

Roman Literature: Translation, Metaphor & Empire

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Abstract: The Romans understood that translation entails transformation. The Roman term “translatio” stood not only literally for a carrying-across (as by boat) of material from one country to another, but also (metaphorically) for both linguistic translation and metaphorical transformation. These shared usages provide a lens on Roman anxieties about their relationship to Greece, from which they both transferred and translated a literature to call their own. Despite the problematic association of the Greeks with pleasure, rhetoric, and poetic language, the Roman elite argued for the possibility of translation and transformation of Greek texts into a distinctly Roman and authoritative mode of expression. Cicero’s hope was that eventually translated Latin texts would replace the Greek originals altogether. In the end, however, the Romans seem to have felt that effeminacy had the last laugh.

Recent work on Roman literature has turned to the act of translation as a fundamental and defining feature of the Roman literary corpus. The focus on translation is not new, *per se*; both the Romans and the scholars who have written about them acknowledge that Roman literature originated in the appropriation and translation of Greek texts. Roman liter-

tion,” and “transmittal” that were so basic to the old denigration of Roman literature actually involved creative processes that laid down a challenge to their source-texts, provided grounds for competitive claims within Roman culture, and ultimately fed into a broad nexus of concerns about foreign influence, native character, and the dangers of empire.

In this essay, I offer a specific case study of one feature of Roman translation that has remained unexplored in the flourishing of translation studies. This is the curious overlap of the Roman terminology for *translation* with the Roman terminology for *metaphor*.² While we moderns understand that to translate is always to transform, our lexicon does not trace the two processes back to identical literal meanings with different figural extensions. In Latin, however, to translate is to “turn” one text into another or to “transfer” a text from one language to another (*vertere, transfere*; the past participle *translatum*). At the same time, to “turn” a phrase or “transfer” a term also means to create a metaphor.³ In other words, both translation and metaphor developed from the basic language of turning, changing, or transferring. Of course, the Romans understood that signifiers from one language cannot be mapped onto exactly the same meaning in another, and that translation thus involved a transformation of sorts.⁴ But unlike contemporary theorists who posit that a translation is itself a metaphorical rendition of an original,⁵ the literary and rhetorical writers of the ancient world never compared translation and metaphor—never even put them side by side—as if there was a deep gulf between the ways they could be understood. This was the case even though (as I demonstrate below) the very *metaphors* they used to talk about metaphor and translation were largely the same. In the end, this shared Roman vocabulary of *translatio* as

metaphor and *translatio* as translation sheds light on the connections between metaphor, translation, and Roman anxieties about the influence of a subject empire: the Greeks.⁶

The Romans lacked an indigenous literary and philosophical tradition, and self-consciously inherited the Greek tradition to fill the void. Their direct contact with Greek learning through the conquest and

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in Greek and Latin, metaphor is viewed as dependent on the foreign quality of the “new” term. But the Roman treatises emphasize geographical and spatial characteristics in their definitions, as if metaphors were foreign texts. Where Aristotle speaks in terms of a transfer between genus and species (Aristotle *Poetics* 1457b), for Cicero, metaphor’s vehicle is seen as specifically fetched or imported from a distant place to carry out a local act of signification.¹³ Thus, he notes, “Everyone takes more delight in carried-over [*translatis*] and foreign [*alienis*] words than in the proper ones that belong to them” (Cicero *De Oratore* 3.39.159), and offers as one explanation that “it’s a mark of talent to skip over what is at your feet and to seize foreign words sought at a great distance” (3.40.169).¹⁴ With the same idea in mind, he cautions elsewhere that one’s source shouldn’t be *too* far away (46.163)—and that the metaphorical vehicle should seem to have immigrated to, but not invaded, its new home (Cicero *Brutus* 274).¹⁵ The first-century philosopher and rhetorician Seneca sees the reader as doing the traveling instead: metaphor, on which we lean like a pair of crutches, “brings us to the literal spot” where we can see what we need to (Seneca *Epistles* 59.6). In either case, there is some ground that has to be crossed.

Translation and metaphor shared other basic features. Both, for example, were discussed in terms of the improvements they could bring to a given sentence or passage. Aulus Gellius, the second-century Latin grammarian, notes that Vergil won praise for translating a risqué passage in Homer into tamer Latin; as Gellius puts it, using “a modest *translatio* of words, even as [Vergil] showed and made clear [the original text], he covered it. He used pure and honorable words.” Gellius is referring to Vergil’s lines in the *Aeneid* that describe Jupiter seeking the “desired embrace” of Juno’s arms; the Homeric passage from

which Vergil took his model spoke more boldly of “deeds of love,” and a bed (Vergil *Aeneid* 8.404–406). Vergil, then, is being praised for describing a sex-act in very oblique (read: “pure and honorable”) language. But does Gellius mean that Vergil’s polite “embrace” is a *metaphor* for sex, or a *translation* of Homer’s passage? All we can discern is that it is a *translatio*, a transferal, from the too-frank original.¹⁶ This and similar passages from Gellius are already revelatory in their combination of a number of considerations: the notion of transformation, the use of metaphor to suggest modesty, and the competition between Roman and Greek versions (Vergil improving on Homer, or not). As Vergil’s mastery in translation is praised, so is his correct use of metaphor.¹⁷

In fact, modesty played a role in the evaluation of both successful translations and successful metaphors. Cicero, we saw above, calls for metaphor to be modest, to seem invited into the text rather than to have forced its way in. The author of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* also wants metaphor to be modest, lest it seem to have “rashly and libidinosly” (!) run across to a dissimilar term (*Rhetorica ad Herennium* 4.34).¹⁸ Such “libidinous” (uncontrolled or far-fetched) metaphors were tied to literally libidinous practices in their creators and were roundly criticized. Seneca condemns eras in which metaphors were used “immodestly” (Seneca *Epistles* 114.1) and then goes on to characterize the frequent or unusual use of metaphor in terms of excessive luxury and deviant sexuality: it springs from the pen of writers that are “effeminate,” marked by *mollitia* (softness), full of license (114.3–4). Such were Maecenas and others like him, who wore colorful cloaks or transparent togas and who were not considered by Seneca “manly men” in the other realms of life as well.¹⁹

What is a libidinous metaphor, or a luxurious one? The parallels in Roman treat-

ments of translation help us understand Greek literature—like the culture in which it was embedded—posed the same perceived threats of excess sweetness and effeminacy. Translators into Latin were well aware of the need to make it appropriate for the sturdily no-nonsense Romans, as they thought of themselves. Indeed, Valerius Maximus, the great Roman collector of edifying moral stories, characterizes the Greek language itself as “sweet” (Maximus *Nine Books of Memorable Deeds and Sayings* 2.2.2).²⁰ As a correlate, we find that translators are praised for modifying or eliminating what is either too sexual or pleasurable in the original; so, for example, Gellius praises Vergil, again, for “prudently omitting what was very sweet in the Greek” when translating Theocritus.²¹ An extreme expression of this xenophobia comes courtesy of Cato the Elder, who warned his son not to learn Greek literature too deeply: it would corrupt everything Roman (Greek doctors were banned from his home, too) (Pliny the Elder *Natural History* 29.7.14). And if too much metaphor ran the risk of effeminizing the author, all of Greek culture represented the dangers of unmanly softness for the Roman elite, who repeatedly figured Greece as the source of all things luxurious and unmanly, including statuary, clothing, philosophy, even pederasty.²²

What are we to make of these alliances between Roman translation and metaphor: the terminology, the idea of transformation, the distance traveled by the text or the metaphorical vehicle, the care taken with sweet or sexual qualities, the potential taint of effeminacy?²³ They tell us much about the Roman view of both Greek literature and rhetorical figure as potential sources of an active and almost contagious anti-Romanness that had to be carefully regulated—or better still,

overcome and made Roman.²⁴ When Vergil famously contrasted Greek statuary and oratory to the Roman “art” of warfare, the divide between these national qualities was as much prescriptive as descriptive: the Romans wanted to contrast themselves to the conquered Greeks in this particular way. But lest we think metaphor and translation can be lumped together in Roman thought as simple cases of the incorporation of “pleasant but risky things from afar,” we should look to their perceived differences to see why the Romans declined to lump them together—to see, that is, how one process was perceived as safe for the Roman character, while the other remained fraught.

To start with, the connotations of effeminacy and excess with which the Romans tarred the Greeks generally did not attach to Greek literature in *translation*. If questions of modesty, self-control, and excess were sources of concern for those writing prescriptions for the use of metaphor, translation, on the other hand, was almost always figured as a successfully accomplished exercise of control and mastery over a foreign text, an operation that “Romanized” it enough to make it all right for consumption. This was possible because the Romans had little interest in producing translations that were identical to their source texts. Instead, from the early days of combining different Greek comedies to produce a single Roman one, to the more sophisticated translations produced by the Roman elite in the late Republic and beyond, the Roman translator not only made available an originally Greek text, but also demonstrated his control over the source material and recontextualized its content, all to show that he was no self-effacing imitator, but a manipulator of Greek originals in his own right.²⁵ And since most elites tended to know both languages, they did not need a literal crib; no one complained

that Roman texts were too different from the works that inspired their creation.²⁶

There are numerous attestations to this way of thinking. The poet Horace's famous lines showering scorn on the servile herd of literary imitators probably refer to his disdain for poets trying to imitate his own accomplishments, not Greek originals, but he himself points out that he treads untrodden turf as he takes on Greek lyric (Horace *Epistles* 1.19). In his programmatic poem, the *Ars Poetica*, he mocks the idea of the faithful translator, and the narrow space in which he works (Horace *Ars Poetica* 133ff). The epistolary writer Pliny the Younger urges us to translate for fun, but also to be ashamed if our versions do not sometimes outdo the original (Pliny the Younger *Epistulae* 7.9). And as Aulus Gellius reminds us, "Whenever we have to translate and imitate famous passages from the Greek poets, people always say we should not try to translate every single word in the original. Many things lose their charm if transferred too violently, as if unwilling and reluctant" (Aulus Gellius *Noctes Atticae* 9.9.1–2). Roman authors produced not one but five versions of Aratus's difficult didactic poem on astronomy, the *Phaenomena*; as Glenn Most writes, the fact that it was translated into Latin so often "is a testimony not only to the importance of astronomy in the ancient world, but above all to the necessity Latin poets felt to sharpen their instruments on the most intractable of materials (and, along the way, to display their virtuosity)."²⁷

In justifying his decision to translate Greek philosophical works, Cicero claims that the Romans are wiser than the Greeks and had improved upon what they inherited from them; the Greeks surpassed the Romans in literature, to be sure, but "victory was easy where there was no contest" (Cicero *Tusculanae Disputationes* 1.2 and 4.1–2).²⁸ The term "victory" is no accident. Modifying the source text was a chance to

display not only one's virtuosity, but also the general superiority of the Roman version over the Greek original, and indeed, of Romans over Greeks.²⁹ The relationship between source text and destination text could even descend to metaphors of violence: as Siobhán McElduff put it, "Roman literary translation, as a general rule, dismembered a Greek text and scattered it within a larger work."³⁰ *Translatio* was the outcome of conquering, of enacting a translation of empire (*translatio imperii*) as well as a translation of literary culture (*translatio studiorum*). Indeed, Cicero's hope was that, eventually, translated Latin texts would replace the Greek originals altogether (2.6) much like a metaphor in which the literal term trumped the imported vehicle, thus turning the whole process of transfer on its head!³¹

If literary translation could and should be free, and represented Roman mastery over Greek originals, it in this respect differed greatly from metaphor.³² Metaphor had to be closely controlled: in the treatises, the need to avoid overstepping certain bounds when creating tropes very much comes to the fore. We have seen the frequent invocation of the language of modesty and restraint.³³ There were injunctions about modest choices, control of the level of dissimilarity, avoidance of base vehicles, avoidance of excess, avoidance of effeminacy. These attempts at control stand in sharp contrast to the confident stance of the translators and their freedom to change the original, to "illuminate" (*inlustrare*, or "light up") the obscurities of the Greeks in the Latin tongue.³⁴ When these rules were ignored, the results were all but disastrous. Well might Seneca lament Maecenas's cloying metaphors, or Cicero limit their usage, or Quintilian decry metaphors that involved lowly and improper vehicles such as sewers (Quintilian *Institutio Oratoria* 8.6.15). In the end, of course, the production of metaphors was up to individu-

al authors; neither their production, nor

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; "Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society 45 (2000): 1–16; "Metaphor, Allegory, and the Classical Tradition: Ancient Thought and Modern Revisions" (2003); "Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric 6 (3) (1988): 307–325; "Metaphor, Allegory, and the Classical Tradition," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 7 (27) (1997): 517–554; "metaphora," *Aristotelian Explorations* (1996), 205–222; "Arethusa 21 (2) (1988): 215–226; "Metaphor, Allegory, and the Classical Tradition," *Central States Speech Journal* 29 (2) (1978): 107–117; "The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language," (1977).

²¹ *De Oratore* 3:38.155.

²³ *Veretere* *De Oratore* 3:38.155.

²⁴ 161 bce, 92 bce, 8(<2, 5-2

... *De legibus* 2.17. ... *interpres*, ... Shadi Bartsch
Roman Theories of Translation, 24–30, 144–145, ... 201–202.

³³ ... *Rhetoric* 1405; *Rhetorica ad Herennium* 34; ... *De Oratore* 3.41.165; ... *Epistulae ad Familiares* 16.17; ... *De Sublimitate* 32.2; ... *Institutio Oratoria* 8.3.37; ... *Epistles* 114.10.

³⁴ ... *De Rerum Natura* 1.136–140; ... *Academica* 1.3 ... *Tusculanae Disputationes* 1.5.

³⁵ ... 146 bce