THE THESEID IN MODERN GREEK – ORIGINAL OR TRADITIONAL?

By Birgit Olsen

Boccaccio's Teseida was translated into Modern Greek in the 15th century. By comparing the translation to the original, this paper analyses how the anonymous translator through language, metre and imagery creates a text that fits into the Greek vernacular literary tradition.

When asked to write something to honour Peter, it's obvious that one comes to think of something to do with translation. These days, Peter is almost synonymous with translating from Latin into Danish, as his works on Saxo Grammaticus and Ludvig Holberg are brilliant examples of. For that reason, I have chosen, as my contribution, to form a written version of a paper given at a Boccaccio conference in Copenhagen in 2013 where I had the pleasure of Peter's presence in the audience. As the title indicates, the subject of this paper is the Modern Greek translation of Boccaccio's *Teseida*.

Giovanni Boccaccio wrote his *Teseida* during the 1340s.[1] It is an extensive poem of twelve books and more than 10.000 verses. His declared aim was to write an epos, and he claimed to be the first to do so in Italian.[2] Nevertheless he dedicated the poem to his beloved Fiametta, and it is basically a love story. The rivalry for the reign of Thebes, which was the main conflict in his most immediate model, Statius' *Thebaid,* has been replaced by the rivalry for the love and hand of a young girl,[3] and Theseus is only the principal character in the two first books. From book three the story focuses on the two Theban princes, Arcita and Palamone, who as prisoners are brought to Athens where they both fall in love with Emilia, Theseus' sister in law. The central conflict of the poem is one of love and friendship and the culmination is the final clash between the two friends and rivals, in the form of a joust, to settle who is

---

[1] Anderson 1988, 3f.

[2] *ma tu, o libro, primo a lor cantare / di Marte fai gli affani sostenuti, / nel volgar lazio più mai non veduti* (XII 84.6–8).

[3] Anderson 1988, 67ff.

GOD LATIN – FESTSKRIFT TIL PETER ZEEBERG
Renæssanceforum 12 • 2017 • www.renaessanceforum.dk
Birgit Olsen: The Theseid in Modern Greek – original or traditional?

going to win the girl and marry her, as the poem's subtitle, *delle Nozze di Emilia,* also indicates.

The Italian *Teseida* seems to have been very popular in its own time and in the following centuries. It has been preserved in many MSS from the 14th and 15th centuries and was printed several times in the 15th and 16th centuries. Many MSS are elaborated and illuminated and among the owners are some of the most outstanding Italian families of the 15th through 17th centuries, including the Angevin kings of Naples, and the papacy. The text also appealed to the intellectual classes. Several academies and academy members have possessed MSS of the *Teseida,* and during the 15th century even members of the middle classes, the professionals and merchants, are found among the owners of *Teseida* MSS.[4]

The first printed edition was published in Ferrara in 1475 and the *Teseida* thus became the first text to be printed in the Italian language.[5] Not surprisingly the text also won acclaim outside Italy. It was translated into French and Greek and was used as the model for the first of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales.*[6] The textual tradition of the Italian *Teseida* is remarkable because one of Boccaccio's autograph MSS still exists.[7] This MS also contains the author's own commentary added to the text some years later.[8]

The Greek translation of this Italian poem is probably to be dated to the 15th century,[9] and it is among the first translations into Modern Greek known to us.[10] The identity of the translator is not known, but it has been argued that the Greek text should be placed on Crete or the Peloponnese.[11] However, I do not think that the text shows enough dialectical characteristics to make it possible to determine the geographical origin of the translation or the translator.

---

[4] Agostinelli 1985–1986, 4f.

[5] Carpinato 1994, 28.

[6] Follieri 1953, 67.

[7] The MS, although it was known in the 19th century, sank into oblivion until it was rediscovered and acquired for the Italian State in 1929 by Guiseppe Vandelli. Now it is preserved in the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana in Florence, see Limentani (1964) 873. According to Agostinelli's description the MS was written in 1348–50, probably in Florence. Boccaccio is identified as the scribe on the basis of his handwriting, but he does not seem to have left his signature, see Agostinelli 1985, 17ff.

[8] As he informs us, he was requested by his female readers to provide some explanatory notes. See the commentary on VII 30,1.

[9] Olsen 1993, 313.

[10] Ibid.

[11] For the discussion of Crete see Olsen 1990, 277. Caterina Carpinato puts forward the theory that the translation should be placed in Peloponnese in the very cultural climate that allowed the diffusion of another Italian poem, *Cantare di Florio e Platziaflore,* which was also translated into Greek. However, she does not really argue for her theory and it is therefore difficult to assess it, see Carpinato 1994, 27.

GOD LATIN – FESTSKRIFT TIL PETER ZEEBERG
Renæssanceforum 12 • 2017 • www.renaessanceforum.dk
Birgit Olsen: The Theseid in Modern Greek – original or traditional?

The language resembles the poetic vernacular used in other texts of the period from different parts of the Greek-speaking world.

Like the Italian original, the textual tradition of the Greek translation is remarkable.[12] This text has been handed down in two MSS and in a Venetian chapbook edition from 1529. The MS P (Par. gr. 2898) I date to approximately 1500,[13] and there is evidence that the other MS, the Pal. gr. 426 (V), dates from 1528–29. This MS has been proved by Enrica Follieri to be the printing source for the 1529 edition and to have been produced with this edition in view.[14] Consequently, it is very likely to have been written shortly before this edition. Furthermore, it is my belief that the choice of the Greek *Theseid* for printing might have been influenced by the fact that this popular Italian poem was published for the third time as an Italian chapbook, by a Venetian publisher, just one year before the Greek printed text appeared. This leaves us the year 1528–1529 for the making of V.

We may assume that the text of the oldest witness, the Paris MS, is quite close to the original translation i.e. to the *archetypus* of the Greek text.

The Greek translation of the poem on the whole follows the construction of the Italian original. The most remarkable differences concern the metre. First of all, Boccaccio's eleven-syllable verse has been changed into the fifteen-syllable verse that from the 10th century was widely used in vernacular Greek literature,[15] with only the last couplet of the octave rhyming. Secondly, instead of Boccaccio's prose, the translator has used the rhymed fifteen-syllable verse for the letter of introduction and for the sonnets, the prologues in the Greek text. Yet another difference is the addition of seven octaves – one in the first book (I 6) and six others in the seventh book (VII 19–25).[16]

Not only in composition but also on a linguistic level the translation can be characterized as in general loyal to the Italian original. Often the Italian text is rendered word by word.[17] This sometimes results in an unusual structure of the Greek text and in some cases it can only be understood with the Italian original at hand. At other points however, the translator removes himself entirely from the Italian text[18] and shows a "delightful originality", as

---

[12] We do not know which Italian MS was the model for the Greek translation, but evidence allows us to conclude that it must have been one of the contaminated MSS of the Italian tradition (Olsen 1993, 314)

[13] Olsen 1990, 281.

[14] Follieri 1953, 70.

[15] Among others for the 12th-century epos of Digenis Akritas.

[16] The last six are nothing but a catalogue of heroes. These may derive from the translator's Italian model or may have been compiled by him. For the first see below p. 66.

[17] Follieri 1953, 74.

[18] I refer to the critical edition of Battaglia 1938 based on Boccaccio's autograph MS with consideration for the corrections made in the edition of Limentani 1964, 876ff. The readings

GOD LATIN – FESTSKRIFT TIL PETER ZEEBERG
Renæssanceforum 12 • 2017 • www.renaessanceforum.dk
Birgit Olsen: The Theseid in Modern Greek – original or traditional?

Follieri was the first to notice.[19]

Unfortunately, we have no information about the translator. But scholars agree that he was not very well versed in mythological matters.[20] All the more surprising is it that he all of a sudden seems perfectly capable of understanding Boccaccio's learned references as e.g. his somewhat indirect allusion to very bad weather conditions by using the constellation *Orione* and *Pliade* and the god *Aeolus* (IV 1). The Greek translator does not mention the constellation or *Aeolus* but instead describes a terrible storm. How this "unlearned" translator was able to understand the symbols of the Italian text and to translate in this manner, I have discussed in detail elsewhere.[21] But as mentioned above, Boccaccio wrote a commentary on the *Teseida*, and I am convinced that the Greek translator used an Italian original, which in addition to the text proper also contained notes.[22] These in different ways he incorporated into his text. There are many examples of his acquiring mythological knowledge and other information from the notes. But they were also useful to the translator in another way. Often they rendered him a solution to the problem of filling in his verses that were four syllables longer than the original.

However, apart from the incorporation in different ways of Boccaccio's commentary into the Greek text proper, there are other characteristic features of the translation in comparison with the Italian original, and these are what I would like to focus on in the following.

The first thing to be mentioned is direct speech. Where the Italian original has indirect speech the Greek text often has direct speech as e.g. in book one when Theseus has gathered the Greek barons to get their support for the campaign against the Amazons, and his addressing them is described in the Italian text. In the Greek text, however, he is giving a speech. The same thing happens in book three when the two young Thebans are cursing their fate. The Italian text states that they often cursed their bad luck. In the Greek text we <u>hear</u> them curse their fate in a very traditional way: "ανάθεμα την ωρ' αυτήν και τον καιρόν εκείνον, οπού στον κόσμον ήλθαμεν με βλασφιμιάν και θρήνον" (damned be the hour and the time when we came to the world with curse and lament) (III 3.7–8). In the same book, when Arcita is leaving, he actually says farewell in the Greek text "έχεν υγαιά" but in the Italian "si dissero addio" (they (Arcita and Palamone) said goodbye) (III 81.7). A last

---

may of course differ from those of the MS that was actually the model for the Greek translation.

[19] Follieri 1958.

[20] Olsen 1993, 315.

[21] Olsen 1993.

[22] Probably not exactly the notes as we find them in Boccaccio's own commentary but a later adaption of it.

GOD LATIN – FESTSKRIFT TIL PETER ZEEBERG
Renæssanceforum 12 • 2017 • www.renaessanceforum.dk
Birgit Olsen: The Theseid in Modern Greek – original or traditional?

example is from the fourth book (36.7) where Arcita in the Greek text reminds himself in both imperative and vocative "τέτοιαν πεθυμιά <u>γνώριζε, άτυχε Αρκήτα</u> | ουκ έχει φύση πλεα απεδά να την βαστάσω ως πρώτα" (such longing, know poor Arkitas, it isn't natural that I should bear it any longer). In the Italian text, on the other hand, he knows it "(conobbe) in sé".

On a grammatical/syntactical level the following is noteworthy: 1) The frequent use of a gerund in the Italian original is in most cases rendered by a participle in the Greek translation as e.g. *rimirando* (III 32.7) – *εβλέποντας* (seeing), *mirando* (III 33.7) – *θωρώντες* (looking), *pensando* (III 37.3) – *σκοπώντας* (thinking), *sappiendo* (III 39.1) – *ηξεύροντας* (knowing), etc. 2) A passive form in the original is often rendered by an active in the translation, as e.g. IV 18.7 "εμπήκε να δουλεύει" (he went to work(for)) from "fu ricevuto" (he was received), V 1.2 "ως είπαμεν" (as we said) from "è già detto" (it has already been said), VI prol. 2 "πως αγάπην εποίκασιν" (that they made peace) from *pacificati* ((they were) pacified), etc. 3) The substantivized infinitives of the Italian text have caused problems since Modern Greek does not have an infinitive. They may become either substantivized imperatives like "το έλα" from "lor venire" (their coming) in III 51.1 and VI rub.13, "το έβγα" for "l' uscir" (the exiting) in III 51.6 and "το σύρε" for l' andare (the going) in III 65.1 or substantivized participles like "το έσοντας" in III rub.49 and rub.50 for the Italian "l' esser" (the being).

When it comes to proper names, obviously the translator had problems. Frequently he did not associate them with the well-known Greek names. The result being that the Greek form is influenced by the Italian. For example, Athena is rendered as *Μινερούα* (Mineva) in IX 2.1 but in I 61.1 she has become *Αρτέμη* (Artemis). Mycenes is *Μέθενα* in IV rub.18 and in the genitive plural *Μεθάνων* in IV 18.5 from the Italian *Mecena*. Thessaly in the genitive is *Τεζάλιας* in book six rub. 55. Finally, the word *Εματικός* from book six 57.1 is a very interesting example of what a mistranslation can lead to. The Italian text has *Ematici,* and in the notes they are explained as the Thessalians. The Greek place name behind the Italian form is *Ημαθία,* i.e. Macedonia. But this misunderstanding on behalf of the Greek translator, combined with a spelling of *αι* and not *ε,* has had a peculiar consequence. On the basis of this single occurrence, in the Kriaras' Lexicon of Medieval Greek the word *αιματικός* has been taken as an adjective to the noun *αίμα* (blood) and given the meaning "of noble blood".

On the other hand, there are also a few instances of the Greek translator trying to render the meaning of an Italian proper name instead of just hellenizing it. One is in book six where *Nonacria* has become *Εννάτη* (Ninth) probably influenced by Boccaccio's comment that this is his way of describing Arcadia because of its nine mountains. Another example is in VII 38.2 where

GOD LATIN – FESTSKRIFT TIL PETER ZEEBERG
Renæssanceforum 12 • 2017 • www.renaessanceforum.dk
Birgit Olsen: The Theseid in Modern Greek – original or traditional?

Vulcan's epithet *Mulcifero* has been translated as *Γλυκόφερος* (who brings softness/the softener).

Other phenomena, characteristic for the translation and probably at the same time serving the purpose of filling in the metre, are the frequent use of compounds, the use of *coppia,* the many formulaic hemistichs, diminutives, and the use of comparisons. The text is full of words, of all categories, beginning either with prefixes like *βαριο-* (heavy), *γλυκο-* (sweet), *ολο-* (whole), *πολυ-* (very), *χρυσο-* (gold), etc. or with prepositions that in most cases do not add any nuance to the stem of the word.[23] The technique of *coppia* is used e.g. in V 99.2 where the *rosa* of the Italian text is translated with "τριαντάφυλλον ή ρόδον" (both meaning rose), in the tenth book "gli nostri ben" (our goods/possessions) have become "τους τόπους και τες χώρες μας" (our places and lands) (21.3), in XI 57.2 *Vulcan* has been translated as "η στία και η πύρα" (the hearth and fire)*,* and in VII 94.5/100.5 where "la luce" (the light) becomes "ο Ήλιος με το φως του" (the Sun with its light).

Formulaic hemistichs, such as "ως πρέπει βασιλέως" (worthy of a king), "ευγενικοι στρατιώτες" (noble soldiers), "χωρίς κανένα σφάλμα" (with no mistake), "μετά καλής καρδίας" (with a good heart), "δια κάνενος πραγμάτου" (not for anything), etc. are often used to fill in the verse. Especially the last hemistich of a stanza often has no basis in the Italian original and functions as a mere filling in the Greek translation.

Diminutives are used in the Greek text where they are not found in the Italian, see e.g. *λαλίτσα* (little voice) (III 7.2 etc.), *φωνίτσα* (little voice) (III 10.8 etc.), *καρδίτσα* (little heart) (III 60.2 etc.), *ζωίτσα* (little life) (III 77.6, etc.), *βουνόπουλον* (small mountain) (I 81.3), *παρεθυρίτσι* (small window) (III 28.5 and III 11.5), *χορταρόπουλα* (small grass) (IV 66.3), νεούτσικος/η (very young) (III 40.4, etc.), *ολιγούτσικην* (very little) (IV prol.5), *σιγανούτσικα* (very quietly) (V 46.7), etc. Finally the Greek text sometimes makes comparisons that have no basis in the Italian, such as "Έλαμπε ως άστραν" (She was shining like a star) (I 126.3), ("Με χέρια της) ... π' άσπρισαν ως το χιόνι" (with her hands)… white as snow) (III 9.3), "Ολόλευκο ώσπερ χιόνι" (all white as snow) (V 79.1), "Ως τον ήλιον έλαμπεν" (like the sun he was shining) (VI 41.4).

All these features are commonly known from other Greek vernacular literature and folk poetry, and apart from serving the metrical purpose, they remove the Greek translation from its Italian original and place it closer to the literary tradition of its own language.

---

[23] See e.g. III 4.3 *'ποκατάστασιν* (situation) – V 39.1 – VI 44.5 *περιλαμβάνω* (receive) – V 93.5 *συντάξασιν* (promise) – VI 1.2 *συναλλάσσει* (change) – VI 6.1 *εσυγκρατούσασιν* (keep).

GOD LATIN – FESTSKRIFT TIL PETER ZEEBERG
Renæssanceforum 12 • 2017 • www.renaessanceforum.dk
Birgit Olsen: The Theseid in Modern Greek – original or traditional?

There are also instances where the translator liberates himself entirely from his original and draws on traditional Greek imagery. The use of the poetic compounds *ρωτοκράτωρ* (master of love) in III 22.7 and *ερωτοπλασίας* (love's creation) in IV 56.3 are good examples.[24] Likewise "του Χάρου το στενό" (Charon's strait) is a very traditional way of rendering the more neutral Italian "d'Acheronte il rio" (the river of Acheronte) in X 41.8, and in X 76.2 where the Italian song that brings crying ("e'l canto, anzi fu pianto, ch'io cantava") has become a *μοιρολόγι,* the traditional word for lament: "και το τραγούδι το έμνοστον εδά 'ναι <u>μοιρολόγι</u>" (and the delightful song here is a lament).

I think the same applies for one of the above mentioned octave (I.6), that is one of the additions to the Greek text:

> Ην τις Ελλήνων βασιλεύς, ευγενικός, ανδρείος,
> πλούσιος, και πανευτυχής της πόλεως Αθήνας.
> Ούτος υπήρχεν ο λαμπρός και βασιλεύς Αιγέος.
> Είχεν υιον πανέμνοστον, φρικτόν εις την ανδρείαν,
> Θησέος ωνομάζετον, έμορφος ύπερ μέτρον.
> Είχε μεγάλην δύναμιν, είχε μεγάλη γνώσιν,
> και εις πολλά βασίλεια έδειξε την ανδρειάν του,
> εις φήμην, δόξα και τιμήν ήλθε 'κ την προθυμιάν του

> There was a king among the Greeks, noble, brave,
> rich and very happy, from the city of Athens.
> This was the shining (and) kingly Aigeos.
> He had a most delicious son, fierce in bravery,
> Theseos was his name, beautiful beyond measure.
> He had much power, he had much knowledge,
> and in many kingdoms he showed his bravery.
> He came to fame, praise and honour for his willingness.

It has been discussed whether this octave was taken from the *Polemos tis Troados* (the Greek translation of The Roman de Troie)[25] or was the traditional

---

[24] As goes for *ρωτοκράτωρ*, only Amore is mentioned in the Italian text. The word also occurs in *Livistros*, see Kriaras, Lex. *ερωτοπλασίας* is a translation of the Italian "quanto nel core amor punge" (when love stings in the heart)*,* and again this word is found in *Livistros* according to Kriaras, Lex.

[25] Giuseppe Spadaro originally presented the theory 1977, 159 but later answered to Roderick Beaton's reservations to it Spadaro 1993, 301 ff. and with reservation Beaton agrees to that. On the one hand, he considers the possibility that this opening formula may have been part of the translator's "stock of oral formulae or knowledge of the oral poetry of his day", on the other he argues that the text "contains no other significant interpolations" Beaton 1989, 168f.

GOD LATIN – FESTSKRIFT TIL PETER ZEEBERG
Renæssanceforum 12 • 2017 • www.renaessanceforum.dk
Birgit Olsen: The Theseid in Modern Greek – original or traditional?

manner of beginning in the Greek vernacular genre.[26] I am more inclined to follow the later view both because this octave is nothing but formulaic hemistichs that could easily by filled in with other names for different texts and because, also at other levels, traditional elements, common to vernacular literature, are incorporate in text of the Greek *Theseid*, as we have seen above.

Moreover, if we look back at the beginning of the fourth book where Boccaccio's learned mention of the constellation *Orione* and *Pliade* and the god *Aeolus* for describing bad weather conditions is rendered by the Greek translator in a way that Follieri found "delightfully original", again we find that this passage is full of traditional imagery that could be found also in folk songs and tales:

> Όσον ημπόρει πλεότερον ήτον βροχή μεγάλη
> και ταραχή εκ τους ουρανούς εγένετο με σκότος,
> βροντές μεγάλες και αστραπές, καθούρια και χαλάζια,
> εσκότοσαν όλος ουρανός, εφύσησαν οι άνεμοι,
> τα δένδρη εξεριζώσασιν και τα ποτάμια ετρέχαν

> It was raining as much as it could
> and commotions happened from the sky together with darkness,
> huge thunders and lightning, downpours and hails,
> all sky darkened and the winds were blowing,
> the trees were uprooted and the rivers were running.

So these "elementi originali" are in fact rather traditional.

<div align="center">*</div>

Based on the above comparison of the two texts, I find that in general the language of the Greek translation could be characterized as simpler than the Italian. In the Greek translation, Boccaccio's learned style has become more vernacular, and the Greek translator when most "original" draws on traditional elements from his own literary and oral background. Furthermore, also in his choice of metre he follows the tradition of that background. Thus, we may characterize the translation as directed rather towards the target language than the source language.

Contrary to the Italian original, the Greek *Theseid* never became a success. It was not reprinted or reedited, and we are left with modern editions of only a very small part of this text. However, as I hope to have shown, this text is interesting not only for linguistic reasons but also because of its textual tradition and translation method. Here we have a rare case where we can follow a

---

[26] Agapitos & Smith 1992, 97.

GOD LATIN – FESTSKRIFT TIL PETER ZEEBERG
Renæssanceforum 12 • 2017 • www.renaessanceforum.dk
Birgit Olsen: The Theseid in Modern Greek – original or traditional?

text from Italian original (autograph MS and commentary) through manuscript translation and printing copy to the actual printed chapbook. The Greek *Theseid* thus renders us the possibility to examine the translating method as well as the preparing of a printed edition in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

GOD LATIN – FESTSKRIFT TIL PETER ZEEBERG
Renæssanceforum 12 • 2017 • www.renaessanceforum.dk
Birgit Olsen: The Theseid in Modern Greek – original or traditional?

Bibliography

Agapitos, Panagiotis A. & Ole L. Smith 1992, *The Study of Medieval Greek Romance,* Copenhagen.

Agostinelli, Edvige 1985–1986, "A Catalogue of the Manuscripts of Il Teseida", *Studi sul Boccaccio* 15, 1–83.

Anderson, David 1988, *Before the Knight's Tale*, Philadelphia.

Battaglia, Salvatore (ed.) 1938, *Giovanni Boccaccio, Teseida*, Florence.

Beaton, Roderick 1989, *The Medieval Greek Romance*, Cambridge (*Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature* 6).

Carpinato, Caterina 1994, "La traduzione neogreca del Teseida. Da Boccaccio a Zinos", *Testi letterari italiani tradotti in Greco (dal '500 ad oggi), Atti del IV Convegno di Studi Neogreci, Viterbo 20–22 maggio 1993*, ed.: Mario Vitti, Messina 25–37.

Follieri, Enrica 1953, "La versione in greco volgare del Teseida del Boccaccio", *Studi bizantini e neoellenici* 7–8, 67–77.

Follieri, Enrica 1958, "Gli elementi originali nella versione neogreca del *Teseida* del Boccaccio", *Ελληνικά παράρθημα αριθ.* 9, 292–298.

Kriaras, Emmanuel / Εμμανουήλ Κριαράς (ed.) 1969–, *Λεξικό της μεσαιωνικής ελληνικής δημώδους γραμματείας,* Thessalonica.

Limentani, Alberto (ed.) 1964, *Teseida delle Nozze d'Emilia, 2, Tutte le Opere di Giovanni Boccaccio* ed. Vittore Branca, Milan.

Olsen, Birgit 1990, "The Greek Translation of Boccaccio's *Theseid* Book 6", *Classica et Mediaevalia* 41, 275–301.

Olsen, Birgit 1993, "The Model and Translation Method of the Greek *Theseid*", *Origini della letteratura neogreca II*, ed.: Nikolaos M. Panayotakis, Venice, 313–318.

Spadaro, Guiseppe 1977, "Sul Teseida neogreco", *Folia Neohellenica* 2, 157–160.

Spadaro, Giuseppe 1993, "Oralità nella letteratura greca medievale?", *Origini della letteratura neogreca II*, ed.: Nikolaos M. Panayotakis, Venice, 285–305.