On Translating Greek Lyric Poetry

Lucy Turnbull

University of Mississippi

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/ms_studies_eng

Part of the Classical Literature and Philology Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/ms_studies_eng/vol5/iss1/9

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in English by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.
ON TRANSLATING GREEK LYRIC POETRY

by Lucy Turnbull

When the Romans in their eastward expansion conquered the Greek world, they took as spoils not only famous works of art and the treasures of many cities, but also the Greek language and literature. Greek scholars and rhetoricians came to Rome as teachers; the Greek language became the second tongue of educated Romans; and a familiarity with Greek literature became the hallmark of a cultured man. In a few generations, in fact, the Romans found that "Captured Greece has taken her rude conqueror captive." Ever since that time, men of other nations have been reading Greek poetry with delight and attempting to share their pleasure by translating it for their countrymen—not always with entire success. Those who have tried translations into English have had a particularly difficult task. Translators in any language expect to meet certain obstacles, such as the frequent lack of an exact equivalent in one language for a word or idiom in the other, and the fact that such a word, even if found, may have very different overtones and associations in the different languages. But between Greek and English there is another formidable barrier: the underlying principles of English metrical verse are entirely different from those of Greek. Greek verse is quantity verse; that is to say, every syllable of every word is regarded as having a fixed quantity or duration, either long or short, depending largely on the vowel sound it contains. For metrical purposes, one long syllable is equal to two short ones (as, in musical notation, one whole note is equal to two half notes). Greek is a highly inflected language, full of polysyllabic words; thus the poet has at his disposal a wide variety

1 Horace, Epistles II, 1. All the translations used in this article are my own unless otherwise noted. For the poems of Alcmene I have followed the readings of J. A. Moore, Selections from the Greek Elegiac, Iambic and Lyric Poets (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1942), I. For the poem of Sappho I have followed the text as given by Denys Page, Greek Literary Panyri (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1942), I, 374-379.
of combinations of long and short syllables, and can employ a correspondingly wide variety of metrical feet. Moreover, words in Greek are commonly so divided that each syllable ends in a vowel rather than a consonant, and many words end in vowels. Of those that do not, a large number end in n, r or s (or one of its variants, \(x\) and \(ps\)). All these factors work together to produce an extremely fluid and musical language. English verse, on the other hand, finds its rhythms in the combination of stressed and unstressed syllables, and quantity plays little or no part. The language is very rich in words of one syllable, which moreover usually end in consonants. Longer words are so divided that most of their syllables also end in consonants. Thus, compared with the smooth, rapid flow of Greek, English verse is slow-moving and lacking in variety, and a translator, even if he is able to produce some sort of approximation in English stress verse to the metrical scheme of the Greek original, can almost never hope to reproduce the flexibility and musical quality of Greek.

These problems have given rise to three main schools of thought concerning the translation of Greek poetry into English. The arguments of each, though they may be applied to the translation of poetry in general, have perhaps been most clearly expressed in regard to translation of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Homer was the first of Greek poets to be put into English, and has continued to attract more translators than any other poet. Though there is some disagreement about his date (he has been placed in every century from the 11th to the 6th B.C.; I myself prefer to put him in the late 9th or early 8th), it is clear that he was not an isolated genius but the heir to a long poetic tradition. For generations, probably centuries, before his time, his predecessors had been perfecting the techniques of oral composition. From them he received many of the characteristic features of his style: the compound adjective ("long-shadowed spear"); the standard descriptive word or phrase that forms a metrical unit of one more feet ("brilliant Achilleus," "long-suffering Odysseus" etc.); most important of all, the swift-moving, flexible dactylic hexameter line that carries the poet and his listener easily through incident after incident of the close-woven plots. But dactylic hexameter, with its profusion of short syllables, is extremely difficult to reproduce in
Lucy Turnbull

English, even with all permissible variations. The translator may manage it for two lines, or ten, but not for twenty thousand.

For this reason, those translators who belong to the first of the three schools mentioned above prefer to abandon any attempt at a verse translation, and try instead to capture the language and spirit of the original in prose. This is the approach favored by many scholars and classicists, and its motives are well expressed by S. H. Butcher and Andrew Lang in the preface to their translation of the Odyssey.

A prose translation cannot give the movement and the fire of a successful translation in verse; it only gathers, as it were, the crumbs which fall from the richer table . . . . Yet to a prose translation is permitted, perhaps, the close adherence to the archaism of the epic, which in verse become mere oddities . . . . We do not know whether it is necessary to defend our choice of a somewhat antiquated prose. Homer has no ideas which cannot be expressed in words that are “old and plain,” and to words that are old and plain, and, as a rule, to such terms as, being used by the Translators of the Bible, are still not unfamiliar, we have tried to restrict ourselves. It may be objected, that the employment of language which does not come spontaneously to the lips, is an affectation out of place in a version of the Odyssey. To this we may answer that the Greek Epic dialect, like the English of our Bible, was a thing of slow growth and composite nature, that it was never a spoken language, nor, except for certain poetical purposes, a written language. Thus the Biblical English seems as nearly analogous to the Epic Greek, as anything that our tongue has to offer.2

The other two factions, however, contend that the essential point is that Homer was a poet, though of a kind unfamiliar to

ON TRANSLATING GREEK LYRIC POETRY

modern readers, and that if those readers are not to be cheated, the translator must render Homer's epics into English poetry, not prose. Here the basic difference of opinion is concerned with the proper approach, and the translator's choice of approach will depend both on his personal taste and on the prevailing literary tastes of his time. He may prefer to try to transport the reader to ancient Greece, by reproducing as closely as he can in English both the meaning and the form of the Greek. Or he may try to bring ancient Greece as close as he can to the reader, using conventional English metres and rhyme schemes in an effort to produce something like the sort of poetry that is familiar to the modern reader. This was the approach favored by Alexander Pope in 1715. Pope, though warmly acknowledging and praising the simplicity, fire and "invention" of Homer, felt that many of his characteristic features, such as the repetitious use of standardized epithets and the occasional repetition of longer passages, would be considered blemishes by the eighteenth-century reader.

Upon the whole, it will be necessary to avoid that perpetual repetition of the same epithets which we find in Homer, and which, though it might be accommodated (as has been clearly shown) to the ear of those times, is by no means so to ours: but one may wait for an opportunity of placing them, where they derive an additional beauty from the occasions on which they are employed; and in doing this properly, a translator may at once show his fancy and his judgment.3

In cases where repetitious phrases follow closely upon one another, Pope recommended varying the expression judiciously. In practice, he often did more than vary phrases; he might omit them altogether, or expand and embellish them at length. Moreover, he transformed the flowing, unrhymed dactylic hexameter of Homer into elegant English heroic couplets.

In our own day, another poet-translator, Richmond Lattimore, prefers to follow the third course; in his translation of the Iliad he keeps both the sense and the meter of his lines as close to Homer's as is possible in English.

My aim has been to give a rendering of the Iliad which will convey the meaning of the Greek in a speed and rhythm analogous to the speed and rhythm I find in the original. The best metre for my purpose is a free six-beat line . . . In 1951 we do not have a poetic dialect, and if I used the language of Spenser or the King James Version, I should feel as if I were working in Apollonius of Rhodes, or at best Arktinos, rather than Homer. I must try to avoid mistranslation, which would be caused by rating the word of my own choice ahead of the word which translates the Greek. Subject to such qualification, I must render Homer into the best English verse I can write; and this will be in my own "poetical language," which is mostly the plain English of today.  

The results of these three approaches can be best illustrated by a reading of the same short passage of the Iliad (Book XVIII, 599-602) as rendered by each translator. The lines describe a group of dancers depicted on the magical shield that the smith-god Hephaistos made for Achilles.

Lang, Leaf and Myers:
And now would they run round with deft feet exceedingly lightly, as when a potter sitting by his wheel that fitteth between his hands maketh trial of it whether it run: and now anon they would run in lines to meet each other.  

Pope:
Now all at once they rise, at once descend
With well-taught feet; now shape in oblique ways
Confusedly regular, the moving maze:

4Lattimore, Richmond, translator. The Iliad of Homer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 55. Apollonius of Rhodes wrote a romantic and artificial pseudo-epic, the Argonautica, in the 3rd century B.C. Arktinos, if he existed at all, was a minor epic poet who lived a century or two after Homer.

ON TRANSLATING GREEK LYRIC POETRY

Now forth at once, too swift for sight, they spring,
And undistinguished blend the flying ring:
So whirls a wheel, in giddy circle toss'd,
And, rapid as it runs, the single spokes are lost.\(^6\)

Lattimore:
At whiles on their understanding feet they would
run very lightly,
as when a potter crouching makes trial of his
wheel, holding
it close in his hands, to see if it will run smooth.
At another
time they would form rows, and run, rows cross-
ing each other.\(^7\)

After Homer came the lyric poets, whose poems are more like
the sort of poetry familiar to English readers. They are compara-
tively short; the language need not be Homer's traditional epic
dialect, but may range from the colloquial to the highly artificial.
The poet often speaks in his own voice and expresses intense per-
sonal emotion, in a variety of subtle and complex metres. But in
translating these poems, one has not the same choice of approaches
as with Homer, whose close-knit plots and rich variety of char-
acterization may be adequately conveyed in a prose translation.
A prose translation of Greek lyric poetry, on the other hand, usually
destroys more than it conveys. It may reproduce the sense, the
imagery, the individual turn of phrase, but it loses what to the
Greek poet was at least equally important, the metrical framework
of his poem. To the Greek poet, as indeed to Greek artists in every
field, the essential beauty in any work of art is beauty of structure
and form, without which no other beauty can even exist. The
Greek word for the universe, \textit{kosmos}, means first of all \textit{order} and
secondly \textit{ornament}. Long before Aristotle wrote it down, Greek
artists were acting on the assumption that beauty in an object or
a poem depends on a well-defined form with an orderly and har-
monious arrangement of parts, and a suppression of all super-
fluous detail. A Greek statue may show great delicacy in the
modeling of the flesh, great richness of texture in the carving of

\(^6\)Pope, \textit{Iliad}, p. 348.
\(^7\)Lattimore, \textit{Iliad}, p. 391.
Lucy Turnbull

hair and clothing, but these beauties are subordinate to the beauty of harmonious structure and clear contour. The poet, like the sculptor, must possess directness and intensity of vision combined with technical mastery of his craft; he cannot pour out his soul in untaught rapture, but must subject his experience to analysis, in order to present it most clearly to his audience. Like the painter, he must be able to see so clearly and control his medium so surely that he can run a swift line around a man or an experience and present it whole to the hearer. Prose, however rhythmic and “poetic,” is clearly inadequate to render such poetry; here if anywhere one must try to give a poem for a poem.

But what sort of poem? One cast in a form familiar to the contemporary reader of English verse, or one that tries to keep as close as English will allow to the actual metre of the Greek? Here those translators who wish to bring Greece to the modern reader will argue that the place of poetry in the modern world is very different from the place that it had in Greece: that it is for us an occasional pleasure, an embroidery on the surface of life, while for the Greeks it was woven into the fabric. Every social and religious occasion had its appropriate choral songs and dances. Poets wrote songs for weddings, funerals, festivals of the gods; they celebrated victories of the city in war and of the citizens at the Games; they sang for themselves and their friends of their own private loves and hates. They could count on a wide audience of hearers who would be able to detect and appreciate complexities of metre and subtleties of allusion that escape the modern listener (from this point I will refer to both the modern reader and the Greek hearer as “hearer,” in order to remind the reader that the translations which follow, like the original poems, must be spoken aloud to gain their full effect). Moreover, Greek poetry was usually meant to be sung to a musical accompaniment, and the poet could thus count on the music both to clarify the intricacies of his metres and to enrich the total effect. This musical element is of course entirely lost to us, and therefore many will argue that it must be replaced in translation by all the familiar ornaments of English verse, including rhyme and a regular stanza form. Some translators seem to be able to manage this feat gracefully enough, but others (myself among them) find it impossible to do without mangling the original. One finds oneself padding the line with
ON TRANSLATING GREEK LYRIC POETRY

words that are not in the original, or taking out words that are there, straining definitions to the bursting point, and generally falsifying both the letter and the spirit of the Greek. On the whole it seems preferable to keep as close as the English language will allow to the original metre and arrangement of words, to take nothing away that is present in the original, and to add nothing of one’s own. The result may not look like the familiar English stanza forms on the printed page, but the reader who takes the trouble to read it aloud will detect its metrical arrangement. In any case, twentieth-century experimentation with English poetry must by now have accustomed the reader to a wide variety of unconventional forms.

As an illustration, here are three translations of a fragment of a choral poem by Alcman, who wrote at Sparta in the seventh century B.C. It is part of a larger poem, now lost; this fragment may describe a night in landlocked Sparta, wherein summer silence and darkness overflow from the mountains to fill the whole valley. First a literal prose translation:

Asleep are the peaks of the mountains, and the ravines; the ridges and the streambeds, and as many races of creeping things as the black earth nourishes; the wild mountain-dwelling beasts and the tribe of bees and the monsters in the depths of the purple sea. Asleep is the race of long-winged birds. 8

The metre of this fragment is a shifting combination of dactyls and trochees:

-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-../-..
Lucy Turnbull

The far peaks sleep, the great ravines,
The foot-hills, and the streams.
Asleep are trees and hived bees,
The mountain beasts, and all that dark earth teems,
The glooming seas, the monsters in their deeps:
And every bird, its wide wings folded, sleeps.9

Here the translator has found it necessary to insert into the first line two adjectives, "far" and "great," which are not in the original text; to change the "leaves" of the original to "trees" for the sake of his rhyme; to put the bees into hives and fold the wide wings of the birds. The reason for changing the precise color-adjectives "black" and "purple" to the vaguer "dark" and "glooming" is less evident, but I may hazard a guess at it. In the original Greek, the dominant vowel sounds in the poem are long o, long a and diphthongs containing these two vowels; the most frequent consonants are n, ng and s. Sound is here used to reinforce sense, and the effect, when the poem is spoken aloud, is almost hypnotic. It is hardly possible to convey this particular effect in a translation, but one can suggest it indirectly by choosing words whose connotations are those of darkness, quiet, and rest. Thus "dark," though used here as a color adjective, has overtones of night and sleep; "glooming" combines these overtones with an echo of the sound of the Greek. Certainly the total effect of this translation on the hearer is very close to that of the original as far as mood and atmosphere are concerned. But one wonders if it is not possible to retain the mood and still render the poem so that it strikes the modern hearer as it did the Greeks, to whom form and content were of such equal importance that the loss of either would destroy the poem.

The following translation is an attempt to render an approximation of the Greek metre in as nearly the exact wording of the original as is possible, line for line:

The mountain peaks are asleep, and asleep the water-courses;
The ridges slumber, and the valleys;

ON TRANSLATING GREEK LYRIC POETRY

The leaves, and every creeping thing the black earth breeds;
Wild beasts of the mountains sleep, and the tribe of bees;
The monsters sleep in the deeps of the purple sea;
At rest are all the race
Of wide-winged birds.

A glance at the metrical scheme of the original will show that the correspondence is not exact, even when allowance is made for the fact that in Greek verse it is often permissible to substitute one long (or in English, one stressed) syllable for two short ones. In the last two lines especially, it has been impossible to make the metre correspond exactly, but I have tried to suggest the slow succession of long syllables in these lines of the original. Though it was impossible to reproduce the full slumbrous effect of the Greek sounds, I have attempted to suggest it by repeating the verb, with slight variations (all well within the original meaning of the Greek), in almost every clause. A faint reminder of the original sound effects may be found in the predominance of a single vowel sound, long e, in the translation, corresponding to the predominance of long o and a in the Greek. To enhance the effect, I have preferred the secondary meaning "breeds" to the primary meaning "nourishes, makes grow" of the Greek word τρέφει in line 3, and I have used "depths" in preference to "deeps" in line 5.

Alcman wrote a great many poems for choruses of maidens, and in many of them he speaks to the girls directly, in a light, teasing tone. The following fragment from such a choral poem illustrates still another difficulty of translation.\(^\text{10}\) The metre of the original is dactylic hexameter.

No longer, maidens with voices of honey, as sweet as desire, can
My limbs sustain me. I wish—I wish I could be a kingfisher,
One who soars with the halcyons over the bloom of the wave,
Keeping a fearless heart, the holy, the sea-blue bird.

Here there has been no real difficulty in translating the literal

\(^{10}\text{Moore, Selections, p. 24, fragment 94.}\)
meaning of the words, line by line; nor has there been any tempta-
tion to distort the natural word order for the sake of the metre
(though I fear the metre itself limps, as it too often does in Eng-
lish). Rather the problem is one of associations and connotations,
for Alcman here is not merely sighing for the wings of the dove.
In the Greek, he has made the word for “kingfisher” masculine in
gender and that for “halcyons” feminine; by this simple means he
reminds his hearers of a familiar Greek legend about halcyons:
when an old male bird becomes weary in flight, the young fe-
male of the flock will carry him on their backs until he is rest-
ed. Alcman is banteringly suggesting to the girls of his choral
group that he is too old to keep up with them in the dance, and
that they should therefore help him as the young halcyons do
their leader. All these overtones, which greatly enrich the original
poem, are lost to the English hearer because the legend is unfami-
liar, and there is no way for the translator to bring them out without
distorting the poem or distracting the hearer with obtrusive foot-
notes. To anyone familiar with English poetry, however, another
legend is almost inextricably associated with the word “halcyon”:
the legend that these birds nest on the waves of the sea, in a short,
holy season of winter calm. This legend was also familiar to
the Greeks, and it would have been present in the minds of Alc-
man’s hearers. Therefore I have felt it permissible to try to bring
out for the English hearer something of the wealth of associations
implied in the Greek words, by translating as “soar” a word that
means “fly” or “hover.” This suggests the image of calmness and
floating associated with halcyons, without making it so strong
as to compete with Alcman’s own imagery.

Both the foregoing fragments are mere scraps, all that survives
of longer poems. Most of Greek lyric poetry, in fact, survives only
in bits and pieces. Much perished even in antiquity; as literary
tastes changed, manuscripts of early Greek poetry were often
neglected or even thrown away. Later the great libraries of the
Greek and Roman world were plundered by Romans, or scattered
and burned by ignorant barbarians or zealous Christians. Many
poets are now represented only by a few lines quoted by later au-
thors or by scraps of papyrus preserved by chance in the dry sands
of Egypt. Sometimes a whole poem may be pieced together from
several sources, but more often only a few tantalizing phrases re-
main, in a text so corrupt that it must be ingeniously emended before it makes any sense at all. Such fragments often have great beauty and power even in their mutilated state and appear to be well worth the effort of translating. But here the translator confronts the most serious dilemma of all: should he keep strictly to the text as it appears, and give the reader a translation full of holes and loose ends, or should he try to work it into a comprehensible form, following the hints of the text itself and the conjectures of learned men? The dangers of the second course are obvious: he may find himself merely writing a new poem with the old words, in the delusion that he knows what the poet really meant.

The following fragment of a poem by Sappho illustrates this dilemma very well.

Hither from Cr. . . . to [?] the holy shrine, where there is a pleasant grove of apple trees, and altars smoking with incense. . . . Here too, cold water sounds between the apple branches, and all the ground is shadowed with roses, and from the trembling leaves slumber comes flowing down. Here too a meadow fit for horses to graze is blooming with spring flowers, and the anise breathes out a sweet scent . . . Here do you, Aphrodite, taking up the garlands, gracefully pour us nectar into golden cups, nectar mingled with the joy of festivals.11

Even in its mutilated condition, the poem displays all the excellences of Sappho: her intense feeling, combined with clarity of vision; her use of simple words arranged in an apparently natural manner, yet fitted to a regular metrical stanza capable of many subtle modulations; and vivid images interwoven with rich musical sounds. The poem is written in the Sapphic stanza, which Sappho perfected and used with greater skill than any other poet, though she probably did not invent it. The stanza is made up of three lines in the following metre: --./-.../-./-, followed by a single shorter line: --./-; it may be modulated by substitut-

11Page, Papyri, pp. 375-379. I have followed Page's readings with the exception of two words in lines 9 and 10, where I prefer the readings of Lobel (cited in Page's apparatus criticus, p. 877).
ing a long syllable for two short ones, or a dactyl for a spondee, in certain feet. The subject is a favorite one of Sappho's, an invocation to Aphrodite, goddess of love and beauty. Probably here it is the Cretan Aphrodite of the Flowers who is being asked to join her worshippers in a festival at an outdoor shrine.

In any translation of Sappho's poetry, the translator must be particularly careful to preserve the graces of the original by doing everything in his power to reproduce not merely the meaning of the words and the images they express but also their arrangement within the line, and as much as possible of their musical sounds, for the charm of Sappho lies in the artful interweaving of all these beauties. For this reason, I have tried in the following translation to keep each line as she wrote it, only altering the word order where the natural arrangement of Greek seems forced and artificial in English. Where Sappho divides a phrase between one line and the next, I have done the same. Though the metre of the translation does not run as smoothly as that of the original, I have tried to make no substitutions of stresses that would not be permissible in Greek.

Hither, goddess, come to us from the holy Shrine of Crete; for here is a lovely grove of Apple trees; and altars are set among them Smoking with incense.

Here cold water babbles between the apple Branches; all the ground is shadowed over with Roses; down from leaves that tremble and whisper, Slumber comes flowing. Here a meadow, rich for the horses' grazing, Blooms with flowers of spring, and the pungent anise Breathes out sweetness; wandering breezes murmur, Drowsy with fragrance.

Come to us here, O Cypris, accept our garlands; With graceful hands pour out into golden goblets Nectar mingled like wine for our delight with Joy of your presence.
It is obvious that I have here made several additions and alterations. Line 1 is very fragmentary and corrupt, but it is highly probable that there was originally some title of Aphrodite or the word “goddess” as a form of address. In line 2, I preferred the adjective “lovely” to its alternatives “charming” or “pleasant,” not only for the chime with “grove” but also for the association of love with Aphrodite. In line 4, the word “babble” seemed to come closest to the combination of sense and sound in its Greek equivalent keladei, and it also provided a chime with “apple” in the same line. In line 6, I have expanded a single word into the phrase “tremble and whisper,” because it seemed the only possible way to convey the full effect of the Greek aithyssomenôn, a word which means “trembling” and also, when spoken aloud, suggests the rustle of moving leaves. The whole third stanza is very fragmentary and corrupt; in one reading there is a suggestion of breezes, which I have expanded to fill out lines 11 and 12 in harmony with the general tone of the poem. In line 14 the word “goblets” may seem rather affected to a modern ear. The word Sappho uses, kylikes, has been brought over into English by archaeologists as a technical term, to describe a kind of drinking cup with a slender stem and broad bowl. To the non-specialist, however, the word would convey nothing at all, and the alternative “cups” might suggest a false image of something like a modern teacup. “Goblets,” a word which describes a drinking vessel of a similar shape to the one Sappho had in mind, at least conveys a fairly exact visual image. The fourth stanza too is incomplete, and here I have taken liberties that may be less justifiable. The Greek word I have rendered as “pour out” may be more accurately translated “pour out like wine”; I have divided it and attached the phrase “like wine” to the word “mingled,” in reference to the Greek custom of mixing water, and sometimes fragrant herbs as well, with the wine at their feasts. The Greek hearer would take the custom for granted, but it may need to be emphasized somewhat for the modern hearer, if it is to have a similar effect in his mind. Finally, the phrase “nectar mingled with the joy of festival,” which exactly renders the meaning of the Greek words, has been altered for similar reasons. To the Greek, the gods were physically present as guests at the festivals and ceremonies of their worship, and they enjoyed the music and dancing and feasting in exactly the same way as their
mortal worshippers. A large part of the “joy of festival” to the wor-
shipper was the feeling that he and the gods were sharing the same
pleasures. This feeling underlies the whole poem, and I believe
that for a modern hearer, unaccustomed to such a concept of divini-
ty, it needs to be made more explicit, lest the whole effect of the
poem be falsified.

Final judgment, of course, must be left to the reader, as with
all translations; if the result strikes him as poetry in English, yet
recognizably Greek poetry as well, the translator’s work has
been successful.