

# NINETEENTH CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

ISSUE 15.1 (SPRING 2019)

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*Ladies' Greek: Victorian Translations of Tragedy.* Yopie Prins. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017. 297 pages.

Reviewed by Marjorie Stone, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada

<1>As befits a book that has garnered awards such as the 2018 North American Studies Association prize for best book and *SEL*'s 2018 Robert Patten Award, Yopie Prins' *Ladies' Greek* might readily be termed a *tour de force* of critical insight, originality, and erudition. The term, however, would not capture the enchanting spell the book also casts as a study that is less a performance of knowledge than a labour of love growing out of Prins' "deep attachment to Greek letters" (232), earlier manifested in *Victorian Sappho* (1999). *Ladies' Greek* enchants because Prins so engagingly immerses readers in the creative processes, lives, works, performances, and cultural contexts of Anglo-American girls and women, themselves spell-bound by the possibility of "knowing" Greek. Or, like Virginia Woolf in her essay, "On Not Knowing Greek," they are spell-bound by meanings "'just on the far side of language'" (37), the nuances of "'not knowing'" (44).

<2>Prins opens with a manuscript ode in schoolgirl's Greek written by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, testifying to the precocious young poet's "'delight inexpressible'" at the very thought of comprehending "'even the Greek alphabet'" (3). The book's title alludes to another, more familiar passage in E.B.B.'s *Aurora Leigh*: Romney's gentle mockery of the "'lady's Greek / Without the accents'" on the margin of one of Aurora's books (qtd. 7). As Prins emphasizes, "the example of E.B.B." was less "exceptional" than "generic" (5): "[t]he 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" (7). In diverse mediums, poets, translators, scholars, performers, drama directors, and educators enacted "a narrative of desire for ancient Greek" with "its own predictable *topoi*": "a primal scene of falling in love with" the Greek alphabet, "the pain and pleasure of learning to read Greek," and attempts "to translate and incorporate Greek into a body of writing" or performance (5). As *Ladies' Greek* further demonstrates, such experiences became rites of passage in the women's colleges established in England and America shaped by the "larger matrix of cultural practices, social networks, and institutional structures" generating a "reinvention of female classical literacy" (12).

<3>Prins' subtitle *Victorian Translations of Tragedy* signals her primary focus on "five Greek tragedies" (31) with female characters that offered "powerful – if ambiguous – models for Victorian womanhood" (26): Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* and *Prometheus Bound*, Sophocles' *Electra*, and Euripides' *Hippolytus* and *Bacchae*. Chapter One focuses principally on the figure of Cassandra in "a primal scene of linguistic estrangement" in the *Agamemnon*, when "it is not clear yet" whether the tragic heroine is "speaking in Greek, or in another tongue, or perhaps in tongues" in an "utterance both barbaric (*otototoi*, a series of stuttering syllables ...) and prophetic" (37). Considering Woolf's representation of this scene in her *Agamemnon* notebook, and its portrayal in "two dramatic productions staged in ancient Greek at Cambridge University," Prins underscores the "mad literality of Greek letters" in a "scene of reading ... repeated again and again . . . by other women, both before and after Woolf" (31).

<4>Chapter Two, the longest of the five, approaches Prometheus' suffering "immobility" as a manifestation of "the translator's bondage" and entanglements in debates over the "value of literalism" (61) in women's translations, adaptations, and stage productions of *Prometheus Bound*. Swerving away from the conventional focus on the Titan rebel protagonist, however, Prins again focuses principally on the background story of the "painfully mobile Io," the "half-girl and half-cow" with "Greek letters inscribed on her body," driven to tortured wanderings by Zeus (31, 73). Among English translations, Prins considers those by E.B.B. (1833, and again in 1850), Augusta Webster (1866), Anna Swanwick (1873), and Janet Case (1903). EBB's 1833 translation of Io's "night visions" of Zeus's amorous approach masks the "erotic violence" of the Greek while still emphasizing that the god's sexual desire is imposed on Io (74-75); her later translation, reflecting the arousal of the courtship period, is more "explicitly erotic" (81). Swanwick cloaks the violence of Zeus's in genteel language, casting Io's night visions as "dreams of 'loftiest nuptials'" (91). In contrast, Case – the first woman to play a role in a Cambridge Greek play (41) – underscores the tyranny of Zeus over a distraught and disoriented Io in her prose translation (94). Among American translations and adaptations of *Prometheus Bound*, Prins considers Annie Field's poem "The Flight of Io" (99); Edith Hamilton's 1927 translation, transforming representation of Io's tormented madness into "the spare diction of American modernist verse" (109), and Eva Palmer Sikelianos's production of *Prometheus Bound* the same year at the 1927 Delphic Festival in Greece, with "a scripted choreography that could mobilize letters as bodies in motion" (112). Throughout her study, Prins adopts a transatlantic approach, but this chapter is especially notable for its expansive mobility, taking us from England to America to modern Greece – and moving as well from elite colleges to more remote regions, as in 1878 report in the Boston *Woman's Journal* describing an unidentified woman reading and translating "*Prometheus Bound* to a rapt audience" in the woods of Maine (95).

<5>Chapter 3 of *Ladies' Greek* opens by briefly considering Electra as a figure of mourning in Victorian visual art and in Sonnet V of E.B.B.'s *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, then focuses on "two historic productions" of *Electra* at Girton College and Smith College, "in 1883 and 1889

respectively” -- “the first collegiate performances of tragedy in ancient Greek by women in Victorian England and America” (32). Prins frames these productions within “debates about the higher education of women,” drawing on materials in college archives (“letters, student magazines, alumni publications, newspaper reports, local reviews, photographic essays, albums”) to reconstruct the preparation of the student cast for their “highly stylized performance” (30). While the figure of Electra is central to these productions, Prins emphasizes that the dynamic of “ladies’ Greek” involved an “equally important” “identification with the chorus as a collective body” (30). Indeed, some of the most fascinating analyses in her study arise from treatments of the choruses in *Electra* and other plays, as these are translated by Anglo-American women or “transposed into poses, gestures, and music” in productions creating “a visual spectacle that could be recognized even by members of the audience who did not know Greek”(123).

<6>Chapters Four and Five of *Ladies’ Greek* “show how women contributed to a major shift in the reception of Euripides” in the late nineteenth century through translations, adaptations, and productions of two plays that especially appealed to *fin-de-siècle* aesthetes and modernists: *Hippolytus*, with its “highly eroticized, lyricized language” and *The Bacchae*, with its focus on the ecstatic female worshippers of Dionysus (32-33). Chapter Four juxtaposes Mary F. Robinson’s translation of Euripides in *The Crowned Hippolytus* (1881) with of Hilda Doolittle’s (H.D.’s) “Choruses from Hippolytus of Euripides” (1919) and *Hippolytus Temporizes* (1927). In a series of subtle and supple close readings of Robinson’s “virtuosic metrical” experimentation (154), Prins illumines the poetic innovations of a still under-appreciated author, demonstrating how Robinson evokes the “rhythms of desire” and “the interplay of choriamb and iambs” in Euripidean “choral meter” (180). By approaching these translations in the context of Robinson’s unpublished correspondence with John Addington Symonds and her intimacy with Vernon Lee, Prins furthermore addresses reasons why female and male aesthetes alike were attracted by Hippolytus as a figure of homoerotic desire – the “male Amazon” and “Lesbian boy” (167) -- and the impact of fin de siècle aestheticism on the more extensively discussed modernist Greek adaptations by H.D. Noting that H.D. sought to convey the “hypnotic effect” of “Attic choruses” in her translations of *Hippolytus*, Prins convincingly demonstrates how the modernist poet turned back to the “complex cadences” of Greek choral metre to deregulate the “metrical norms” of accentual/syllabic verse – as in choral odes whose rhythms powerfully convey the irresistible effects of Eros (185).

<7>Similar energies animate Prins’ analysis in Chapter Five of “new women” at the turn of the century enacting their desires and mobility by making “Greek letters dance” in increasingly “kinetic” and embodied identifications with the ecstatic, female worshippers of Dionysius in Euripides’ *The Bacchae* (201). Moving from page to stage to pedagogical platforms, Prins demonstrates how these women were inspired less by Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* than by Walter Pater’s essays and each other: by Isadora Duncan’s performance of “the Bacchic shiver” in 1903 in the Athenian Theatre of Dionysus (206); by Jane Harrison’s foundational

historical/anthropological scholarship giving women and “maenadism” a “central role ... in the birth of tragedy” (210); and by Harrison’s performative multi-media lectures at Newnham conveying the “thrill” of knowing Greek, one of them concluding with her ““throwing back her head”” and bursting ““into a chorus of Euripides in Greek”” (217-18). Prins also examines the “cult” and “cultivation” of “ladies Greek” at Bryn Mawr College through rituals established under its first president, M. Carey Thomas (219), and the effects of this culture on students such as Eva Palmer (later Sikelianos). After her 1927 staging of *Prometheus Bound* in Delphos, Sikelianos travelled back to Bryn Mawr, and in 1935, she directed a production of *The Bacchae* in which Bryn Mawr students dressed in hand-woven flowing Greek robes, sang choral odes, and executed carefully choreographed Greek movements and the “Bacchic shiver” (225-27).

<8>Such productions and such educations do not come cheaply, and Prins acknowledges in her “Introduction” that they were accessible largely to economically privileged women – although she notes in passing that the working-class Mary Vivian Hughes “identified with the cult of Classics at Cambridge” (46). “Ladies’ Greek” was also overwhelmingly a performance of “white womanhood, undeniably with racial implications” given the intertwining of “Aryan ideologies” with Hellenism (25), as Prins points out. For this reason, her study is usefully complemented by another highly ranked contender for the 2018 NAVSA Best Book prize, Tricia Lootens’ *The Political Poetess: Victorian Femininity, Race, and the Legacy of Separate Spheres* (2017), which powerfully analyses the racialized underpinnings of both nineteenth-century women’s poetry and feminist reconstructions of the poetess figure today. Given her very different subject matter, Prins addresses the racial and ethnic aspects of “Ladies Greek” through some strategic examples: by, for example, briefly treating Amy Levy’s keen sense of alienation as “one of the first Jewish women to study at Cambridge” (20), and by noting Anna Julia Cooper’s appeal “to Greek ideals in her famous plea for the higher education of African American women,” arising out of her own experience as the daughter of a slave and white landowner” (25-26). Prins’ evocative epilogue or “Postface,” focused on “refractions” of Sophocles’ *Antigone* in the nineteenth-century – in archives, in George Eliot’s writing, and in the contemporary art of Andrea Eis – also includes a discussion of an African American performance of *Antigone* at Spelman College directed by Anne Cooke in 1933, drawing on materials in the college archives (239-42) Such fruitful use of archives throughout *Ladies’ Greek*, along with its deep learning, brilliant close readings, transatlantic scope, and investigations of engagements with Greek in multiple genres and mediums all contribute to the spell the book casts. As Prins aptly observes in concluding her chapter on *The Bacchae*, her goal throughout has been to show the many ways in which “so many women have been knocked off their feet” by their passion for Greek letters: “what never seems to fade ... is the thrill” (232).