

Virgil's Aeneid

Probably the greatest epic poem of all time, written by the Roman poet Publius Vergilius Maro (70-19 BC), usually referred to as Virgil or Vergil. It tells of the travails of Aeneas during his long journey from the walls of Troy (after its fall) to the shores of Italy, where according to myth he founded Rome.

In memory of the late Helen M. Cory, my high school Latin teacher, I recently decided to pick up the Aeneid to have a go at it. I had skipped Latin my junior year, when "Miss Cory" taught Virgil, and took Cicero from her in my senior year. Regretting the skipped year, I asked her to help me with some Aeneid reading after school, which she kindly did. Then sports usurped that time period and as a result I didn't get very far into the Aeneid. Now I have the time and am picking up where I left off.

Here are the first four lines of Book I:

*Arma virumque cano, Trojae qui primus ab oris
Italiam fato profugus Laviniaque venit
litora--multum ille et terris jactatus et alto
vi superum, saevae memorem Junonis ob iram,*

And here is my amateur translation, in dactylic hexameter like the original Latin, dum-diddy, dum-diddy... (six feet to a line), with every line ending in a mandatory spondee, dum-dum. I couldn't fit it into four lines.

Wars, and a warrior, first to arrive from the slaughter at Troy's beach,
Exiled by fate to Italian land at Lavinia's seashore--
These are the subjects of my song. Terribly smitten was this man,
Both on the earth and on watery ways, by the gods who live on high;
All due to Juno's unending hot hatred for heroes of far Troy.

Virgil puts spondees within some lines, as I did. This was very hard work, and I don't plan to continue with the verse translation, but will keep going with a more prosy effort. The purpose is to be able to read Virgil in his language rather than in a translation by somebody. As they say, poetry loses something in the translation.

Here are the first four lines of John Dryden's famous translation:

Arms, and the Man I sing, who forc'd by fate,
And haughty Juno's unrelenting hate,
Expell'd and exil'd, left the Trojan Shoar:
Long labours, both by Sea and Land he bore;

Well, he got it into four lines, but he left out stuff. Dryden was a sissy to translate the Aeneid into iambic pentameter rhymed couplets (and some triplets), which seems to me a lot easier than doing it in the unrhymed dactylic hexameter that Virgil used. Translators should adhere to the original's form--same meter, and same rhyme scheme if any, while conveying to the maximum its sense and "flavor." That is very difficult, but it must be done in order to produce a true translation.

Nevertheless I did a little more, but this is the end, it takes too much time, and I'm not proud of the result.

*Multa quoque et bello passus dum conderet urbem
Inferretque deos Latium genus unde Latinum
Albanique patres atque altae moenia Romae*

Many a battle had he to endure, until finally he brought
Gods into Latium's new town, out of which rose a fine new race,
That of the Latins, the Alban first fathers, and bulwarks of great Rome.

*Musa mihi causas memora quo numine laeso
Quidve dolens regina deum tot volvere casus
Insignem pietate virum tot adire labores
Impulerit. Tantaene animis caelestibus irae?*

Oh muse, tell me the causes, which deity offended was, or how
Juno, the queen of the gods, could be so vexed, making a good man,
Known for his piety, suffer so many calamities for years.
Answer me truly, can heavenly minds be possessed of such ill will?

For a masterful treatment of the art of translating verse, see *Le Bon Ton de Marot*,
by Douglas R. Hofstadter, author of *Godel, Escher, Bach--An Eternal Golden Braid*,
and *Metamagical Themas*.