

Curtain call *for Latin*



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What's the point of translating novels and plays into ancient languages? Robin Meyer makes the case

Entering a well-stocked bookshop in the 21st century is like taking a trip not only around the world but also through time: one discovers literature from across the globe translated into an accessible language, opening up different cultures and periods to curious readers. Those hunting for translations off the beaten track may find unexpected translations of modern literature in ancient languages such as Latin and Ancient Greek.

In the absence of native speakers, one might inquire as to the purpose of books such as *Ἄρειος Ποτήρ καὶ ἡ τοῦ φιλοσόφου λίθος* (*Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* in Ancient Greek), *Avem occidere mimicam* (*To Kill a Mockingbird* in Latin) and *Π-ἰ-ῶ-ῶ-ῶ-ῶ* (*The Tale of Peter Rabbit: Hieroglyph edition*). 'Who's going to read that?!' was the perfectly good response of Mark Walker, the Latin translator of Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (*Hobbitus Ille*; 2012).

When, in November 2018, I was asked to translate into Latin parts of Bertolt Brecht's

play *Leben des Galilei* (*Life of Galileo*), for Frank Castorf's 2019 production at the Berliner Ensemble, similar questions crossed my mind: Is anyone going to understand this scene if one character speaks Latin? What is the point of having a Latin-speaking character?

According to Walker, translating modern literature into ancient languages can bridge a literary chasm for the language learner or "intermediate reader, who is tired of the textbook but not quite ready to grapple with... stately poetry... [or] grand rhetoric". It is also a bit of fun. Such texts are said to be more approachable to the modern – and especially the younger – reader than ancient 'easy reading', such as short biographies of important personalities or moralising letters.

When it comes to films and plays in ancient languages, the aim may be as much to startle and stun the audience with the unexpected, as with Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). The director also thought Latin would help to make the movie "as real as possible".¹

Castorf's production of *Leben des Galilei* similarly aimed to startle and alienate its audience, not only with Latin dialogue but also with wildly post-modern costumes, naked actors and fluid role assignment.²

Modern translations into ancient languages, then, appear to have two primary purposes apart from novelty value. In written texts, they encourage young readers to engage with the languages in genres they are familiar with and interested in. In this way, they increase the amount of text read in that language, hopefully fostering a command of it. In the performing arts, they serve to create an authentic setting for the production, not infrequently accompanied by particular, often alienating, effects on the audience.

Translating into an ancient language can be tricky as far as authenticity is concerned. If one strives to emulate ancient authors and their style – and not everybody does – one is forced to make concessions regarding accuracy or faithfulness to the original style.

Translations into Hieroglyphic Egyptian suffer from our limited knowledge of different registers in that language, as well as the floral and faunal differences between early 20th-century Britain and ancient Egypt. Expressing sentiments such as ‘Now run along, and don’t get into any mischief’³ is challenging in a monumental or sacral language. Equating the European rabbit (*Lepus cuniculus*) with the desert hare (*Lepus capensis*) is a minor and unavoidable inaccuracy by comparison.

New concepts, old words

Translating Brecht from 20th-century German into Latin provided a rather different challenge. Our stylistic and lexical repertoire is far greater in Latin than in Hieroglyphic Egyptian, and the settings contrast less starkly. The main challenge was to maintain the concise diction of Brecht and combine it with the accuracy required of Latin.

To allow for a reasonably colloquial and unadorned style, I modelled my prose on the comic writers Plautus and Terence. This avoids the grandiloquence of higher registers, as employed in historiography, philosophy and rhetoric by writers such as Cicero and Caesar, who feature prominently in the school curriculum. It also evades the artificiality and permissiveness of mediaeval and neo-Latin, which were not spoken as native languages, and allows for greater syntactic flexibility.

Concessions, however, were inevitable. When teaching translation into Latin or Ancient Greek at university, I encourage students to find ancient parallels for modern settings in the texts – for example, using Λακεδαιμόνιοι (‘Spartans’) or Galli (‘Gauls’) for ‘Scots’. Yet in Castorf’s Brecht dialogue, only one character speaks Latin, so this approach would have been confusing.

Additionally, many concepts of Galileo’s time make an appearance: conflicts between Protestants and Catholics, the Inquisition, and contemporaneous city states like Padua and Venice. Good (post-mediaeval) Latin terms exist for all of these (*protestantes, catholici, Sancta Inquisitio de Fide, Patavia, Venetia*), but more recent concepts were harder. How does one casually talk about cannonballs and telescopes in a language whose last native speakers predate the invention of such things by centuries? For telescopes, staying true to ancient diction would have required a wordy

periphrasis, such as *instrumentum ad ulterius videndum* (‘instrument for seeing farther’) or *tubus speculatorius* (‘scout’s tube’), which goes against the spirit of conciseness. The neo-Latin *telescopium* was shorter and comprehensible, and thus had to do.

Cannons, by contrast, have existed since the 13th century and have at least functional counterparts in the ancient world in the shape of crossbows, catapults and trebuchets, which all emit destructive missiles at high velocity. *Telum* or *missile* (‘missile/weapon’) served as plausible translations for ‘cannonball’, while ‘cannon’ found its match in *tormentum* (‘engine for hurling missiles’).

An equally taxing challenge was the rendition of pragmatically laden exclamations such as *Aber Herr Galilei! Welche Auffassung!* (‘Galileo! I don’t understand your cynicism!’⁴ or ‘Really, Mr Galilei, what a way of looking at it!’⁵), while maintaining the desired brevity. This was where recourse to the comic diction of Plautus proved key: *Per pol, domine Galilaei, qualia eloqueris!* (‘By Pollux, Mr Galilei, the kind of things you say!’) The invocation of Pollux, often in surprise or other states of emotion, is a recurring feature of early Latin drama and would have been less readily expressible in the words of Caesar or Cicero.

The future of ancient tongues

The set of skills required to produce such translations, including the ability to evaluate the appropriate model for a translation and establish where to draw the line between accuracy in the ancient target language and fidelity to the original, requires extended study and does not form an obligatory part of every Classics course in UK universities. It is evident that the ‘need’ for capable translators into ancient languages is far more limited than the need for their modern counterparts. Classical languages and civilisation make up the smallest segment of GCSE subjects, taken by fewer than 16,000 students a year since 2015, compared to more than 120,000 for French.

Why then practise it at all? Two prominent reasons stand out: the loss of any skill or discipline, however rarefied, is unfortunate at the very least – ever the more so if it has such a long-standing history. More important is the principle of language teaching itself: few would contemplate teaching a modern language without an active target-language

component. The same should be true for ancient languages. Eleanor Dickey summarises this sentiment succinctly: “An active command [of an ancient language], like that of any other language, brings with it an increased fluency in comprehension and a greater appreciation of an author’s choices and the reasons behind those choices.”⁶

Modern translations into ancient languages, in theatre, film or books, keep public memory and awareness of these languages alive. At their best, they inspire spectators and readers to learn or reactivate their knowledge of these languages, and in a small way help to ensure that future generations, too, will have the opportunity to appreciate them.

Notes

- 1 ‘Mel Gibson’s Great Passion. Christ’s agony as you’ve never seen it’. In *Zenit*, 6/3/2003
- 2 Wengierek, R (2019) ‘Denken am Limit. Das Drama des alten Mannes: Frank Castorf macht in „Galileo Galilei“ aus Brechts Verfremdungseffekt eine Horrorshow’. In *Die Welt*, 21/1/2019
- 3 Potter, B (2005) *The Tale of Peter Rabbit: Hieroglyph edition*, trans. Nunn, JF and Parkinson, RB. London: The British Museum Press
- 4 Brecht, B (2013) *A Life of Galileo*, trans. Ravenhill, M. London: Bloomsbury.
- 5 Brecht, B (1986) *Life of Galileo*, trans. Willett, J. London: Bloomsbury
- 6 Dickey, E (2016) *An Introduction to the Composition and Analysis of Greek Prose*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

AN ELEMENT OF SURPRISE

Robin translated parts of Frank Castorf’s Galileo Galilei – Das Theater und die Pest (above left) into Latin; and (below) Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone in Ancient Greek and The Tale of Peter Rabbit: Hieroglyph edition

