

## BOOK REVIEW

*Beyond Greek: The Beginnings of Latin Literature*. By DENIS FEENEY. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016. Pp. xii + 377. Hardcover, \$35.00. ISBN 978-0-674-05523-0.

“That’s the reason why I had to embroider tulips, which I hate, on his slippers; because you are fond of tulips; that’s why [*Throws the slippers on the floor*] we go to the mountains during the summer, because you don’t like the sea air; that’s why my boy is named Eskil, because it’s your father’s name; that’s why I wear your colors, read your authors, eat your pet dishes, drink your beverages--this chocolate, for example--that’s why. Oh, my God, it’s fearful, when I think about it; it’s fearful! Everything, everything, came from you to me, even your passion! Your soul crept into mine, like a worm into an apple, ate and ate, grubbed and grubbed, until nothing was left but the rind within. I wanted to fly from you, but I couldn’t; you lay like a snake and enchanted me with your black eyes--I felt as if the branch gave way and let me fall. ... Possibly, all in all, at this moment I am really the stronger. You get nothing from me, but you gave me much. And now I appear like a thief to you. You wake up and find I possess what you have lost!”

**T**hus Mrs. X to Ms. Y in August Strindberg’s short one-act play *The Stronger* (1889). This brief snippet from the dramatic monologue in which Mrs. X describes how she won the love of Ms. Y’s former lover offers a different perspective of Roman literature from Horace’s celebrated dictum *Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit* (*Ep.* 2.1.156) and one on stage in Denis Feeney’s latest book, *Beyond Greek. The Beginnings of Latin Literature*, in which we observe firsthand how imitation and adaptation can reveal the hand of the stronger.

*Beyond Greek* offers an engaging account of the origins of Roman literature, succinctly described throughout as the “translation project.” A short review cannot do justice to the depth and breadth of this innovative literary history that covers a century of significant change in Rome (240-140 BCE). The 81 pages of endnotes that support the book’s detailed narrative alone constitute a third of the monograph (8 chapters plus introduction and conclusion), a percentage that does not include the 37 pages of bibliography. Because of the fragmentary nature

of the literature covered in this study, Horace's demeaning words on early Roman poetry aside, less attention has traditionally been paid by scholars to this critical era of Roman literature. Feeney's revelatory analysis, I hope, will create considerable interest in a time when we find only the *disiecta membra* of the poetic pioneers.

I begin with the last sentence of the final chapter that did not surprise me after reading the book, but would have beforehand: "Although nothing seems more natural than that a nation should have a literature, there is nothing inevitable or predictable about it" (235). In 240 BCE when Livius Andronicus first translated Greek drama for the Roman stage, he did something unprecedented in the Mediterranean basin. Whereas other peoples translated their texts into Greek (e.g., Manetho and Berossus), the early multi-lingual translators imported Greek masterpieces into Latin, a process that led to "an institution of Hellenizing literature unlike anything we appear able to reconstruct from other contemporary societies" (7). In order to understand the new literature, the Romans would have to be familiar with Greek, and, as Feeney points out, "it was by no means normal in the ancient world for conquerors to learn the language of their subjects" (30). Different from other instances in which people translated scientific, medical and other practical texts, the Romans ignored these and translated Homer and Euripides; Aratus instead of Eudoxus, as it were.

At the core of this unparalleled beginning lies the bilingual classroom in which Livius "gleaned conceptions of translinguistic interpretation from a pedagogic experience of intralinguistic interpretation" (52). A key component in this process involves conveying in Latin not only what the translated text says but in a way that spoke to the sensibilities of the new audiences, thus addressing differences and domesticating non-Roman concepts, contrary to Latin translations into Greek that aggressively preserved its Latinity and made little accommodation to the target audience. And, as we know, none of the individuals who carried this off were native-born Roman citizens—Andronicus, Naevius, Ennius, Pacuvius, Plautus, Staius Caecilius and Terence—writers who "were able to parlay their skills across linguistic and cultural interstices, and to benefit from the vitally enhanced creative potential that came from inhabiting two or three linguistic cultures at once" (67). Feeney perceptively observes that in these early translations the Greek words deployed in both tragedy and epic were those that were already in use; that is, the earliest Roman literature did not foreground exotic effects as seen in later writers like Catullus or Vergil, who were native speakers of Latin and whose more sophisticated audiences were familiar with Greek literary

practices. That said, the fragments reveal that deliberate archaisms are more prominent in the epics than the dramatic pieces, elegantly reflecting the source texts.

As background for the dramatic moment when Roman literature as we would come to know it began, Feeney notes that there already existed a non-Greek-speaking market for Athenian drama in Magna Graecia, similar to the appreciation we find of European opera in America and of American culture consumed worldwide at present. Moreover, just as the presentation of the first translated drama at the *Ludi Romani* in 240 followed a major crisis, the First Punic War, the introduction of *ludi scaenici* to this same festival in 364 came about more than a century before because of a plague; Etruscan-inspired theatrical performances were added to reestablish the *pax deorum* and helped set the stage for the next and defining development, “the Roman fascination with the hybrid nature of their culture on display” (110). In the process, Rome established its literary hegemony over the Italian peninsula, featuring a canon codified by Alexandrian scholarship. Of equal significance, the *Ludi Romani* of 240 also functioned effectively as victory games presented to an international audience. “[T]he Roman games with their Latinized Menander and Euripides showcase the Roman ability to process and internalize difference, to make it their own, and the games also showcase their ability to turn that understanding back onto a continually changing audience of outsiders, including Etruscans, Latins, Samnites, Campanians, Greeks, and visiting Hellenistic monarchs” (131).

Because of the importance of epic long after the “translation project,” we tend to forget about the centrality of drama at the beginning of Roman literature. Feeney’s study offers a critical reminder of this fact and makes me wonder if Augustus’ interest in Greek drama was envisaged as part of his program of societal restoration. *Beyond Greek* merits close examination. There is so much more information and analysis in the book than I could include in this review. Feeney’s prose is a pleasure to read, so don’t wait for the movie.

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