

Translation and the Classics Curriculum

A proposal for curriculum reform in the teaching and examination of classical texts

Submitted by: Mohammad Shehadeh, Translational Justice

Contact: translationaljustice.com

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THE PROBLEM

Translation failure isn't a modern problem created by AI or procurement chains. It's ancient. It's structural. It's in the oldest texts we have, and in the way we teach them.

When students study classical literature at A-Level or GCSE, they're overwhelmingly reading translations. They read Fagles and think they're reading Homer. They read Rieu and think they're reading Virgil. The translation is treated as the text. The translator disappears.

This isn't just about linguistic access. It's a structural failure in how the discipline is taught. Students aren't told they're reading an interpretation, so they never develop the ability to question one. The habit of treating a translated text as authoritative begins in the classroom.

THE SPECIFIC FAILURE

The failure operates at two levels, and they're connected.

First: students are given a translation and learn it. They're not taught why particular choices were made, what was lost, or what alternatives existed. The translator's decisions are invisible.

Second: the examination rewards this invisibility. Students who memorise the set text translation and reproduce it under exam conditions are rewarded for accuracy, but what's being examined is memory, not translation. A student can pass a classical literature paper without ever having been required to think about what translation is.

These two failures are self-reinforcing. Because students are never shown that choices were possible, they can't account for the choices they make when they translate. Because the exam doesn't require them to interrogate a translation, teachers have no incentive to teach them to do so. The curriculum produces students who can produce a translation but can't explain it.

THE LATIN WORD MINISTERIA

The Latin word *ministeria* refers to service, duty, attendance: the work of those who facilitate without being seen. It's also an accurate description of what happens to translators in the classics classroom. They're present in the text but absent from the record. Their choices shape everything the student reads, but the student is never asked to notice.

This is the same structural failure that Translational Justice documents in asylum proceedings, where the interpreter's rendering becomes the official record and the original testimony is erased. The classics classroom is where many students first encounter a translated text as authoritative. It's where the habit of forgetting the interpreter begins.

THE PROPOSED REFORM

We're calling for a specific change to how classical literature is examined at A-Level and GCSE, particularly in OCR's specifications.

The literature paper should require demonstrable interpretive awareness, not linguistic memory. Concretely, this could mean one or more of the following:

Students are asked to compare two translations of the same passage and account for the differences, explaining what each translator's choices reveal about the text

Students are asked to justify a translation choice they made in an unseen, explaining why they rendered a particular word or phrase as they did and what alternatives they considered

A named translator is identified in the question, and students are asked to interrogate that rendering: what it emphasises, what it loses, and what it assumes

None of these proposals require removing translation from the curriculum. They require that the curriculum acknowledge what translation is: an act of interpretation, not a transfer of content.

WHAT THIS WOULD CHANGE

If students were taught to interrogate translations, to ask whose reading they're reading and why it was made, they'd leave school with a critical faculty that extends far beyond the classics classroom. They'd understand that any text that has passed through an intermediary has been shaped by that intermediary. They'd know to ask what was lost.

This isn't a niche concern. It's the foundational literacy of a world in which AI tools, automated translation, and mediated communication are ubiquitous. The classics curriculum is one of the few places in secondary education where students encounter this problem directly, and it's currently one of the places least equipped to address it.

THE ASK

We're asking the Classical Association and organisations working in classics education to:

Engage with the argument that translation is currently examined as memory rather than as interpretive skill

Consider whether OCR's current specifications for classical literature at A-Level and GCSE adequately require students to engage with translation as an interpretive act

Support a conversation with OCR about how the examination of translation might be reformed to require demonstrable interpretive awareness

If appropriate, collaborate with Translational Justice on a formal submission to OCR

The full argument is set out in the Translational Justice essay 'The Dolphin and the Interpreter', available at translationaljustice.com/writing/dolphin-translation