



Translation or Adaptation?

by Paul Found

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I guess the first issue that comes to mind when considering classical works in translation is 'what is the actual purpose of the text?' In the Classical Civilisation classroom, we are introducing students to ancient societies and ancient cultures that they will discuss in English. Apart from the fact that few, if any, of our own (state school) students will have any experience in Latin or ancient Greek, I have to question the validity of the argument some use that Classics *must* be studied in its original language in order fully to understand and appreciate the ancient authors.

So what should we expect from a good translation?

Dryden had an ambition to make the poet on whom he was working 'speak such English as he would have spoken, if he had been born in England, and in this present age' (Dryden, 1697). Well, I'm sure we have all listened to the informal chatter of teenagers and thought, 'I didn't understand a word of that!' But while I am not suggesting we should be so sacrilegious as to translate Virgil into urban street slang for the purpose of serious study, I frequently ask students to translate the English translation into their own 'playground English' in order to

consolidate their understanding of the text and to get them thinking about the problems of translation as different groups invariably use wildly contrasting vocabulary in completing the exercise. A small collaborative project which some of my A Level and GCSE students are currently working on is to produce a 15-minute performance of the *Curse of the House of Atreus* in the format of the *Jeremy Kyle Show*. While this is largely a fun project, the arguments over choices of vocabulary, accent, dialect and delivery have produced some rather heated discussions over how far these elements stray from early translations of the myth to the point where they might be producing an adaptation. This naturally leads to debate over characterisation and more importantly, the validity and credibility of their version - something I can reintroduce during their study of the works of Homer and Virgil.

What this does highlight though is the fluidity of the English language which may render a 17th century translation of Homer as useless as the original unless the purpose is to study the language itself. Beyond the confines of the English Literature classroom, few students *really* enjoy reading Shakespeare in the original form, although I think few plays from any period really lend themselves to classroom reading, and there is a reason why Chaucer rarely makes an appearance in the English classroom. What they do appreciate, however, are the stories and the plots. Two years ago we staged a

production of *Medea* and I was inundated with questions from a range of year-groups - 'What? She actually murders her own children?' 'How does she kill them?' 'Did she get away with it?' None of them bought a ticket to see the play but they are all fascinated by these incredible stories.

So, however we stage the production, the story *will* be told but the *full* script in translation will likely leave the audience cold, bored, confused and, considering our students have a minimal grasp on the terminology and ancient references, much of it will have the same effect on the cast. While much is often made about the beauty of the original language and the problems of producing an adequate translation, for most of us, particularly in the state school system, there is absolutely no choice; it is translation or nothing. We can generally only access scripts translated and published in the early 20th century as these are available to print and perform free-of-charge and these tend to conform to a seemingly rigid set of guidelines that allow minimal deviation from a literal translation. The English is a little archaic and one cannot help but wonder if this is in some kind of reverence to the original text, but it does very little to inspire the 'average' students.

We also have to consider that students studying for A Levels do not have time to rehearse adequately a two-hour (and more) performance; so the first thing we do is work through the script and remove *most* of the Chorus lines. While we appreciate the Chorus can

be very much the voice of the playwright and therefore provide us with invaluable insight to the thought process of the writer and the intended message, a school production, while presenting itself as a study of the play for the students involved, is not a study inviting the depth of enquiry required for classroom study or an exam. Our audience of mostly parents, grandparents and siblings will be overwhelmingly uninterested in either the politics or the history of ancient Athens and much of the terminology, even in translation, will mean nothing to our audience. Therefore, what we forego in originality, we have to make up for in effect. As we are 'The Classics Play' we strive to ensure it carries a little *gravitas* as we do not want our production simply viewed as 'another school play' and, as stated in Aristotle's *Character of Tragedy* we must ensure the audience reach a point of *catharsis*. We have achieved this with varying degrees of success from *Antigone*, through *Medea* to our recent *Iphigenia at Aulis*. It could only be achieved through keeping the audience engaged and, with minimal stage set and effects, the bulk of that engagement would be through the dialogue - the language. So while we edit the vast majority of obscure terminology, the students like to retain elements of the (usually) Victorian translations: so words such as *thee* and *thou* are retained throughout. I was asked by Professor Edith Hall why this was the case and why we didn't modernise the entire text, and the simple answer was that this was the students' choice and they felt that the 19th century English provided the balance required for the play to retain its distinction and prestige in spite of the high level of editing.

We are also careful that the Chorus will provide both an exposition and an ongoing commentary; but the background to the story / backstory is what often needs editing or excising completely. What the students latch onto in the plays is the interaction between child and parent, or the relationships between the parents. This is unsurprising as these are the sort of relationships that are central to their world. Greek drama is full of startling sets of these relationships. The plot is properly 'character in action' and the key decisions central characters make dictate the way the plot moves. In tragedy that means towards the demise of the tragic hero. Plot is therefore vital. With this in mind the

exposition can be cut and replaced with something more simple and straightforward. A few paragraphs of summary in the programme notes can eliminate whole swathes of Chorus lines or you could be really smart and invite an expert / academic to come along and give an entertaining pre-performance talk. We were delighted to host Professor Hall to introduce our *Iphigenia at Aulis* with a highly engaging talk. Incidentally, this has the added bonus of providing extra incentive for classics departments from other schools to attend your play and boost the audience numbers...and the takings!

Once we think we have adequately edited the script, the real test comes in rehearsals:

'How do I pronounce 'Dana? What does it actually mean?'

'They were a tribe who originated in Egypt and established themselves in the provinces, integrating with the Greeks.'

'So they were Greeks then.'

'Er, yes. I guess so.'

'Can I just say Greeks then?'

It's familiar language and the students are therefore more confident in its delivery. So we go through the script again, making more amendments. This may happen multiple times until we achieve something that not only generates confidence in the students' delivery but, with luck, allows them to highlight and recreate the areas of value that were important to the ancient author. While a translation will by its very nature prevent the student of Classics from comprehending the full creative power of the ancient author, we can still grasp and present the problems with which the original writer was faced. While I would never dismiss or underplay the value of learning an ancient language, I would argue that a well-presented production in translation can open new and wider horizons of ancient culture to our students (and audience!) than hour upon hour of exhausting study of texts in the original tongue.

A question frequently raised is 'when does a translation become an adaptation?' An interesting line of thought on this is that adapting an ancient text to the times in which we live and to the culture that we belong to, for many of us, the most

effective kind of translation. A teacher or director would need to have studied the text in sufficient depth really to penetrate its core purpose and be able to reincarnate these in a new and relevant way. We have no problem watching Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet* (Luhrmann, 1996) or any other Shakespeare presented in modern dress as Shakespeare is universal to all times. Students of all ages love this film and it has probably done as much to promote present-day student engagement with Shakespeare as most of the original texts combined. Is it more acceptable to translate from early-modern English into modern English than it is from ancient Greek to modern English? Many would successfully argue that Shakespeare is to be revered as much as Euripides and Sophocles so is it the perceived 'sacredness' of the ancient Greek language that has the Classics purists cringing at the very thought of translation? Language is language and while most cultures attach a degree of pride to their native tongue, I'm certain that the Greeks would be more proud of the ideas, philosophy and art forms generated through their language than of their language itself, and in the Classical Civilisation classroom it is these elements of their culture that we strive to impart to our students...of all abilities! Provided our ancient texts contain something that is universal, I'm sure their writers would be delighted that 2000 years later, their works have transcended barriers of geography, time and language.

Prior to preparing this article, I sought counsel from our Head of Drama who has been highly involved with all our Classics productions and has spent many years working in both amateur and professional theatre. He is adamant that translators should collaborate with playwrights and / or directors when working on ancient texts as the language can be tailored to the specific production just as say a musical score would be written to fit a film. There is also the issue perhaps that these plays were meant to be performed rather than read, as were Shakespeare's, and that 'stage eye' is needed. Tony Harrison's translations / stage adaptations of the *Oresteia* (1983) and *Lysistrata* (1964) are cases of a poet / playwright's take on the plays, breathing new life in to them for contemporary audiences. To reinforce this assertion, there exists a claim that the best translations are rarely made by professed scholars as they bring too much knowledge to the table and

their literary instinct will be influenced by years of research and various interpretations of an original text. This will in effect distort the meaning of the translation from the original in any case as we arguably know more about the Peloponnesian War for example than Aristophanes ever did, and we have the benefit of far more research into the psychology of women who kill their children than was available to Euripides.

As a teacher, I am a great believer in context. If we cannot explain to a student

why they are learning something, then there is little point in teaching it. Allow those with knowledge of theatre production to 'translate' the set and associated context, then give us literary and script translations that are easily accessible and relevant. Classics is for everyone.

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