In “The Task of the Translator,” Walter Benjamin argues that the act of translation is not a process of finding equivalencies but rather of rendering “that which lies beyond communication . . . the unfathomable, the mysteries, the ‘poetic’” (253). Benjamin wrote this essay in 1921 during an important period of classical reception and critical reflection about literary translation, particularly of Greek tragedy, facilitated in large part by modernist poets and writers such as Ezra Pound, Richard Aldington, Virginia Woolf, and H.D. New texts, commentaries, and bilingual editions helped to reveal the mysteries of ancient Greek, previously the domain of upper-class men, to these non-specialists. Gilbert Murray, for instance, made the work of Euripides available to a wide audience: first to classical scholars and students of Greek through the Oxford Classical Text edition of the plays; to a non-specialist audience through his translations; and finally through his productions of his translations on the professional stage in collaboration with Granville Barker, beginning in 1904.  

Bilingual editions such as J. W. Mackail’s Select Epigrams from the Greek Anthology, first published in 1890, and the Loeb Classical Library series, founded in 1911 by James Loeb, helped to circulate Greek texts to a broad audience and played a formative role in the literary productions of H.D. and Virginia Woolf. The image of the translation as a fragment of a Greek vase further attests to the influence of popular Hellenism on Benjamin:

Fragments of a vessel that are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of imitating the sense of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s way of meaning, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel. (“The Task of the Translator,” Illuminations, 260)
According to this image, any work is only a fragment of an original, pure language that cannot be fully accessed (Paul Deman, “‘Conclusions’ on Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Task of the Translator’, Messenger Lecture, Cornell University, March 4, 1983, 31). This paper will show how the concept of the ‘unfathomable’ and the ‘incommunicable’ associated with the reading and translating of Greek tragedy, particularly the chorus, informed the literary productions of Virginia Woolf and H.D., helping them to fashion a feminist, modernist aesthetic within the male classical tradition.

The Greek Chorus and Modernism

As Yopie Prins has demonstrated in her recent book, *Ladies’ Greek* (2017), Greek tragedy was of particular interest to women of Greek letters, such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Mary F. Robinson, Jane Ellen Harrison, Virginia Woolf, and H.D., who identified with its ‘feminine’ pathos, ‘feminist’ polemics, and sympathetic female characters. The ancient Greek language “cast a spell” over them (Harrison, *Aspects, Aorists and the Classical Tripos*, 1), delighting them with a strangeness that could not be translated (Prins 2017, 7). Their position as amateurs at the margins of classical philology allowed them to transform ancient Greek texts into their own literary productions. In particular, they gravitated toward the tragic chorus, with its inherent complex meters, unstable texts, and impenetrable language, because of its very untranslatability and the experience of “linguistic estrangement” it induced (Prins, 2017, 31). Because inherently untranslatable, even for classical scholars, Greek choral odes could be readily adapted to a new modernist aesthetic and shaped to express a female perspective on translation and poetics.

Although central to religious worship and drama in ancient Greece, the chorus was all but discarded by the Romans. The demise of the chorus as a cultural and literary form contributed to its modern status as an enigmatic anomaly, a ‘problem’ debated and theorized by German idealist thinkers, beginning with the Schlegel brothers in the early eighteenth century (Billings 2013). Almost two centuries later, the Greek chorus had become surprisingly popular in a variety of contexts, from
classical scholarship to modern dance. This ‘rebirth’ of the chorus can be attributed in part to Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* published in 1872, which singled out the chorus for its ‘astonishing significance’ (*Birth* 129). Rejecting August Schlegel’s concept of the chorus as the ‘ideal spectator’, Nietzsche considered the dramatic chorus to be “the Dionysian-musical substratum of tragedy” (*Birth* 110), whose function was to stir the minds of the spectators “to a pitch of Dionysian frenzy” (*Birth* 70).

This conception of the chorus as integral, alien, and ecstatic in turn influenced the Cambridge Ritualists who similarly held that Greek drama grew out of ritual dances in honor of Dionysus (Macintosh 2010: 192). The imprint of Nietzsche’s ideas is most clearly seen in the work of Jane Ellen Harrison, the first female British classicist, shown here playing the role of Euripides’ *Alcestis*. Her influential theory of the chorus popularized in *Ancient Art and Ritual* in 1913 held that tragedy originated not simply in choral performances in honor of Dionysus but songs performed by female worshippers (Seaford 1995: 265-71; Prins 2017: 215-16). Drawing on Dörpfeld’s controversial view that the actors and chorus performed on the same level, without a stage (Harrison *CR* 4 (1890) 274-77), Harrison further argued that the chorus served as the “centre and kernel and starting-point of the drama” (123) and yet at the same time represented its most alien component. Tragic plays, she says, owe “their peculiar, their incommunicable beauty largely to this element of the chorus which seemed at first so strange” (122). The idea of the chorus as ‘incommunicable’ and ineffable clearly influenced Virginia Woolf, who gives the scholar a cameo in *A Room of One’s Own*, and H.D., who, although she never directly refers to Harrison in her writing, encountered her ideas diffusely through Gilbert Murray, particularly his book *Euripides and his Age*, and elsewhere.

Performances of Greek tragedy, both at universities and in professional theaters, also influenced the popular reception of the chorus. For instance, in April, 1903, H.D. attended an all-male student production of *Iphigeneia in Tauris* at the University of Pennsylvania performed in ancient
Greek, which included Ezra Pound as a chorus member (Pearcy 2008). The play may have sparked her passion for Euripides, for she later remarked, “I felt I had heard Greek at last” (Guest 1984: 20; Prins 2017: 182). It had quite the opposite effect on fellow student ‘Billy’ (William Carlos) Williams, who recalled Ezra Pound in “a great blonde wig at which he tore as he waved his arms about and heaved his massive breasts in ecstasies of extreme emotion” (Pearcy 2008: 8). The new Euripides was an iconoclast and radical, a harbinger of the modern age (Verrall 1905; Murray 1913).

Another key, but as yet unacknowledged, figure for the reception of the Euripidean chorus during this was the “barefoot Classic dancer,” Isadora Duncan, shown here dancing in the Theater of Dionysus in 1921. Around 1908, Duncan began thinking about the Greek chorus in relation to dance, gravitating toward Euripides (Daly 1995: 145). Her aim was “to revive the Greek drama and the Greek chorus” (Daly 1995: 145); indeed, she tried to communicate the concept of the collectivity of the chorus even in solo performance (Duncan 1928: 96; Zanobi 2010: 240). Inspired both by Nietzsche and Harrison, who accompanied one of Duncan’s performances with a dramatic reading of the Homeric Hymn to Demeter and Theocritus’ Idylls (would I ever have loved to be in that audience! Zanobi 2013: 7-8 and n. 34; review in The Times 16 March 1900), she found in the chorus not only the possibility of dancing as a form of Dionysiac ecstasy, an intoxicating surrender of the self (Franko 1995: 18), but also an impersonal, abstract “vehicle of emotion.” H.D. appears to have attended one of Duncan’s performances in Philadelphia during her 1908 American tour, describing her in a letter as follows, “Isadora is the greatest dancer of them all! Has studied Greek vases. But you’ll probably be shocked because she dances barefoot!” (Wolle, A Moravian Heritage, 55-56). This production may have featured Gluck’s choruses from Iphigeneia in Aulis, a work she danced to negative reviews at the Criterion in New York during the summer of 1908 (Simonson 2012: 511 and n. 2; Francis Wolle mentions “Blue Danube Waltz”). Although a direct connection between Virginia Woolf and Isadora Duncan cannot be found, it has been argued that the new “free style” of
modern dance may have influenced her narrative strategies (Susan Jones, “Virginia Woolf and the Dance,” *Dance Chronicle* 28 2005: 186).

*Virginia Woolf’s Classical Literacy*

Although Virginia Woolf did not produce any literary translations, she engages a narrative of classical translation in both her essays and fiction throughout her career, particularly in her “The Perfect Language” (1917), “On Not Knowing Greek” (1925), and her novel, *The Years* (1937). Born into literary family in 1882—her father, Leslie Stephen, was a well-known literary critic and editor—Woolf received was more classically educated than many women of her generation. But in contrast to her brothers, who both studied classics at Cambridge, and even her sister Vanessa, who studied painting at the Royal Academy, Virginia received most of her education at home. At age seven, her mother taught her Latin, French, and history (Edward Bishop, *A Virginia Woolf Chronology* 1989: 1). In 1897, she began classes in Greek and history at King’s College, London, continuing Greek with George Warr, author of a translation of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* published in 1900 (*Chronology* 2). From 1899, she took private lessons in Latin and Greek with Clara Pater, the sister of Walter Pater. Woolf later worked with Janet Case, a Cambridge-trained classicist with whom she forged a lasting friendship. Case edited a volume of *Prometheus Bound* (J.M. Dent, London, 1905), a bilingual text praised by Verrall (Herman 261). Case taught her grammar and chose the texts they read together. With her, she translated Plato, Aristotle, Thucydides, Aeschylus, and Euripides (*Lee*, 141-42). An unpublished Greek notebook begun in Greece in 1906 documents the thorough training received under Case: Sophocles’ *Ajax*, Plato’s *Symposium*, and Aristophanes’ *Frogs* are carefully annotated, followed by a commentary on the *Odyssey* focusing on its narrative structure and style (*Lee*, 142). During this period, her brother, Thoby, also encouraged her classical education sending to her from Cambridge a copy of J.W. Mackail’s popular book, *Select Epigrams from the Greek Anthology* (in 1902; Alley 1982: 291; *Moments of Being* 1978: 108; *Chronology* 3). Her reading of...
Greek texts had a visceral effect, “as though the physical stuff of my brain were expanding, larger & larger, throbbing quicker & quicker with new blood—and there is no more delicious sensation than this” (Lee 168; Passionate Apprentice, 178). She began an Agamemnon notebook in 1922 as she was working on Mrs. Dalloway, “I should be at Aeschylus, for I am making a complete edition, text, translation, & notes of my own-mostly copied from Verrall; but carefully gone into by me” (Diary 2.215). This edition involved cutting and pasting Charles James Blomfield’s 1831 edition of the play on the right and then transcribing A. W. Verrall’s 1904 prose translation, along with her own translations, on the left to form a ‘crib’. Here you can see her marginalia at right, including grammatical notes, glosses, and commentary.

Although Woolf had a decent grasp of Greek grammar and vocabulary—far more than H.D., in fact—her access to the meanings of Greek texts seems to have been heavily mediated by English translations. In “The Perfect Language,” her 1917 TLS review of the Loeb Classical Library’s translation of the second volume the Greek Anthology, she praises the series for giving the amateur a “gift of freedom . . . . the ability “to read a whole play at a time.” These scholarly yet accessible translations reward those with little Greek “one of those moments of instant understanding that are the flower of reading,” a Platonic moment in which “we seem not to read so much as recollect what we have heard in another life.” Such bilingual editions appeared to have played a large role in her reading of Greek, as she admitted in a 1923 diary addition, “I now know how to read Greek quick (with a crib in one hand) & with pleasure” (The Diary of VW, 2.114-19). At the same time, she argues that no translation can adequately capture the beauty of the Greek language, “the bloom and scent, the natural poise and sequence, all that we feel before we understand the meaning.”

The untranslatability of Greek and its importance as a language for “not knowing” is central to Woolf’s 1925 essay, “On Not Knowing Greek” (Prins 2017: 12). The essay begins by embracing the impossibility of ascertaining the “real meaning of Greek.” Later Woolf questions whether “we are reading Greek as written” when deciphering an inscription, a choral strophe, a fragment of
Sappho, or a metaphor in Aeschylus (35) instead of “read[ing] into Greek poet but what we lack” (pp. 34-35). She despairs of getting “the whole fling of a sentence in Greek as we do in English” (35). Even simple nouns, like θάνατος, ἄνθος, ἀστήρ, σελήνη, are untranslatable, and in fact she does not provide English equivalents, since “It is useless, then, to read Greek in translations. Translators can offer us but a vague equivalent” (36). For instance, the use of ‘wan’ by J.W. Mackail for a Greek word distracts the reader by evoking a bygone era. Jebb’s translation of a line from Sophocles’ Electra, a play Woolf frequently cites in the essay, “thee, who evermore weepest in thy rocky tomb” does not adequately capture “the flight and fall of the words”:

άτ’ ἐν τάφῳ πετραίῳ
αἰεὶ δακρύεις. (S. El. 151-2)

Throughout the essay, Woolf interposes Jebb’s literal translations between herself and the original text, despite having earlier call them “stiff, safe prosaic and utterly impossible for any Greek to understand” (Letters VW II: 1912-1922, 221; Emily Dalgarno, “Virginia Woolf: Translation and ‘Iterability’,” The Yearbook of English Studies 36 2006: 148). At the bottom of the first page of the essay, for instance, she quotes Jebb’s translation of the first, rather prosaic, line of Sophocles’ Electra, “Pick up any play by Sophocles, read—Son of him who led our hosts at Troy of old, son of Agamemnon” (S. El. 1-2; Common Reader, 23). The toggling back and forth between English and Greek encapsulates the challenge of adequately rendering the original. When she quotes from the original Greek without supplying a translation, she demonstrates its untranslatability, as when Electra reacts to news of her brother’s death and when she orders him to strike their mother:

οἱ ’γὼ τάλαιν’, ὀλωλα τῇδ’ ἐν ἡμέρᾳ (S. El. 674)
παῖσον, εἰ σθένεις, διπλήν. (S. El. 1415)

Instead of providing translations for these lines, Woolf leaves them in Greek to communicate the powerful tragic emotions of “despair, joy, hate.” Nowhere is this problem more evident than in the plays of Aeschylus, which necessitates not knowing Greek so much as understanding poetry and
requires “tak[ing] that dangerous leap through the air without the support of words” (30). The mark of the highest poetry is in fact, ambiguity, “we cannot know exactly what it means. Take this from the Agamemnon, for instance—

\[\text{όμμάτων δὲ ἐν ἀχηνίαις ἔρρει πᾶσ' Ἀφροδίτα. (A. Ag. 418-9; 379 in her text)}\]

The meaning of this line, from the first stasimon or second choral ode, lies “just on the far side of language” (31). Looking at her Agamemnon notebook, we see she sticks closely to Verrall in rendering, “with the want of the eyes all of the passion is gone” [check Fraenkel]. It is a meaning perceived without words, a meaning that the words point to but cannot indicate (31). Through bold use of metaphor, Woolf argues, Aeschylus’ words have a symbolic power that convey “not the thing itself, but the reverberations and reflection which, taken into his mind, the thing has made; close enough to the original to illustrate it, remote enough to heighten, enlarge, and make splendid’ (31; Dalgarno 150). In her final, untranslated quotation from tragedy, she chooses another moment of dramatic crisis, the “naked cry” of Cassandra in Agamemnon:

\[\text{ότοτοτοὶ πόποι δᾶ. ὥ 'πολλον. (A. Ag. 1072-3)}\]

For Woolf, the language of Greek tragedy derived its power from its poetic expression of originary, powerful human emotions, particularly of loss and mourning, symbolized by the nightingale’s song. She further attributes this capacity to the chorus, who also “sing like birds in the pauses of the wind,” in order to communicate “those ecstacies, those wild and apparently irrelevant utterances” (29).

Without the mediation of (male) translations, Woolf invites the reader to experience the sheer emotion of Greek tragedy and its choral songs. The inability to know Greek is thus not a deficit but rather a recognition of the limits of translation and a call to imagine a world beyond the text, “The nightingale has only to be named by Sophocles and she sings; the grove has only to be called ἄβατον, ‘untrodden’, and we imagine the twisted branches and the purple violets” (S. OC 670-7; 35), as “only an image of reality, not the reality itself” (35).
For Woolf, this female “not knowing” allowed a means of positioning herself within a domain controlled and accessed largely by men, as represented by the character of Edward Pargiter in *The Years*. As a Greek scholar, he is a “priest, a mystery monger . . . [a] guardian of beautiful words” (*The Years*, 409). In the first scene at Oxford, a young Edward is busily engaged in translating the Greek of Sophocles’ *Antigone*:

> He saw nothing but the Greek in front of him. But as he read, his brain gradually warmed; he was conscious of something quickening and tightening in his forehead. He caught phrase after phrase exactly, firmly, more exactly, he noted, making a brief note in the margin, than the night before. Little negligible words now revealed shades of meaning, which altered the meaning. He made another note; *that* was the meaning. His own dexterity in catching the phrase plumb in the middle gave him a thrill of excitement . . . . his mind went on without the book. It traveled by itself without impediments through a world of pure meaning. (*The Years*, 49-50)

Edward’s knowledge of ancient Greek not only affords a direct and unfettered comprehension of the text but it also allowed him access to “pure meaning.” In contrast, his sisters, Eleanor and Sara, are only able to read and experience *Antigone* through Edward's translation. Woolf juxtaposes Edward's mental focus with the fragmented identities of *The Years’* female characters. They continually ask “Where am I?” (Rose, 23; Delia, 25), “Am I that, or am I this? Are we one, or are we separate—something of the kind” (Maggie, 140); “What’s ‘I? . . . ‘I’ . . .” (140); and “Where does she begin, and where do I end” (Peggy, 334)?

The ancient Greek language which Edward strives to master at Oxford and which Sara and Eleanor do not understand recurs in a more ominous form at the end of the novel when a chorus-like pair of children appear at a family party and sing a vaguely Greek song:

> Etho passo tanno hai,  
> Fai donk to tu do,  
> Mai to, kai to, lai to see  
> Toh dom to tuh do–
In contrast to the language of Greek tragedy, their words are discordant and meaningless, “As they stood there they had looked so dignified; yet they made this hideous noise” (430). This song recalls “those horrible voices” that Woolf experience during her episodes of manic-depressive psychosis (Lee, 173-74, 342, 744; SP, MB, 136). One aural hallucination that occurred in 1904 has particular resonance: “while I had lain in bed at the Dickenson’ house at Welwyn thinking that the birds were singing Greek choruses and that King Edward was using the foulest possible language among Ozzie Dickinson's azaleas” (Lee, 191 and n. 92, 782; "Old Bloomsbury," MB, 162). In Mrs. Dalloway, Septimus, a veteran experiencing PTSD, can hear birds singing “in Greek words” about death and immortality; in the manuscript version, the ghost of Evans, his comrade killed in battle, appears to him as a “Greek nightingale” (Lee, 192; and see n. 92).

As a literary form, Woolf deployed the chorus as patterned repetition of sounds in her novels both to reinforce the fragmentation of identities and to unify the narrative. In The Years, several refrains recur: the street hawker’s “nice vilets, fresh vilets”; “hammer, hammer, hammer” (67ff.); and “Take two coos, Taffy. Take two coos” (75 and passim). By putting these lyric fragments into the mouths of commoners and street people, Woolf continually evokes the idea of the chorus; for example, as an old woman declaimed in the park, “her voice tapered off into a thin frail pipe. A chorus of little boys imitated her” (240). It is as if Sara hears only the chorus when she mutters, half-asleep at the park, “Voices . . . Only voices” (247). But in contrast to spoken words, the interweaving of all these voices into a text creates a pattern of the sort described by Eleanor at the end of the novel: “is there a pattern; a theme, recurring, like music; half-remembered, half foreseen? . . . a gigantic pattern, momentarily perceptible?” (369). North similarly distinguishes the written from the oral word, as he observes upon picking up a volume of Catullus: “There the words lay, beautiful, yet meaningless, yet composed in a pattern—nox est perpetua una dormienda” (394).
H.D.’s Classical Literacy

Although Virginia Woolf and H.D. do not seem to have known each other or read each other’s work, they share many similarities in their interest in Greek tragedy, especially in their emphasis on untranslatability as the starting point of their own literary productions. Thanks to her large collection of papers housed in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, which contain not only manuscripts, diaries, unpublished essays, books, but even scraps of her embroidery, we know much about H.D.’s classical literacy. The sheer volume of her autobiographical fiction provides further insights into her ideas about the Greek chorus and translation practices, which went hand-in-hand. Although the path to H.D.’s Hellenism have already been well outlined by Gregory and others, it has not been placed within the larger context of a critical period of classical reception, when English translations, dictionaries and general commentaries afforded non-specialists, especially those without a university education, unprecedented access to the classical past.

As H.D. herself admits, she never gained full proficiency in Greek, “Yes, I read a very little Greek and what possible translations there were” (Swann 1962: 10). But what I want to show in the rest of this paper is that she did indeed work very closely and carefully with the Greek texts in the early part of her career. She received some formal training in the classical languages, first at Friends’ Central School in Philadelphia, where she studied Latin and worked on learning ancient Greek independently (Wallace 1985: 105-6). As a commuter student at Bryn Mawr College, she continued her study of Latin, reading Horace, Livy and Cicero (Wallace 1985: 108). After just three semesters, however, she withdrew, largely because of her affair with Ezra Pound, whom she met in 1901 at a Halloween party. In her words, he “proved a stimulus and was the scorpionic sting or urge that got me away.”55 Through Pound, she became further interested in ancient Greek and the potential of translating it for fashioning her own poetics. Indeed, she modeled her first poems on Theocritus, thanks to Pound’s gift of Andrew Lang’s translation of Theocritus, Bion and Moschus (her personal
collection at the Beinecke contains the 1916 version). This volume is a good example of how the availability of translations of classical texts allowed the Greekless, particularly women, entry into a tradition that had previously been the domain of men.

Another factor in H.D.’s acquisition of ancient Greek was the Reading Room of the British Museum. After traveling to Europe with her friend Frances Gregg in July, 1911, H.D. settled in London and began frequenting the Reading Room in November, documented by a postcard sent to her mother with the note, “where I spend my mornings.” As Susan Bernstein has argued, the Reading Room offered an egalitarian space in which women, like H.D., Virginia Woolf, and others, could both seek knowledge and produce meaning alongside men (Bernstein, 12). There she pursued her Greek studies in earnest, later joined by Ezra Pound and Richard Aldington, her future husband (Gregory 1997: 54 and n. 29; Yao 2002: 87). Indeed, it was in a tearoom at or near the British Museum around a year later that Pound famously anointed her ‘H.D. Imagiste’ (Sept. 1912, debates), in an account H.D. published almost 50 years later:

‘But Dryad,’ (in the Museum tea room), ‘this is poetry.’ He slashed with a pencil. ‘Cut this out, shorten this line. Hermes of the Ways is a good title. I’ll send this to Harriet Monroe of Poetry. Have you a copy? Yes? Then we can send this, or I’ll type it when I get back. Will this do?’ And he scrawled ‘H.D. Imagiste’ at the bottom of the page.’ (1979: 18)

H.D.’s partnership with Aldington rapidly accelerated her Greek studies. From their first days, they translated Latin and Greek together, building a library of primary texts, commentaries, dictionaries, and secondary scholarship (Zilboorg 1990: 27). Aldington had learned Latin and Greek as a schoolboy, and had pursued a Classics degree at University College London before he was forced to withdraw in 1911 for financial reasons. Prior to 1913, he was forced to rely on H.D.’s transcriptions of classical texts from the British Museum because he did not yet meet the minimum entrance age of twenty-one. In a 1912 letter to Harriet Monroe, he mentions H.D.’s transcription of a text of Sappho (fr. 96 L-P; probably from the newly discovered Berlin papyrus) that served as the
basis of his translation, “To Atthis,” subsequently published in *The New Freewoman.* His remark that he probably didn’t get it right suggests that his grasp of Greek was also tenuous (letter to Harriet Monroe in Zillborg 1990: 28 and n. 8, 12 November 2012). H.D.’s autobiographical novel *Bid Me to Live* (1960), which documents the period between 1916 and 1918, depicts the couple attempting to read Greek together to distract them from the war planes flying over head, “Pindar in the original which they could not read (she picked out a word here, there, with a dictionary, he manipulated a telling phrase now and again.” The poem “Heliodora,” composed in 1916, suggests how she and Aldington collaborated in their translations in its depiction of a male and female poet working together through the night to render two epigrams of Meleager, “he caught,/ seeing the fire in my eyes,/ my fire, my fever, perhaps . . .” (Zilboorg 1990: 28 and n. 10).

Indeed, the poems H.D. presented to Pound in the tearoom were re-workings of three of the epigrams in this collection. Published in *Poetry* magazine in 1913, “Hermes of the Ways,” is a rendering of an epigram by Anyte of Tegea, a female Greek poet active in Arcadia in the 3rd cent. BCE (Mackail 1906: 207). As you can see, the translation bears little resemblance to the original, but rather expands upon and develops the imagery and the conception of Hermes as a boundary marker. Nonetheless, H.D. does appear to have paid close attention to the Greek text. This page of Meleager’s *Garland* from Mackail shows several underlined and glossed words, only nouns and adjectives, but no grammatical notes. Next to βλαισήν, she has written ‘bent, twisted,’ and οἴµης ‘way, path of poem=poem’. Here it is clear she is consulting Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English lexicon, since she uses the exact same words in the same order as the dictionary entry. The lexicon recurs in her fiction as the starting point of her translation process; in *Bid Me to Live,* she describes several times “the Greek dictionary spread open at the low chair at her elbow” (*Bid* 1960: 108 ; cf. 98). The language and style of the epigram offered the first model for H.D.’s own poetic aesthetic. She seems to have read and followed Mackail’s injunction in his introduction that the genre must
retain the characteristics of a “real inscription,” that is, be concisely rendered, “highly finished, evenly balanced, simple and lucid,” the literary equivalent of a carved gem (Mackail 1911: 4; see Babcock 1995). In fact, H.D. has underlined “lapidary precision” and “imaginative tension” in her own copy of the book. By reworking an epigram from a relatively obscure ancient Greek female poet, H.D. found a place for herself in the male classical tradition and a means to reshape it from a female perspective (Gregory 1997: 43-52; Yao 2002: 101).

In 1912, the poet also started to work on Euripides, inscribing one of Dindorf’s editions of his plays with her new professional name, “H.D.,” indicating the period before her marriage to Aldington (Za/D721/Zz870E= Gregory 4). The initials were meant to convey “pure spirit” with “no identity attached,” characteristics that she also associated with the Euripidean chorus (Wolle 1972: 58). The new name, and the Euripides’ volume, inaugurated an exciting new period in her poetic experiments and laid the foundation for her subsequent career. Indeed, the Euripidean chorus was to become the perfect venue for conveying impersonal and temporally ambiguous voice that embodied a modernist sense of fragmentation. In early August, 1913, H.D. told the imagist poet John Gould Fletcher that she was thinking about translating an entire Greek play, one of Euripides’, perhaps, in a style entirely different, and closer to the original than that of Gilbert Murray. She was now at work on some of the choruses, which she proposed to translate in meters corresponding to the originals (early? August 2013; J. Fletcher, J., Life Is My Song, 80-81).

Between 1912 and the publication of her Collected Poems in 1925, H.D. worked on several Euripidean plays—Rhesus, Iphigeneia in Aulis, Ion, Hippolytus, Helen, Trojan Women, Andromache and possibly Bacchae. She purportedly completed her first translation, Rhesus, of which nothing survives, in the summer of 1915, just after the outbreak of World War I. In November, Choruses from the Iphigeneia in Aulis of Euripides appeared as Number 3 of The Poet’s Translation Series. Translations from Ion were announced in January, 1916, although never published due the war (Gregory 1995: 25). In 1919, Choruses from the Iphigeneia in Aulis was reissued together with portions of Hippolytus. And somewhere
between 1915 and 1920, she returned to translating Ion. In 1925, the year her she began her play Hippolytus Temporizes, which she published in 1927. She also wrote several essays on Greek subjects between 1918 and 1921, Euripides composed prior to 1918, and collected under the heading, “Notes on Euripides, Pausanias, and the Greek Lyric Poets,” much of which remains among her unpublished papers. During the mid-1920s, she turned increasingly to fiction writing, producing a series of autobiographical stories set in classical antiquity, starting with Palimpsest in 1926. Before and after analysis with Sigmund Freud, H.D. worked extensively with the texts of Electra, Orestes and Ion, completing her play-length adaptation of the latter in 1937. In the final period, in the early 1950s, H.D. returned again to Euripides, specifically his Trojan plays, in preparation for her extended verse drama, Helen in Egypt (Eileen Gregory 1997: 280, n. 5). This brief synopsis shows how closely intertwined H.D.’s poetic development was with her study and translation of ancient Greek, particularly Euripides’ choral odes.

H.D.’s extant library contains several texts of Euripides, including English translations by Theodore Buckley for the Bohn’s Classical Library, with its motto ‘literally translated’ (1892), and A. S. Way for the Loeb, and the French translations of Leconte de Lisle. She possessed a standard edition of Euripides by Paley originally owned by May Sinclair but does not seem to have used it. Rather, she relied on three separate Teubner editions of Euripides’ plays edited by Dindorf. Many of these texts show heavy marking, indicating that she worked closely with the original Greek. Her notations are not scholarly but rather glosses, underlined words, brief marginal comments, and most importantly, choral divisions. To give an example, here are the first words spoken by Phaedra in Euripides’ Hippolytus. Again, she has penciled in the lexicon definitions from Liddell and Scott in the case of εὐπήχεις, ‘with beautiful arms,’ and αἰγείροις for ‘black poplar’. Skipping ahead to the first stasimon (second choral ode), you can see that heavy lines are used to offset the chorus and demarcate strophe and antistrophe, a feature of almost all of her notations of Euripides’ choruses.
Here’s another example, from the Bacchae [little Bacchae]. Surprisingly absent are metrical notations, especially considering her early ambition to render Greek meters into English. In fact, the only scansion I’ve been able to find in her collected papers is this page from her unpublished Paris diary (May–June 1912?).

*The Choros-Sequence*

This period of literary experimentation, translation, and close readings of Euripides’ plays resulted in a significant poetic innovation, what H.D. called the ‘choros-sequence,’ ‘the Greek sequence,’ or simply ‘sequence.’ In its earliest usage, it refers to her literary translations, as in this passage from Bid Me to Live, which probably alludes to her work on the Hippolytus choruses:

She was working on a chorus-sequence that she had always, it seemed, been working on. It would take her forever to get what she wanted, to hew and chisel those lines, to maintain or suggest some cold artistry. (*Bid* 98-99)

In an unpublished essay on the Helen, H.D. similarly describes the words of the chorus as “hardly intelligible,” singling out “the rhythms, the meters” as most important (“Helen in Egypt,” 9). H.D. and her circle erroneously believed that the Greek chorus represented a form of vers libre because of its absence of rhyme, spare language, traditional meters, and short lines (Gregory 1997: 140; Prins 2017: 180-201). Indeed, the poet renders the original meters of Euripides’ choruses into what she calls “broken, exclamatory or evocative vers-libre” (*Ion* 1986: 32). In Palimpsest, these pulsating meters have a hypnotic effect on Hipparchia, who becomes “dazed, drugged and drunk with snatches of Euripidean choros” as she struggles to translate Greek into Latin. In her unpublished notes on Euripides, she remarks, “There is no adequate translation for the Greek words and there will never be” (137).

The inherent untranslatability of the choral ode was not for H.D. a source of frustration but rather an exhilarating starting point for her own poetics, affording her greater scope for
experimentation than classically educated men (Prins 2017: 31). Her translation practice, therefore, purposefully dispensed with male classical scholarship, instead serving as a springboard for her imagination, as the second passage shows:

She brooded over each word, as if to hatch it. Then she tried to forget each word, for “translations” enough existed and she was no scholar. She did not want to “know” Greek in that sense. She was like one blind, reading the texture of incised letters, rejoicing like one blind who knows an inner light, a reality that the outer eye cannot grasp. (Bid 99)

The goal of “cold artistry” in the top passage reflects her conception of the chorus as fundamentally detached and impersonal, allied with what she calls her “crystalline” aesthetic borrowed from epigram. Similarly, the allusion to the process of translation as a form of reading braille, as touching the “incised letters”, recalls the association of epigram with inscription praised by Mackail (1911: 4). The inability to translate or comprehend the physical text, the not knowing Greek represented by the metaphor of blindness, rather than obscuring meaning in fact facilitates a higher, intuitive comprehension.

Although the concept of the ‘choros-sequence’ grew directly out of H.D.’s translations of Euripides, it had a broader meaning within her poetic idiom. As a poetic form, it is a series of loosely related fragments dislodged from any overarching narrative or dramatic structure, much like the “fragments of musical notation, discovered in the sand” (“Helen in Egypt,” 9). Indeed, at the end of her life, she refers to her early poetic experiments with the Greek texts as “fragments,” as parts of a lost whole (“Delia Alton” 1986: 214). She also uses a textile metaphor to define the sequence as “threads in a tapestry” leading to “a final pattern” (“Delia” 1986: 214). The image of her daughter weaving together the velvet ribbons of a dress during the period in which she wrote *Hippolytus Temporizes* “recalls the Greek sequence and my place in the pattern” (1925; Autobiographical Notes,” 15). In “The Egyptian Cat,” she further compares the process of writing to working on a sampler, So many stitches and just so many rows, day after day. If I miss even one
day, I drop a stitch and lose the pattern and I feel I’m never going to find it again” (145). And it’s difficult not to think of H.D.’s own needlework as exemplified by this very new acquisition of the Beinecke.14

Choruses from Iphigeneia in Aulis

H.D.’s interest in Euripides’ detached female choruses and the lyric female voice is clearly seen in her choice not to translate an entire play as she had originally planned, but rather to focus instead on the choral odes with her publication of Choruses from Euripides’ Iphigeneia in Aulis in 1915 and Hippolytus in 1919. It should be noted at the outset that ‘choruses’ is a bit of a misnomer, as H.D.’s translations of both plays also include lyric monodies and even iambic trimeter. With the Iphigeneia, in particular, H.D. appears to be working more closely with the Greek text than in her subsequent work (in contrast, by the time of Helen in Egypt, she seems to be relying extensively on French translations in her poetic composition). To understand her technique, it is necessary to consider the place of the translation of Greek texts within a modernist context. Modernist poets rejected romantic Hellenism, which they considered decadent and inauthentic, in favor of a ‘true’ Hellenism—“anything that has existed or subsisted unbroken from antiquity” (Pound, ABC of Reading 56)—in the form of imitation, translation and adaptation of classical texts. In her introduction, H.D. distinguishes herself from other translators of Euripides, particularly Gilbert Murray, as both more modern and closer to the Greek.

A literal, word-for-word version of so well-known an author as Euripides would be useless and supererogatory; a rhymed, languidly Swinburnian verse form is an insult and a barbarism. It seemed, therefore, that the rhymeless hard rhythms used in the present version would be most likely to keep the sharp edges and irregular cadence of the original. While the sense of Greek has been strictly kept, it is necessary to point out that the repetition of useless, ornamental adjectives like “ἐὐπλοκάµος” and “καλλιπλόκαµος” for example, is a heavy strain on a translator’s ingenuity.

H.D.’s goals as a translator echo the Imagist credo set forth by Ezra Pound in Poetry magazine soon after her first adaptations of epigram appeared. To summarize this: avoid superfluous adjectives and
abstractions; focus on cadence or the movement of the words rather than meaning and don’t end each line with a full stop. Eschewing English rhyme in favor of a broken, incantatory free verse, H.D. attempts to capture the sound and sense of the original, mainly through the avoidance of subordinate clauses and participles, transforming the “twisty-turny” syntax of the odes into a series of short declarative statements. Textual problems are ignored in favor of clarity. The “useless, ornamental adjectives” are often condensed or their core idea extrapolated, rather than omitted altogether. This modernist aesthetic eliminates the linguistic unintelligibility associated with choral odes, relying instead on cadence and meter to capture their “haunting beauty.”

_Choruses from the Iphigeneia_ includes the complete parodos (164-302), part of the epode in the first stasimon (574-89), all of the remaining stasima (751-800; 1036-97; 1510-1531), and Iphigeneia’s two monodies (1277-1335; 1467-1473), divided into six sections. Within the choral odes, H.D. has mostly retained the triadic structure of strophe, antistrophe, and epode. The decision not to connect the excerpted lyric passages by means of notes or commentary, as she later does with _Ion_ and _Helen in Egypt_, distances the songs from the narrative and contributes to an overall sense of fragmentation and detachment. The de-emphasis of place names and the expansion of topographical imagery creates a pervasive sense of spatial indeterminacy. Similarly, the shifting temporalities conveyed by allusions to the mythic past and future are further enhanced by deliberate changes in verb tense.

In the parodos, H.D. has retained the formal structure, separating and numbering the three strophes and antistrophes, the mesode, and the epode, although she has divided the later in half, giving her a total of nine subsections. The first strophe, here juxtaposed with the original Greek gives a good idea of her technique. You can see that she has divided the first strophe into six units of varying lengths, rendering the lines not according to the original Greek meters but in free verse:

_Χορός_
_ἐμολον ἀμφὶ παρακτίαν_ (strophe 1)
_ψάμαθον Ἀὐλίδος ἐναλίας,
Εὐρίπου διὰ χευμάτων
κέλσασα στενοπόρθων,
Ελληνικά και Ελληνικά

Χαλκίδα πόλιν ἐμὰν προλιποῦσ᾽,
ἀγχιάλων ὕδατων τροφὸν
τὰς κλεινὰς Ἀρεθούσας,
Ἀχαιῶν στρατίαν ὡς ἐσδόθη μοι,
Ἀχαιῶν τὶ πλάτας ναυσιτόρους ἠμιβάλεσον, οὐς ἐπὶ Τροῖαν
ἐλάταις χιλιόσωσιν
τὸν ξανθὸν Μενέλαόν θ᾽ ἀμέτρητοι πόσεισ'
ἐνάπροσ᾽ Ἀγαμέμνονα τ᾽ εὐπατρίδαν
στέλλων ἐπὶ τὰν Ἑλέναν, ὧν ἐνδύματα δοῦκοτρόφου
Πάρις ὁ βουκόλος ἃν ἔλαβε
διώρον τὰς Ἀφροδίτας,
ὅτ᾽ ἐπὶ κρηναῖασι δρόσοις
Ἡρα Παλλάδι τ᾽ ἐριν ἐριν
μυρφᾶς ἀ Κύπρις ἐσχευ. (E. I 164-184; Collard and Moorwood)

I came along the sandy shore of Aulis that lies by the sea, after putting in across the currents of Euripus’ narrow strait, leaving my city of Chalcis, nurse of the waters of famous Arethusa close by the sea. To view the army of the Achaeans was my purpose, and the sea-faring vessels of the Achaean demi-gods, whom, our husbands say, <both> the fair-haired Menelaus and the nobly born Agamemnon are leading a fleet of a thousand ships to Troy to get Helen: Paris the oxherd took her from Euritouchion’s reedy river, as the gift of Aphrodite when by the dewy waters of a spring the Cyprian goddess joined in strife, strife with Hera and Pallas over beauty.

I crossed the sand-hills.
I stand among the sea-drift before Aulis.
I crossed Euripos’ strait—
Foam hissed after my boat.

I left Chalkis,
My city and the rock-ledges.
Arethusa twists among the boulders,
Increases—cuts into the surf.

I have come to see the battle-line
And the ships rowed here
By these spirits—
The Greeks are but half-man.

Golden Menelaos (sic)
And Agamemnon of proud birth
Direct the thousand ships.
They have cut pine-trees
For their oars.

They have gathered the ships for one purpose:
Helen shall return.
There are clumps of marsh-reed
And spear-grass about the strait.
Paris the herdsman passed through them
When he took Helen—Aphrodite’s gift.

For he had judged the goddess
More beautiful than Hera.
Pallas was no longer radiant
As the three stood
Among the fresh shallows of the strait.

In her rendering, H.D. strives for an immediacy of image and rhythm. She breaks the original one-sentence strophe into 13 sentences to capture the short lyric lines and rapid acolo-choriambic meter. These shorter lines also require a simplified syntax. The feminine participles are converted into first person singular indicatives—προλιποῦσα (‘having left’) becomes ‘I left’ and κέλσασα (‘after putting in’) ‘I crossed’—and subordinate clauses such as those marked by ὡς and ὅτε are eliminated. The alternation between past and present tenses—‘I crossed, I stand, I left, I come’—when rendering the past tense combined with the use of emdashes contributes to a sense of temporal blurring (Eliot “Classics” 102).

A signature technique is to extrapolate a larger idea or image from an adjective or brief phrase. For instance, ἐλάταις χιλιόναυσιν (‘a thousand ships’, 174) becomes “They have cut pine trees for their oars,” amplifying the core idea of ἐλάτη as pine and omitting the cumbersome adjective. The phrase ἀπ’ Εὐρώτα δονακοτρόφου (‘from reed-producing Eurytos’, 178-9) becomes “There are clumps of marsh-reed/And spear-grass about the strait.” The omission of Eurytus and the expansion of the phrase conjure a remote and idyllic space far from the battle. The subordinate clause, ὅτ’ ἐπὶ κρηναῖαι δρόσοις/Ἡρα Παλλάδι τ’ ἔριν ἔριν/μορφᾶς α´ Κύπρις ἔσχεν (‘when by the dewy waters of a spring, Cypris joined in strife, strife, with Hera and Pallas over beauty’, 182-4) turns into an entire stanza, “For he had judged the goddess/More beautiful than Hera. Pallas was no longer radiant/As the three stood/Among the fresh-shallows of the strait.” H.D. introduces a number of changes here: Paris is made the subject of the verb and the judge of the
beauty contest, and the event occurs not near “the dews of the springs” but “among fresh shallows of the strait.” The reference to strife (ἔρις) is replaced by a static image of the three female beauties. The lack of spatial specificity introduced by her deliberate mistranslation of ἐπὶ κρηναίαις δρόσοις and the shifting temporalities (“Helen shall return,” “There are clumps,” “He had judged”) reinforce the sense of detachment and alienation from the dramatic action.

Conclusion
The Greek chorus also entered the work of other Greek dancers such as Ruby Ginner and the Ginner-Mawer school (Macintosh 2013: 202 and n. 56).


Letter to George Plank 29 March 1928, from Silverstein’s chronology. Much later, H.D. mentions reading Duncan’s autobiography, *A Life*, and recalls again seeing her in performance, “I did in youth and was indirectly, through friends, in a way in touch with her ideas.”


“Autobiographical Notes,” BRBML chronology says Collecott notes.


Presumably from a text sent to her by F. S. Flint in 1916; chronology, letter, 17 May 1916; *Live* 1960: 3.

Gregory 1995: 140, 276 n.15. Chronology much debated, Friedman's dates different significantly from Gregory’s.


*Palimpsest*, 77; cf. p. 34, “the metre beat and beat rhythmic and undeniable hypnotic refrain”; p. 38, “Euripidean choros was perfected subtle breath of metre”; see also “Murex,” 147.
“Helen in Egypt,” p. 9, “elemental detachment, abstract, aloof”; p. 24, on the chorus at 1688-92, “And there is the circle of Greeks again, impersonal, praying for the safety of the ship, lying ready to depart.”

https://beinecke.library.yale.edu/about/blogs/poetry-beinecke-library-room-26-cabinet-curiosities-yale-collection-american-literatur-2; see also A. Elkins, “A Stitch in Time: H.D.’s Craft Modernism as Transhistoric Repair,” The Space Between: Literature and Culture, 1914-1945, 12 (2016) 1-1. Indeed, she once described her daily writing practice “like working on a sampler. So many stitches and just so many rows, day after day. If I miss even one day, I drop a stitch and lose the pattern and I feel I’m never going to find it” (Signets, 5).