

## Untranslatability and the Chorus in Virginia Woolf and H.D.

Within reception studies, there has been a growing interest in modernist responses to Hellenism (Hooley 2001; Rosenblitt 2016; Prins 2017; Worman 2018). Critical to the transmission and adaptation of Greek texts during this period were women of classical letters. What drew them to the translation and adaptation of the ancient Greek language was, uniquely, the promise of “an encounter with something untranslatable” (Prins 2017: 31). Focusing on the work of Virginia Woolf and H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), this paper argues that the experience of linguistic estrangement encountered in the act of translating Greek specifically involved the tragic chorus. The resistance of the choral form to translation offered Woolf and H.D. the freedom to adapt it to their own literary experiments, allowing them to fashion a new feminist aesthetic that challenged the masculine classical heritage.

Woolf and H.D. derived their ideas of the Greek chorus from two main sources: the work of the first British female classicist, Jane Ellen Harrison, and contemporary modernist translation theory. Woolf was a personal acquaintance of Harrison and attended her public lectures (Mills 2014: 8), while H.D. knew of her ideas indirectly through Gilbert Murray (Gregory 1997: 123-4). They drew on Harrison’s fascination with the chorus as a “queer anomaly” that nonetheless functioned as “the centre and kernel and starting-point of the drama” (Harrison 1913: 123). Modernist poets like Ezra Pound and Richard Aldington also had a strong interest in the choral ode, erroneously viewing it as a form of *vers libre* because of its absence of rhyme, spare language, traditional meters, and short lines (Gregory 1997: 140; Prins 2017: 180-201). Their translations rejected classical philology as a barrier to an authentic experience of the text,

preferring instead to push the boundaries beyond ‘literal’ or accurate renderings of semantic meanings (Yao 2002: 84).

Like Harrison and the modernist circle, Woolf and H.D. considered the tragic chorus to be the highest form of lyric expression, its language “so clear, so hard, so intense,” and yet ambiguous and obscure. Woolf attributed the difficulty of translating Greek to its elusiveness and inherent unknowability. Quoting a line from the first stasimon of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* (ὀμμάτων δ’ ἐν ἀχηνίαις/ ἔρρει πᾶσ’ Ἀφροδίτα, A. Ag. 418-19), she concludes, “the meaning is just on the far side of language.” H.D., who commenced her poetic career with translations of choruses from Euripides’ *Iphigeneia in Aulis* and *Hippolytus*, was also ‘exhilarated’ by the untranslatable and the fragmentary (Gregory 1997: 154). In her 1926 novel, *Palimpsest*, the untranslatability of the language casts a spell on Hipparchia as she struggles to translate Greek lyrics into Latin, “dazed, drugged and drunk with phrases of poems . . . beaten by some odd untranslatable fragment” (*Palimpsest*, 77).

The strange unknowability of the tragic chorus can be understood as a symbol of the alienation of modernist female writers from the male classical heritage which they attempted to refashion and reclaim as their own. Both Woolf and H.D. repeatedly distinguish their own classically informed literary experiments from the male scholarly enterprise. In *The Years*, for example, the character Edward translates *Antigone* with fluency and ease in his rooms at Oxford, “He made another note; *that* was the meaning . . . his mind went on without the book. It travelled by itself without impediments through a world of pure meaning” (*Years*, 50). H.D. also represents her translation process as a deliberate departure from the male approach, as a deliberate form of ‘not knowing’, “she was no scholar. She did not want to ‘know’ Greek in that sense” (*Bid Me to Live*, 162-3). Her review of Edwin Cox’s 1924 volume, *The Poems of Sappho*,

while praising his scholarly excellence, further takes issue with his abilities as a translator; his rendering of ὑάκινθος as ‘larkspur’ puts pedantry over poetic imagination (“Winter Roses,” 596). The female experience of not knowing Greek thus opened the way to new forms of poetic insight. Unbound by the constraints of formal Greek training, H.D.’s translations surpassed those of Gilbert Murray in the view of T.S. “precisely because she was a poet and not a classical scholar” (“Euripides and Mr. Murray,” 188).

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