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A Woman Reads Greek in the Woods of Maine

Mary Townsend

<https://thebestschools.org/review/ladies-greek/>

Ladies' Greek: Victorian Translations of Tragedy

Yopie Prins

Princeton Univ. Press, 2017

In 1885, there was a single woman cast in “the Cambridge Greek Play,” an event wherein a Greek tragedy is performed just like that—that is to say in Greek; at the time, it was usually performed entirely by male undergraduates. This time, Athena in Aeschylus’ *Eumenides* was the exceptional role; and so well did Janet Case, the mortal woman in question, acquit herself, that other peoples’ memory of her embodiment of the goddess remained alive for the rest of her own life.

But Janet, who also had done quite well at Cambridge’s monumental Classical Tripos Examination, did not continue on to renown as a professional classicist. Instead, settling on Hampstead Heath, devoting herself to politics and the occasional translation, she took on private students in Greek, one of whom, as it happens, was Virginia Woolf.

Virginia herself never had a high opinion of her own Greek, but she was full of praise for her teacher; in a eulogy for Case, Woolf wrote: “If the pupil were destined to remain an amateur . . . somehow the masterpieces of Greek drama were stormed, without grammar, without accents, but somehow, under her compulsion so sane and yet so stimulating, out they shone, if inaccessible still supremely desirable.”

In Yopie Prins' remarkably wide-ranging, even scandalously scholarly work, she has collected a series of vivid *tableaux vivant* featuring translations and performances of Greek tragedies by 19th- and early 20th-century women, both in Britain and America. Making use of everything from now-forgotten but then highly praised translations to letters, marginalia, photographs, and diagrams of choral dances found in archival research, Prins shapes a lovely sort of explanatory fresco on the power that Greek had as both a discipline and a point of free departure for the lady poets, journalists, educators, students, directors, and the occasional *bon vivant* whose work she investigates. Ranging from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 1833 translation of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* to a performance of Sophocles' *Antigone* at Spelman in 1933, she follows the stories of various women's love and despair over the Greek language, its presence in their writing early and late, as they fall out of the Greek and into their English, letting Greek shape their poetic meters and the very alphabet of their thoughts.

For those who come to *Ladies' Greek* with an already developed taste for the Greek language, the book is sort of an Aladdin's cave of stories and connections: archives to daydream about visiting, manuscripts one wishes to touch for one's self—the hand-collaged dual-language private copy of the *Agamemnon* that Woolf made for herself; odd books to seek out—Hilda Doolittle's autobiographical prose-poem about having a nervous breakdown after dropping out of Bryn Mawr, through which a young Ezra Pound-like figure flits; performances that sound so good one curses the fate of being born too young to witness them, such as Eva Palmer Sikelianos' in-Greek production of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* at Delphi, herself buried there a few days after the closing performance.

The book is also particularly good medicine for the times we find ourselves in, where there exists a burgeoning faction in American

Internet Letters wishing to claim the Greek world as a sort of masculine daydream, and one in eminent need of recovery as such. Reading *Ladies' Greek*, one immediately stumbles into a momentum that amounts to zeitgeist, into a world peopled by women thinking through their encounter with everything from irregular verbs to Pindar, making alphabet puns, writing doggerel poetry (in Greek of course), being praised as the sex with more skill in translation (so hinted *The Athenaeum* in 1865). If you didn't know better, you could wonder how you could have missed it all until now.

Witnessing the immediate and very real sympathy between these women and what to them were the anything-but-remote heroines and anti-heroines of the tragedians, it becomes harder than ever to imagine anyone arguing with a straight face that “the Greeks” were at their very core a masculine “warrior culture,” etc., or that the Classics have always been a man's world; this is a welcome reminder no less than a timely addition to the conversation.

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In addition to the individual authors and plays, the reader is also offered a compelling window on several debates that span this transatlantic time period. Foremost is the story of the slow incorporation of women into higher education as learners and teachers, which is intriguingly illuminated by following the progress and pedagogical forms of women learning Greek. Likewise, the pressing debates about what kind of place classical languages should have in schools are complicated by women's desire to participate in something that for some was the bedrock of the university, while for others was already passé.

The early 20th century comes alive as a moment when certain women took up the trope of the Dionysian Maenad for themselves, despite raised eyebrows from both sexes. One witnesses the

running dialogue on the question of what constitutes good translation into English, the familiar categories of literal and poetic present but with intriguing differences that distance from current fashion provides; not to mention many lovely observations on the contrasts between Greek and various English meters (something that Prins' fans will take especial pleasure in). Liveliest of all, perhaps, for the generality of readers are the discussions of specific, largely all-female productions, from a version of Sophocles' stately, fraught *Electra* in 1833 to Euripides' imperiously dissolute *Bacchae* at Smith and Bryn Mawr in the 1930s. The students in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* who seek Dionysian enlightenment are outshone, perhaps, by the single dancing figure of the head of the Maenads at Smith in 1934 (really, do go look at this picture).

But why was it Greek, specifically, for these women? In one sense, it's obvious enough that, given the place Attic Greek held and perhaps still holds in our collective imagination, to possess some knowledge of it marks one out as educated in some irreproachable sense. And so, as you might well imagine, the story of women learning Greek inevitably intertwines with the slow process by which women become ratified as not only officially educated but capable of being educated at all. And yet Prins identifies an element that runs deeper than this: she notes that within the many stories she examines, time and time again, despite travail of all sorts, there is present to the learner not merely duty or ambition but a real *eros* for the language itself, even a thrill at the very alphabet; and such Grecian desire often stretches itself over into some one text or author that becomes a life-long Beloved. Witness Eva Palmer Sikelianos on first reading Plato:

I was about eighteen. It was an incredible experience which had no breaks, no contrast. From the first Dialogue to the last my feet did not seem to touch the ground, and wherever I went I had the sensation of flying.

The tale of such desire is necessarily an intimate one; and despite Prins' insistence that she will not intrude on the interiority of the figures she details, enough is present on the surface, I'd argue, to be its own depth. Desire is a better reason than many to learn a language, and a stronger tie than most: in their own words, the women display not primarily the desire to parade one's learning, but rather a yearning to internalize something they hold to be precious, and give it voice.

Now, Prins often articulates this process as a "performance" of some kind, whether of literacy, learning, or poetic art; this circumlocution is connected to the academic slang of a "performative" act wherein, if I may paraphrase, we do or say something—as near to conscious action as makes no difference—in order to be it: at worst, to cynically signal something; at best, one hopes, to *be* insofar as humans can *be* something at all. While it's certainly a fair observation that women, in the process of attempting to be taken seriously, needed to make their Greek learning solidly public and active in some way, the very frequent recourse to this usage sits uneasily with the book's emphasis on desire; and Prins makes the verb "to perform" do more work in more senses than the word can really bear.

Her overall narrative, however, remains aware enough of the power of desire to satisfy even, perhaps, a fairly grumpy Platonist; the stories she discusses can't help being replete with desire; and in the end, her answer to the "why" of women's Greek is something like Jane Harrison's: because of "the hot-cold shiver of delight," which Prins glosses as a thrill that simply doesn't fade, despite our distance from the faded letters these women left behind. Crucially, as a maxim and a point of order, Prins reminds the reader that the whys and wherefores of our own desire (I will add, and of our potential hatred) for Greek in our own specific history are a necessary component to any thorough investigation of the classics

for us, lest we get caught up in an abstract tale of their ahistorical, monolithic hegemony and lose the human reasons why they should be studied at all.

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As Prins is well aware, there is a fundamental fault line present in the study of Greek by anyone whomever, whether two hundred years ago or just now at the present time: the immediate possibility of one's own failure to measure up to the peculiar, almost moral exactitude required in the way this infamously classical language is studied—as well as the impossibility of any one human comprehensively understanding, let alone finally translating, its corpus entire. And so the stories Prins collects are not only triumphs but also those that an individual woman herself couldn't help but see as failure, even if we might disagree.

Helen McGill, journalist and spokesman for women's education, considered her 1877 PhD in Comparative Philology from Boston University insufficient, so much so that she would not name herself "Dr"; she eventually left for Cambridge to be the first American woman to study for the Tripos exam, before admitting defeat and departing with a mere Third Class. All such relations to Greek, from the Junoesque Bostonian Annie Fields with her literary salon and her poetic riffs on *Prometheus Bound* to Anna Swanick's well-regarded complete Aeschylus, are in their way just as telling as for the story of the whole—as well as (however strangely arrived) an anonymous young woman, immortalized in newsprint, reading Greek aloud by a campfire in Maine to what was reported to be a spellbound audience. For Prins' readers, whatever their relation to Greek, even if they possess only a handful of myths or from the *A* to the *Ω* not a letter in between, there is material enough to reflect upon their own state of relative knowledge and inevitable ignorance.

The relation of potential ignorance of women in particular for Greek, however, is not a neutral one, as the book's title playfully acknowledges: in a phrase from a poem by E. Barrett Browning, "lady's Greek" is the sort "without accents;" that is, the kind lacking the diacritical apparatus that the Alexandrines placed around the original, unmarked Attic variety, in order to preserve in scholarly fashion the pronunciation of the works they treasured. The rules of Greek accentuation are somewhat involved; in fact, it's a favorite snub of the philologist to point out someone's errors in this regard, as a reviewer once did to George Eliot when she quoted a line of Sophocles in one of her novels. Yet this snub is taken up first by Browning and now Prins, and reworked into something that, if not a perfect badge of honor, is at least a recognition that lady's Greek, while not the sort of Greek that is the product of generations of the benefactors of pristine, richly funded scholarship, has its own qualities that are not unpleasing.

In fact, it often possesses, through its amateurish, lover-like qualities, the very life and power that those immured in the patterns and categories of academe struggle to lay hold of: *Ladies' Greek* excerpts example after example of translations that demonstrate this beyond a doubt. Edith Hamilton, for instance, despite (or because of) her public popularity, was not always taken particularly seriously by her fellow scholars; and yet it's her translation of Aeschylus that Robert F. Kennedy reaches for when he becomes the tragic Messenger to us, bringing the news of the death of Martin Luther King.

Now, anyone who's ever been corrected by a philologist on a point they strongly suspect is beside the point will recognize the justice of and the pressing need for such trenchant amateurishness. But the problem has two sides: lady's Greek takes on a life not only because of the freedom and playfulness possible at the unregarded margins of its study, the "lunatic fringe," as Sikelianos puts it; but also when the seriousness and the fineness of the language's

demands are taken up in all sober earnestness, even (or especially) when its demands are recognized as an impossible standard to which one nevertheless aspires.

In the end, I'm left with an irony: so very much learning has been required to get us to the story of ladies' Greek in the first place: the time, the scholarship, the institutional support it takes to collect such evidence of such a world, to have even an inkling of what to look for, leaves me dizzy, even as the results of such a study exhilarate. There's an analogy here to the study of Classics itself: as the women who first attempted the Tripos exam pointed out, those with preparation before college in Greek or at least Latin have all the advantage, and this is hardly less true today. Such study requires years of preparation, and it requires winning, in some respect, a sort of human lottery that puts one in the position to accept such learning and to have been given the habits to take it in—not to mention the final addition of the *je ne sais quoi* of desire. And yet, to compose a little doggerel poem in Greek, or to stage a play with your own however-faulty translation does not require such an excess of good fortune—and neither does the simple act of falling in love with Antigone or the Maenads or anyone in between.

The measure of the Greeks is not what we decide to think about them, but what they allow us to do. And so, my remaining question is something like this: what sort of study of Greek could we, should we undertake, to produce the discipline and the freedom united that could give rise to the admirable poetics these long-dead women display? In *Ladies' Greek*, Yopie Prins reminds us that the place between the fineness of each letter of the alphabet, and the freedom we allow ourselves to form our own letters out of it, is where we should aim our desires if we possibly can.