‘Learning Greek was delight inexpressible’

Francesca Wade on the women, from Virginia Woolf to HD, who shook up the snobbish world of classical scholarship

**LADIES’ GREEK**

*by Yopie Prins*

In November 1883, a performance of Sophocles’s *Electra* was held at Girton College, Cambridge, one of the two colleges for women established at the university little more than a decade earlier. In the weeks leading up to the play, all societies and sports were put on hold; the students spent their evenings busily rehearsing, learning lines, and sewing costumes over tea.

Keen to make the set and costume design as authentic as possible, Janet Case, who played Electra, wrote to Charles Newton, professor of archaeology at University College London and keeper of antiquities at the British Museum; he replied with advice on the right dimensions for brooches and cloaks, and appended a sketch for the correct sort of knife to employ. The college gymnasium was draped with curtains and bay leaves to conjure up the ruins of Mycenae.

One reason for the choice of this play was that it called for a chorus of unmarried women; the accomplished performance in Greek by a company of dedicated women students, in front of several notable suffragists as well as female dons, could easily be read as a striking political statement, a call for independence. A reviewer, impressed by the spectacle, hoped that the production would “do much to promote the knowledge of classical life and literature amongst women, to whom such studies have been for so long a forbidden delight”.

The story of “ladies’ Greek”, writes Yopie Prins in this fascinating academic study, goes hand in hand with that of the progress made in women’s education during the second half of the 19th century. At Girton, women students could attend lectures and sit examinations, but not receive official degrees – a privilege not granted at Cambridge until 1948. Even so, the college insisted that its prospective students sit an entrance exam in Greek, and encouraged its students to sit for the classical tripos exam, even when competing against public school-educated men who had been steeped in classical language and literature since childhood.

Girton’s emphasis on Greek scholarship, explains Prins, was part of a wider movement in the 19th century, where women drew on “the cultural prestige of Greek studies as one way to justify their claim to higher education”. At a time of “transition from informal to formal education for women”, learning Greek – and displaying that knowledge through publication or performance – became a way for intellectual women to assert their own standing, in a tradition dating back to Sappho and Aspasia, as “the Woman of Greek Letters”.

Prins’s monograph asks not just why women in Victorian England and America wanted to learn Greek, but also how these female scholars discovered stranger, often subversive strands in the ancient texts. Prins structures her argument around several tragedies – Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon*, as transcribed by Virginia Woolf who, under the tutelage of Case (the erstwhile Electra), made her own bilingual edition of the play to help
her read it “quick... and with pleasure”; *Prometheus Bound*, the parable of liberation from tyranny that many women found feminist resonance in translating; *Electra*, as performed by Girton and, later, Smith College in America; *Hippolytus*, which the imagist poet Hilda Doolittle transformed into her own “lyric form; and Euripides’s *The Bacchae*, with its chorus of ecstatic worshippers whose sexual transgressions mirrored those projected in the scaremongering press on to the figure of the New Woman.

In the parallel, quietly radical classical tradition she explores, Greek learning became a field where women could assert their intellectual independence: to prove themselves, in the words of Anna Julia Cooper, activist for the higher education of African American women, as “women who can think as well as feel, and who feel nonetheless because they think”.

Learning a dead language “for sheer love of the beauty of its words and the delicacy of its syntactical relations”, wrote the Newnham classicist Jane Ellen Harrison (“the public face of ladies' Greek”, says Prins) in 1915, has too long been considered “unwomanly”.

But to the several women whose published works, notebooks, diaries and sketches Prins examines here, Greek offered a challenge and a pleasure, both formative. It is striking how many of Prins’s subjects refer to the “spell” cast on them by the alien alphabet, its secrets hidden behind complex rules of grammar.

“To comprehend even the Greek alphabet was delight inexpressible,” wrote 13-year-old Elizabeth Barrett Browning in her diary, weeping when she could not understand the words. In her novel-poem *Aurora Leigh*, the narrator describes the thrill of learning Greek and imitating it in her own work, until a cruel cousin finds her poetry and dismisses it as “lady’s Greek/Without the accents”. But despite such assumptions, Prins convincingly counters the widely held idea that “women were excluded from a ‘masculine’ tradition of classical learning in the 19th century”.

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At Cambridge, women could not receive official degrees until 1948
Under an alien spell: the imagist poet HD or Hilda Doolittle, left, transformed Hippolytus into a modernist lyric; right, Frederic Leighton’s Electra at the Tomb of Agamemnon, from 1869.