persuasively re-appropriates the term "Ladies' Greek" to name a particular way of "doing classics" (a way which of course was just as intellectually and artistically productive as any gentleman's), and a particular way of *loving* to do it, connected to "the pain and pleasure of learning to read Greek" (Prins 5) and to the "erotics" of translation and performance. As women on both sides of the Atlantic gradually transitioned into formal education at the end of the Victorian era, creating the traditions and rituals of the great women's colleges, "knowing Greek" opened a terrain for alternative forms of desire.

Prins' subjects include poets, novelists, scholars, choreographers, even college administrators; they range from very well-known figures (Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Virginia Woolf, Edith Hamilton, H.D.) to lesser-known and even anonymous women, in an "archive" of Ladies' Greek that includes news clippings, marginalia, carefully kept production records, unpublished notes, sketches, and drafts. We meet some famous firsts: Janet Case, later Virginia Woolf's Greek teacher, shining as Athena in the previously all-male Cambridge Greek Play; Agnata Ramsey, "the iconic Girton Girl" (14) celebrated in the press for outdoing her male competitors in the famously difficult Tripos exams. But failures also matter. Amy Levy, one of the first Jewish women to study at Cambridge, comes to life through self-deprecating caricature; she left without taking the exams, and later wrote *Xantippe*, "a dramatic monologue in which the embittered wife of Socrates narrates her exclusion from the philosophical dialogues between men in his inner circle" (20). Coleridge's daughter Sara put down her unfinished translation of the *Agamemnon* to review Tennyson's misogynist *Princess Ida*, and somehow never picked it up again. Others whose direct pursuit of professional scholarship was thwarted went on to found institutions of higher learning which upheld the banner of Greek and its value for young women. Ladies' Greek as a collective (often feminist) cultural project becomes especially visible when Prins analyses campus performance of Greek tragedy – and of the "thrill" of Greek – from Cambridge to Bryn Mawr and Smith, and eventually Spelman, where a 1935 production of *Antigone* "redefine[d] the spectacle of white femininity associated with Ladies' Greek" (242).

Prins argues that although women did not actively choose marginality, many maintained an amateur stance that helped them work productively "with a difference" even after formal barriers fell. I was reminded of Woolf's view in *A Room of One's Own* that circling around the sacred grove, unauthorized but self-authorizing, might not be so bad after all: "it was unpleasant to be locked out, but worse perhaps to be locked in." (Indeed, any reader of *Middlemarch* would much rather be Dorothea than Casaubon.) "Ladies' Greek" enabled those who practiced it to work at the boundary between scholarship and creativity, to act as mediators, opening up and democratizing access to the tradition and giving it a new lease on life. Along with college founders like M. Carey Thomas, the clearest examples of this are Jane

Harrison, who returned to Cambridge after an independent career and whose acceptance as a scholar has always been ambiguous, even while her enthusiastic lectures were credited with “the revival of popular interest in ancient Greece” (*Pall Mall Gazette* as qtd. in Prins 17), and Edith Hamilton, whose best-selling books *The Greek Way* (1930) and *Mythology* (1940) brought classics to a mainstream American public.

Prins is both a classicist and a Victorianist, and her work falls into the increasingly vital field of classical reception studies. Rather than telling a linear story of influences, or evaluating interpretations by how closely they match (someone’s idea of) a source text’s intrinsic meaning, reception studies look for interchanges, meeting places of ancient and modern. Issues of faithfulness fall away, and the original is seen as the product of a mobile process of meaning-making, an endless series of re-enactments that (re)create it for new times and audiences. Virginia Woolf, whose “On Not Knowing Greek” hovers over Prins’ project, may in a way have invented reception studies, in that essay’s self-conscious reflexivity: since (she says) no one of “us” “now” (1925) can truly “know” it, the value and excitement of reading Greek comes precisely from that impossibility, as we reach for an understanding we can never quite seize. As in her previous book, *Victorian Sappho*, Prins enacts a doubled, or palimpsestic, reception: providing her own brilliantly nuanced readings of ancient tragedy, she explicitly situates herself within the interpretive tradition her book describes.

Much of this material has been carefully studied before, and *Ladies’ Greek* is a good guide to the field, but doesn’t entangle itself in the minutiae of intrascholastic debate. Instead, moving seamlessly back and forth between historical and archival context and close literary analysis, Prins carves out a set of “dramatic episodes” (Prins 33), engagements with particular tragedies, as performed through translation and translated through performance. She begins with Woolf’s study of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, followed by a quite varied set of women’s versions of his *Prometheus Bound*. 1880s performances of Sophocles’ *Electra* at Girton College and then at Smith are shown as both drawing on and challenging Victorian ideals for women, through traditions of highly stylized classical posing (and, at Smith, the “expressive movement” of the Delsarte school). We are then shown “how women contributed to a major shift in the reception of Euripides” (32), and how this in turn changed women’s own writing: his *Hippolytus* was “transformed into new lyric meters” enabling new erotics, first by A. Mary F. Robinson (under the “queer” tutelage” [153] of J.A. Symonds), and then, rather differently, by H.D. in both prose and verse. Then, we see the *Bacchae* “transposed into dancing letters by women posing as modern maenads,” both on page and on stage. In a beautiful coda, the notes made in 1909 by Meta Glass, future president of Sweet Briar, in her student copy of Sophocles’ *Antigone* are magically transfigured by contemporary visual artist Andrea Elis, whose photographic palimpsests are apt figures for the still-active workshop of *Ladies’ Greek*.

Prins connects her work to the “recovery project” of second-wave feminist critics like Gilbert and Gubar, whose original impulse to uncover silenced and forgotten women writers of the past can also be traced back to Woolf’s (in *A Room of One’s Own*). But where that first generation of critics assumed “that women were excluded from classics as a ‘masculine’ domain” they sought to enter, Prins argues against such simple framing. For instance, where Lorena Hardwick saw “empowerment” in women claiming their right to translate Aeschylus, Prins sees a more complex entanglement: the translator is both bound, and unbound, both Prometheus and Io (84). Where early feminist critics were interested in “women’s *identity*,” Prins is, she says, more interested in “their strange *identification* with Greek letters” – “Why did women in Victorian America and England desire to learn ancient Greek, and how did they turn it into a language for desire?” (xii). As a result, she is less quick to homogenize her subjects: while one comes to agree that this rather varied group of women are all, somehow, engaged in roughly the same undertaking, the singularity of each women’s life and effort remains palpable.

This is in every way a fantastic book, a tour de force. Behind each paragraph one senses whole notebooks of research and reflection, and an enviable ability to select and shape. The archive itself is, she says, “a place of dreams,” “an encounter with the eros and pathos of dead letters” (244). But sometimes it is easier to “get into” the archive than to pull oneself *out* of it, to decide amid a welter of fascinating information which details are the luminous ones and which must be left in shadow. In the case of *Ladies' Greek*, the result is truly a work of art.

My one (slight) unease with the book's framing has to do with periodization. For Prins, the “long nineteenth century” is very long indeed: it reaches as late as Edith Hamilton's influence on Robert Kennedy. Starting as I do from the other end (my “long century” is the twentieth), the word “Victorian” in her subtitle feels a bit ... stretchy. She succeeds in convincing me that Robinson, the author of “A Handful of Honeysuckle,” had *some* points in common with H.D., and that the later poet “found a ‘queer’ lineage within late Victorian Hellenism” (181) has been well demonstrated. Prins' deep reading of H.D.'s engagement with the figure of Hippolytus, and of her sense of meter as embodied, is truly brilliant. But seeing that Robinson's adaptation of Greek to English meter resulted in lines that now feel embarrassingly close to doggerel (“OH! my NIGHTingale, NIGHTingale, TRILL out thy ANapest”), I'd say that while Robinson and H.D. were asking the same question (just as Swinburne and Pound were), they answered it in a radically different way, and that, as another metrical modernist said, has made all the difference. Of course, these are subjective questions of taste; but taste itself has a history. Edith Hamilton is credited here with the first modernist translation of *Prometheus Bound* (1927); if it had not been modernist, Americans would not have bought it in the quantities they did. I think it was Barbara Johnson who said, “thought as a break is different from thought as a chain.”

Modernism also, I think, introduced a particular *kind* of self-reflexivity about literary history and institutions. One need not agree with Woolf's half-facetious claim that “on or about 1910 human nature changed” to read her thinking about the classical tradition as a break; the very estrangement of language, the “momentary alienation of words from meanings” (37) that Prins traces to Woolf's encounter with Greek, itself seems part of a modernist turn whereby “untranslatability” became not a weakness but a strength, for poets and novelists who sought a similarly untranslatable density in their own language. Prins herself shows a modernist, or even a post-modernist, sensibility, in asserting that drafts, fragments, failed attempts and what the painters call “labor traces” are as interesting as polished products. I suspect she would agree with me that more than one temporal frame is worth applying, much as Elizabeth Barrett Browning saw good reason for there to be many translations of the same Greek text, “using the metaphor of a mirror that ‘may be held in different lights by different hands’” (69).

Contexts illuminate but can never fully explain. Prins' tracing of her own identification with Greek particularly gripped me because I shared it, rather literally so (same school, same time). And I, too, desired Greek, without quite knowing why. But the same teachers she warmly thanks were utterly terrifying to me: I was in my forties (and tenured) before I first opened a Greek primer. And yet, when Prins quotes Woolf, writing in a letter, “I have taken a plunge into tough Greek, and that has so much attraction for me – heaven knows why – that I don't want to do anything else” (35). I'm right there with both of them. I did some Greek this morning. It felt a bit procrastinatory.... it also felt *great*. “See, I can do this hard thing,” yes, but there's something more, something we can't put into words.

It's not just Greek, either. “Why are you interested in this?” “I don't know, *just because*–” could stand for the liberal arts idea more broadly, an idea in danger of drowning between the

Scylla of corporatization and the Charybdis of our own guilt about “privilege.” Can scholarship as a labor of love be reclaimed from the overlords of “productivity,” with their measuring rods and their counsel of the “least publishable unit”? Can intellectual pleasure be taught? and how should Greek in particular be taught now, so that it does not die? Arguments about “treasures of Western civilization” are cringemaking; forcing things down people’s throats just won’t do. Today what keeps women (and others) from Greek is not that it is too manly, but that it is not manly enough: “what are you ever going to *do* with that?” the fathers now want to know, since a grown daughter who remains at home is no longer the wished-for delight Mr. Barrett found it.

Perhaps there is still, as I write, some secondary gain of remaining an amateur, able to say, “My Greek is not that good, *but*–.” Especially when one wants to simply walk away from the toxic traps of the academy, and from certain of the “drier” practices that take the art out of scholarship and the poetry out of poetics. These are rooms from which one can, as Adrienne Rich once put it, “quietly walk away,” no longer under the sign of feminine modesty, but rather in the service of feminist interdisciplinarity. I’m grateful to Yopie Prins for her excellent book, which both delights and instructs, and suggests that one future of the Greek past may yet be female.

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