

Reading and Performing Greek Plays: Ancient and Modern in Dialogue

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Round –Table: Ancient Drama and its Reception: National Cultural Perspectives

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Some Key Questions for participants (it would be useful to translate and circulate these in advance):

Who reads and performs Greek plays in Bulgaria today?

How do contemporary examples ‘fit’ with the history of Greek plays in Bulgaria?

Are there Greek plays that are especially significant in Bulgarian cultural tradition (eg *Antigone*, *Medea*)?

How does Bulgarian practice overlap with and differ from that in other national traditions and do readers and audiences have access to different examples?

In this contribution to the Round- Table discussion, I want to examine how the formal aspects and the performance contexts of ancient drama impact on modern readings and stagings of the plays and how the modern interpretations in turn shape perspectives on the ancient. The resulting interactions allow us to use the model of ‘dialogue’ between ancient and modern and I shall identify some of the most important areas in which ancient forms and modern readers, theatre practitioners and spectators ‘meet’ in conversation, expectation and sometimes in conflict. Areas in which ancient and modern meet include formal elements such as the *agon*, the Messenger speech, the lament, the Chorus and also thematic – suffering, war, humour.

Attitudes to the origins and cultural history of ancient Greek drama have pervaded national cultural traditions in a number of ways. These include theatrical origins and performance traditions, histories of scholarship (including that of classical more broadly) as well as the exploitation of Greek plays to address key political and cultural traditions. Sometimes the plays themselves have become virtual battlegrounds for working through senses of cultural and national identity and for the assertion of cultural and political values in the face of oppression (key examples are found in the recent cultural history of South Africa and of Ireland).

However, in contributing to the Round–Table I would like to present a slightly different perspective. **Research and documentation of the histories of Greek drama within national cultures are extremely important not just for the understanding of individual cultures but also for comparison between cultures.** The Greek plays are in that sense a resource held in common but interpreted and performed in different ways shaped by time, place and language as well as by the exigencies of events. I argue that in spite of the recent tendencies to appropriate Greek plays in particular cultural and political contexts, the agencies associated with theatre poetry and with the physicality of performance infuse modern readings and performances with energies that carry the ancient texts in spite of translocation and transformation. This occurs in spite of differences of language, place, culture and even of performance style and in spite of the fact that readers and spectators may not be consciously aware of the ancient modalities.

Performance on the modern stage:

Why is performing Greek drama still an attractive challenge for theatre practitioners worldwide? And why and how are different translations and versions created not only in each generation but also for different audiences and performance contexts? The persistence of these questions suggests that it is necessary to look to theatrical practice as well as to scholarship and theory in order to come up with some provisional responses.

Most modern performances of Greek drama are staged using translations. Of course there are exceptions, especially in Greece, and also in the 'Greek Play' traditions in a number of other countries (eg the Cambridge Greek play in the UK). However, most commercial and festival performances are in a vernacular. So translation is not only a means of communicating Greek material in non-classical languages but is also a significant means for transmitting understanding of the forms, conventions and idioms of the Greek theatre and for expressing the themes of the plays in ways that can be understood and internalised by audiences in the 'receiving' tradition.

Translation for and to the stage also involves participatory relationships of various kinds – directors, designers, actors, musicians, choreographers as well as writers, readers and spectators. So the term 'translation' has to reflect the different kinds of activity that shape the move from the ancient text and understanding of *its* language and contexts to a new work that can be performed in the receiving language and is attuned to the semiotics and contexts of the receiving theatrical environment and *its* artistic and social traditions. Performances have to have an immediate impact; one cannot 'reprise' during live performance and there is often a process of 'creative misremembering' that assimilates the performance into personal and group consciousness in ways that may be strongly divergent.

Yet performances also have their own histories – the narratives involved in their own creation and the histories of the individuals, groups, communities and traditions that have contributed (sometimes unknown to each other) to the generation and realisation of the performance. The academic as scholar may reflect in tranquillity on the origins and trajectories of the material that underlies the theatrical experience but this is a different experience from that of spectating, when immediacy is likely to be the dominant sensation.

Greek drama on the modern stage is recognised as a cultural and political phenomenon. The virtual explosion of productions that began in the 1950s and 60s and intensified in the last third of the 20th century shows little sign of abating. The evidence is being extensively documented including by research projects with published databases, for instance the European Network of Research and Documentation of Greek Drama, the Oxford Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama, the Open University Reception of Classical Texts Research Project and the Czech Academy of Sciences data base of modern Czech Theatre. To these must be added the research that has been developed in Bulgaria.

Herman Altena has noted the emergence of a 'canon' of international productions that receive most of the critical attention but has argued **the need for extensive**

comparative research on 'local' characteristics and differences, noting especially the range of approaches from the archaeological reconstructionist to post-modern and the importance of the audience as the realisers of meaning (H Altena, 'the Theater of Innumerable Faces' in (ed.) Justina Gregory, *A Companion to Greek Tragedy*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2005, pp 472 – 489, especially p 473)

Edith Hall in her introduction to the collaborative essay collection *Dionysus since 69* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004) identified Greek tragedy as 'a fertile place in which to explore cultural difference' (p 23).

There is growing debate among classicists and beyond about the question of *who* might be said to create the play-text. A few classicists translate for the stage – Walton, McDonald, David Wiles and Michael Ewans, who also directs. Modern dramatists who work directly from the Greek are few – Tony Harrison is an outstanding example. Others either make use of mediating literal translations (eg Frank McGuinness for his *Hecuba*) or use a range of scholarly translations (for instance Seamus Heaney's use of translations by Jebb and Lloyd - Jones for his version of the *Antigone*, *Burial at Thebes*, 2004). There is in some literary critics a slightly curmudgeonly sense that an adaptation may be good theatre but if done by non-classicists it is not Greek. Equally, there is a sense among some theatre practitioners that if the text is prepared by classicists it will not be good theatre. Of course, there are some distinguished hybrids who are at home in both spheres.

I view receptions of classical material on the modern stage as expressions of creative energy sited operating at the **intersection of traditions** and not as handed –down 'influences'. In analysing Greek plays translated for and to the modern stage I use a four-fold approach:

- close reading of text and performance
- sensitivity to other texts and performances alluded to by the creators (writers, directors, designers)
- awareness of ancient and modern contexts and the intervening 'migrations'
- exploration of the role of readers and spectators in realising meaning

I propose to explore this approach by focussing on an example of how meaning has been generated in modern performance in ways that both work with and change perceptions of the ancient play.

Example: Sophocles' *Antigone*

A particularly thought-provoking example, which raises question about both text and context, was the production of the *Antigone* in Cairo in 2002, directed by Frank Bradley of the American University in Cairo. The set was designed by Stancil Campbell and there was an original musical score by Ashraf Fouad. The cast was largely Egyptian. The play was initially performed in April 2002 (18th – 24th) and was then revived in the September (4th – 7th) as part of The Other Side of CIFET (Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre Fringe).

Recent theatre history contains some telling examples of audiences in North Africa who have seized on the resonances of Greek drama for their own situations. The most famous example is probably that of the production of Sophocles' *Electra*, performed in a Roman theatre in Algeria in 1966 when the country was newly independent from France. The staging was not specifically directed at the Algerian context but the implications of Electra's situation for the abuse of power, resistance by the oppressed and the long wait for redress and revenge sparked a tremendous response in the audience, which in a moment of recognition that fused past and present insights, rose in affirmation. The director, Antoine Vitez, recalled that 'The whole audience recognized in Electra their nation humbled, subjected to colonial rule, restored to life when hope seemed lost' (quoted and discussed in David Wiles, *Greek Theatre Performance: An Introduction*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp 189 -196).

Two points from this are particularly relevant – the director's aesthetic was very much opposed to making reductive correspondences with contemporary situations. The play was performed in France also and revived on several occasions with slightly different approaches and was in no sense a propaganda production. Thus set and design did not point the audience to draw analogues between their situation and that of Electra. The audience's construction of meaning was prompted by the theme, structure and poetry of Sophocles' play. The response may also have been fostered by the open-air setting, with its large audience emphasising solidarity and communal response. The second point is that in this particular point in their history the people of Algeria focussed on those aspects of the play that were concerned with suffering, oppression and the righting of wrongs rather than reflecting on the play's implications for understanding of the psychology of revenge and the coruscating personal and communal effects of a cycle of revenge with its violence and counter-violence.

Frank Bradley's direction of the *Antigone* in Cairo had in common with Vitez' *Electra* that Bradley holds back from imposing conceptual approaches. In an interview he commented:

'As a director, I prefer not to impose conceptual approaches which constrain a text; rather I prefer to dig into the text to allow a production concept to emerge, one which, I hope, will help illuminate a text at the same time that it allows the text to live. This I believe is what happened in *Antigone*' (Source: personal e mail, 2003).

The performances were created using Timberlake Wertenbaker's English version. This version, previously published in 1992 as part of her sequence *The Thebans (Oedipus Tyrannos,, Oedipus at Colonus and Antigone)* had originally been commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company and was performed at the Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon on 25 and 26 October 1991, directed by Adrian Noble and designed by Uitz. Although the publishers (Faber) billed the work as 'translated' by Wertenbaker she did not herself work directly from the Greek.(Wertenbaker is a distinguished playwright who has also written variations on other Greek themes, notably *The Love of the Nightingale* which reworks aspects of the story of Procne, Tereus and Philomela.) For *The Thebans* she worked in collaboration with the classicist Margaret Williamson and produced a text which followed quite closely the structure and formal elements of the Sophocles. Professor Williamson has described how she wanted Wertenbaker to reproduce in her version the Sophoclean multiplicity of meanings surrounding the key concept of *philia* – friendship, love, family bond, alliance – in order to convey how Sophocles continually played with the tensions between emotions, kinship and other alliances. However,

although she accepted the linguistic point, Wertenbaker refused because she thought it would confuse the audience, her point being that complexity makes bad theatre. (Sources: Notes from private conversations with MW; seminar given by MW on Intercultural Translation, University of Warwick, UK, 1998; discussion in Jan Parker, 'Profound Ambiguities in Sophocles' and Anouilh's *Antigone*' in edd. L Hardwick et al., *Theatre Ancient and Modern*, Milton Keynes, 2000, pp 125 – 135, at 126).

Yet arguably the dramatic structure of the play depends on the ambiguity between Antigone's insistence on a *philia* that privileges her duty to give burial rites to a dead brother and Creon's concept of a *philia* that creates bonds giving cohesion to a citizen community already devastated by stasis, civil war. It is Creon's 'tragedy' that construction of these bonds must be at the expense of family ties, his own as well as Antigone's. To lose this multiplicity of meanings is to reduce the dramatic stature of Creon and of the play. Wertenbaker's insistence that 'complexity makes bad theatre' encodes assumptions that modern audience tastes and capabilities differ fundamentally from those of the Greek.

Yet other aspects of Wertenbaker's version *did* follow Sophocles closely. Bradley also referred to the relationship between Wertenbaker's text and the setting and design of his production;

'The decision to set the play on, under, and around a bombed collapsed bridge arose from an exploration of images found in Wertenbaker's translation of Sophocles. Images of broken metal, hardness and brittleness permeate the text. Stancil Campbell's set came about as a result of studies of shapes based on recurring images that I had emphasized. We rigorously pursued these images to the point that the world they projected became specific and vivid' (Source: e mail interview with Bradley, 2003).

Let me give some examples from Wertenbaker's rendering of the opening Chorus Sophocles *Antigone* lines 100-154). Here the Chorus (in Sophocles the Chorus were Theban Elders, in Bradley's production a rather different group to which I will refer later) celebrate the sunrise that marks the end of the battle that saw the defeat of the invaders led by Polyneikes:

This army

Because of Polyneikes

Polyneikes and his dubious and many

Claims

Came clashing and clanging over our

Land...

Hovering

Over our roofs

No movement

Gaping mouth widening circle

Around our gates, teeth of bloody

spears.

(Wertenbaker published text p 94; Soph. *Ant.* Lines 106f.)

Wertenbaker's Chorus goes on to describe in strikingly physical language the reaction of Zeus to 'the haughty glint and clang of gold'; of the invader. Zeus' lightning streak hurls down the proto – victor:

The echo;

Thump

Crack

Twangs through ground

..They all splintered against his might

(Published text – pp 94 -5)

These images are picked up in the Third Chorus, in which

A seismic god

Shakes a house in his fist

And all end in the one word Wreckage (Published text, pp 111 – 113)

Wertenbaker's text creates a verbal image of an architectural structure in collapse, but its component parts are not bricks and mortar but metal and pride. Kreon elaborates on the images –

You should know that it is the hardest wills that collapse

Most easily. And that the hardest iron tempered in the

Hottest fire is most easily shattered

(Published text p 106)

Thus there was a direct line between Sophocles' language, Wertenbaker's version and Stancil Campbell's set design. Bradley did, however, make one radical departure from Sophocles:

'Sophocles writes a chorus of male Theban Elders. I cast a chorus of six women and a man. The man functioned as a kind of shadow Creon, a voice from the dark; the women were refugees who had been caught near the bridge when the bomb exploded. The casting allowed for an especially ironic interpretation of Sophocles most famous choral song 'Man' (Chorus #2). In addition, the casting of six women (one of whom at the beginning of Chorus #5, which we called 'The Song of the Mother' transforms into Jocasta) allowed for a distinctly feminist slant to the play (Source: Director's remarks, e mail, Feb. 2004). This departure from Sophocles was probably important in stimulating the reactions to the production by audience and critics. It gave an experiential impact to the images of physical contact with the land'. ('Wearing away, scratching' in Wertenbaker, p 102 , which resonates with the language of Sophocles' Greek lines 339 f.)

In Bradley's and Campbell's visualisation of the setting for the text, recent events had also played a part. On the Director's Notes to the Cairo production in 2002, Bradley commented –

When a year ago we chose to put *Antigone* in our season, the world seemed innocent. When last November [2001] we began discussing among ourselves the conceptual approach, September 11 had changed everything. Since beginning rehearsals in early March the world has gotten uglier, more despairing.....The Thebes you see a fallen city, ruined by war. In most *Antigones* I've seen, Thebes stands tall, cracked perhaps, but not broken. But we've seen so many fallen cities recently – Sarajevo, Kabul, Ramallah that it seems fitting to go ahead and admit that whatever was standing before is gone and that the rebuilding before us is not a matter of patching up cracks but of building new foundations., This is where *Antigone's* story begins – with what to do after the external war has ended and turned inside. How will we deal with the pieces, the corpses? [Sophocles'] 2,500 year old perspectivetells us that we cannot sacrifice our capacity to judge, to evaluate, even in the face of ideas that shake our foundations. We must accept our enemies, our dead'.

I have emphasized the way in which Wertenbaker's pared - down text directly incorporates those elements of Sophocles' language that stress visual and tactile images rather than conceptual complexity and ambivalence and have suggested that these fed directly into the expressive architecture and sharp visual shapes of the set design. They also, I think, fed indirectly into the changes Bradley made in the composition of the Chorus. These factors, together with the context of current events converged in the reactions of the audience and critics. Let me quote from the Review by Nehad Selaiha, author of major scholarly works on transcultural translation in the theatre and also theatre critic of *Al Ahram Weekly* (no 585, 9 – 15 May, 2002) –

'The scene facing me at the Falaki theatre was one of total devastation: the ruins of a city ravaged by war enveloped the stage, you could make out, high up, near the flies, what looked like a huge crane lying on its side, precariously perched on top of the slanting wall of a gutted-out collapsed building....Red light flickered here and there from underneath the rubble through the metal bars. Stancil Campbell's set, it seemed, had transported the Greek Thebes to the West Bank – to Jenin, Nablus and Ramallah'

Selaiha extended her observation to include the response of the audience –

'You could feel the whole auditorium tensing up and edging forward in their seats as Wiam El Tamami (a thin, pale *Antigone*, in jeans and black sweater) and Jasmin Sobhi (looking pathetically frail in a huge coarse shawl as *Ismene*) flitted through the ruins like tormented ghosts... when Kreon (Michael Guirgis) marched in, tall, fair and imposing in combat gear, to deliver his edict into the microphone from a podium (as if before TV cameras) with his queen Eurydike in a prim suit (like a typical first lady) and his son, Haemon, in uniform, standing at a discreet distance behind, smiling benignly, while photos of the corpses of Eteokles and Polyneikes were ceremoniously displayed to the viewers, the old Thebes took a stunning leap forward to the present'.

Selaiha went on to recall the almost subconscious impulse to identify *Antigone* with the contemporary female suicide bomber Wafaa Idris. She recognised the impact of the immediate context of the Arab-Israeli conflict in Palestine but also suggested that the production avoided giving a one-sided view of *Antigone* – 'however much sympathy this

Antigone provokes, one is never allowed to forget that the central conflict in the play is not a melodramatic one of good versus evil, but is, rather, one between two passionately held principles of right. While the production touches a raw nerve in its Arab audience, unwaveringly underlining the overweening confidence of Kreon and the intolerant arrogance of military power, it never allows them to sidestep the fact of the *equally destructive intolerance of the oppressed* [italics added]. When Antigone says to Kreon 'There is nothing that you can say/That I should wish to hear, as nothing I say/Can weigh with you', the hopelessness of the Arab/Israeli deadlock becomes the shared responsibility of both parties'.

Selaiha also picks up the impact of the Chorus of bereaved women wandering through the rubble of what was once their homes. She sees them as a visual and verbal counter-text to Kreon's despising statements about the role of women. They present a contrast to Kreon's attitude with which, she says, 'every peace-loving person on either side of the Palestinian/Israeli border could identify'. When Antigone says that her way is to share her love not share hate, Kreon replies that she can share her love among the dead. He will have no woman's rule while he lives (Wertenbaker p 108).

Selaiha is an insightful and liberal critic who sees theatre as a site for transforming awareness and developing commonalities of understanding. However, I think it is difficult for modern critics to recognise the religious conservatism of Antigone's stance, combined with its radical social and political implications. Here the ancient context helps. When Kreon denies burial to Polyneikes because he died 'Destroying the land', her response is 'None the less, Hades demands these observances' (Wertenbaker p 108) and she denies Kreon's rigid distinction between treatment due to friends and that due to enemies. In countering this, Antigone transgresses Greek social conventions as well as modern cultural politics, even though she also draws on the well-spring of religious tradition and respect for the dead. In Sophocles' world the kinship role of women in funeral ceremony was entrenched, even allowed for in the preliminaries (according to Thucydides in his preamble to his account of the public funeral for the war dead in the first year of the Peloponnesian War, Thuc Bk 2. 34 – 46, at 34) when the funeral and its ceremonies were taken over by the *polis*. The *Epitaphios Logos* attributed to Pericles was made famous by Thucydides but no less important was the taking over by the polis of responsibilities previously vested in families. This removed the inequalities of wealth and social status in the arrangements and prevented a potentially divisive public focus for grief.

Nevertheless, although in reinscribing the religious values that Kreon denied she willingly accepted, even chose, death for herself, Antigone was not the equivalent of a suicide bomber in that it was not part of her plan to take others with her. It was Kreon's actions that did that. As Tiresias says – 'The sun will not have completed many revolutions before you yourself will....pay heavily for making one who belongs above go down to those below' (Wertenbaker p 128; Sophocles II 1068 – 70).

I have already suggested that Wertenbaker's text did, however, shy away from communication of the subtleties of detail about the duty to *philoï*, thus loading the dice against Kreon. In that respect, the nuances of the Sophoclean voice were absent, but they *were* present in the translation of the language of hardness and brittleness, of gleaming and clanging, of stress and fracture. It was this language, meditated by Wertenbaker, that shaped the set and lighting design and colluded with the life experiences of the audience to produce the effects described by Selaiha. This was

intensified by Bradley's Sophoclean use of the Chorus, especially crucial in its emphasis – also Sophoclean – on shared survival.

A fuller audience response of the reflective kind desired by Selaiha would have needed a more complex Kreon. Current emotions were perhaps too raw and Wertenbaker's script too bare for the tensions and ambiguities in terms like *philia* and *dike* to be communicated and reflected on. Nevertheless, the focalisation offered by the Chorus suggested a revision of the concept of the commenting community which was in its way just as transgressive as the Sophoclean return of responsibility for religious observance to the sphere of women if it was rejected by the ruling male politicians. When I tried out this example in a discussion earlier this year, one participant tellingly observed that the Cairo spectators might just as well have seen Kreon's dilemma as one between tradition and modernity. They might have identified resonances with President Mubarak's regime in Egypt. Of course we cannot know but the point is a useful reminder that in Sophocles the debate is between members of the ruling class.

What then, do very different examples of the reception of the same play have in common? They share a sense of trust that the ancient plays offer something that is good to think with, good to work with and that they have the capacity to cross boundaries of time, place, culture and language. They provide examples of how the plays create an atmosphere for critical thinking. They share a capacity to transform awareness and expectations and bring the spectators (and participants) to the centre of the construction of meaning in specific contexts. Alternatively, I could equally well have cited examples in which directorial approaches and **repression of the dynamics of the ancient plays** have suppressed critical reflection (we might consider that in the discussion).

What I hope I have indicated is that productions of the plays continue to *matter*, sometimes in ways that are directly analogous to the experience they may have offered to spectators and participants in the ancient world, sometimes in different ways. It is the energy infused into and generated by this interaction between ancient forms and modern contexts that continues the dialogue – both with the past and between the participants in the present.