

The Culture of Ancient Greek Literature – A Study

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Abstract

This paper attempts to study ancient **Greeks** and their contributions to **literature**, art. Also look at **Greek literature in translation**. The culture of Ancient Greek literature however is very different from our modern one. As its medium, the Ancient Greek language is incomprehensible outside the general context of Greek civilisation. Any translation of an Ancient Greek text is to some extent false, or at least artificial, and it cannot express the special character of the reality of the original. Selected translations of passages from Homer, Herodotus and Aeschines illustrate the incompatibility of the ancient and modern styles of narration. The study of the language of literature in relation to the reality it represents is advocated as a possible solution to this problem. Readers are also recommended to make the effort to study the ancient originals instead of reading the texts in translations, which can never be flawless.

Key words: translation, ancient Greek, Homer, Herodotus, Aeschines, Ancient Greek literature

Introduction

First, there is the conflict between over-translation and crib-style translation. How exactly should one echo the phraseology, word order, sentence structure, metaphors, and so on of the original? Though one can think of a number of supposed translations of ancient texts where the translators have imagined that they knew better than the original author what he was trying to say, it is the other extreme which is all too common in this field: over-literal translation – translation that reads like the first draft of a schoolchild's exercise, or a 1950s' phrasebook for Eastern European tourists. Astonishingly, such translations do still get published. This was all very well in the days when most of the audience for such translations were familiar with the ancient language, and were even using them as cribs to help them through texts, but that is not the case today. Over-translation tends to underestimate the intelligence of the original author: if they had wanted those extra flourishes, they would have put them in. Crib-style translations tend to underestimate the intelligence of the reader, by assuming, for instance, that they have to have the same Greek word translated every time by the same English word – which is to assume that readers cannot recognize family resemblances between English concepts with different names.

A second potential conflict facing the translator is more metaphysical. It is possible to programme a computer these days to come up with translations that are accurate, grammatically correct ... and total abominations! Why? Because computers can't tell the difference between translationese and real English; they can't sense the weight of words and place them accordingly within a sentence, which is weighed within a paragraph, which is weighed within a chapter. Most surviving classical authors were capable of achieving this kind of harmony (as we may call it), and their translators therefore have to try to encompass as well. This is where sensitivity to English (or any other modern

language) is as important to the translator as sensitivity to ancient languages. It is no embarrassment to a translator to absorb the English of Cormac McCarthy as well as Charles Dickens, of Robert B. Parker as well as Robert Graves. Extremely wide reading in both languages is an absolute prerequisite for a translator.

A third balancing act lies between the two languages and cultures involved. If one translates *aulos* as “flute” rather than “reed pipe”, how misleading is it? Should one use words such as “penniless” or “quixotic”, given that at the time there were no pennies and no Cervantes? There’s an ancient Greek proverb which says “Don’t move something bad when it’s fine where it is.” This clearly means the same as “Let sleeping dogs lie” – but should one use this contemporary English version? What connotations might it trigger in the English reader’s mind? If language consisted entirely of publicly accessible objects such as tables and dogs, a translator’s life would be much easier. But a great deal of language consists of abstract terms and ways of attempting to express less publicly available feelings and thoughts, conditioned by an alien culture.

While the *Iliad* is purely a work of tragedy, the *Odyssey* is a mixture of tragedy and comedy. It is the story of Odysseus, one of the warriors at Troy. After ten years fighting the war, he spends another ten years sailing back home to his wife and family. During his ten-year voyage, he loses all of his comrades and ships and makes his way home to Ithaca disguised as a beggar. Both of these works were based on ancient legends. The stories are told in language that is simple, direct, and eloquent. Both are as fascinatingly readable today as they were in Ancient Greece.

The other great poet of the preclassical period was Hesiod. Unlike Homer, Hesiod speaks of himself in his poetry. Nothing is known about him from any source external to his own poetry. He was a native of Boeotia in central Greece, and is thought to have lived and worked around 700 B.C.E. His two works were *Works and Days* and *Theogony*. The first is a faithful depiction of the poverty-stricken country life he knew so well, and it sets forth principles and rules for farmers. *Theogony* is a systematic account of creation and of the gods. It vividly describes the ages of humankind, beginning with a long-past Golden Age. Together the works of Homer and Hesiod served as a kind of Bible for the Greeks. Homer told the story of a heroic past, and Hesiod dealt with the practical realities of daily life.

The Greek literary tradition is one of the oldest in the Western world. Homer’s “*The Iliad*” and “*The Odyssey*” are both two foundational works of the Western canon. Today, Greece has no shortage of amazingly talented contemporary writers. Nikos Kazantzakis’ “*Zorba the Greek*” and “*The Last Temptation*” are world-renowned, while Panos Karnezis’ recent novel “*The Maze*,” detailing the catastrophic Anatolian campaign of 1920-1922 in which Greece attempted to invade Turkey, has quickly garnered critical attention.

“It’s the power of Greek writing that makes it so rewarding. It’s emotional, it’s visceral, it’s passionate,” Irish author Richard Pine contended. “Of course the perennial themes of love, jealousy, and ambition are present, but Greek novelists seem to be preoccupied, very instructively, with the events of history in the past century, and the emotions they evoke.”

Bogged Down by Bureaucracy

Yet in spite of the remarkable works Greek writers routinely produce, these works aren't being translated. In Greece, the Frasis project, which is managed by the national book center, funds the translation of Greek language literary works into other languages in an attempt foster global readership of Greek literature. Yet this two-year-old program does not have a successful track record.

Though the project has an annual budget of €189,000, it has only subsidized the translation of a mere 28 books — just a bit over one-fourth of the 100 applications it received. Only four of these books were translated into English. Many authors report that the project is bogged down by bureaucracy and lacks any kind of coherent operating procedure. Furthermore, virtually no marketing support is provided, making it incredibly difficult for aspiring Greek writers who want to see their books on Amazon's homepage.

What is clear is that readers across the global need better access to Greek literature. "What these stories have in common is an earthiness, a deep sense of history and tradition, a seemingly infinite capacity to engage with social issues, and a sensitivity to what it means to be Greek, how to celebrate life in all its horrors and joys," Pine said. "Partly for the echoes and parallels, partly to discover a new culture, readers need to find them."

What can be lost in translation from ancient Greek?

The feel of the poetry. Ancient Greek poetry was not based on rhyme and meter, but on vowel length.

Longfellow's *Hiawatha*, or "over the river and through the woods," is an emulation of the meter of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but not the same.

1. Genre characteristics. The readers/listeners had certain expectations from literary forms, which modern readers don't know. Just think of the way we watch movies nowadays or how we expect a pop song to come to refrain. Ancient Greek had much more complex genre requirements.
2. Ideas, notions, societal values and conceptions. Ancient Greeks saw reality and society very differently than we do. Even the common words we have today—some of them, ironically, derived from Ancient Greek—had very different connotations. "Virtue" is my favorite example: in Ancient Greek, it meant something like "male prowess, warrior-like ability," basically the skills to succeed in a heavily militarized patriarchal society. When an ancient philosopher writes that women can attain little virtue, he is not a misogynist, he basically wants to say that they possess less physical strength than men.
3. Rhythm. Ancient Greek prose was based on complicated rhetorical principles that were studied for years. Sentences have a syntactic flow that is not only supposed to show off an elegant style, but often also to show which school of rhetoric and/or philosophy the writer adhered to. It was common for books to be read out loud (something like audiobooks but usually done by slaves) and many phrases and figures were meant to help the listener orient themselves in the text.
4. Allusions to current events, but that is true for any text even today. In fact, ancient philologists often collected various comments and explanations that came down to us, so we are actually often able to understand many of those allusions, although not all and not always perfectly.

pedagogy also hinders the development of real comprehension, since, among other things, it encourages students to translate Greek and Latin into their native languages even when they read on their own. We know that's not how you learn a language; it's also a hard habit to break. Wilson herself has gotten to the heart of the problem by making a distinction between translation and "translation." Translation is a flexible, creative exercise, whereas "translation" — what most of us do in class — is one in cryptography, "a tool that stands in for comprehension." As she points out, most Classics students are still encouraged to think of what they're doing as learning "to translate," as opposed to learning to understand. The original text is seen as a problem to which a clunky "literal" translation is a solution; as if there were a 'right answer' to what it means, and it's something ugly in English, even if the original is beautiful.

Conclusion

In addition to history and philosophy, Ancient Greek literature is famous for its epic and lyric poetry as well as its drama, both tragedy and comedy. Ancient Greek tragedy remains among the highest literary and cultural achievements in Western literature. Translation issues concerning moral concepts such as *sophrosyne* or *hybris* are evident; even more so are the constant problems with polonised versions of names and proper nouns. Timarchos' name itself is an issue, since it contains the stem, Timarch-, and the nominative suffix -us. Polish translation practice has been to keep the original Greek in the nominative and to replace the Greek suffixes with Polish ones in other cases, but this could startle the present-day reader who knows neither Greek nor Latin, and might have only a limited knowledge of Polish grammar. The resulting vocative Timarchosie, for example, sounds strange and again distorts the rhythm of the rhetorical prose. All one can do is to repeat the above quote by Łanowski. It is true that the translator might have "the urge to abandon one's work, simply feeling this is a hell of a job," and to question the very sense of translating Ancient Greek literature. The translation gives no idea of the original

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