Which is the “Real” Virgil?

A Comparison of English Translations of Virgil’s *Aeneid*

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In the literary criticism surrounding the countless translations of Virgil’s *The Aeneid*, one question which consistently arises is whether the given translation is the most accurate depiction of the Latin text, or indeed whether such a translation is even possible.\(^1\) Two striking English translations of the poem, those of John Dryden (1697) and Frederick Ahl (2007), have been the subject of a great deal of study; despite the enormous gap between the times of their publications, both offer equally intriguing evidence of the development of Virgilian translation over the centuries. These translations essentially become English poems in themselves, and each translator, whether intentionally or not, thus conveys a specific nuance of the text to the modern reader. When one considers the contextual influences on each translation, namely the translator’s attitudes toward his translation, and subsequently applies them to a passage from the end of Book 2 of *The Aeneid*, distinctly different impressions of each translation emerge. The pace of each translation, achieved primarily through the various punctuation consciously placed by each translator, contrasts drastically: Dryden’s translation moves quickly, whilst Ahl’s is replete with striking pauses which contribute to the slower, graver pace of his work. Each translator’s engagement with the word order and line organization of the original Latin text also differs considerably, particularly in their rearrangements of certain lines and words. Finally, the diction in each translation is especially significant in examining the overall tone of this passage. By considering the translators’ stylistic decisions, all of which result from contemporary influence, the modern reader discerns two distinct depictions of Aeneas after his loss of Creusa in *Aeneid* 2: the hero with forcibly restrained emotion in Ahl; and the explosive, reckless, and resentful hero in Dryden.

Colin Burrow remarks that “[t]he unconscious identity of the translator is the one thing which must always be gained in translation…”, and the translations of Dryden and Ahl demonstrate this notion. Many critics have discussed how Dryden’s personal views are implicit in his translation, including political sentiments, feelings of marginalization or nostalgia, and autobiographical references to his health and spiritual state. Most important, however, is his perspective on translation as a seventeenth-century poet, and its consequent effect on his translation of this passage. According to Lawrence Venuti, the seventeenth-century marked the beginning of “[f]luency” or “domestication” in English translations. That is, this period favoured translations “in which the foreign text is imprinted with values specific to the target-language culture.” In Susanna Morton Braund’s opinion, Dryden’s Aeneid is the “zenith of English domestications of the Aeneid, not least because it achieves status as a poem in its own right.” The most obvious evidence of this domestication is the fact that Dryden rendered his translation in heroic couplets, the conventional poetic form of English poetry and translation for over a century. Another prominent feature of Dryden’s translation is his “rhetorical heightening” of Virgil’s words, for he interprets a latent emotion in Virgil and elaborates it. Dryden himself claims that the translator actually ought to take such liberties in order to create a translation “with any force or spirit of an original,” and as such the translator must “never dwell

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3 Ibid, 29.
4 Ibid, 30; and 36, respectively.
7 Ibid, 49.
9 Venuti, The Translator’s Invisibility, 62. For a discussion of the heroic couplet as a political device, see Venuti 63.
on the words of his author,” but rather should effectively convey the overall “genius and sense” of the original text.\(^\text{11}\) Overall, Dryden strives to assimilate Virgil into the confines of his own seventeenth-century context. He famously states his intentions behind his translation: “I have endeavoured to make Virgil speak such English as he would himself have spoken, if he had been born in England, and in this present age.”\(^\text{12}\)

Translated centuries later, Ahl’s text is one of many concerned with “accuracy” over coherency. Ahl disapproves of the assumptions his predecessors made in their translations of Virgil: “The translator has no right to impose any […] intentionalist framework. The epic should be allowed to speak, in so far as a translation can achieve this goal, for itself.”\(^\text{13}\) He states outright that he refuses to “smooth out” any discrepancies in the narrative, preferring to let readers interpret Virgil’s ambiguities for themselves.\(^\text{14}\) Braund consequently examines the how this text works to emphasize the “alienness” of Virgil’s poem rather than domesticate it.\(^\text{15}\) Indeed, his translation draws the reader’s attention to the intricacies of the Latin language by making them evident in an English equivalent or near-equivalent.\(^\text{16}\) For instance, Ahl strives to reflect the Latin hexameter in English;\(^\text{17}\) he attempts to replicate Virgilian wordplay, such as anagrams, with English words;\(^\text{18}\) and he endeavours to limit his vocabulary to words of Anglo-Saxon origin.\(^\text{19}\) Although Burrow claims such a practice is an attempt to “make Virgil truly


\(^{12}\) Ibid, 26.


\(^{14}\) Ibid, l.

\(^{15}\) Braund, “Mind the Gap,” 450.

\(^{16}\) Ibid, 462.

\(^{17}\) Ibid, 462.

\(^{18}\) Ahl, “Translator’s Note,” xlviii-xl ix.

\(^{19}\) Ahl, “Translator’s Note,” xlvi-xl vii.
English,” this is not entirely true with regard to Ahl. Braund actually commends his endeavour to utilize Anglo-Saxon roots, for indeed the Latin Virgil uses is reminiscent of the diction of his Latin predecessors. Ahl therefore reflects the roots of the Latin language by demonstrating the roots of his own. Given Ahl’s attentiveness to these intricacies of Latin, where Dryden endeavours to make Virgil “speak […] English,” Ahl strives to make his English speak Virgil. Overall, regardless of intent, each man’s attitude towards translation permeates his text, resulting in two vastly different English poems for the reader’s comparison.

The first distinct variation between these translations is their respective paces, which differ most notably by means of the punctuation used. Dryden maintains a quick pace throughout his translation, a “feverish energy” which Burrow claims to result from Dryden’s age and poor health. This pace lends a sense of agitation or frenzy to this particular passage, which in turn implies that Aeneas himself is frantic and over-emotional. Strong punctuation, such as periods, colons, and semicolons, gravitate towards the ends of lines, and thus are major factors in this speed; indeed, there are only approximately five instances of strong punctuation appearing mid-line in this entire selected passage (185-186), and even mid-line commas are relatively infrequent. For instance, as Aeneas rushes to his home, the chosen punctuation reflects his desperation and terror:

All things were full of horror and affright,
And dreadful e’en the silence of the night.
Then to my father’s house I make repair,
With some small glimpse of hope to find her there. (185)

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22 For a discussion of the reader’s anachronistic reading of classical texts due to contextual influence, see Craig Kallendorf, “Philology, the Reader, and the Nachleben of Classical Texts,” in The Virgilian Tradition: Book History and the History of Reading in Early Modern Europe (Padstow: TJ International Limited, 2007), 137-156.
24 Since Dryden does not use line numbers, references to his translation will relate to page numbers from James Kinsley, The Works of Virgil (London: Oxford University Press, 1961).
All punctuation in this brief segment occurs at the end of each respective line; as such, there are no moments of hesitation in mid-line, and the consistent syllables and rhyme only heighten this speed further. Such rapidity suggests a desperation within Aeneas during his search for Creusa, and thus foregrounds the intense emotion Dryden’s translation emphasizes in this passage.

Ahl punctuates his text quite differently, as his strategic use of mid-line strong punctuation slows its pace considerably. His punctuation thus lends a more calming, almost sombre feel to the text, as if inviting readers to consider Aeneas in this manner. This is reminiscent of Robert Fagles’ remarks on his own translation of Virgil, as he intends to make his translation “introspective” and to have “occasional pauses for second thoughts.”25 This structure lends more power to individual phrases: succinct statements, preceded and followed by a contemplative pause, greatly emphasize their content. Ahl’s treatment of the passage depicting Aeneas seeking his home is markedly different from Dryden’s: “Horror beleaguered my mind; even silence itself brought me terror. / First I head back to my home, just in case, by some chance, some remote chance, / She’d returned there.” (2.755-757).26 An immediately striking element of this selection is Ahl’s extensive use of commas; although they do not bring about as powerful of a pause as a period or colon, they disrupt the flow of the text and emphasize Aeneas’ ardent hope to locate Creusa. Additionally, Ahl’s decision to complete the last three words of the phrase on the succeeding line, and to coordinate a pause immediately after, makes the statement far more conspicuous. Additionally, the brevity of this statement only serves to accentuate further the already italicized word “she’d.” Undoubtedly, these lines accentuate Aeneas’ intense and indeed debilitating fear for Creusa’s well-being. However, the punctuation slows the pace of

26 All references to Ahl’s translation are from Aeneid, translated by Frederick Ahl (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
the poem, and implies that, if Aeneas has no control over his emotions now, then he will find
control in the future, which will appear in the form of Creusa’s ghost.\(^\text{27}\)

The nature of the Latin language allows for some flexibility in word order, and Virgil
utilizes this flexibility by strategically structuring the lines of his poem, much in the same way a
modern poet would. Ahl and Dryden’s respective treatments of one particular Latin line is
especially indicative of their respective portrayals of Aeneas in this passage. The Latin line is
seven words: *ipse urbem repeto et cingor fulgentibus armis* (2.749),\(^\text{28}\) which literally translates
to: “I myself seek again the city, and I am girded by gleaming arms.”\(^\text{29}\) The word *et*
divides the
line in half, as it is flanked by the two verbs and their respective clauses, with the first phrase in
the active voice, and the following in the passive. Overall, the line interestingly seems to project
Aeneas forward by giving him a purpose, and subsequently restrain him by capturing him in
armour.

In general, Ahl follows as closely as possible Virgil’s original, keeping the same number
of lines as Virgil,\(^\text{30}\) and almost managing to replicate the Latin word order.\(^\text{31}\) His close adherence
to the original renders his changes – whether intentional or simply unavoidable – all the more
potent, and his treatment of this particular line is one such example. Ahl’s translation of this line
ultimately coincides with the translation’s overall depiction of Aeneas as a pragmatic man: “Put
on my glittering armour, head back on my own to the city” (2.749). One first notices that he
changes the translation of *cingor* from passive to active, which grants Aeneas agency in the act

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27 This is one of at least three instances in Book 2 of *The Aeneid* in which Aeneas’ overwhelming emotion is
checked by another figure. Cf., for example, Venus calming Aeneas’ rage towards Helen and redirecting his
thoughts (2.594-620). Lewis Stiles, “Latin 400” (lecture, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, November, 2016)
28 All references to the Latin text are from *The Aeneid of Virgil: Books 1-6*, ed. R.D. Williams (Basingstoke and
29 This is my own, literal, translation of the text, which I only provide in order that readers unfamiliar with Latin
might appreciate these translations’ engagements with the word order of this line.
30 Braund, “Mind the Gap,” 460
31 Ibid, 463.
of putting on his armour rather than allowing it to happen to him. Another striking feature is the fact that he places the verbs at the beginning of each clause, which lends determination to Aeneas’ character in this situation and reinforces the notion that Ahl’s text portrays him as hero who can contain his emotions.

In contrast, Dryden demonstrates no such fidelity to the Latin text, due to his insistence that the translator must capture the “genius” of the original author rather than the literal words, and also adhere to the “slavery of rhyme” of the heroic couplet. In fact, he uses no line numbers at all; due to his extensive elaborations of Virgil’s text, the fact that he “makes explicit what is implicit in Virgil,” Dryden’s translation is “almost half again as long as the original.” Nevertheless, his translation still engages with the line order and organization of the original. Dryden’s translation of this line is characteristically embellished, drawing on the essences of lines 749-751:

In shining armour once again I sheath
My limbs, not feeling wounds, nor fearing death;
Then headlong to the burning walls I run,
And seek the danger I was forced to shun. (184)

Dryden’s translation perhaps best reflects the connotations of the original Latin line in this respect, in that he translates cineor as “sheath,” which accentuates the essence of being “girded” by armour, and places it at the end of the line. Aeneas’ limbs are enclosed as if they are weapons within his armour, and the placement of this verb at the end of the line, in addition to the enjambment of “sheath / My limbs,” lends emphasis to his noble pursuit of Creusa. Yet, the juxtaposition of this line with his running “headlong” into the city “not fearing death” portrays
Aeneas as behaving with reckless abandon. This simultaneously depicts Aeneas as valiant yet wild, and emphasizes the intensity of his love for Creusa. These changes to the Latin in both texts may be for the sake of clarity in English, but they nevertheless result in particularly potent and divergent representations of Aeneas in this instance.

A powerful distinction between these two translations is the diction within them, as it is the most prevalent evidence demonstrating their respective portrayals of Aeneas. Ahl uses words such as “resolve” (2.750) to describe Aeneas’ decision to seek Creusa, and “carefully” (2.753) to indicate his meticulousness in that search, all of which emphasizes his determination in spite of the loss of his beloved wife. In addition, his conclusion of the book is particularly arresting: “I’d lost, and I knew it” (2.804). This is likely an embellishment of the Latin cessi, meaning “I went” or even “I yielded,” in order to express Aeneas’ sorrow. These words imply that Aeneas has resigned himself to his fate; he seems hopeless, but he is not out of control, due to his meeting with Creusa’s ghost. This encounter is one of the most arresting aspects of this passage. Ahl’s translation of Creusa’s speech maintains the imperative mood apparent in the Latin text (2.778-789), but the words Ahl chooses in translating the experience are particularly potent. Creusa immediately asks why Aeneas is “indulging [his] frantic / Grief so intensely” (2.776-777), which effectively labels Aeneas as excessively over-emotional, as if his emotion were unfounded and thus would need to be subdued. The combination of imperative verbs, short sentences, and even punctuation effectively transforms the interaction into a kind of chastisement or admonition. Ahl also retains the essence of deseruit in stating Creusa “deserted” Aeneas (2.791), which possesses a distinct air of finality: Aeneas must cease “indulging” in this grief, and, as the reader clearly observes, he does. He departs the city in sorrow, but, as previously mentioned, it is disciplined.
Due to Dryden’s “rhetorical heightening” of Virgil’s text, his diction is consequently teeming with powerful connotations which notably contribute to the depiction of Aeneas as victim to unbridled emotion. Similar to Ahl, Dryden ends the book with Aeneas’ acceptance of his fate, but Dryden imbues this with a tone almost resentful: Aeneas “yields” to his fate, but he does so “unwillingly” (186). Dryden’s depiction of Creusa is also remarkably potent, but, in contrast to Ahl’s, Creusa appears to be more loving and sympathetic. Her entire speech is imbued with a sense of reassurance, for she tells Aeneas to “[f]ear not” for her sake any longer (186). In addition, in Dryden’s translation Creusa departs by “gliding… unseen in air” (186), a vastly altered depiction of her departure than the Latin and Ahl convey. All of these instances serve to highlight Aeneas’ emotional turmoil from losing Creusa. However, the most potent demonstration of Aeneas as subject to unrestrained emotion is prevalent in the opening lines of this passage, immediately after losing Creusa:

Stung with my loss, and raving with despair,
Abandoning my now-forgotten care,
Of counsel, comfort, and of hope bereft,
My sire, my son, my country gods, I left. (185)

Words such as “stung,” “raving,” and “abandoning” emphasize the debilitating grief Aeneas is experiencing at the loss of his wife. At the conclusion of these lines, Dryden places his verb: “I left.” Dryden makes no reference to Aeneas concealing his family before departing, as both the Latin text and Ahl indicate in lines 747-748; in this instance, then, Aeneas appears to have abandoned his family in the “ungoverned madness” (185) he is feeling at his loss. These may be examples of Dryden imbuing the text with his own interpretation, for Burrow expresses that he

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36 Corse, *Dryden’s Aeneid*, 16-17.
holds an interest in “the pains of Virgilian family feeling,” which the intensity of Aeneas’ emotion unquestionably demonstrates. Virgil’s *The Aeneid* continues to resonate with audiences nearly two thousand years after its publication, and this profound impact is due largely to the efforts of such translators as Frederick Ahl and John Dryden. Although each has a distinctive approach to translating the text: for Dryden, this is a result of contemporary seventeenth-century influence; and for Ahl, this is a result of his perspective on translating as informed by centuries of predecessors. Essentially, the practices they employ in rendering their translations result in extraordinarily different depictions of the same poem, and the reader may investigate the connotations of these differences, particularly with regard to Aeneas. Their respective speeds are the result of strategically-placed punctuation. Dryden’s relocating of most significant punctuation to the ends of lines rather than the centers contributes to a rapid pace, and reflects the desperation of Aeneas; and Ahl’s placing of a great deal of punctuation within the line slows down the pace considerably, suggesting the potential for the restraining of emotion. Each translator engages differently with the Latin word order and organization, and creates intriguing sentence constructions with their own connotations. Finally, the diction in each translation is a remarkable distinction between them, particularly in the encounter with Creusa’s ghost, as it creates the tone of chastisement in Ahl and of passionate grief in Dryden. Both translations contribute to the everlasting fascination with translating his *Aeneid*, and demonstrate, despite their extensive differences from each other and, on occasion, the original text, they do possess inherent merit as English translations of Virgil.

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Bibliography


