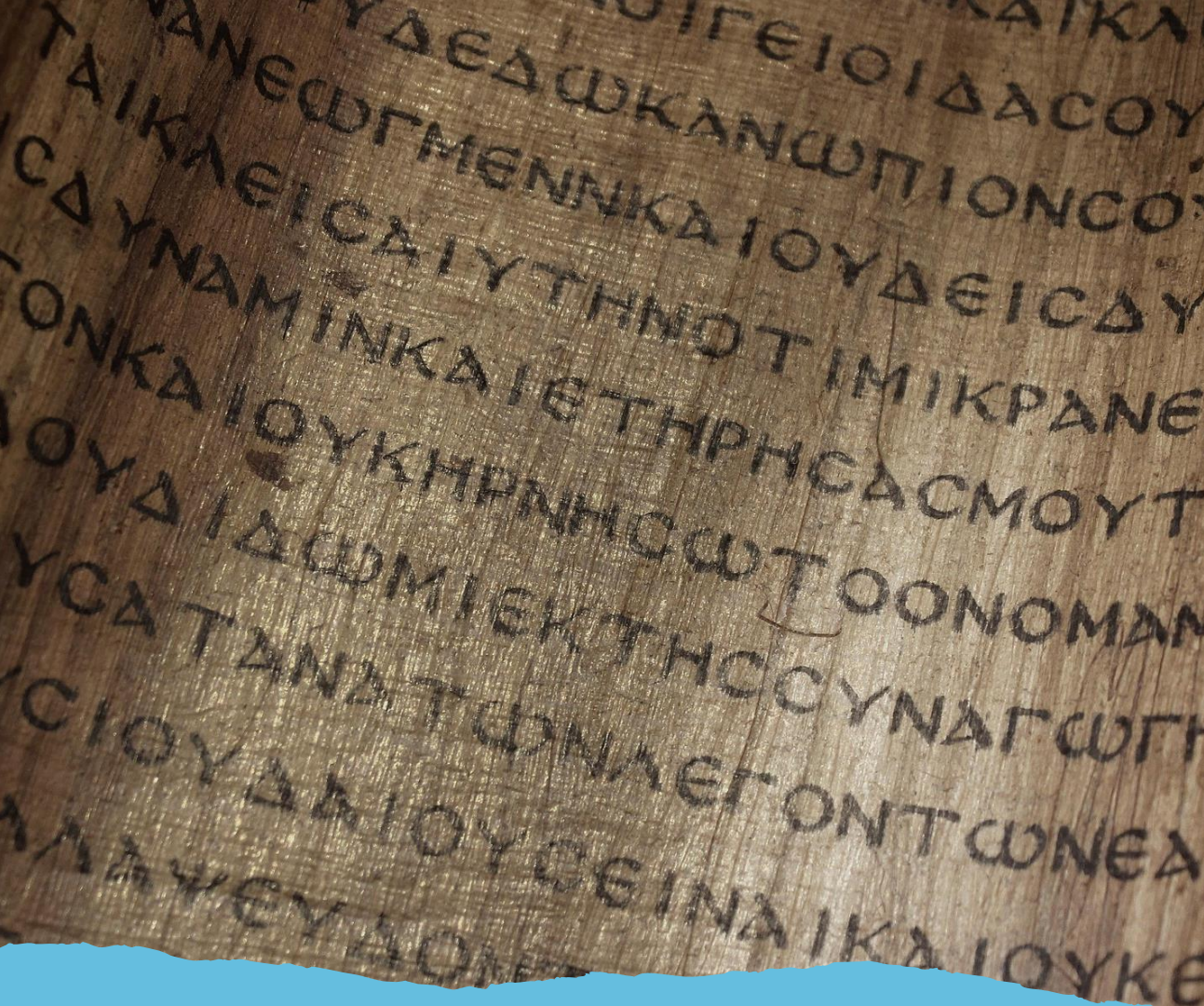




Why are there so many translations of the same ancient Greek & Roman texts?

Why do we have so many translations* of ancient Greek & Roman texts? Why so many different versions of Homer's *Iliad*, Vergil's *Aeneid*, Herodotus' *Histories*, or Tacitus' *Annals*?

Sometimes, newer translations are needed to replace older ones whose dialect and idiom are no longer straightforward for later/younger readers to understand. Take, for example, the translations below of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, 4.614-620:

1. Arthur Golding (1557, published by Willyam Seres):

And Persey bearing in his hand the monster Gorgons head,
That famous spoyle which here and there with snakish hair was spread,
Doth beat the ayre with wavying wings. And as he overflow
The Lybicke sandes, the droppes of bloud that from the head did sew
Of Gorgon being new cut off, upon the ground did fal.
Which taking them (and as it were conceiving therwithal)
Engendered sundrie Snakes and wormes; by meanes whereof that clime
Did swarme with Serpents ever since, even to this present tyme.

3. A.D. Melville (1986, Oxford University Press):

But Perseus, with the snake-haired monster's head,
That famous spoil, in triumph made his way
On rustling pinions through the balmy air
And, as he hovered over Libya's sands,
The blood-drops from the Gorgon's head dripped down.
The spattered desert gave them life as snakes,
Smooth snakes of many kinds, and so that land
Still swarms with deadly serpents to this day.

2. Brookes More (1922, The Cornhill Publishing Company):

...and the other [Perseus], (as he bore
the viperous monster-head) on sounding wings
hovered a conqueror in the fluent air,
over sands, Libyan, where the Gorgon-head
dropped clots of gore, that, quickening on the ground,
became unnumbered serpents; fitting cause
to curse with vipers that infested land.

4. A.S. Kline (2000, [Poetry in Translation](#)). A prose version:

...but the other [Perseus] was travelling through the gentle air, on
beating wings, bringing back an amazing, monstrous prize, and as
the victor hung above the Libyan sands, bloody drops fell from the
Gorgon's head. The earth caught them and gave them life, as species
of snakes, and so that country is infested with deadly serpents.

Still, this hardly accounts for *all* the versions we find in libraries and bookstores....

*The English word 'translation' comes from the Latin word *translatio*, 'carrying/bringing across'.

So, why *are* there so many different translations of ancient Greek & Roman texts?

Because, as the Italian folk-saying says: *Traduttore, Traditore* → ‘Translator, Traitor!’

(Or in smoother, more idiomatic English: ‘Translators are Traitors!’)

This saying reminds us that it is impossible to capture the linguistic, cultural, and contextual nuance of one language in another language:

Since the process of “finding ways to express alien concepts from an alien culture...is necessarily imperfect,” it requires “a succession of compromises in the search for an equivalent in the target language.” (Davie 2012).

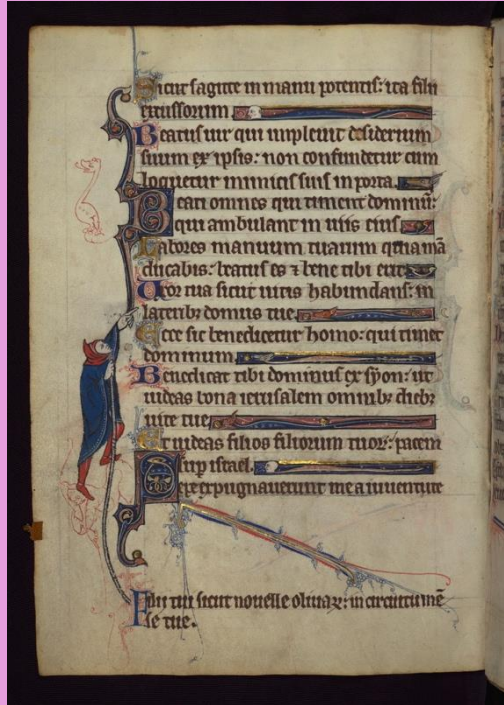
Thus, because a translator necessarily makes a series of compromises (‘betrayals’) to wrestle language A’s sense into language B, and since each translator is different, every translator generates a different (yet valid!) translation.



But translating ancient Greek & Roman texts is further complicated by five other factors...

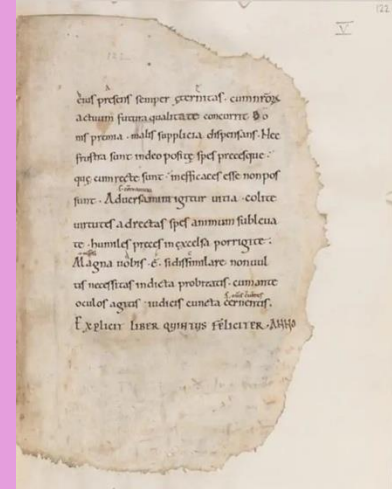
I. Ancient texts and their copies were originally hand-written

The word manuscript is Latin for ‘written by hand’. Scribes (often monks) copied texts by candlelight in freezing or sweltering, dimly lit rooms for hours. Predictably, errors crept into these copies: misspellings; garbled passages; skipped words, phrases, and lines; etc. — errors re-copied by later scribes. In time, libraries throughout Europe & the Middle East had different versions of the same texts.



← Here, in *The Book of Hours*, a monk accidentally skipped a line of text. He therefore drew a man who is holding a rope tied to the missing line (at the page’s bottom) and pointing to where it belongs. The monk caught his error — this time. (From the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore; [Walters Manuscript W.102, fol. 33v](#). Public Domain).

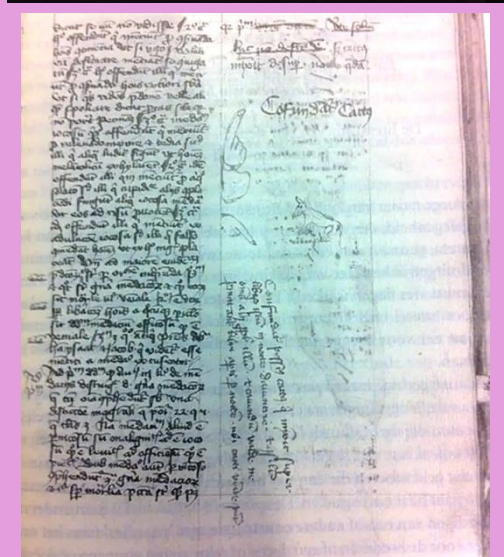
Early manuscripts were also perishable. Initially scrolls of papyrus or vellum (then [codices](#), then → leather-bound books), they crumbled, rotted, or were eaten by insects & rodents (not to mention how combustible they were if a candle got too close). As you can see, rodents chewed on this copy of Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy*. (© Corpus Christi College Cambridge, MS 214, fol. 122r)



Rats & mice were such a problem that monasteries used cats to → control their numbers. But then the cats themselves became a threat to manuscripts: this 15th c. CE document from Dubrovnik’s State Archives tells us that a cat tipped over an inkwell, walked through the spilled ink then stepped on an official document. (Photo by Emir O. Filipovic).



← This 15th c. CE manuscript from Deventer (in the Netherlands) curses the cat that peed on it. The right column remains blank because the urine stain made it unusable: its top half has the drawing of a large hand pointing up at the phrase: ‘may the cat be cursed.’ Below it is drawn a smaller hand, next to a cat, pointing at either the cat, the pee stain, or a more elaborate Latin curse (written sideways) on the right column’s lower half: ‘Here is nothing missing, but a cat urinated on this during a certain night. Cursed be the pesty cat that urinated over this book during the night in Deventer and because of it many [other cats] too. And beware well not to leave open books at night where cats can come.’ (Translated by T. Pjorck, 2016; © Cologne, Historisches Archiv, G.B. quarto, 249, fol. 68r).



Thus, our surviving manuscripts of Homer, Vergil, the Bible, etc., differ from each other because of scribal error and/or physical damage. This forces translators (experts in the text’s language & cultural/historical context) to construct a version that they think is closer to the original work, which adds to the layers of compromise (‘betrayal’) already innate to translation.

II. Sometimes, translations ‘betray’ original works because the texts being translated are confusing...

This is especially the case when it comes to ancient philosophy. Take, for example, Aristotle’s Metaphysics, which explores the nature of reality & ‘being.’ Book 7 (which focuses on ‘substance’ — a thing that exists) is especially confusing. Below, we have the opening to Book 7, section 13:

1. W.D. Ross’s translation of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (Oxford, 1908). Ross’ translation is famous for making the *Metaphysics* accessible. It has influenced many English-speaking philosophers.

Book 7, section 13:

“Let us return to the subject of our inquiry, which is substance. As the substratum and the essence* and the compound of these are called substance, so also is the universal. About two of these we have spoken; both about the essence and about the substratum, of which we have said that it underlies in two senses, either being a ‘this’ — which is the way in which an animal underlies its attributes — or as the matter underlies the complete reality. The universal also is thought by some to be in the fullest sense a cause, and a principle; therefore let us attack the discussion of this point also. For it seems impossible that any universal term should be the name of a substance. For firstly the substance of each thing is that which is peculiar to it, which does not belong to anything else; but the universal is common, since that is called universal which is such as to belong to more than one thing. Of which individual then will this be the substance? Either of all or of none; but it cannot be the substance of all. And if it is to be the substance of one, this one will be the others also; for things whose substance is one and whose essence is one are themselves also one.

Further, substance means that which is not predicable of a subject, but the universal is predicable of some subject always.”

2. C.D.C. Reeves’ translation of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (Hackett, 2016). Reeves’ translation tries to follow Aristotle’s Greek as literally/closely as possible.

Book 7, section 13:

“Since, however, it is with substance that the investigation is concerned, we should return to that. Just as the underlying subject and the essence* are said to be substance, so also is the universal. Now, about two of these we have already spoken, namely, about the essence and the underlying subject, and said that it underlies in two ways, either by being a this something (as the animal underlies its attributes) or as the matter underlies the actuality. But the universal too seems to some people to be most of all a cause, and the universal most of all a starting-point. So let us turn to that too. For it seems impossible for any of the things said [of something] universally to be substance.

For first the substance of each thing is special to it, in that it does not belong to anything else. A universal, by contrast, is something common, since that thing is said to be a universal which naturally belongs to many things. Of which, then, will it be the substance? For it is either the substance of none or of all. And it cannot be the substance of all. But if it is the substance of one, all the others will be this one as well. For things whose substance is one and whose essence is one are also themselves one.

Further, substance is said to be what is not said of an underlying subject, whereas a universal is always said of a certain underlying subject.”

- **These translations differ because of their translation philosophies (Ross seeks accessibility, Reeves aims to represent the original Greek as much as possible).**
- **But the material is also difficult; translators must first interpret (try to understand) Aristotle’s philosophy before they can make translation choices.**
- **Their translations, then, are like hybrids: Aristotle-Ross’ *Metaphysics*, or Aristotle-Reeves’ *Metaphysics*.**

Since a translator’s voice is impossible to avoid in a translation, it is best to read multiple versions of any translated text you study. This is especially recommended for complicated or important/foundational texts (like philosophical authors or the Bibles).

*In Aristotle, ‘essence’ is what defines something, its definition.

II. (cont.): Similarly, the historian Thucydides’ “Greek is notoriously difficult” (Greenwood 2015), making his work challenging to translate!

Even ancient Greeks & Romans found Thucydides hard to understand:

”[H]is *History* is sometimes made almost incomprehensible by neologisms [invented, new words], awkward abstractions, and linguistic idiosyncrasies of all kinds. These are not only a problem for the modern reader. They infuriated some ancient readers, too. In the first century BC, in a long essay devoted to Thucydides’ work, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, a literary critic and historian himself, complained — with ample supporting quotations — of the “forced expressions,” “non sequiturs,” “artificialities,” and “riddling obscurity.” “If people actually spoke like this,” he wrote, “not even their mothers or their fathers would be able to tolerate the unpleasantness of it; in fact they would need translators, as if they were listening to a foreign language.” (Beard 2010)

Thucydides’ confusing language has led to some famous translation ‘betrayals’!

“Take, for example, perhaps the most favorite of all Thucydidean catchphrases, repeated in international relations courses the world over, and a founding text of ‘realist’ political analysis: ‘The strong do what they can, the weak suffer what they must’ [Thucydides 5.89]. It is taken from the famous debate that Thucydides evokes between the Athenians and the people of Melos. The Athenians had demanded that the neutral state of Melos come over to the Athenian side in the war between Athens and Sparta; when the Melians resisted, the two sides debated the issue. The representatives of imperial Athens put forward a terrifying vision of ‘might is right’: justice only existed between equals, they asserted — otherwise, the strong rule the weak and so the power of Athens could always ride roughshod over the aspirations of a small island” (Beard 2010). Ultimately, Athens destroys Melos, killing the men and enslaving its women and children.

Yet Thucydides’ text does not say ‘The strong do what they can, the weak suffer what they must’! Rather, the Athenians tell the Melians to stop arguing about what is ‘right’, since:

...δίκαια μὲν ἐν τῇ ἀνθρωπείῳ λόγῳ ἀπὸ ἴσης ἀνάγκης κρίνεται, δυνατὰ δὲ οἱ πρὸνχοντες πράσσουσι καὶ οἱ ἀσθενεῖς ὑγχαροῦσιν.

...(what is) right in human conduct is determined from an equal power to compel, but those superior in power do/act/exact/extort(!) and the weak yield/comply.
— (a more literal translation by Leah Himmelhoch).

The Athenians say: “when one party is overwhelmingly superior in might the question of right does not arise” — not ‘might makes right’ (Hornblower 2009: 580-1).

This passage expresses no ‘obligation’ for (or ‘natural law’ governing) a realpolitik that the weak must endure suffering at the hands of the more powerful.

Rather, the Athenians dismiss the Milesians’ moral arguments as irrelevant because the Athenians are stronger.

Can you explain what the difference is?

“Whatever the linguistic nuances, the truth is that the ‘jingle’ we attribute to Thucydides was, in part at least, the work of Richard Crawley, a not very successful nineteenth-century Oxford classicist whose main claim to fame was a few satirical verses in the style of Alexander Pope — apart, that is, from his translation of Thucydides, which was adopted in the early twentieth century by the Everyman Library (for it appeared clear and fluent, as the requirements of that series demanded); now long out of copyright, it has become a favorite version to republish. It is in this guise that ‘Thucydides’ has regularly been plundered for courses in political theory and international relations, and for the slogans that have supported either a neoconservative or realist, or sometimes even left-wing, political agenda.”

(Beard 2010)

III. Likewise, poetry's capacity for ambiguity, multivalence (how a word's meaning differs in different contexts) & wordplay often bars 'exact', 'faithful' translation.

A. In the opening lines of **Homer's *Odyssey*** (Book 1, lines 1-2), the adjective describing Odysseus (πολύτροπος) is famously difficult to render into English! Its basic sense, 'of many ways,' can mean 'much travelled;' but its intellectual aspect is more prominent: either 'ingenious, versatile, resourceful;' or, more negatively, 'shifty, cunning,' & other similar concepts!

1. The Greek for *Od.* 1.1-2's opening thought is: ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, μοῦσα, πολύτροπον, ὃς μάλα πολλὰ / πλάγχθη, ...

a. Murray, A. T.. *Odyssey*. Loeb Classical Library. (Harvard, 1919): "Tell me, O Muse, of the man of many devices (πολύτροπον), who wandered full many ways..."

b. Lattimore, R. *The Odyssey of Homer*. (Harper Perennial, 1991): "Tell me, Muse, of the man of many ways (πολύτροπον), who was driven far journeys..."

c. Lombardo, S. *The Essential Homer*. (Hackett, 2000): "Speak, Memory, of the cunning hero, the wanderer (πολύτροπον), blown off course time and again..."

d. Wilson, E.. *The Odyssey. Homer*. (Norton, 2018): "Tell me about a complicated (πολύτροπον) man. Muse, tell me how he wandered and was lost..."

How do the translators' choices affect the opening's nuance? What does each opening suggest about each approach to Odysseus? Which one(s) do you prefer?

B. A less visible reason why translators regularly 'betray' **Vergil's *Aeneid*** centers on its frequent wordplay, e.g., its regular use of acrostics (using lines' first letters to spell 'vertical' words), puns, & anagrams (using the same letters to spell different words). Translations often omit Vergil's wordplay because it is so very difficult to replicate in another language!

1. F. Ahl's *Aeneid* translation (2007. *Virgil. Aeneid*. Oxford) is known for identifying, & preserving Vergil's word play, when possible!

a. In Book 7, the Latin queen Amata & the Rutulian prince Turnus succumb to Juno's manipulation & start a war with Aeneas/the Trojans (despite King Latinus's efforts to avoid one). The omniscient narrator then describes how the ancient Latin custom of 'opening the gates of war' is later adopted by Rome:

Mos erat Hesperio in Latio, quem protinus urbes
Albanae coluere sacrum nunc maxima rerum
Roma colit, cum prima movent in proelia Martem,
Sive Getis inferre manu lacrimabile bellum. 7.601-4

Men had a custom in Latium's Hesperian days, which the later
Alban cities adopted and hallowed. It now is the practice in mighty
Rome's great empire, when men rouse Mars for a new set of battles:
Say, for example, they're planning to bring war's tears to the Getae,.... 7.601-4

i. These lines form a vertical acrostic, spelling '**MARS**' as the narrator introduces the now unstoppable war that ultimately 'founds' Rome! (Note, however: though Ahl's translation here is *correct*, to make the acrostic visible in English he made different choices than other translators have done/do).

b. In book 7, lines 765-77 Vergil inserts a bilingual pun (exploiting Greek & Latin) that is also an anagram. We learn that the Greek hero Hippolytos, who was torn to pieces by his horses (& whose name in Greek means 'horse destroyed'), was later resurrected by Apollo's son Asclepius. When Zeus saw that Asclepius could 'cure' death, he killed Asclepius with a lightning bolt. Hippolytos, however, 'now' lives incognito in the Italian forest...

solus ubi in silvis Italis ignobilis aevom
exigeret versoque ubi nomine Virbius esset. 7.776-7

[where/so] he could live his life alone and unknown in Italy's forests,
Renamed 'Virbius': saving his life by erasing its meaning. 7.776-7

i. The Latin versoque ubi nomine Virbius esset literally says: "... 'the name [or 'meaning'] being turned around.' Virbius is an anagram of the Latin *viribus*, 'strength', lost in reassembling the elements of the mutilated Hippolytus. The element 'horse' (Gk. *hippo-*) becomes 'man' (Latin *vir*); the 'destruction' in Gk. *lytos* becomes 'life', Gk. *bios* (but with the Latin spelling, *bis*). Hippolytos lives, but his strength and identity are gone" (395).

Here, Ahl simply notes the wordplay; the bilingual pun & anagram are impossible to transfer into English!

Ancient poetry, then, is complex to translate given how — like most poetry — it revolves around language's innate ambiguities. But, also, many of the 'special effects' important to its meaning & performance (remember: ancient poems were performed!) are impossible to 'transfer' into another language and/or cultural context!

IV. Translations sometimes vary from each other because they target the needs or interests of different audiences

For example: Greek tragedies are essentially lengthy poems. Some translations seek to make the text clear to modern audiences; others recreate their poetic aspects; still others focus on performance. Below are some translations of Aeschylus *Agamemnon*, lines 104-121 (from the *parodos*, the chorus's entry-song):

A. Vellacott (1959), p. 45. *His translation is not literal. Aiming for impact and clarity, he uses English rhythms & rhymes to mark his choral passages.*

[I sing] How those twin Monarchs of our warlike race,
Two leaders, one in purpose, were sped forth —
Their vengeful spears in thousands pointing North
To Troy — by four wings' furious beat:
Two kings of birds, that seemed to bode
Great fortune to the kings of that great fleet.
Close to the palace, on spear-side of the road,
One tawny-feathered, one white in the tail,
Perched in full view, they ravenously tear
The body of a pregnant hare
Big with her burden, now a living prey
In the last darkness of their unborn day.
Cry sorrow, sorrow — yet let good prevail!

C. Meineck (1998), p. 7. *Meineck translates for a theater company, so creates “accessible, performable & dramatic” texts “retaining fidelity to the Greek” (xlviüi).*

I can tell how the twin-throned power of the Greeks
joint rulers of the youth of Hellas,
received a sign from the furious eagles
and hurled against Troy the spear of war!
The kings of the birds for the kings of the ships,
one black, the other white-tailed, appeared
on the lucky spear-arm side of the palace.
They perched there clutching a pregnant hare
who never had the chance for one last run,
and in full view feasted on her unborn young.

Cry, cry the song of sorrow, but let the good prevail!

B. Fagles (1984), p. 107. *Fagles is a poet; he tries “to impersonate” (7) Aeschylus (staying loyal to his grandeur & forceful language) while using our living language.*

I sing how the flight of fury hurled the twin command,
 one will that hurled young Greece
and winged the spear of vengeance straight for Troy!
The kings of birds to kings of the beaking prows, one black,
 one with a blaze of silver
 skimmed the palace spearhand right
 and swooping lower, all could see,
 plunged their claws in a hare, a mother
 bursting with unborn young — the babies spilling,
quick spurts of blood — cut off the race just dashing into life!
Cry, cry for death, but good win out in glory in the end.

D. Himmelhoch (2023), p. 86. *Her translation is more literal, sticking closely to the Greek (including its word order) to help Greek students ‘see’ the original Greek text.*

[I have authority to tell] how the double-throned
power of the Achaeans, the like-minded leadership
of Hellas's youth,
a swooping bird-sign sent off with avenging spear and hand
to the Teucrian land,
the king of birds for the kings of ships,
the black one and the one white behind,
appearing close to
the royal quarters from the side of the spear-wielding hand
(settling) on perches plain for all to see,
both feeding on one born of hare-kind pregnant with many
 offspring yet-to-be-born,
having thwarted her final run.
Cry sorrow, sorrow, but let the good prevail!

Each of these translations is ‘correct’. Which one(s) do you prefer? Why?

V. Finally, translation ‘betrayals’ sometimes stem from translator bias

One common bias-driven translation ‘betrayal’ stems from the tendency of modern translators to project modern racist beliefs, constructs, & associations onto ancient material.* Though Greek & Roman texts do not mention skin color often, the Romans mention it more than the Greeks do (likely because of the Roman Empire’s spread & duration). Thus, for Greek texts, modern racial bias largely manifests as *assuming* that Greek authors & characters were ‘white.’ Translations of Latin texts, however, reflect modern racism more than one might suspect.

I. When the Romans *did* describe themselves, they used an adjective that Latin students are likely familiar with: *albus*. Latin textbooks & dictionaries traditionally translate *albus* as ‘white.’ But recent research indicates that this translation is incorrect! As Thompson 1989 notes:

- A.** Non-Romans were ‘barbarians.’ Barbarians were either from the “‘barbarian ‘under-developed’ world” or the “‘barbarian but ‘cultivated’ world”. For Romans, then, the civilized, “‘developed world’ [was] the world of pale-brown Mediterraneans”, i.e., Romans saw “the majority of the world’s *white* inhabitants as ‘savages’ and benighted ‘barbarians’” (10).
- B.** When Romans *did* note skin color, they applied a “tripartite schema of blacks, Mediterraneans, and ‘Nordics’ (*Aethiops*— *albus*—*candidus*)” (67); “‘black’ Africans (*nigri Aethiopes*) were at one end of the spectrum of somatic distance from the Mediterranean norm, and *candidi Galli* (the pale-white peoples of central and northern Europe) at the other extreme”. There was no “ascending scale of whiteness” (11). Simply put, Romans perceived “the peoples of non-Mediterranean Europe as ‘palefaces’” (65).
- C.** Thus, when the Latin word *albus* is used to describe skin color, it means ‘pale brown’! The adjective *candidus* means ‘bright/pale white’: “marked by a very white, frosty complexion, blond or red hair, blue eyes, upturned ‘snub’ noses, and an almost obscenely large frame and tall stature” (65-66). (Note how Roman bias blends geography/climate & physical features).
- D.** So why do modern textbooks & dictionaries incorrectly define *albus* as ‘white’ to this very day? The cultural & racial bias of nineteenth-century lexicographers led them to assume (or to deliberately promote the fiction) that ancient Romans were ‘white’ like the British and other western & northern Europeans (Haley 2009: 27).

II. Modern racial bias also leads translators to *assume* that ‘black’ characters in Latin texts are enslaved and/or grotesque, debased figures who largely appear as sources of derisive humor — even when the text offers no evidence for either assumption. This leads to translations with inappropriately negative or misleading slants.

- A.** The pseudo-Vergilian poem *Moretum* (1st c. CE) includes a woman of African heritage, Scybale. Its description of her (see below) suggests it could assume an “audience [with] enough contact with Africans to appreciate Scybale’s racialized gender” and indicates “that Africans were not a rare spectacle for at least some portion of the Roman populace” (Haley 2022: 134). Scybale “is sympathetically drawn” as the *custos* (companion) of the Italian peasant Simulus “with whom she lives and for whom she cares” (Haley 2022: 134). (For more on Simulus, see next slide). Haley sees her as Simulus’ equal: she is *first* called his *custos* (a term never used for a slave) & only later called *famula*, ‘household servant/slave’ (2009:46). More recent scholars think Scybale *is* enslaved, but still agree with Haley that her broader depiction, her *importance* to Simulus, “blurs the boundary between exploitation and collaboration” (Xinyue 2025: 414).
- B.** Yet oddly, though *Moretum* gives no such indication, past scholars routinely treated Scybale as “old or ugly”. Why? She “becomes ugly if the beholder has been socialized to believe that African physiognomy is ugly” (Haley 2009: 46) and/or assumes Scybale reflects the *modern*, racist image of a ‘debased black slave.’ The further assumption that Romans found black women “disgusting” (Haley 2009:44) also drives their thinking. Translations **ii** & **iii** (below) by Snowden & Thompson — both black men — perpetuate & naturalize modern misogyny/misogynoir: “male scholars, both black and white, [have] been imprinted with the [modern] physical and sexual stereotypes of black women” (Haley 2009:42). Haley (translation **iv**.) is a black woman.

i. *Moretum* (31-35)
Erat unica custos,
Afra genus, tota patriam testante figura,
torta comam, labroque tumens et fusca colore,
pectore lata, iacens mammis, compressor alvo,
cruribus exilis, spatiosa prodiga planta.

ii. Snowden (1970: 9)
[Erat unica custos,]
African in her race, her whole figure
proof of her country —
her hair tightly curled, lips thick, color dark,
chest broad, breasts pendulous, belly
somewhat pinched,
legs thin, and feet broad and ample.

iii. Thompson (1989: 31)
She was his only help.
She was African in stock, and all her physical
features gave testimony of her land of origin:
tightly-curved hair, swollen lips, dusky complexion,
broad chest with low-swinging breasts, belly rather
pinched,
thin legs, broad and ample feet.

iv. Haley (2009: 42)
She was his only companion,
African in her race, her whole form a
testimony to her country:
her hair twisted into dreads, her lips full,
her color dark,
her chest broad, her breasts flat, her
stomach flat and firm,
her legs slender, her feet broad and ample.

*For modern racism as an unknown construct in Greco-Roman antiquity, see the presentation: ‘Were Ancient Greeks & Romans ‘White’ People. Part 1. Definitions & Visual Sources.’

V. (cont.): Translation ‘betrayals’ stemming from translator bias

Another common cultural-bias-driven translation ‘betrayal’ is born from misogyny (‘hatred of women’, an extreme form of discriminatory sexism).

I. The racist assumption that Romans found ‘black’ women “disgusting” (Haley 2009: 44) led male translators to create racist translations of *Moretum* 31-35 (making Romans seem to share our attitudes). Similarly, white male critics have (anachronistically) treated Scybale as analogous to “the controlling image of the mammy/Aunt Jemima figure in the United States” (Haley 2009: 46; see, e.g., pp. 44-46). Yet *Moretum* participates in a pastoral tradition praising the simple life (or, for other constructive reads see: Bellei 2024 & Xinyue 2025). Simulus’s *custos* (companion) Scybale should not be read as grotesque.

II. Modern critics’ misogynistic responses to *Moretum*’s vivid description of Scybale’s body have also impacted the poem’s interpretation:

A. Again, some have recently questioned whether Scybale was enslaved, while others note her comparative equality within her household hierarchy. Most prior critics, however, read Scybale as an enslaved/subordinate to the ‘Italian’ peasant Simulus. What they assumed was an ‘ugly’ Scybale’s debased objectification in *Moretum* 31-35 only seemed to confirm her status as his possession.

B. Yet their assumption that Simulus must be her free, ‘Italian’ owner led them to miss evidence suggesting otherwise. To begin, the names Scybale & Simulus are Greek. Romans often gave Greek names to their slaves, *and farmers were often enslaved*. Further, Simulus’s name suggests he might be of African heritage! Derived from the Greek adjective σιμός (*simus* in Latin) meaning: ‘flat/snub-nosed’, Simulus’s name “evokes an ancient stereotype of Africans” (Xinyue 2025: n. 37). Simulus could be enslaved *and* of African heritage, i.e., he & Scybale might indeed be ‘equal’. Or he might be a freedman (its own ‘class’) while she is enslaved; or maybe they were once enslaved together before his freedom. These possibilities could well make their interactions more collaborative than exploitative.

C. Thus, modern misogyny/misogynoir led (usually white) male commentators to assume that *Moretum*’s vividly objectified African Scybale was an ‘ugly’ inferior owned by the farmer Simulus. This, in turn prompted the (modern) racist assumption that Simulus, though poor, must be a free ‘Italian’ (a ‘white man’). Their bias led critics to ‘miss’ evidence that Simulus *might* share Scybale’s heritage, along with her enslaved status (either currently or recently). Notably, *Moretum*’s possible impact/interpretation changes dramatically if we try to ‘read’/‘hear’ it as Romans might have.

III. Another well-known misogynistic ‘spin’ appears in translations of Homer’s *Odyssey*:

A. When Telemachus kills the women who ‘slept with’ Penelope’s suitors in *Od.* 22, most translators have him call them ‘sluts’, ‘whores’, etc. Yet the Greek says no such thing. True, Telemachus likely views the women negatively; to him, they ‘sided’ with the suitors. But we should not import language that is not there. Indeed, *these lines describe enslaved women who could not refuse*. Only Wilson (2018)’s *Odyssey* translation, the first published by a woman, refrains from importing misogynistic language.

1. *Odyssey* 22.462-4: μή μὲν δὴ καθαρῷ θανάτῳ ἀπὸ θυμὸν ἐλοίμην / τάων, αἱ δὲ ἐμὴ κεφαλῇ κατ’ ὀνειδέα χεῦαν / μητέρι θ’ ἡμετέρῃ παρά τε μνηστήρσιν ἴανον.

a. Literally: I would not take away, with a clean/pure death, the life of these women/girls, who poured abuse/shame on my head and on our (my) mother, and/as they slept with the suitors. (Himmelhoch)

b. Fitzgerald (1961): I would not give the clean death of a beast to trulls who made a mockery of my mother, and of me, too — you sluts, who lay with suitors.

c. Lattimore (1965): I would not take away the lives of these creatures by any clean death, for they have showered abuse on the head of my mother, and on my own head, too, and they have slept with the suitors.

d. Lombardo (2000): I won’t allow a clean death for these women — the suitors’ sluts — who have heaped reproaches upon my own head and upon my mother’s.

e. Wilson (2018): I refuse to grant these girls a clean death, since they poured down shame on me and Mother, when they lay beside the suitors.

IV. Modern homophobia, a bias related to misogyny, also leads to translation ‘betrayals.’ Often, translators do not ‘see’ (or ‘re-write’? treat as ‘arguable’?) allegedly objectionable content.

A. The debate whether *Iliad*’s Achilles & Patroklos could have been ‘a romantic couple’ might be more straightforward to settle if Thetis’s comment to Achilles in 24.128-31 (as he mourns Patroklos’ death) were not regularly mistranslated/‘re-interpreted’(?). Only Wilson (2023)’s translation follows the Greek.

1. *Iliad* 24.128-31: τέκνον ἐμόν, τέο μέχρις ὀδυρόμενος καὶ ἀκεύων / σὴν ἔδδει κραδίην, μεμνημένος οὔτε τι σίτου / οὔτ’ εὔνης; ἀγαθὸν δὲ γυναικί περ ἐν φιλήτοτι / μίσγῃσθ’....

a. Literally: ‘My child, until what point, as you grieve & sit silent, will you devour your heart, mindful in no way of either food or bed? It is a good thing, even with a woman, to join in love...’ (Himmelhoch). *Thetis suggests that Achilles ‘join in love’, even with a woman, acknowledging that (ideally) he would rather ‘join in love’ with Patroklos!*

b. Fagles (1990): ‘My child - how long will you eat your heart out here in tears and torment? All wiped from your mind, all thought of food and bed? It’s a welcome thing to make love with a woman.’

c. Lombardo (2003): ‘My son, how long will you let this grief eat at your heart, mindless of food and rest? It would be good to make love to a woman.’

d. Mitchell (2011): ‘Child, how long will you gnaw your own heart with sorrow and longing and not think of food or rest? Yet it would do you good to make love with a woman.’

e. Alexander (2015): ‘My child, how long will you devour your heart in weeping & grieving, mindful neither of food nor bed? Indeed, it is good to lie with a woman in lovemaking.’

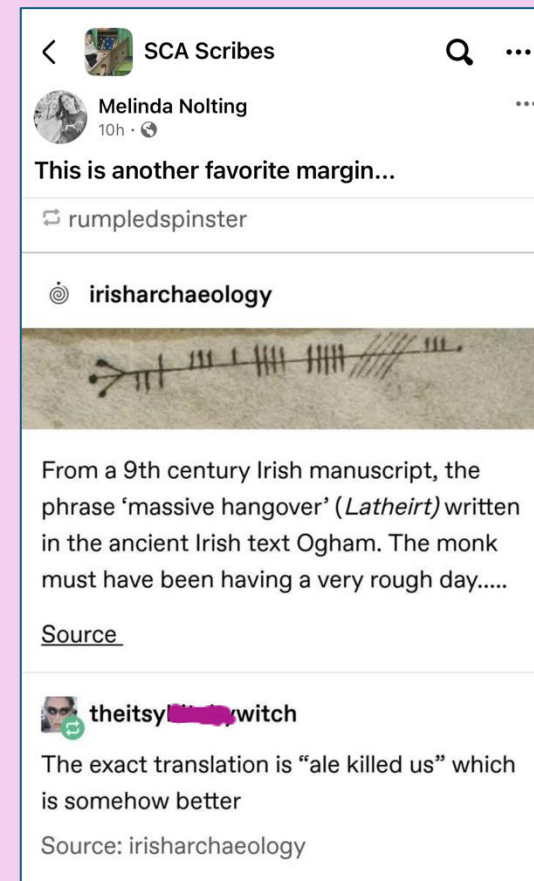
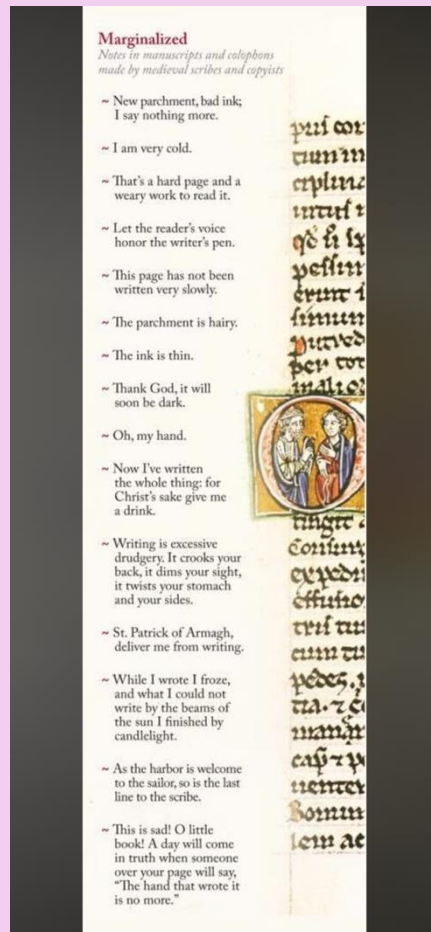
f. Wilson (2023): ‘My child, how long will you devour your heart with grief and sorrow, and not think of bread or bed? It is a good thing, even with a woman, to join in love.’

In Sum...

The Italian saying is right: translators are, indeed, traitors.

- ❖ Ultimately, an important or treasured text is best read in its original language, not only to improve understanding but to protect against the occasional mistranslation — mistaken or otherwise.
- ❖ Still, given this is not always possible, translations remain an excellent option — especially if you remain aware that translations do not, and cannot, ‘perfectly’ replicate the original text!

But before we go, let’s remember & thank the scribes from long ago who endured so much to ensure the survival of ancient texts!



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