

INTRODUCTION

Women and the Greek Alphabet

AN ODE IN GREEK

At the age of thirteen, a precocious English girl composed a poem in ancient Greek. Entitled “First Greek Ode May 4th, 1819 To Summer,” the manuscript is difficult to decipher (Figure 0.1).¹ Written in awkward letters and riddled with errors, the Greek words appear mostly without accents or other diacritical marks. Here is a transcription, a transliteration, and my version of a “literal” translation:

Μουσα καταβε(αινε) αδειν
Εξ αναντιας του πολου
Μουσα δεομαι σου τουτο
Κελευε την λυρην αντηχειν
Ω Μουσα επιπνε με.
Ασπαζω σε ω θερε
Ἡ Μουσα ασπαζει σε
Ἡ φυσις ασπαζει σε
Ὁ κοκκυξ ασπαζει σε
Και οἱ αοιδοι των νεμων!
Ασπαζω σε ω θερε.

Mousa katabe(aïne) adein
Eks anantias tou polou
Mousa deomai sou touto
Keleue ten luren antechain
O Mousa epipne me.
Aspasdo se o there
He Mousa aspasdei se
He phusis aspasdei se
Ho kokkuks aspasdei se
Kai hoi aoidoi ton nemon!
Aspasdo se o there.

Muse descend to sing
 Down from the sky
 Muse I beg this of you
 Command the lyre to resound
 O Muse inspire me.
 I welcome you O summer
 The Muse welcomes you
 Nature welcomes you
 The cuckoo welcomes you
 And the singers of the meadow!
 I welcome you O summer.

The ode begins with an invocation in line 1, where the letter *omikron* is combined with *upsilon* in Μουσα, spelling out the name of the Muse. Although the verb *katabe(aine)* in line 1 has several letters crossed out (by mistake) it seems to be an imperative: “Muse descend to sing” (Μουσα καταβαινε αδειν). Line 2 imagines the Muse appearing “down from the sky” (Εξ αναντιας του πολου),² and in line 3 the Muse is reinvoked with a verb in the first person: “Muse, I beg this of you” (Μουσα δεομαι σου τουτο). Perhaps “this” refers back to the previous lines, begging the Muse to make herself visible. Or perhaps “this” refers forward, begging the Muse to make herself audible, as we read in line 4: “Command the lyre to sound” (Κελευε την λυρην αντηχειν). Line 5 repeats the call to the Muse, this time with a vocative that superimposes *omega* over the capital O: “O Muse, inspire me” (Ω Μουσα επιπνε με).

From *omikron* to *omega*, little o to big O, the ode asks for inspiration to breathe new life into an ancient language, much as summer breathes life into nature and makes it sing. As a prelude, line 6 modulates from invocation to apostrophe: “I welcome you, O Summer” (Ασπαζω σε ω θερε). Starting in line 7, breathing marks begin to appear for the first time, before the letter *eta* in Ή Μουσα, as if the muse herself is sighing a warm breath in response to summer’s breeze: “The muse welcomes you” (Η Μουσα ασπαζει σε). The verb *aspazei* recalls the salutation in the epistles of St. Paul, a revelation of the spirit in the letter that is projected here into the natural world, as the verb is repeated in line 8, “Nature welcomes you” (Η φυσις ασπαζει σε), and again in line 9, “The cuckoo welcomes you” (Η κοκκυξ ασπαζει σε). In line 10 the sound of the cuckoo is amplified into the song of many birds: “And the singers of the meadow!” (Και οι αιδοι των νεμων!). The last line of the ode joins the choir of birdsong by repeating line 6, like a musical refrain: “I welcome you, O Summer” (Ασπαζω σε ω θερε).

“First Greek Ode” thus performs a rhetorical turn around its own invocation. Beginning and ending in the vocative (Μουσα is the first word, ω θεε the last), it invokes the first songs of summer in order to assert the vocation of the young poet, her own first song. At the bottom of the page, the ode is signed E B Barrett (Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, later known as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, or E.B.B.). Although its meter is irregular, the ode creates a musical figure for the song of the poet, who tries to warble her own rhythmic cadences as the Greek muse teaches her to sing (*adein*) along with the poetic birds: in the ode those singers of the meadow are called *aoidoi*, the Greek word for “poets.” But has ancient Greek been translated into the sounds and rhythms of the world, or does the ode translate the sounds and rhythms of the world into ancient Greek? And can these sounds be heard at all? The lyre that seems to resound in line 4 (ἀντιχεῖν, *anti* + *echo*) is but an echo of a dead language that is no longer heard or spoken. Letter by letter, word by word, line by line, it is spelled out in a strange alphabet.

I came across this lovely ode in girlish Greek when I was leafing through the papers of Elizabeth Barrett Browning in the New York Public Library. Copied out by hand on a loose page, this manuscript was carefully preserved as a piece of juvenilia and inserted into her mother’s commonplace book. Although reproduced as a facsimile in a pamphlet from 1971 (“New in the Berg Collection”), and duly noted in 1984 as an entry in *The Browning Collections: A Reconstruction with Other Memorabilia*, the ode was not translated or collected in any book until its publication in *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* in 2010, compiled by a team of E.B.B. scholars.³ Their long collective labor of editing the complete poems—the first scholarly edition since 1900, with annotations on manuscript revisions and variant editions—is a feminist project of recovery, discovering new materials and making it possible to read E.B.B. in new ways. But the appearance of this ode in print should not efface the traces of E.B.B.’s handwriting, especially if we want to read her emergence as a Woman of Letters by retracing the outlines of the letters that she wrote in Greek.

E.B.B. was spell-bound by ancient Greek for many years. In “Glimpses into My Own Life and Literary Character,” an autobiographical essay she started writing just a few months after her “First Greek Ode,” she defined her literary character through an intense identification with Greek letters. Having learned to read and write Greek at an early age, first on her own and then with her brother’s tutor, she confessed: “To comprehend even the Greek alphabet was delight inexpressible. Under the tuition of Mr. McSwiney I attained that which I so fervently desired” (350). Ancient Greek became her language of and for desire, as she proclaimed with girlish delight in an escalating series of exclamation

points: “To be a good linguist is the height of my ambition & I do not believe that I can ever cease desiring to attain this!! . . . I well remember three years ago ere I had the advantage of Mr. McSwiney’s instruction & crying very heartily for half an hour because I did not understand Greek!!!” (355) E.B.B. went on to cultivate her understanding of Greek with a series of mentors; after grammatical instruction with Mr. McSwiney, she exchanged erudite letters on Greek metrics and the pronunciation of classical languages with Sir Uvedale Price, and in her twenties she read Greek literature together with the blind scholar Hugh Stuart Boyd, who liked to call her “Porsonia” (after the English classical scholar, Richard Porson). Having dedicated much of her youth to Greek studies, she wrote to Boyd in 1827: “I intend to give up *Greek* when I give up *poetry*; &,—as Porson said on a case equally decided,—“*not till then*.” Tho’ I never become a critical scholar, I may continue to enjoy that divine poetical literature, for whose sake I encountered the language” (BC 2:56).

This passion for Greek is put on display in the manuscript of “First Greek Ode,” where E.B.B. has transformed her early reading of Greek into the poetic performance of her own writing. As “Poet Laureate of Hope End” by the age of eight, E.B.B. had started composing English verses for her family at Hope End Mansion. Between 1815 to 1816 she penned a series of little odes, invoking the muse for her brother’s birthday (“Oh Come Fair Muse, Oh raise thy fondest strain / Come let us hear thy plaintive voice again”), her mother’s birthday (“Come Oh my Muse, Sing of the first of May / . . . And cheer my verses with a bounteous smile / Aurora sings in her triumphal car / And Nature’s Music does the hour beguile”), and her father’s birthday (“Hail dear Papa! I hail thy natal day / The Muses speak my hidden thoughts of love / . . . Sweet Philomel enchants the listening grove / While music’s warblings twitter in her throat”). In 1817 she wrote “The Sorrows of the Muses” as her first long poem (dedicated to her mother), and by 1818 she was writing “The Battle of Marathon” (dedicated to her father and printed for private publication in 1820). Thus, by the time she composed her “First Greek Ode” in 1819, E.B.B. was trying to transpose these classical themes and tropes back into the language from which they were derived: the invocation to the muse, the echoing of her song in nature’s music, the warbling of birds in groves and meadows, as if the whole world could be translated into and out of ancient Greek.

Two decades later, in yet another “Biographical Sketch,” E.B.B. described the poetic ambitions of her girlhood with some amusement, as “the narrative of nascent odes epics & didactics crying aloud on obsolete Muses from childish lips.” The muse invoked in her “First Greek Ode” must have seemed the most obsolete of them all, an obscure exercise in a dead language. But reading and

writing ancient Greek was a formative experience for E.B.B., who remembered her early years at Hope End as “a retirement scarcely broken to me except by books & my own thoughts,” when she “read Greek as hard under the trees as some of your Oxonians in the Bodleian—gathered visions from Plato & the dramatists—eat & drank Greek & made my head ache with it.” (BC 7.353–54) Her desire for Greek was so intense, she fixated on the Greek alphabet and revived it in her thoughts, as if she herself might re-embody this dead language and bring it back to life. As a girl she did not have access to universities such as Oxford, where she might peruse Greek texts alongside students and scholars at the Bodleian Library, but she imagined another locus for reading Greek that took a different form. Reading Greek “under the trees,” in the shadow of her imagination, she lifted archaic letters off the page and projected them out of books and beyond the library, into the inner life of her mind and the life of the world outside her. Not quite dead and not quite alive, ancient Greek seemed to have an afterlife of its own, strangely reanimated.

“SOME GREEK UPON THE MARGIN”

The afterlife of Greek letters, variously transliterated, transcribed, translated, transformed, and performed by women in Victorian England and America, is the subject of my book. E.B.B. was not the only one to identify her literary character through identification with ancient Greek. By 1840, she had acquired the reputation of an exceptionally literary woman: “Miss Elizabeth Barrett may justly claim to stand alone . . . as well for her extraordinary acquaintance with ancient classic literature, as for the boldness of her poetic attempts.”⁴ But the example of E.B.B. was generic; or rather, her exemplarity was generic in being figured *as* exceptional. As we shall see, there were many women who cultivated a passionate reading of Greek, and each seemed exceptional in her own way. In their diaries, correspondence, autobiographies, biographies, and other narratives, we encounter again and again a narrative of desire for ancient Greek that has its own predictable *topoi*: an early encounter with the Greek alphabet, a primal scene of falling in love with the language, a pedagogical experience that revolves around the pain and pleasure of learning to read Greek, an attempt to translate and incorporate Greek into a body of writing, an idea that the woman writer herself might be the very embodiment of Greek letters.

In the course of the nineteenth century, learning Greek increasingly served as a rite of passage to become a “woman of letters.” The phrase is a late Victorian invention, but as Linda Peterson has argued, “women of letters flourished throughout the century, as women increasingly conceived of their literary

careers and constructed their public personae in a professional mode.”⁵ The public persona of E.B.B. was one of the myths of authorship invoked by and for Victorian women writers, who found in E.B.B. the very personification of a Woman of Greek Letters. E.B.B. herself encouraged this autobiographical fiction in *Aurora Leigh*, the widely read and often-cited “novel poem” that narrated the story of its eponymous heroine as an aspiring woman writer. In Book I, Aurora narrates how she learned “the trick of Greek” from her father in her youth (I, 714), and how she tried to revive it by imitating Greek poetry in her own English “odes . . . bucolics . . . didactics . . . and elegiac griefs.”⁶ Although she mocks her own early attempts (“We beat the phormix till we hurt our thumbs,” 1.978) and dismisses earnest invocations to the classical muse (“We call the Muse,—“O Muse, benignant Muse . . . What make-believe!” (1.980, 983), nevertheless her poetic career begins with the incorporation of ancient Greek into her own poetry. Aurora reflects self-consciously on the self-classicizing ambitions of her literary character: “Oft, the ancient forms / Will thrill, indeed, in carrying the young blood” (1.998–99).

It seems thrilling, indeed, for the young Aurora to embody an ancient form at the beginning of Book II. Like the young E.B.B. who imagined that “Aurora sings in her triumphal car” in the early ode on her mother’s birthday, a triumphant Aurora proclaims her own name on the morning of her twentieth birthday, at the dawn of her career as a poet. Crowning herself with ivy, she strikes the classical pose of a Poetess and is poised to make her claim to fame, when her cousin Romney discovers her standing alone in the garden:

I stood there fixed,—
My arms up, like the caryatid, sole
Of some abolished temple, helplessly
Persistent in a gesture which derides
A former purpose. Yet my blush was flame,
As if from flax, not stone.

‘Aurora Leigh,
The earliest of Auroras!’ (2.60–66)

By punning on her name, Romney mocks Aurora’s classical ambition to be among the first (or “earliest”) women poets. Suddenly the thrill of embodying an ancient form feels like the empty gesture of an allegorical figure, and Aurora (“fixed” by Romney’s arresting gaze) is frozen into a statue that serves only as the remainder of “some abolished temple,” no longer standing. Trying to reach out to a vision of an antiquity that has long disappeared, she now seems

“persistent in a gesture which derides / a former purpose.” In the eyes of Romney, she looks like a caryatid, upholding the ruins of an antiquated faith that is her worship in the temple of all things Greek.

Yet the young blood flows through the petrified Aurora to reanimate her ancient form; she is after all a living woman, addressed by a man who makes her blush. He returns to her the book of poems that she had left behind:

‘Here’s a book I found!
No name writ on it—poems, by the form;
Some Greek upon the margin,—lady’s Greek
Without the accents. Read it? Not a word.
I saw at once the thing had witchcraft in ’t,
Whereof the reading calls up dangerous spirits:
I rather bring it to the witch.’ (2.74–79)

Even without Aurora’s name inscribed in the book, Romney recognizes it is her writing because of the Greek she has marked, or rather left unmarked, in the margins. He calls it “lady’s Greek without the accents,” suggesting she lacks the education of any English schoolboy: she does not know how to write Greek with the proper diacritical marks, or perhaps she does not know how to mark the quantities of Greek verse for proper pronunciation and metrical scansion. Either way, Romney emphasizes that he has read “not a word” of the English poems and their Greek marginalia in her book. He teases Aurora that “the reading calls up dangerous spirits,” as if Greek letters might have been brought back from the dead to inspire her writing, turning it into a form of witchcraft, or a magic spell.

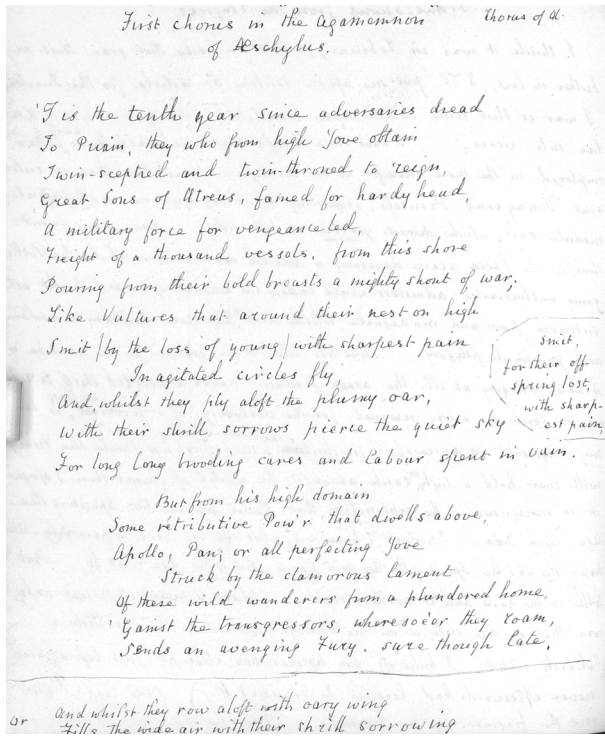
The spell of Greek was played out in many ways and by many women: not one lady’s Greek in the singular, but Ladies’ Greek in the plural. What looked like an individual performance—the scene of Aurora standing alone in the garden to proclaim herself a classical poetess, or the notion that E.B.B. “may justly claim to stand alone” because of her acquaintance with classics—was a collective identification with the Greek alphabet, self-consciously performed by nineteenth-century women of letters. Like E.B.B. who expressed “inexpressible” delight in her early attempts “to comprehend even the Greek alphabet,” these women were fascinated by the literality of Greek letters that simultaneously provoked and resisted translation. For them, the special appeal of ancient Greek was that it remained a dead language, retaining a trace of strangeness that could not be translated into English. Their way of comprehending Greek departed from the disciplinary practice of nineteenth-century philologists,

who emphasized mastery of the text as an object of scholarly knowledge. No doubt there was passionate identification with Greek at play in the increasingly specialized discourses of classical scholarship, but the professionalization of philology produced a scholarly relation to ancient Greek and other “dead” languages, through debates about accurate reconstructions, editions, commentaries, and translations of classical texts. By contrast, nineteenth-century women discovered other ways of knowing and desiring Greek, or what Jennifer Wallace calls “the erotics of Greek”: they were “amateurs,” whose love of Greek letters circulated around the boundaries of nineteenth-century philology.

It was precisely because these women seemed to have a marginal knowledge of Greek (“Some Greek upon the margin,—lady’s Greek”) that they were able to transform it in their own literary productions. They produced translations and imitations without claiming the authority of classical scholarship, in forms of writing often overlooked by literary critics and cultural historians who were looking for particular kinds of literary or scholarly activity to define “the classical tradition” in Victorian England and America.⁷ Translating Greek in the margins of that literary history, many women have until recently dropped out of view. And yet the purloined letters of Ladies’ Greek are hidden, in plain sight, in the archives. Like the Greek marginalia in Aurora’s book with “no name writ on it,” women’s transcriptions and translations of Greek can be found in their notebooks and personal correspondence, in student magazines and small literary periodicals, in out-of-print editions or any number of anonymous publications and other miscellaneous manuscripts in the scattered archives of women’s messy, often illegible writing.

Consider, for example, a page from the manuscript notebooks of Sara Coleridge, a contemporary of E.B.B. Included in a section that she labeled “Translations from the Classics” is a fair copy of her translation of a choral ode from the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus (Figure 0.2).⁸ The manuscript includes various corrections and revisions, as Coleridge tried to transform the dense metaphorical language of Aeschylean poetry into English verse. On the first page of her translation, she struggled with the simile that compares the sons of Atreus to eagles or vultures circling overhead, trying in vain to protect their young:

Like Vultures that around their nest on high
Smit by the loss of young with sharpest pain
In agitated circles fly
And whilst they ply aloft the plummy oar
With their shrill sorrows pierce the quiet sky
For lone long brooding cares and labour spent in vain.



0.2 Sara Coleridge, "First Chorus in 'The Agamemnon.'" Page 1 from "Translations from the Classics" in Manuscript Notebook, "Poetry 1823–1851" (Container 3.3). Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

As Coleridge scribbled variations in the right margin ("Smit for their offspring lost, with sharpest pain") and also in the margin below ("And whilst they row aloft with oary wing / Fills the wide air with their shrill sorrowing"), it would seem that her own translation was also flying "in agitated circles," lamenting the long brooding over "labour spent in vain." After eight pages with a list of "Variations" at the end, the incomplete draft ends abruptly; it was never published, and it may be difficult to see why, much less read how, these scribbles are significant.

Nevertheless Coleridge's obscure notebook gives us an insight into the private and public circulation of Ladies' Greek. In a multilayered reading of her notes, the historical context of the translation is as important as its literary content. Along with her draft, Coleridge also records how her translation was interrupted in 1848, by an invitation to review *The Princess*, Tennyson's new poem about women's education:

I was at that time intent upon translating the “Agamemnon” of Aeschylus into verse. I have since thought that my time would have been better employed in the mere attempt at an Aeschylean translation, than in criticizing Tennyson’s “Princess.” . . . I cannot think “The Princess” will ever hold a higher rank amongst the works of genius than I assigned it in consequence of the explanation that Gama means the Spirit of the Age, and Ida—I protest I know not what she was said to personify. Perhaps she was the Spirit of the Age and Gama that of the Age gone by—But I talk in the dark and it matters not. What I meant to record only was that, as the critique of the Princess appeared in the Quarterly of March 1848, I broke off my Agamemnon attempt just before, and never afterwards had leisure to resume it.

In *The Princess*, King Gama is persuaded by his daughter to found a women’s college, where Princess Ida presides until it falls to ruin. Uncertain what kind of woman Princess Ida was “said to personify” (does she embody the new Spirit of the Age, or its failure?), Coleridge gave Tennyson’s poem a mixed review, noting his “pretty mockery of feminine pretensions to learning and argument” as well as the “lovely imagery” in his “description of undergraduate relaxation in the gardens of Ida’s college.”⁹ In her notebook, she reflected further on women’s aspirations to higher learning, so dramatically disrupted in Tennyson’s poem, as an interruption of her own exercise in higher learning as well: “I broke off my Agamemnon attempt just before, and never afterwards had leisure to resume it.” What is left of her “Agamemnon attempt” is transcribed in the notebook, with this prefatory note and an allusion that is translated (wittily? wistfully? wryly? wearily?) from the prologue to this Aeschylean tragedy: “—But I talk in the dark and it matters not.”

Even if Coleridge’s Greek translation never saw the light of day, it does matter. It survives in the material form of her notebook, where we can see how Coleridge (like Aurora Leigh) performed “the trick of Greek” that she learned from her father. In the case of Coleridge the father was not a fiction: Samuel Taylor Coleridge had elaborate theories about how to teach ancient Greek, as he planned a grammar book in which Part I would be “the Principles of Universal Grammar” exemplified in the juxtaposition of Greek and English, and Part II would be “Greek lessons, methodically selected and arranged.”¹⁰ His pedagogical scheme never came to fruition, and he left the tutoring of his daughter mostly to others, but she inherited his passion for Greek and proved quite a prodigy. According to the *Memoir and Letters* later published by her own daughter, Sara Coleridge’s “favorite pursuits were chiefly literary and linguistic. Before she was

five-and-twenty she had made herself acquainted with the Greek and Latin Classics, and was well-skilled in French, Italian, German, and Spanish. These acquirements were mainly the result of her own efforts.”¹¹ Coleridge went on to marry a Greek scholar (her cousin Henry Coleridge, whose “compositions ‘chiefly on classical subjects’ . . . formed a topic of common interest”), and she took an active interest in the classical education of her children. In her correspondence, we find a list of her opinions on a variety of pedagogical topics, including “Reasons Why the Greek and Latin Poets Ought to Form Part of the Course of School Instruction,” “Love of Books as a Source of Happiness, and Likely to be Increased by Classical Studies,” and “Value of the Greek Language as an Instrument of Mental Cultivation.” On the last of these topics, she wrote to a female friend: “I wish very much that some day or other *you* may have the time to learn Greek, because that language is an *idea*. Even a little of it is like manure to the soil of the mind, and makes it bear finer flowers.”¹²

Manure to the soil of the mind, indeed: for Coleridge, learning ancient Greek was not only a way to cultivate the mind and make it flower, but the very ground of thought. According to her “*idea*” of the language, translation would grow naturally out of a process of reading and writing Greek. In drafting a series of revisions of the choral ode from Aeschylus in her notebook, Coleridge performed a complex interaction with the text, simultaneously reading Greek through English and English through Greek, continually rethinking her understanding of each language in relation to the other. Furthermore, this self-revising translation produced a way of knowing Greek that did not make it simply the object of knowledge, but rather made it possible to think about the very question of knowability, what could be known and what would remain unknown. “Things of the mind and intellect give me intense pleasure; they delight and amuse me as they are in themselves,” Coleridge wrote in her autobiography, preferring the process of thinking rather than its completion: “whatever subject I commence, I feel discomfort unless I could pursue it in every direction to the farthest bounds of thought.” This was Coleridge’s way of thinking about Greek as well, allowing Greek letters to “delight and amuse me as they are in themselves” and pursuing their translation “to the farthest bounds of thought” without reaching a conclusion.

These same sentences were quoted by Virginia Woolf in her essay on Coleridge’s autobiography, which Coleridge left unfinished much like the Greek translations in her notebook. “Sara’s mind wandered,” Woolf wrote: “she was diffuse, unable to conclude.”¹³ But Woolf was sympathetic to modes of thinking that did not insist on concluding, both in her essay on Coleridge and even more famously in her essay “On Not Knowing Greek” (1925). Here Woolf pursued

her own exploration of “the farthest bounds of thought,” by meditating on moments in ancient Greek when “the meaning is just on the far side of language.” Like Coleridge, she saw in Greek an opportunity to reflect on the movement of the mind, exemplified by Aeschylus in particular: “He will amplify and give us, not the thing itself, but the reverberation and reflection which, taken into his mind, the thing has made; close enough to the original to illustrate it, remote enough to heighten, enlarge and make it bold.”¹⁴ So also the experience of reading and translating Aeschylus might give us “not the thing itself” but its “reverberation and reflection,” simultaneously “close enough to the original” and also “remote enough” to allow the language to reverberate soundlessly in the mind. Woolf’s imagination of ancient Greek moved toward an ideal of pure literality, writ large in the mind’s eye by the desire to “heighten, enlarge and make it bold.”

In my first chapter, we will return to Woolf, whose famous essay “On Not Knowing Greek” is a powerful meditation on Greek as a language for not knowing. Her articulation of Ladies’ Greek is critical throughout the following chapters of my book, where I read different encounters with the literality of Greek letters. My central claim, however, is that this *idea* of Greek was not peculiar to Virginia Woolf, or Sara Coleridge, or Elizabeth Barrett Browning, but part of the larger nineteenth-century legacy of women for whom translation, in all its various forms, was a performance of “not knowing” Greek even while desiring to know it. As I try to read such strange scenes of reading, my second claim is that this idiosyncratic approach to Greek was played out not only in the mind of the solitary reader. The encounter with Greek letters so often described by *Women of Letters*, with all its imaginary and real implications, was enacted within a larger matrix of cultural practices, social networks, and institutional structures, during a time when women were making a transition from informal education to more formal education in universities. Out of their reinvention of female classical literacy emerged the culture that I call “Ladies’ Greek.”

“OUGHT WOMEN TO LEARN THE ALPHABET?”

To locate the scene of reading within historical sites for learning Greek, my research has focused on the culture of Ladies’ Greek in and around women’s colleges in England and America. Here the cultivation of Greek played an important role in debates about the higher education of women. Their interest in classics was, of course, a form of class identification that turned the Greek alphabet into a sign of advanced literacy, allowing Greek letters to be mobilized for upward mobility and to be personified as an idealized, feminine figure: an

aesthetic ideal that was whitened, like the nineteenth-century imagination of Greek statues, to create an elite culture for (mostly) white women of privilege. I return here to one place of special privilege in the broader cultural imaginary of Ladies' Greek: Victorian Cambridge. From the first generation of women who studied Greek there, I present four "representative" figures in order to sketch out some of the new discourses and debates that were circulating through these women, around the boundaries of classical scholarship, around the boundaries of the university, and around both sides of the Atlantic. Shaped by polemics about "knowing" Greek among classical scholars within the institution, these four women also show us how Ladies' Greek departed from such claims to knowledge, allowing them to "do" Greek differently as a theory and practice of not knowing.

"Now and for us it is a time to Hellenise and to praise knowing; for we have Hebraised too much and have over-valued doing," Matthew Arnold wrote in his Preface to *Culture and Anarchy* in 1869, proclaiming Victorian Hellenism at its height. Whether women were included in Hellenising "now" and "for us" was open for debate, however. This was the year Girton College opened its doors for women to study at Cambridge University, under the leadership of Emily Davies. Opposing the creation of any special system of education for women, she insisted they follow the same curriculum of study as the male undergraduates. Her vision of women's education was simultaneously radical and conservative, as her insistence on educational equality also meant a resistance to curricular reform. This was also the time when the compulsory Greek debates were starting up at Cambridge (questioning whether Greek should be a required subject in the "Little-Go," the Previous Examination required for entrance into the "Tripos" Examinations for an honors degree). The intensity of both debates—about the place of women in higher education and the place of classics in the curriculum—converged in "The Girton Girl," who became a popular icon for the entry of women into Greek studies. In "doing" Greek at Cambridge did they make a claim to "knowing" it as well? And was their cultivation of Greek the kind of knowing that Arnold wanted to claim for Hellenism?

The question of Greek—with its multiple and often contradictory significations—was hotly contested within Victorian Hellenism, and especially in Victorian Cambridge, as Simon Goldhill has argued: "This is never merely a question of linguistic competence or training. Rather a host of political, cultural and personal politics make 'knowing' Greek a very complex idea indeed."¹⁵ Analyzing the passionate polemics around classical education among Cambridge scholars and other Victorian men of letters, Goldhill notes that "the specific question of what it means to 'know Greek' is constantly framed—though not

contained—by the history of education” (194), and he emphasizes “the range of positions available in such debate about ‘knowing’ Greek” (196). Within his longer cultural history of Hellenism, Goldhill’s chapter on nineteenth-century struggles around “Greekness” concludes:

There’s no knowing Greek—no knowing—without desire. A desire that is not just a wish for social or intellectual achievement, but a self-consuming, self-forming interest, informed by the exchanges of status, power, cultural regulation and social expectation. That’s why the simple question ‘Do you know Greek?’ can never have a simple answer. (245)

Ringling various changes on the title of his chapter (“Who Knows Greek?”), Goldhill defines the cultural politics of Greek in terms of the dynamic debates around knowing Greek and the complication of different claims to knowledge: never a simple answer, but also, never a simple question.

We can approach the gender politics of Ladies’ Greek through the related, but different, question of “not knowing.” Although Victorian women of letters do not figure in Goldhill’s account of Victorian Cambridge, certainly their desire for Greek was also regulated by status, power, social expectation; beyond linguistic competence or intellectual achievement, their Greek studies also served to define a “self-consuming self-forming interest.” But the self that was being formed, or consumed, through Ladies’ Greek was not a male subject, and the identification of a female subject with debates about knowing Greek produced a different relation to the institution, where status and power were exchanged in the name of scholarly identity and the institutional production of knowledge. It is not possible to exchange women’s names for the names of men in this story without further differentiating the forms of desire inflected by gender, and pointing to a knowing that was shaped by more diffuse and open-ended interactions often played out in the margin of institutional discourses. The very terms of exchange and exchangeability, in other words, need to be probed, if we want to understand the formation of a female subject whose claim to individual identity or personal agency was mediated by the collective practice of Ladies’ Greek.

How do we read the image of Agnata Frances Ramsay, for example, the iconic Girton Girl who was widely celebrated for her triumph in the Cambridge Classical Tripos in 1887?¹⁶ Because she was the first woman to achieve top honors in Part I of Tripos Examination (the linguistic part most difficult for women), she was featured in a drawing by Du Maurier in *Punch* (Figure 0.3). As the only student to be ranked in the First Division of the First Class in the First Part of



HONOUR TO AGNETA FRANCES RAMSAY !
(CAMBRIDGE, JUNE, 1887.)

o.3 "Honour to Agneta Frances Ramsay! (Cambridge, June 1887)." *Punch* (July 2, 1887): 326.

the Classical Tripos that year, Ramsey is seen entering the "First Class" compartment of a train, marked "Ladies Only." But since women and men were classed separately in the examination lists, the train compartment also marks her institutional segregation from the male students who took the same examination: if any of them had ranked in the First Division, she would not have appeared at the top of the list. Ushered into the train by Punch (dressed as an obsequious don, hats off to her) and a dancing dog, Ramsay is a reminder of Samuel Johnson's famous words that an educated woman preaching is like a circus dog performing tricks. The implications of the cartoon are ambiguous. Is Ramsay the exception that proves the rule? Does she merely imitate what her master has trained her to do? What is the end stop for the "Ladies' Only" train? Is she stepping into a scholarly career in Classics, or will she be derailed? Although Ramsay is dressed in full student regalia, and went on to successful completion of Part II of the Tripos, women did not receive University degrees until 1948. Simultaneously included in and excluded from the institution, Ramsay's identification with classical scholarship was all in the family: as the daughter of a classical scholar, and later the wife of another, she became known for her scholarly edition of a book of Herodotus. But with her back turned in the cartoon, she remains an enigmatic figure: not quite anonymous, yet faceless.

The depiction of Ramsay in *Punch* suggests many ambivalences about the desirability of classical education for women, and the ambiguities of their desire

for Greek. Whose desire was it? Was it the personal assertion of individual women's desires, or a public rejection of the university's desires to identify Greek with "Men Only," or a collective projection of Girton's desires for a collegiate identity through identification of Greek with "Ladies Only"? Although other women before Ramsay excelled in Tripos Examinations in various subjects, she became the image of "the first" woman to get "the first" in Classics, "the first" serious subject for women to study at Girton, "the first" of the women's colleges at Cambridge. (The cartoon still hangs in the front hall of Girton College and can be viewed on its website.) The popular circulation of the image both within and beyond the university makes it possible to see how the imagining of Ladies' Greek—the "examination" of Greek knowledge, and also what it might mean for women to know Greek and to examine their own knowing of Greek—was simultaneously under- and over-determined.

Ramsay was "a" first, but she was not "the" first. She was preceded by a variety of women who achieved success in Classics at Cambridge, including the illustrious Jane Ellen Harrison from Newnham College. In 1879 she was among the first generation of women to complete the Classical Tripos (not yet divided into two parts), and she received the highest marks that year in the philosophy exam. Although Harrison was passed over for a teaching position at Newnham in 1880 and (twice) for the Yates professorship in archaeology at the University of London, she finally returned to Newnham in 1898 as another "first," proclaimed to be the first "professional" female classicist. But rather than a forward progression into the profession of classical scholarship at Cambridge, as Harrison's biography is often narrated, her career (like her way of "knowing" Greek) was more circuitous. During nearly two decades in London, she had established a different reputation as an independent scholar by lecturing at various museums and writing about ancient Greece for academic publication as well as for circulation in popular periodicals (like *The Woman's World* and *The Quarterly Review*). Before returning to teach at Cambridge, she offered courses at the London Society for the Extension of University Teaching, where she inspired her students with passion for Greek; in 1888 one of her courses began with questionnaire, asking: "Do you know Greek? If not, you are strongly advised to spend a few hours in learning the letters in order to make out easy inscriptions."¹⁷

Even more than Ramsay (faceless in *Punch*), Harrison emerged as the public face of Ladies' Greek, as we see in an 1891 interview from *The Pall Mall Gazette* (Figure 0.4). The first page of the interview sets the scene for a double encounter that transforms the meeting with Harrison into "the occasion 'when Greek meets Greek.'" In a room where "the very air . . . breathed antiquity," Harrison

A WOMAN'S VIEW OF THE GREEK QUESTION.

AN INTERVIEW WITH MISS JANE HARRISON.

THE very air (writes one of our representatives) breathed antiquity. There was a fine photograph of the Parthenon on the wall; over an etching of one of Burne-Jones's pictures a piece of mummy cloth was hung; there were strange vases and pots; and books and pamphlets innumerable concerning the ancient Greeks stood on the shelves and in the quaint eighteenth-century book-case. It was an occasion "when Greek meets Greek." Two ladies bent together over a book of daintily coloured plates, lost in admiration of something which I was presently called upon to admire. The two ladies were Miss Jane Harrison, the lady to whose lectures during the last ten years the revival of popular interest in ancient Greece is almost solely due, and Miss Millington Lathbury, one of the three of Miss Harrison's pupils who have made Greek life and art their "professional" study, who has just been appointed Lecturer to the Oxford Society for the Extension of University Teaching. "Isn't it beautiful?" I was asked as the picture of a yellowish, noseless, and otherwise rather decrepit old Greek was handed to me. "Very," I replied, emphatically, and thought of the beauty of ugliness. The conversation drifted to the topic of the day, Greek at the Universities.



MISS JANE HARRISON.

"Of course, Miss Harrison," I asked, "with your enthusiasm for Greek you are all for retaining the study of the language at the Universities?"—"I hardly know what to think, at present," was the reply. "Personally, I must confess to a pretty strong prejudice in favour of 'compulsory Greek.' But, if you will have it, I will try to look that prejudice in the face. There is, first, though I am a constant reader of the

o.4 "A Woman's View of the Greek Question (Interview with Jane Harrison)," *Pall Mall Gazette* (November 4, 1891): 1.

seems a living Greek whose "enthusiasm" breathes new life into the dead language: she is "the lady to whose lectures during the last ten years the revival of popular interest in ancient Greece is almost solely due." Harrison seems more vivid than the artifacts and representations of Greece that surround her: "a fine photograph of the Parthenon," "a piece of mummy cloth," "strange vases and pots," "books and pamphlets innumerable concerning the ancient Greeks," all of which come to life in her imagination. "Lost in admiration of something" when the interview begins, Harrison emerges from her studious reverie long enough to ask, "Isn't it beautiful?" Indeed she personifies the revival of interest in ancient Greece, as the picture of "Miss Jane Harrison" featured in the article looks youthfully Greek, with a distinctly classical nose, in contrast to "the picture of a yellowish, noseless, and otherwise rather decrepit old Greek" that she presents to her interviewer. The disfigured face in the picture seems to produce the idealized, classicized, feminized figure of Harrison herself, whose eye (and nose) for Greek defines her aesthetic perception of Greek antiquity.

Harrison's aesthetic contemplation of all things Greek is also a pedagogical encounter, since the scene includes one of "Miss Harrison's pupils who have made Greek life and art their 'professional study.'" The quotation marks around "professional" suggest they profess a version of classical scholarship on the boundaries of the profession: Miss Jane Harrison lectures to popular audiences and Miss Millington Lathbury "has just been appointed Lecturer to the Oxford Society for the Extension of University Teaching." Although the location of these "two ladies bent together over a book of daintily coloured plates" is not specified, it suggests a feminine space, more private than public, where a relation of intimacy is played out through identification with Greek. Yet as the title of the article suggests, Harrison is also a public persona who can provide "A Woman's View of the Greek Question." "Of course, Miss Harrison," the interviewer asks, "with your enthusiasm for Greek you are all for retaining the study of the language at the Universities?" And she replies, "I hardly know what to think at present." Simultaneously proclaiming to know and not to know, she responds with a personal rather than a professional opinion: "Personally, I must confess to a pretty strong prejudice in favour of 'compulsory Greek.'"

The interview with Harrison creates a gendered perspective—the view of a woman who embodied "The Greek Question" for women, both its subject and its object—on debates about classical education, as seen both inside and outside the institutional politics of Greek studies (including Harrison's own) at Cambridge. The interview continues on other topics, but this opening vignette in *The Pall Mall Gazette* incorporates many of the features I associate with Ladies' Greek: the identification with a dead language, the personification of Greek letters, the "revival" of Greek for popular appeal, the idealization of classical beauty, the creation of a feminized marginal space, the implicit erotics of Greek pedagogy, the absorption of knowledge into aesthetic perception, the suspension between knowing and not knowing. When Harrison returned to Cambridge in 1898, she continued her self-conscious performance of Ladies' Greek within the institutional setting of Newnham College, even while redefining herself as a "professional" scholar in the university. At Cambridge she was known for the performative drama of her lectures, and the literary performativity of her scholarly prose often took priority over philological expertise.

Thus Gilbert Murray, Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford and Harrison's close friend and collaborator, remembered her as "a teacher who combined certain minor defects, due in part to a lack of early training in the drudgery of exact scholarship and in part to a natural impulsiveness, with a width of learning, a force of historical imagination, and an infectious interest in her subject which amounted to genius."¹⁸ Mary Beard points out that Murray's memorial

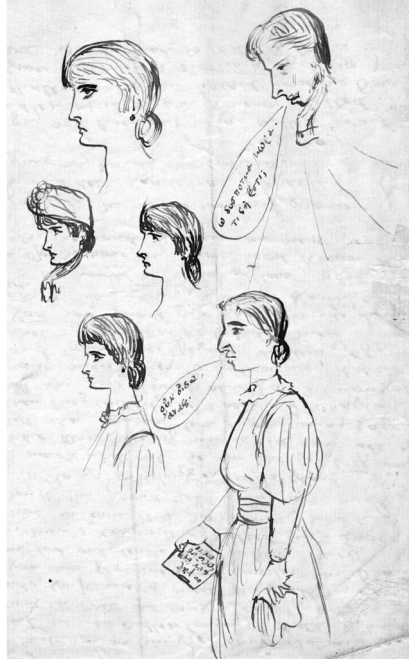
lecture is “one of the founding texts of the story—perhaps, better the *myth*—of Jane Harrison,” as Murray glossed over her years in London in order to launch “one of the orthodox narratives of Harrison’s scholarly career,” her emergence as a brilliant and influential figure among The Cambridge Ritualists.¹⁹ Calling into question some of those orthodoxies in *The Invention of Jane Harrison*, Beard delves back into the archives in order to discover “a different place for her in the history of classics” as a “series of competing narratives, a battleground of biographies” (11), and to interrogate how and why Harrison “remains the most famous female classicist there has been, an originary and radical thinker, a permanent fixture in the history of scholarship” (162).

But the invention of Jane Harrison was not only the invention of Jane Harrison. If she transformed (as Murray recalled) the “minor defects” of her training and the “drudgery of exact scholarship” into an impulsive, passionate, and imaginative reading of Greek, it was more than the expression of her individual genius. The originality of her imagination emerged from a late-nineteenth-century culture of women’s “high amateurism,” as described by Bonnie Smith in *The Gender of History*. According to Smith, “amateurs articulated liminality that worked to mark out the boundaries, spaces, and locations of femininity,” and in reconstructing the multilayered methodologies and multiple genres used by female amateurs writing history in the late nineteenth century, Smith emphasizes the importance of reading their work on its own terms: not a crisis point or transition in the professionalization of knowledge, but an opening into new lines of inquiry and forms of knowing: “The amateur expanded cognition to include aesthetic, emotional, and kinetic registers, constructing these within a historical knowledge that was—and remains—beyond the horizons of the professional.”²⁰ So also Harrison, not quite a “sound scholar” by her own admission, played on the aesthetic, emotional, and kinetic registers of classical scholarship. Even after twenty years at Cambridge, at the heart of the institution, she could suddenly proclaim with extravagant passion that she was falling in love with Russian, just as she first “fell in love suddenly, hopelessly” with ancient Greek: “What was the spell cast by Greek?” she asked in “Aspects, Aorists and the Classical Tripos” (a 1919 Cambridge pamphlet not nearly as dry as its title), self-consciously situating an amateur’s passion for strange alphabets within, but also before and beyond, the disciplinary formation of the Cambridge Classical Tripos.

Of course, not all women at Cambridge were quite so enchanted with the Classical Tripos, and few were as successful as Ramsay at Girton or Harrison at Newnham, who were made to exemplify and indeed personify the classical ambitions of their respective colleges. There were other, more marginal figures

like Amy Levy, one of the first Jewish women to study in Cambridge. She pursued classical and modern languages at Newnham College from 1879 to 1881, and during this time she also published “Xantippe,” a dramatic monologue in which the embittered wife of Socrates narrates her exclusion from the philosophical dialogues between men in his inner circle. Complaining that “my soul which yearned for knowledge, for a tongue / that should proclaim the stately mysteries” has been left uneducated, she proclaims an ironic variation on the Socratic credo, “I know only that I do not know.” Unable to proclaim the mysteries, her Greek tongue has turned into a woman’s shrewish tongue, turning Xantippe into a figure for Levy’s sense of double marginalization, as a Jew and as a woman at Cambridge.²¹ The stories, poems, and comic sketches that she drafted in her student notebooks illustrate a more satirical perspective on the cult of Classics at Cambridge, including her own desire to learn Greek: she too identified with Greek letters as a way to define her literary character. The self-mockery is visible in a comical sketch by Levy of five young women, including herself, with their Greek tutor, Mr. Jenkinson of King’s College (Figure 0.5). In the mock-Socratic dialogue of this pedagogical scene, the caricature of Jenkinson asks in ancient Greek, “O wretched girl, what is this?” The caricature of Levy is placed at the bottom of the page below her tutor, in submission to his mastery, as she responds in garbled Greek: “I do not know, master.” Unable to translate the text she holds in her hands, she marks her failure as a Woman of Greek Letters: Levy’s Greek is not quite “Lady’s Greek without the accents,” but in the margins of her notebook it is written inaccurately, with the wrong accents.²²

The sketch also accentuates Levy’s lower place in the hierarchy of other female students. Their straight “Greek” noses contrast with her “Jewish” nose, marking a racial/ethnic/cultural difference from the classical beauty of their profiles. They anticipate the idealized illustration of Harrison in *The Pall Mall Gazette*, and although it is unlikely that Harrison was in their class (in every sense), the face of Greek is familiar enough: it illustrates an aesthetic of whiteness that is identified with Greekness, from which Levy is excluded. Is the imperfection of Levy’s Greek knowledge embodied in the imperfect beauty of her female figure, or is it the imperfection of her awkwardly figured body that makes her unable to know what they know? Yet the silence of the other students is ambiguous, as they seem to embody Greek without speaking it. Perhaps they know more Greek, or less, since Levy is the one to answer the question “what is it?” in her own version of Ladies’ Greek, no matter how imperfect. Even in disclaiming knowledge of Greek, she is illustrating another way to know Greek, simultaneously identifying with Greek letters and disavowing that personification.



0.5 Amy Levy, Sketch (ca. 1880). Amy Levy Archive, Private Collection, England.

Levy's canny use of Greek provides us with another perspective—not an answer, but a different question—on “A Woman’s View of The Greek Question” that circulated in the popular imagination. In an unpublished story entitled, “Lallie: A Cambridge Sketch,” Levy created a female literary character who wonders whether “happiness depends on one’s knowledge of the classics,” and in the draft of a verse drama entitled “Reading,” the characters also wonder whether learning Greek leads to happiness. A student from “Newnham Hall” named “Janet Gerund” struggles with Greek, lamenting her “poor efforts” in “faulty Attic, over which my brain / Has been a-boiling since the morn; Refrain / I beg from reading!” Hovering (like the gerund of her name) over the reading of Greek, she finds it difficult to put into practice. Levy’s own response to this difficulty was to refrain, as she left Newnham College after two years without sitting for examinations: having done Greek, her way of “doing” Greek was to reflect on its failure.

Contemporaneous with Levy at Newnham was another figure on the margins of Victorian Cambridge: Helen Magill also aspired to a career in classical scholarship, without much success. As the first American woman to take the

Classical Tripos Examination, in 1881, she barely squeaked by with a “Third Class” and returned to America in disappointment. But according to the only existing biography of Magill, she was “as fascinating in failure as she was singular in success.”²³ She had already distinguished herself as the first woman to receive a Ph.D. in America, awarded by Boston University in 1877 for her dissertation on Greek tragedy. Magill began intensive studies in Classics at Swarthmore College, where her father Edward Magill (then president of the college) encouraged Quaker self-discipline in her desire for ancient Greek. The Magill family at Swarthmore College was part of a progressive movement in America for the higher education of women, articulated by T.W. Higginson in his influential 1859 essay, “Ought Women to Learn the Alphabet?” Widely circulated and later reprinted in *Common Sense for Women* (1881), his essay was an inspiration for the formation of women’s colleges in America, where his plea for equal education was transformed from the “common sense” of common literacy into a claim for the advanced literacy of classical education.

Like other American women of her generation, Magill was firm in the conviction that women “ought” to learn the Greek alphabet. At Swarthmore College she read Greek until her eyes hurt, as she transferred her passion for the language to a grand passion (“strong, unreasoning, overmastering”) for her professor of Greek, William Hyde Appleton.²⁴ After receiving her degree from Swarthmore in 1873, she read in the pages of the *Woman’s Journal* about Higginson’s efforts to open the doors of Harvard for the higher education of women, but when she was denied admission there, Magill had to settle for graduate studies in comparative philology at Boston University: “Blessed Utopia” she called it. B.U. proved less than utopian, however, because it lacked a rigorous graduate curriculum. Although her completion of the Ph.D. was announced in *The Woman’s Journal*, she did not feel sufficiently authorized to name herself “Dr. Magill.” As America’s answer to “A Woman’s View on the Greek Question,” she set off for Newnham College, where she published a detailed account of her academic progress in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1878.²⁵ Cambridge proved a more rigorous challenge: “In spite of all the work which I have already done in America in the classics,” she reported, “I cannot stand among my equals in two years and not probably in three, because my preparation is not such as to give me a fair start.”²⁶

Eager to make herself another “first” in the public eye, Magill nevertheless resolved to prepare for the Classical Tripos. In personal journals and letters she recorded the pains and pleasures of her studies: “If this does not kill me, I believe it will make me stronger and better, more of a woman,” she wrote in her diary. She pursued Greek with a tutor in Greek at Trinity College, Richard

Dacre Archer-Hind (“Has not he a name?” she quipped, “It represents an entire hunting scene, pursued and pursuer”).²⁷ After struggling through the *Agamemnon* in Greek, Magill described herself as “very stupid in class—had to have the same thing explained seventeen times and then didn’t understand very well. Poor Mr. A-H had a hard time but was very politic. Finished the Ag. at last!!! No I can’t believe it. Began in October growing stupider and lazier every day. Think two years will be enough to forget all I have ever learned. Poor Tripos!”²⁸ At the dreaded Classical Tripos Examination, she blanked out. Despite reassurances from Archer-Hind that her philosophy paper had been “very good” and some of the Greek translations “very fair,” she was crushed by her failure in rhetoric and prose composition.

Although Magill’s “knowledge” of Greek did not make the grade in Cambridge, she knew enough to recognize that knowing Greek in a different way would make all the difference. Back in America, she taught for several years at Howard Collegiate Institute and at the women’s annex to Princeton, and developed her own ideas about the study of classical languages. In notes for a public lecture, she maintained that “Latin and Greek are by far the best instruments for training the mind in grammar and its logic, but this training should not come first. Every language should be studied as an *art* before it is studied as a *science*.”²⁹ Distinguishing between the process of knowing and the production of grammatical knowledge, she emphasized that “the two studies are entirely distinct and I believe that classical scholarship has lost much by so often failing to recognize this fact. Doubtless the very best way of studying a language, as such, is that where no word of grammar is never heard, nor of any interpretations except that which the mind gradually forms from the light thrown by one word upon another.”³⁰ To encourage a “vivid” interest in dead languages, she argued that the reader should learn to see words in their own light rather than through the lens of translation. In her view, “there is no such thing as real translation; all translation is a makeshift,” and for this reason “the habit of reading without consciously translating must be cultivated by every means,” allowing readers to “take the thoughts as the ancient gives them and hold the mind in that ancient attitude of suspended judgment.” In the suspension between knowing and not knowing, the light of the language would be revealed.

Despite her “failure,” Magill successfully embodied Ladies’ Greek for circulation in America, and she succeeded in doing so at a critical moment in the ongoing intercollegiate exchange between American and English women. Other Americans followed in her footsteps, among them the more “successful” Emily Smith (who studied Classics at Girton from 1889 to 1891 and later became dean of Barnard College) and M. Carey Thomas (who visited Cambridge

several times after becoming dean of Bryn Mawr College in 1884, and president in 1894). For women who were forming the institutions of higher education, Classics at Cambridge served the purpose of “doing” as much as “knowing,” notwithstanding Arnold’s claim that “we have over-valued doing.” Like others of her generation, Magill went on to publish articles and present lectures to the American public about the education of women. An article on “Woman’s Work in the Nineteenth Century” by “Professor Helen Magill,” was accepted by Higginson for publication in *The Independent* in 1882, and he invited her to deliver a paper on “Progress in the Education of Women” at the annual meeting of the American Social Science Association in 1887. She concluded her lecture with a rhetorical flourish in Greek:

For how many years must we turn from the doors of these our native institutions to those more generous and more just of our mother country? What can we do which will go further toward opening these and other universities? I will give you three answers. In the first place improve our scholarship, in the second place improve our scholarship and again improve our scholarship. We may have as much now as the men who are admitted. Very well, if enough will not do let us give them more than enough. καλὸν γάρ τὸ ἄθλον καὶ ἡ ἐλπίς μεγάλη.³¹

She may (or may not) have translated the Greek for her audience: “for beautiful is the reward and the hope is great.” Although some of her own great hope had not been rewarded, she still identified herself as a Woman of Greek Letters and performed this personification for her audience, which included Higginson himself. This conference was also the occasion for meeting Andrew Dickson White, the co-founder and first president of Cornell University, who was strong in support of co-education for women. (Reader, she married him.)

Agnata Ramsay, Jane Harrison, Amy Levy, Helen Magill: they were the public face, and just a few of the many faces, of women’s education at a time when it was increasingly personified through Greek. Of course there are more stories to be told about other Women of Letters who learned Greek, within and beyond Cambridge, in private and public universities, in the cities and in the provinces, on both sides of the Atlantic. Even before the formation of women’s colleges, women were learning Greek outside of the university in a range of educational settings, including private tutorials and primary or secondary schools. For example, Miss Anna Swanwick, who helped to found Bedford College for Women in 1849 in London, first learned the Greek alphabet from a schoolboy and went on to pursue independent studies in ancient and modern languages in Berlin,

before going on to become an eminent Victorian translator of Aeschylus.³² And in America, as Mary Kelly has demonstrated, young women were already pursuing an ambitious educational agenda at the female seminaries during the first half of the nineteenth century.³³ Thus Elizabeth Cady Stanton, after learning Greek with her family's pastor and receiving a prize in Greek at school, went on to attend the Female Seminary at Troy, where women were learning classical languages (albeit more Latin than Greek); in her memoir, she recalled how she "decided to study Greek" as one of her "resolutions never to be forgotten, destined to mold my character anew."³⁴

More than a private passion, this desire for Greek was part of a collective identification with Greek letters that Anglo-American women recirculated for different purposes. For many it was a performance of white womanhood, undeniably with racial implications, as the discourses of nineteenth-century Hellenism were often intertwined with Aryan ideologies: to "do" Greek was to "be" a white woman of a particular class. But precisely because of these ideological associations, Ladies' Greek could also be mobilized in other directions, moving across categories of race and class to redefine female character. In *A Voice from the South: By a Woman of the South*, for example, Anna Julia Cooper appealed to Greek ideals in her famous plea for the higher education of African American women. Beginning with a familiar question—"Shall Woman Learn the Alphabet"—she introduces a series of elaborate rhetorical maneuvers in "The Higher Education of Women" in order to transform a call for basic literacy in every single woman into an even more ambitious claim to classical literacy uniting all women.³⁵ She proclaims a lineage of educated women from antiquity to the present, by invoking classical figures like Sappho and Aspasia as a prototype for "women who can think as well as feel, and who feel nonetheless because they think" (59).

And to prove herself this type of woman, Cooper offers her own education as example. Born in 1858 as the daughter of a slave and a white landowner in North Carolina, she recounts her early schooling in Raleigh: when it was announced that "finally a Greek class was to be formed," she replied, "humbly I hope, as became a female of the human species—that I would like very much to study Greek, and that I was thankful for the opportunity" (76–77). This humility came with grand ambition, as Cooper went on to pursue "The Gentleman's Course" at Oberlin College from 1881 to 1884, where she chose the "classical" curriculum for male students rather than the "literary" curriculum for the women. As a teacher and writer, she went on to become the public face of black female intellectuals and a popular orator on both sides of the Atlantic, invited to speak at the 1893 World's Congress of Representative Women

in Chicago, and in London at the first Pan-African Conference in 1900. By way of her classical education, Cooper became a “representative” woman who embodied other ways of “knowing” and “doing” Ladies’ Greek.³⁶

In the chapters to come, we will keep in mind the various politics of gender, class, and race associated with the Woman of Greek Letters, as a generic category and in individual examples, situated within a variety of literary contexts, social networks, and institutional locations. But through these differences we can also see a recurring passion for ancient Greek that characterized how women thought and felt in the nineteenth century and beyond; we can see how they used ancient Greek to prove themselves: as Cooper wrote, “women who can think as well as feel, and who feel nonetheless because they think.” In this way, Ladies’ Greek became a lively and diverse culture with its own modes of cognition and recognition, producing its own dynamics of affect and desire, and turning classical reception into an active production for the transmission and transformation of classics. The question was no longer whether women ought to learn the Greek alphabet, but how.

TRANSLATING GREEK TRAGEDY

Greek tragedy was especially suited to the gendered performances of Ladies’ Greek, as a genre that could be used to perform “female” pathos, “feminine” sympathy, and “feminist” polemics within a Victorian culture of sentiment and ongoing debates about “The Woman Question.” The proliferation of nineteenth-century editions of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, along with critical commentaries and literary translations, made Greek tragedy increasingly accessible for women to read, in Greek and in English, and they often invoked Greek tragic heroines for sympathetic identification and moral reflection. They moralized about the loyalty of Antigone, the mourning of Electra, the self-sacrifice of Alcestis, the filial piety of Iphigeneia, the maternal grief of Hecuba, the revenge of Clytemnestra, the rage of Medea, and the suffering of other female characters in Greek tragedy as powerful—if ambiguous—models for Victorian womanhood. The dramatic monologues and elegiac lamentations of these tragic women could be used to articulate the plights of nineteenth-century women and their political causes; when John Stuart Mill was preparing to write *The Subjection of Women*, Florence Nightingale sent him a privately printed edition of *Cassandra* (1852) as her “angry outcry against the forced idleness of Victorian woman.”³⁷ And a few years later, George Eliot incorporated her intensive readings of Aristotle and Greek tragedy into various essays (including “Antigone and its Moral” in 1856) and into her novels, where we find

variations on the themes, plots, characters and the very idea of Greek tragedy, as many critics have observed.³⁸

On the other side of the Atlantic Greek tragedy was also avidly read by American women. Margaret Fuller named tragic heroines like Cassandra, Antigone, Hecuba, and Iphigenia alongside other “shining names of famous women” in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1844). Her transfiguration of many women, both literary and historical, into a single figure for “Woman” demonstrates how “Fuller relies on the rhetoric of prosopography to establish the claims of woman,” as Alison Booth points out in *How to Make it as a Woman*. One way to make it as a woman in the nineteenth century was to identify with Greek tragic heroines, and indeed, the Greek tragic mask (or *prosopon*) is the defining term for Booth’s study of female multibiographies: she notes that “prosopography—literally the writing of masks—is sometimes used as another term for collective biography or “multibiography.”³⁹ Through prosopopoeia, the rhetorical figure of personification, female prosopographies gave faces and names to personae that embodied the abstract ideals of Victorian womanhood.

Thus *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* included an appendix (“Appendix G: Euripides. Sophocles.”) on Greek tragedy, with some of Fuller’s own notes and translations attributed to a fictional “Miranda”:

As many allusions are made in the foregoing pages to characters of women drawn by the Greek dramatists, which may not be familiar to the majority of readers, I have borrowed from the papers of Miranda, some notes upon them. I trust the girlish tone of apostrophizing rapture may be excused. Miranda was very young at the time of writing, compared with her present mental age.⁴⁰

Quoting “Miranda” as a younger version of herself enraptured by reading Greek tragedy, the mature Fuller addresses Greek tragic heroines in the name of all women:

Iphigenia! Antigone! You were worthy to live! We are fallen on evil times, my sisters! Our feelings have been checked; our thoughts questioned; our forms dwarfed and defaced by a bad nurture. Yet hearts, like yours, are in our breasts, living, if unawakened; and our minds are capable of the same resolves. (136)

Moving from the past tense (“you were worthy to live”) into the present, “Miranda” addresses these self-sacrificing heroines in order to define the

transhistorical character of woman; her apostrophe to “you” as “my sisters” defines the common nature of all women, even if “we are fallen on evil times” and “defaced by a bad nurture.” Through sympathetic response to the heroic suffering of Iphigenia and Antigone, women can discover that “hearts, like yours, are in our breasts, living.” Paradoxically, these literary characters translated out of a dead language seem more alive than the women who must learn to live and think by their example.

The rhetoric of exemplarity had the effect of turning Fuller herself into an emblematic female character, both through the identification of “Miranda” with the characters of Greek tragedy and through the very process of translating these texts. After several excerpts from *Iphigenia at Aulis*, translated from Euripides by Fuller, the appendix reflects further on how to read tragedy not only for sympathy with the character, but in sympathy with the translator:

Can I appreciate this work in a translation? I think so, impossible as it may seem to one who can enjoy the thousand melodies, and words in exactly the right place and cadence of the original. They say you can see the Apollo Belvidere in a plaster cast, and I cannot doubt it, so great the benefit conferred on my mind, by a transcript thus imperfect. And so with these translations from the Greek. I can divine the original through this veil. . . . Beside, every translator who feels his subject is inspired, and the divine Aura informs even his stammering lips. (144)

According to Fuller, we can “appreciate” the original Greek text in translation because “every translator who feels his subject is inspired.” The letter is infused with spirit through the inspiration of the translator: even if the translation cannot retain “words in exactly the right place,” even if it is an imperfect “transcript,” nevertheless we can get an impression (the image of the original, as seen in a plaster cast or through a veil). But this is only possible if the translator really “feels his subject,” or (in the case of Fuller) feels “her” subject. Turning “Miranda” into an ideal example of “every translator,” Fuller invited a sympathetic reading of her own literary character through translating Greek tragedy.

Fuller’s vision of Greek tragic heroines was a self-conscious reflection of, and on, the popular reception of Greek tragedy in Anglo-American literary culture. In addition to circulating in new scholarly editions and popular translations, classical drama was increasingly performed on the nineteenth-century stage, where actresses appeared as the embodiment of ideal womanhood, in Grecian garb and classical poses that imitated Greek statuary, in a series of individual “attitudes” and tableaux of carefully composed group formations, like

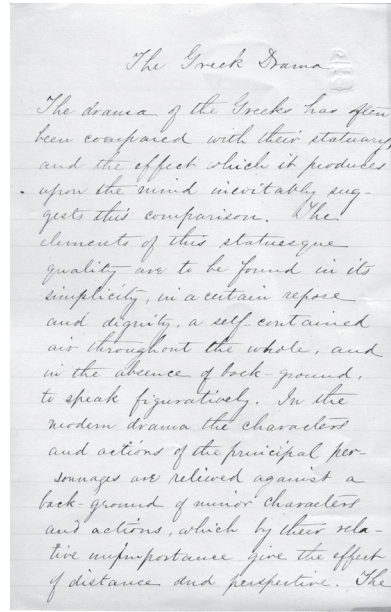
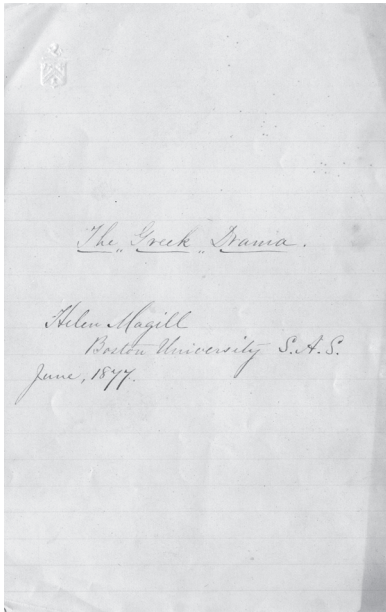
statues. Helen Faucit's 1845 performance of *Antigone*, for example, inspired De Quincey to write: "What perfection of Athenian sculpture! The noble figure, the lovely arms, the fluent drapery! What an unveiling of the ideal statuesque!" Conflating the pose of the woman with the moral character of *Antigone*, he added; "Perfect she is in form; perfect in attitude."⁴¹ This common comparison between Greek tragedy and the art of sculpture, embodied by women in particular, produced an idealized "feminine" aesthetic that women increasingly sought to mobilize for their own purposes, as they translated Greek tragedy from the page to the stage and also from the stage back to the page.

Given the wide-spread interest in revival of Greek tragedy by women, it is no surprise that the first Ph.D. awarded to a woman in America was for Helen Magill's thesis, "The Greek Drama." Dated 1877 at Boston University, the document remains unnoticed in the annals of women's higher education. It is a mere 17 pages copied out by hand; at a time when women were given "honorary" degrees for postgraduate work, it may have passed for more of a doctoral dissertation than it really was. Nevertheless I publish the first page here for the first time, out of historical as well as literary interest (Figure 0.6). While Magill's thesis did not offer any original arguments, it effectively cited German critics (like Müller and Schlegel), English dramatists (like Shakespeare and Dryden) in order to condense nineteenth-century ideas about Greek drama, by which she meant tragedy in particular. Her opening paragraph emphasized the effect of Greek tragedy "upon the mind," turning the statuesque "pose" cultivated by women performing Greek tragedy into an Arnoldian emphasis on "repose":

The drama of the Greeks has often been compared with their statuary, and the effect which it produces upon the mind inevitably suggests this comparison. The elements of the statuesque quality are to be found in its simplicity, in a certain repose and dignity, a self-contained air throughout the whole, and in the absence of background, to speak figuratively.

In elaborating the effect of Greek tragedy "upon the mind," Magill was not only describing its effect on her own mind; she was also echoing a broader critical tendency to read Greek tragedy as an idea that could be played out in the imagination, "self-contained" and with "absence of background."

In the following pages, Magill went on to argue that "the peculiarity of the ancient drama is to be found in its ideal character," and "this may be compared with the effect which is produced in statuary by absence of color" (2). Concurring with Schlegel, Magill discovered the "ideality" of Greek tragedy through Sophocles in particular: after comparing the three tragedians, she concluded



o.6 Helen Magill, "The Greek Drama," 1877 Thesis, Boston University. Helen Magill White Papers #4107. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

that "Sophocles has the most ennobling influence on the mind" (17). In contrast to Fuller's impassioned apostrophe to Greek tragic heroines, Magill's thesis was more concerned with the contemplation of action as embodied in the chorus. According to Magill, while lyrical dialogue "excites sympathy with the hero or heroine through its own expressions of sympathy," the choral odes allow for "a transition from scene to scene, bringing the mind back from the excitement of the temporary interest to a calm consideration of the spirit and meaning of the whole, thus acting as interpreter between poet and audience" (10).

Although Magill's thesis is a marginal document in the history of classical scholarship (another example of "some Greek upon the margin"), it highlights some central points to keep in mind in our reading of nineteenth-century women's reading of Greek tragedy. Their idea (and idealization) of this genre in particular worked in tandem with an idealization of woman, embodied in the characters of Greek tragedy as well as in the characters of women who translated and performed Greek tragedy. In addition to their tendency to identify themselves with tragic heroines, equally important was their identification with the chorus as a collective body that could reflect on the performance of

Greek tragedy, thus incorporating a self-consciously performative element into women's translations of Greek tragedy. As a genre that combined dramatic monologues and dialogues with choral odes, tragedy also gave them the opportunity to write in different literary forms. Through the heightened pathos of Greek tragedy, they could dramatize their passion for ancient Greek, which they enacted in the performance of translation, not only on the page but also on the stage and in other forms of re-enactment.

The following chapters focus on five Greek tragedies, the *Agamemnon* and *Prometheus Bound* of Aeschylus, the *Electra* of Sophocles, and the *Hippolytus* and *Bacchae* of Euripides. I fold my own reading of these tragedies into my analysis of various translational practices, in order to reflect further on the transformation of content into form through translation: in this double reading, we can refer "what" is being translated back into "how." More often than not, as I have already begun to suggest, the appeal of translating ancient Greek was an encounter with something untranslatable, creating an experience of linguistic estrangement that left Greek letters unspoken and unknown. To ponder this paradox, Chapter One considers "On Not Knowing Greek" by Virginia Woolf as part of the longer Victorian legacy of Ladies' Greek. I place Woolf's 1925 essay within the context of her earlier Greek studies, when she pursued intensive readings of Greek tragedy, first with Janet Case as her tutor and then in her own notebooks. Looking at Woolf's *Agamemnon* notebook, I consider how the strange utterance of Cassandra (otototoi) appears in Greek letters on the page and also how it was made to appear in two dramatic productions staged in ancient Greek at Cambridge University (in 1900 and in 1921). In the process of transcribing and translating Cassandra's utterance, Woolf confronts the mad literality of dead Greek letters: a scene of reading that is repeated again and again in translations of Greek tragedy by other women, both before and after Woolf.

Demonstrating how women's claim to classical literacy often revolved around the problem of translating "literally," Chapter Two moves from Woolf to a longer historical chain of women who also translated Aeschylus. I consider different versions of *Prometheus Bound*, analyzing how various practices of "literal" translation seemed to bind women to the Greek text: rather than claiming authorial mastery by translating Greek, they performed their subjection to a language that could never be completely mastered. I argue that the translator's bondage is dramatized not only through the suffering of the immobilized Prometheus (the god who taught mankind how to write Greek letters), but also through the cries of the painfully mobile Io (the woman who has Greek letters inscribed on her body). The chapter begins with a reading of E.B.B., as the first woman to translate *Prometheus Bound* into English (in 1833 and again in

1850) and as an important prototype for other “lady-translators” in England and America. E.B.B.’s incorporation of Greek letters into the body of her writing was turned into an increasingly public performance in print, in translations of *Prometheus Bound* by Augusta Webster (in 1866) and Anna Swanwick (in 1873) and Janet Case (in 1903). American women also turned to translating this tragedy with various degrees of constraint and freedom, in an imitation of Io in the notebooks of Annie Fields (ca. 1880), a “free” version of *Prometheus Bound* by Edith Hamilton (first published in 1927, reprinted in 1937, and performed in Athens in 1957), and a spectacular production mounted at Delphi by Eva Palmer Sikelianos (in 1927). By tracing the travels of Io from England to America and back to Greece, we see how these women performed their identification with Greek letters through different modes of translation.

The spectacle of feminized classical literacy is further explored in Chapter Three, where I consider two historic productions of the *Electra* of Sophocles. Fully staged by women at Girton College and at Smith College, in 1883 and 1889 respectively, these were the first collegiate performances of tragedy in ancient Greek by women in Victorian England and America. I read their performance of ancient Greek in relation to nineteenth-century debates about the higher education of women, emphasizing the collegiate community and transatlantic collegiate communication that made it desirable for women to memorize and recite a dead language as if it were alive. Rather than translating Greek into English, they drew on a tradition of classical posing, to “transpose” the text into the visual and auditory languages associated with Delsartean performance practices: gesture, costume, set design, synchronized movement, metrical recitation, song. Their dramatic presentation depended on these alternative modes of translation as well as the subsequent re-presentation of the spectacle in various written accounts: personal letters, student magazines, alumni publications, newspaper reports, local reviews, photographic essays, albums, books. From materials in the college archives I reconstruct how the cast of *Electra* was trained for a highly stylized performance, embodying the Sophoclean text in and for a collective student body that sought to commemorate itself through the ritual of mourning. The lamentation of Electra and the chorus made the female actors into figures for melancholy identification, bearing the empty urn of a dead language, yet filling it with new meaning.

After considering translations of Aeschylus and Sophocles in my first three chapters, Chapters Four and Five show how women contributed to a major shift in the reception of Euripides. While early nineteenth-century scholars were quick to dismiss the third of the great Greek tragedians as melodramatic, decadent, and effeminate, there was growing interest toward the end of the century

in the female tragic heroines of Euripidean tragedy and in its “feminine” lyricism. The highly eroticized, lyricized language of *Hippolytus* appealed to British aesthetes such as John Addington Symonds, who entered into correspondence with the young Agnes Mary Francis Robinson and encouraged her to translate this tragedy. Chapter Four begins with a reading of their letters (and Greek letters in their letters) and goes on to analyze in further detail Robinson’s translation of Euripides in *The Crowned Hippolytus* (1881). Like E.B.B., she began her literary career by translating Greek; creating a new type of female aestheticism and a highly aestheticized poetic style, the metrical virtuosity of her translation made it possible to read Ladies’ Greek “with” the accents. I further argue that the early work of Hilda Doolittle (H.D.) owes much to this late Victorian vision of Euripidean tragedy; in translating “Choruses from the Hippolytus of Euripides” (1919) and in writing “a play after Euripides” entitled *Hippolytus Temporizes* (1927), the modernist cadences of H.D.’s poetry can be aligned with Ladies’ Greek, turning Victorian cadences into the “feet feet feet feet feet” of modernist verse.

In Chapter Five, I ask why and how women became especially interested in *The Bacchae* of Euripides to reimagine the bacchante, or maenad, as ecstatic female worshipper of Dionysus. Even more than Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*, Walter Pater’s essays inspired versions of Dionysian Hellenism by female aesthetes, as they turned to the maenad to enact the mobility of “the new woman” at the turn of the century and to mobilize Ladies’ Greek in new directions, toward an experience of kinesthesia. Their imaginative identification with maenads took different forms in prose and poetry, in dance and drama, to incorporate an idea of rhythm into a moving body, both individual and collective. I consider Jane Harrison as a “modern maenad” whose ideas about Dionysiac ritual developed during her years at Newnham College, in the performative aesthetics of her scholarship and her pedagogy. On the other side of the Atlantic, I consider the pedagogical setting of Bryn Mawr College, where students were initiated into a “cult of Greek” under the leadership of M. Carey Thomas. I conclude with a closer look at a student production of *The Bacchae* for the fiftieth anniversary of Bryn Mawr. Directed by Eva Palmer Sikelianos, herself an alumna of the college, the choreography of this performance can be read as a transformation of ancient Greek into dancing letters.

Ladies’ Greek is structured as a series of dramatic episodes; some of the *dramatis personae* are familiar names, some less so. My examples have been chosen to emphasize multiple approaches to translating Greek tragedy, and to develop an approach to classical reception that does not depend on a chronological or “comprehensive” survey of Greek tragedy in Victorian England and

America. Rather than assuming the continuity or coherence of a classical tradition, I argue that classical reception is better understood through converging and diverging enactments, demonstrating different possibilities for the performance of Ladies' Greek, at different moments and in different places on both sides of the Atlantic. I emphasize a transatlantic perspective, not only to extend current research on the role played by Anglo-American women in the nineteenth-century circulation of classics, but as a logical extension of my argument about translation, as a dynamic movement between languages, across texts, and around various contexts. The mobilization of Greek letters created new ways to read and write Greek tragedy, and new networks of literary exchange among Women of Letters. In the following pages, we can begin to see how they transformed and transported Greek tragedy in a moving performance of translation, filled with πάθος and ἔρως.