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THE QUEST FOR THE GOLDEN FLEECE: ON TRANSLATING APOLLONIUS RHODIUS' *ARGONAUTICA*

Abstract: Before recently, there was no full Polish translation of Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica*. However, five Polish classical scholars, W. Klinger, Z. Abramowiczówna, J. Łanowski, W. Steffen and W. Appel, have translated excerpts of this Hellenistic epic into Polish. A comparative analysis of these excerpts with the relevant passages from the first complete Polish version of the *Argonautica* by E. Żybert makes it possible to trace the individual strategies of the translators. The most important decision which every translator of epic poetry has to take at the beginning of his or her work is to choose the form in which the poem will be rendered. In Polish there are three main traditions of translating epics: in thirteen-syllable meter, in prose, and in hexameter. The last type of versification was chosen by five out of six of the translators mentioned above; only Świderkówna decided to render the Apollonian poem in thirteen-syllable verse. There are also stylistic and language differences that occur in the passages, due to the individual preferences of the translators, as well as the writing style characteristic for the times in which they lived. Klinger, for instance, prefers modernist stylistics, while Steffen chooses to archaize the language of the poem. However, the aim of this article is not to evaluate the translations but to open a discussion on how poems written over two thousand years ago might be rendered in an adequate and contemporary fashion.

Key words: Apollonius Rhodius; epic poetry in translation; Polish translations of the *Argonautica*; translating dactylic hexameter

Every translator commencing their work on an ancient epic poem has a difficult decision to make at the outset, concerning not only the choice of their translation strategy, but also the very form that the translation is going to take. The choice has to be made between prose and poetry, and when one chooses verse translation, it has to be established whether the poem is to be rhymed or in blank verse, syllabic or syllabotonic, isometric or experimen-

tal, or whether it will combine several different traditions. The classical epic owns this *embarras de richesse* to its exceptional cultural significance, its own long history and, finally, to its ambivalent origins. In the Polish tongue the classical epic has been rendered both in prose and poetry, and when its form is versified, it is usually in thirteen-syllable verse – hexameter that may or may not be rhymed, depending on the historical period and the individual preferences of the translators.¹

When I started my work on the Polish version of Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica*, I was aware of the multiplicity of views as to the form the epic should take in contemporary Polish as representing a specific literary genre. I decided to translate the poem with the use of the “Polish hexameter,” which relies on metrical words and obviously provides only an approximation of the ancient hexameter, as a result of a vowel length that the Polish language cannot accommodate.² I made this decision based on the principle that we should translate using the verse that we can successfully employ (cf. Wikarjak 1977: 130).

A similar choice was made by the majority of the translators who undertook the task of rendering Apollonius Rhodius' poem into Polish. An analysis of their work and its comparison with chosen passages from my own translation may be taken as an introduction to a renewed discussion on the most adequate form for the ancient epic in Polish.

Before now, only partial translations of the *Argonautica* have been published. These were penned by five classicist philologists: Witold Klinger (1938, 1939), Zofia Abramowiczówna (written at the turn of the 1960s–1970s, published in 2000), Wiktor Steffen (1980), Jerzy Łanowski (1991) and Włodzimierz Appel (2002). As they chose to translate various pas-

¹ We may take as relevant examples the translations of ancient texts in wide circulation: the *Iliad* translated by F. K. Dmochowski in 1800 (rendered in rhymed thirteen-syllable verse), by K. Jeżewska in 1972 (in unrhymed hexameter), as well as J. Parandowski's prose version of the *Odyssey* from 1953, and Hesiod's *Theogony*, *Works and Days* and *Shield of Heracles* translated (in unrhymed hexameter) by J. Łanowski in 1999, but also the multitude of forgotten and unread versions by less fortunate translators. It will suffice to mention that there are seven complete Polish versions of the *Aeneid*, eight of the *Iliad*, seven of the *Odyssey*, as well as numerous fragmentary translations.

² Even though the discussion on the possibility (or lack thereof) of introducing the metre into Polish has been underway since the nineteenth century, new hexameter translations of Greek and Latin epics are created on its periphery, as it were. The discussion itself is detailed in M. Dłuska's analysis in *Studia z historii i teorii wersyfikacji polskiej* (Studies in History and Theory of Polish Versification, 1978: 123–142) and in her *Prace wybrane* (Selected Works, 2001: 477–494).