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Cover image: Athenian Fragmentary votive sculpture of Dionysus (?) Greek Ashmolean Museum. Photograph by Mary Harrsch, CC BY-SA. Cover design by Anna Gatti.

Guest Feature 5

Diane Rayor on Translating Sappho and Euripides

Diane Rayor, Professor Emerita of Classics at Grand Valley Statue University, discusses literary translation.

For the purposes of a Greek textbook, "translate" means "demonstrate your ability to read Greek." You do this by rendering a Greek passage into accurate English that makes sense.

If your goal is to craft a literary translation, however, accuracy is just the starting point. You must follow accuracy with introspection because every translation has a *skopos*—a goal or purpose. What do you want the translation to do? Who are your expected readers or audience? How can you best put into English the ideas and emotions, the rhythms and imagery of the original text? One cannot simply place tracing paper over the Greek and draw up an English copy. How do you make the best choices?

As a junior in college, I first tried literary translation when a Greek professor asked me to translate a Sappho poem (fragment 2) because she didn't like those available in English. My original *skopos* was simple—please my professor with a translation both accurate and poetic (something that sounded good in English and looked like a poem). The experience, however, turned out to be transformative for me, "like wind crashing on mountain oaks" (Sappho fr. 47.2) followed by the piercing radiance of the Colorado sun.

The request to translate one poem led to research on Sappho, her time and place (late 7th century Lesbos), and the performance of archaic lyric poetry. Sappho's songs survive as fragments pieced together from papyrus, parchment, a potsherd, and later authors'

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quotations. Therefore, translating from the most up-to-date, authoritative text possible is essential.

The fragmentary state of Sappho's songs also demonstrates that it is impossible for a translation to recreate the original. My goal is to draw the reader closer to Sappho, conveying the pleasures of her Greek to a non Greek-reading audience. My driving theory is that the experience of reading a translation should be as close as possible to that of reading the text in its original language.

The final version should sound good when read aloud as well as maintain meaning and imagery, neither adding to nor subtracting from the original. So many choices and challenges! Some strategies include reading the Greek aloud and noting techniques to emulate, such as tempo, repetition, rhyme, alliteration, or stanza form. When you translate, read your drafts aloud, too. As an example, read aloud Sappho fr. 140 in Greek and English. See if you can hear, feel, and see the sound, the beat:

κατθνάσκει, Κυθέρη', ἄβρος Ἄδωνις· τί κε θεῖμεν; καττύπτεσθε, κόραι, καὶ κατερείκεσθε χίτωνας.

Girls:

Delicate Adonis is dying, Aphrodite—what should we do? *Aphrodite:*

Beat your breasts, daughters, and rend your dresses.1

Translations are inherently interpretations; the translator's reading becomes the new poem:

γλύκηα μᾶτερ, οὔτοι δύναμαι κρέκην τὸν ἴστον πόθω δάμεισα παῖδος βραδίναν δι' Ἀφροδίταν.

Sweet mother, I cannot weave—slender Aphrodite has overcome me with longing for a girl.

Sappho fr. 102

At the time this was published (2014), all other translations rendered the neuter $\pi\alpha\tilde{\iota}\delta\circ\varsigma$ as "boy" rather than any of the other possibilities (girl, child, daughter, son, slave). For this particular fragment, "girl" fits best with Sappho's homoerotic work, rather than with her

¹ Diane J. Rayor, 2014. Sappho: A New Translation of the Complete Works (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) p. 44.

marriage or family songs.² This is only one quick example of why you need to read Greek. Don't trust translators!

Translating Greek tragedy calls for additional strategies. For performance, the language must be clear and work in speech. Can the actors say these lines and the audience understand them—in a single hearing and at the tempo at which they should be spoken or sung? By revising a draft in collaboration with actors and their director during rehearsals, I fine-tune the translation into an actable script. When actors stumble on lines, I adjust and revise until they no longer do. In Euripides' Hecuba, the actor had difficulty saying, "Those in power must not rule wrongly" (282). Try saying this aloud! In returning to the Greek, which repeats $\kappa\rho\acute{\alpha}\tau$ oc, I changed it to the more precise (and powerful), "Those in power should not abuse that power." We all need help—attentive listening and collaboration are critical.

The first time hearing my draft scripts aloud always brings laughs and surprises. In the first rehearsal of Euripides' *Helen*, Menelaos asks for "a bier, empty of a body, bearing covers." Everyone heard Menelaos ask for a "beer" not a "bier"! Definitely neither the translator's nor Euripides' intended meaning. Now the line reads: "an open coffin, filled with robes, no body."

Plays provide many unique challenges. While my books include introductions and notes, performance needs to work without those guides. With cultural concepts that are tricky to convey succinctly, such as *xenia* (guest-host relationship) and supplication, I try to slip in extra guidance. In Euripides' *Medea*, the title character supplicates Kreon: "μή, πρός σε γονάτων τῆς τε νεογάμου κόρης." My translation adds the italicized words for clarity: "No, *I beg* you by your knees, by your newlywed daughter!" (324).³

Translation is an act of $\chi\acute{\alpha}\rho\iota \varsigma$ —gratitude and reciprocity that grants the original new life. The Greek is a gift to us, and our English translation a gift to new readers in gratitude to the original, bringing each closer to the other.

To watch a video of Diane Rayor reading and commenting on her translations of Sappho, follow this link:

² https://sweetbitterpodcast.com/listen/

³ Diane J. Rayor 2013. *Euripides' Medea: A New Translation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

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For the Greek text of Sappho 31 and Diane Rayor's translation, see Appendix XIII.

To watch a video on performing Diane Rayor's translation of Euripides' *Helen*, follow this link:

Performing Euripides' Helen.⁵

⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jGN_4VhBLrw.

⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AGwU0X34cQk.