

## How far do translations shape our understanding of ancient literature?

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Word count: 3661

Translations are ever-present in a classical education; the ability to translate is viewed as an essential skill in the journey to understanding ancient literature. Whilst translations – most basically defined as transferences of text from one language to another<sup>1</sup> – may be seen as a less obvious form of classical reception, it is this positioning of translation on the fringes of reception which enriches possibilities for its study. This essay argues that every translation of a classical text is a form of reception; translations are inherently interpreted texts, since, a “translation is made possible by an interpretation of a previous text”, as Umberto Eco describes Georg Gadamer’s argument<sup>2</sup>. Translations therefore shape our understanding of ancient literature towards the selection of interpretations offered by a given translation. However, though all translations are interpretations, their scope for actually shaping the understanding of ancient literature may be limited by the nature of translation, whose purpose is generally to convey knowledge of the content and sense of the original, and by the comparative power of other forms of literary reception to shape understanding. This essay ultimately argues that although translations function differently to other forms of literary reception, they do shape our understanding of ancient literature to a significant extent, and it is their unique position that enhances their ability to shape understanding.

In the Anglo-American pedagogical tradition, translations of ancient literature have been generally considered an inferior version of the original text, to be used as a vehicle for moving on to study the original.<sup>3</sup> This viewpoint is still popularly maintained today; in the 2003 Penguin Classics edition of *The Aeneid*, the translator David West is named only in small font on the back of the book, with the front cover presenting the work as Virgil’s alone. The general sense is that translations may *provide* an understanding of the content of the text at a macro-level<sup>4</sup>, but they lack equivalence at a stylistic level – they lose several “substantial levels”<sup>5</sup> of the original text, which transmit the content and therefore sense, through style of language, at a micro-level. This viewpoint implies that translations at the same time shape to a very limited extent the understanding of a text and are simply a means through which to access ancient literature, whilst also shaping a greatly simplified understanding of ancient literature. There is a clear tension between these two main inferences; the first suggests that the reading of a translation shapes our understanding of the *original* text from which it is translated, whilst the second suggests that the translation fails in this act and instead shapes a lesser, interpreted understanding.

The first inference disregards that translations are inherently interpretative forms, based on a specific reading of a text from the many possible. To paraphrase Professor Emily Wilson in her 2019 Sebald Lecture, no translation is a clear window through which to view the text. Therefore, any reading of a translation will in some ways shape the understanding of ancient literature not only by providing access at some levels to the content of the original text, but also by shaping our understanding in the direction of this interpretation.

Every translation is a form of reception informed by the contexts of both the original text and the translator, a “companion and instrument of cross-temporal, cross-lingual and cross-cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Eco, U. (2004) *Mouse or Rat?: Translation as Negotiation*. Pheonix. p1

<sup>2</sup> Eco, U. *Mouse or Rat?: Translation as Negotiation* p124

<sup>3</sup> For example see Ullman, B.L. (1948). *The Ancient Classics in Translation*

<sup>4</sup> This concept is drawn from the “macro-propositions” and “micro-propositions” in Eco, U. *Mouse or Rat?: Translation as Negotiation*

<sup>5</sup> Eco, U. *Mouse or Rat?: Translation as Negotiation* p30

interpretation”<sup>6</sup>. However, it is a form of reception which often is not regarded as such, rendering it different from other forms of reception such as literature with classical references (like WB Yeats) or novels reworking ancient stories (like *Circe* by Madeleine Miller), which clearly take inspiration from ancient literature but lack the same relationship with the original text. This dissonance between the fact that the work *is* reception, and the presentation of the work as not reception, or less of reception, opens up space for translations to shape the understanding of ancient literature to a greater extent. Translations are to a lesser extent viewed as presenting an interpretation, so the reader may take the interpretation as if it *were* the original text.

Therefore, when the first inference of the traditional viewpoint – that translations are a clear window through which to view the text – is the context in which a reading operates, the second inference also holds some weight. Translations do shape a more limited interpretation of a text; no translation can transmit with perfect equivalence the content and substantial levels of the original text, and therefore each must choose at every point in the text which levels to preserve<sup>7</sup>. The impossibility of recreating the reading of an ancient contemporary is even more pronounced than in the translation of modern texts, because of the vastly different world in which any reader of an English translation (no matter the time period) exists and the significant structural differences in the language. Nevertheless, no two readers are the same; translations may not shape a true and perfect understanding of ancient literature, which is impossible, but they do shape understanding in some direction. Furthermore, although today we cannot replicate a reading made by a contemporary to the texts, there was no one reader or reading of ancient literature in Antiquity either.

A key feature of translations is that they are able to expand the readership of ancient literature beyond the generally small and exclusive group of those who have command of ancient languages (although translation also plays a role when reading the original). Therefore, whilst translations in one way limit understanding, in another they increase the audience and so increase understanding not only because more people can understand ancient literature in any sense, but also because opportunities are increased for different interpretations which can shape our understanding of ancient literature in different directions.

Additionally, translation, in a different form to the reading of a textual translation but still nonetheless translation, shapes our understanding of ancient literature even when reading the original text. Indeed, this phrase should be in quotations, because the textual variations in ancient literature by virtue of their transmission add yet another layer to the reception; uncertainty persists over exactly what an ‘original text’ may be<sup>8</sup>. The readings of an ‘original text’ can be carried out in a wide variety of ways. To continue the study of a pedagogical setting – since the ancient languages are no longer spoken by any native speakers, and generally must be learnt – students are only able to reach understanding of ‘original’ ancient literature *through* the process of translation. Whilst some scholars may be fluent enough to read Greek or Latin without a written translation, for many ‘reading the original’ will involve some process of either written or mental translation, based upon the education received around how to translate, which will be used to gain an understanding of the text. Translation here functions differently to the reading of a translation, but understanding would be impossible without translation; even if it shapes it in a more nuanced direction, translations are at the root of our understanding.

Overall, whilst translations shape our understanding of ancient literature insofar as they limit the readings that can be made of the work of ancient literature, it does not necessarily follow that they are inherently inferior. This essay argues that, in fact, opening a greater discourse around translation and

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<sup>6</sup> Hermans, T. (2003). *Cross-Cultural Translation Studies as Thick Translation*. Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London p382

<sup>7</sup> Eco, U. *Mouse or Rat?: Translation as Negotiation*

<sup>8</sup> Finglass, P. (2016) *The Gainsford Lecture 2016: Transmitting Tragedy*. Oxford Faculty of Classics Podcasts

how translations are seen would provide far more opportunities for fruitful study and reading of ancient literature. The traditional context in which translation readings operate limit the ability of translations to shape constructively our understanding of ancient literature.

I will now examine the ways in which translations shape our understanding of ancient literature by using as an example two translations of Virgil's *Aeneid* by John Dryden and David West. When reading these two extracts, it is clear that they offer different readings of *The Aeneid* which contrast with both each other and with the Latin. The translation decisions at the micro-level and macro-level, whilst in one way providing an understanding of the content of the text, at the same time shape an understanding of the text individual to each translation. Let us compare two extracts from English translations of the first 7 lines of the *Aeneid*. John Dryden, in his translation published in 1697, writes:

Arms, and the man I sing, who, forc'd by fate,  
And haughty Juno's unrelenting hate,  
Expell'd and exil'd, left the Trojan shore.  
Long labors, both by sea and land, he bore,  
And in the doubtful war, before he won  
The Latian realm, and built the destin'd town;  
His banish'd gods restor'd to rites divine,  
And settled sure succession in his line,  
From whence the race of Alban fathers come,  
And the long glories of majestic Rome.<sup>9</sup>

Whilst David West (1990, in the revised 2003 edition) writes:

I sing of arms and of the man, fated to be an exile, who long since left the land of Troy and came to Italy to the shores of Lavinium; and a great pounding he took by land and sea at the hands of the heavenly gods because of the fierce and unforgetting anger of Juno. Great too were his sufferings in war before he could found his city and carry his gods into Latium. This was the beginning of the Latin race, the Alban fathers and the high walls of Rome.<sup>10</sup>

Dryden's translation is in iambic pentameter with rhyming couplets; this transmits some of the metrical and poetic qualities of the original, whilst David West's translation feels not like a poem but a novel. Dryden's translation maintains a fast pace and sense of movement<sup>11</sup>. These rhyming couplets and general tone suggest to the modern reader a definite archaic quality, with a sense of a folk or fairy tale. The major difference between the translations by Dryden and West is in the metre and tone, decisions which continue in both translations beyond these extracts. West transfers *The Aeneid* to prose, and due to writing several hundred years later uses a very different semantic field. To the modern reader, it seems more fluent although certain aspects such as the placement of the verb at the phrase "a great pounding he took" and "of Juno" (rather than Juno's) create a more formal and slightly archaic tone which, like Dryden's rendering of the first line.

Translation decisions at a micro-level also play a role in the affecting the interpretation offered. Dryden retains the word order of the Latin in the first line, with "I sing" ("cano") at the end of the phrase. This is an unusual and strange placement to the native English reader; by maintaining the word order with the verb at the end, which would be normal in Latin and certainly unquestioned in verse, it signals that this is a somehow foreign text. West, however, brings the verb forwards in more natural English to the beginning of the phrase, creating a more familiar and domesticised atmosphere

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<sup>9</sup> Virgil trans Dryden, J. *The Aeneid* 1.1

<sup>10</sup>Virgil trans. West, D. (1990, 2003) *The Aeneid*. The Penguin Group. p3

<sup>11</sup>Morken, J. (2016) *Which is the "Real" Virgil? A Comparison of English Translations of Virgil's Aeneid*

from the opening of the text, although perhaps losing the now-recognisable phrasing of the opening used by Dryden which is more popularly quoted and associated with the work. In the final line of this extract, Dryden has selected as the key substantial level to maintain the metaphorical meaning of “atque altae moenia Romae”, removing any literal suggestion of high walls. The penultimate line seems to make an attempt at transmitting some of the assonance of the original, but the final line lacks the same effect and loses that stylistic choice which suggests a sense of eternity. West’s is a far more literal translation in terms of word choice. Unlike Dryden, he does not change around or insert phrases, and keeps the ambiguity of “atque altae moenia Romae” as both a literal and metaphorical statement with “the high walls of Rome”.

There are numerous possible commentaries on the translation choices made and how this can shape our understanding of this section of the text, and thereby how translation choices across a whole work shape understanding of *The Aeneid* as a whole. However, just a small selection of these is sufficient to demonstrate that different readings are offered by each translation. West’s translation might at first appear to shape understanding less radically, given its more recognisable (to the modern reader) linguistic tone and literal method, but the transference to prose and lack of clear metre represents a significant change. The positioning of *The Aeneid* in its translations as a novel in comparison to a poem produces very different text; the presentation as a novel may lead the reader to focus more on the story and less on the stylistic decisions, which are generally of greater importance in poetry. Neither forms, of course, retain equivalence with the role of epic poetry in the ancient world, but each shape in different ways the understanding of *The Aeneid* and offer the opportunity for fresh readings, informed by the interpretative choices of the translation.

Finally, in order to make some accurate judgement on how far translations shape the understanding of ancient literature, although of course other factors are present in shaping understanding, I will consider the other factors within the same grouping as translation, literary factors: specifically critical responses, poetry inspired by ancient literature, and literary responses in the form of novels.

The extent to which translations shape understanding depend on the text in question. Canonical texts bring with them a long history of reception in which the role of translation is diminished by the quantity and variety of other interpretations. Literary reception is not limited by the content of the text in the same way translations are and so can radically shape a new lens through which the original piece of literature can be understood. Modern novels based on the Homeric epics continue to be published today, which shape more dramatically than translations a new lens through which the poem can be seen. Pat Barker’s *The Silence of the Girls* retells *The Iliad* through the eyes of Briseis, questioning in the form of a novel the absence of women in the text. It represents one way for the modern reader to gain an understanding not only of the text itself, but of the world which lies just beyond its boundaries. *The Silence of the Girls* details the complex relationships between women during the Trojan war and may lead the reader towards a feminist reading of the *Iliad*, considering the way in which women are treated as prizes in war, what this tells us about the ancient world, and our own response to this. Although translations of epic and ancient literature in general can certainly be based on feminist readings – Emily Wilson in her translation of *The Odyssey* renders the women murdered by Telemachus as “the girls...[who] lay beside the suitors” in comparison to other translations by men who translate them as “sluts, whores” and “these creatures”, despite the lack of a term of abuse in the Greek<sup>12</sup>– these are decisions at a micro-level which contribute to the overall picture, and shape in a less radical direction than a reworking of the text.

However, with more obscure works of ancient literature the literary reception is more limited and therefore translations shape the understanding of the text to a greater extent. Here translations, for many readers, can represent a first bridge to understanding the text and therefore will play a critical

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<sup>12</sup> Wilson, E. (2019) *Sebald Lecture 2019*. British Centre for Literary Translation. 00:39:00-00:41:00

role in shaping their understanding of it. Given the context of translation readings and studies, this also shapes perceptions about the content and sense of the original text, as opposed to applying the lens proposed by a novel to produce a fresh understanding.

With certain works, translation may be not a bridge to understanding but may participate with other literary reception so that the lines between the two are blurred and translation is difficult to isolate, therefore its impact is difficult to assess. In the introduction to Julia Haig Gasser's anthology *Catullus in English*, she does not clearly distinguish between translation, imitation, and poetry inspired by Catullus, suggesting they all shape each other reciprocally and continually. Haig Gasser proposes that poets and critics "created a Catullus in their own image", from a "seventeenth century French courtier" in *The Adventures of Catullus* (1707) to a "full-blown Romantic" in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>13</sup> In *The Adventures of Catullus*, the anonymous English translation of a French novel, more than 40 translations by various authors of Catullus' poems are inserted into a fictional history of Catullus based upon his poetry, which "treats [him] and his friends as if they were characters in a novel of seventeenth century courtiers and their ladies"<sup>14</sup>. Here translation and novelistic reception elide and work together to shape a certain perception of Catullus as a persona situated in the historical context of his reception.

The "liberation of sexual mores" from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century led to increased interest in Catullus, and greater exploration of the more controversial poems, which were no longer omitted from translations, responses, and critical studies.<sup>15</sup> The opening up of Catullus' work functioned in tandem with the increased freedom of his reception in books, as detailed by Theodore Ziolkowski in *Anglo-American Catullus since the Mid-Twentieth Century*; Catullus is identified variously as a witness to political turmoil, a representation of sexual freedom, or the ideal of a liberated thinker. These readings can also be drawn from translations which focus on these and other specific interpretations of Catullus as a figure and what his work represents.

Translations additionally shape our understanding of ancient literature when functioning alongside other forms of reception within one work; Anne Carson's *Nox* (2010) juxtaposes translation with literary, artistic and critical reception. *Nox* is difficult to define and is not a traditional translation. It is a form of elegy to her dead brother Michael Carson in the format of reproducible artistic book,<sup>16</sup> and it is infused with translations of Catullus 101, Catullus' elegy to his own dead brother. Each left-hand page gives the lexical gloss for the Latin text of the poem, one word at a time; Carson also critically discusses translation and her translations. She only gives a full translation of Catullus' poem towards the end of the *Nox*, having left the reader to consider Catullus' elegy piece by piece, able to understand each section but not the whole, reminiscent of the impossibility of Carson being able to wholly understand her brother. The glosses have been edited by the author<sup>17</sup> and whilst these are not the direct translation of a text we are used to, nevertheless they are a form of disjointed translation which render Catullus' poem, and translations of his poem, fully present throughout the work. The glosses suggest a multiplicity of translations and an idea of multiplicity which can be expanded to readings of the Catullus poem, readings of *Nox*, and Carson's understanding of her brother. This is echoed in Carson's own commentary about her translation of Catullus 101: "I came to think of translating as a room, not exactly an unknown room, where one gropes for the light switch. I guess it never ends. A brother never ends. I prowl him. He does not end."<sup>18</sup> *Nox* is framed by translation and by Catullus' poem as considered through translations. Carson creates a symbiotic conversation

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<sup>13</sup> Haig Gasser, J. (Ed.). (2001). *Catullus in English*. pxi

<sup>14</sup> Haig Gasser, J. *Catullus in English* p62

<sup>15</sup> Ziolkowski, T (2007) *The Anglo-American Catullus since the Mid-Twentieth Century*. International Journal of the Classical Tradition

<sup>16</sup> Corcoran, N. (2012) *Review: A Brother Never Ends*. Cambridge Quarterly

<sup>17</sup> Corcoran, N. *Review: A Brother Never Ends*

<sup>18</sup> Carson, A. (2010) *Nox*. New Directions

between her work and classical literature which enrich each other, but also form an altogether new starting point for discussion.

In conclusion, translations shape to a significant extent our understanding of ancient literature. This shaping is less overtly radical than other forms of literary reception. However, translations do have the power to change the whole landscape of the text itself, not just to position the reader in a new viewpoint from which they can consider the work, as other forms of literary reception might. Translations also continue to form the basis of reading ancient literature even when reading an 'original text'; they are crucial in shaping understanding even when doing so in a more nuanced way. Despite this less obvious shaping, translations hold a unique role as the closest way to access ancient literature in our native languages, meaning they can shape in surprising and constructive ways our understanding of ancient literature, the languages in which it was written and the world which in which it functioned.

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