OCASO PRESS GREEK PAGES

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Previous Translations of Euripides' Medea

Coleridge and Murray

Since this may be the only fully rhymed version to have appeared since Gilbert Murray's translation of 1913, the translator needs to say something for readers unfamiliar with older conventions. Today's preference is for free verse, usually a rudimentary verse that purposely avoids interposing anything too literary between reader and text. Too finished a translation, it is thought, will not allow the authentic excellences of the original to shine through, an argument put by T.S. Eliot in his Euripides and Professor Murray essay. There is some merit in the view, as can be seen by comparing different renderings of lines 225-9, to which Eliot most objected in Murray's version:

E. P. Coleridge (1891)

But on me hath fallen this unforeseen disaster, and sapped my life;
ruined I am, and long to resign the boon of existence, kind friends,
and die. For he who was all the world to me, as well thou knowest,
hath turned out the worst of men, my own husband.

Gilbert Murray (1913)

But I —
This thing undreamed of, sudden from on high,
Hath sapped my soul: I dazzle where I stand,
The cup of all life shattered in my hand,
Longing to die — O friends! He, even he,
Whom to know well was all the world to me,
The man I loved, hath proved most evil.

Later Medea Translations: David Kovacs (1994/2001)

In my case, however, this sudden blow that has struck me has destroyed my life. I am undone. I have resigned all joy in life, and I want to die. For the man in whom all I had was bound up, as well I know — my husband — has proved the basest of men.

Diane Arnson Svarlien (2008)

My case is different. Unexpected trouble
has crushed my soul. It's over now; I take
no joy in life. My friends, I want to die.
My husband, who was everything to me—
how well I know it—is the worst of men.

Ocaso (C.J. Holcombe) Translation (2010)

But, friends, remember that this severing blow
has killed the happiness I used to know.
So grieved my spirit, it would follow on

to where my innocence in life has gone.
However be my world, it's not as then:
230. I know my husband as the worst of men.

The two prose versions are similar. Coleridge’s version is the more compact but very dated. Kovac’s is closer to contemporary idiom, though 'undone' has connotations of melodrama, and I want to die sounds a little peevish. Murray’s version has semantic problems. I dazzle should perhaps be I am dazzled, though dazzled is not the right word for numbing grief. The meaning of 'The cup of all life is shattered in my hand' is clear in context, but a rendering so free as to become an interpolation. 'Longing to die' is an orphan in the text.

Svarlien’s is a contemporary translation: clear, lively and intelligent, with impressive set of stated aims: to be faithful to the diction, tone, connotation, context, echo, image, euphony and image, and to render dialogue, lyric and anapaest sections by different English measures. Many students will find this a helpful approach, and not worry that the result is only nominally English verse. It is older readers who may miss the range and effectiveness of traditional measures, seeing the dialogue possibly as stress verse: five beats to the line, with a diction close to everyday speech, making for naturalness but not poetry. The anapaest sections are again not strictly anapaests, but do give lines that can be vigorously chanted: e.g. lines 89-91 in Kovac’s numbering:

Hurry up now and get yourselves inside the house—
but don’t get too close to her, don’t let her see you:
her ways are too wild, her nature is harmful. . .

The Chorus sections are generally prose fragments, but occasionally adopt metre and lyricism: lines 832-3 in Kovac’s numbering:

They say that there
the nine Pierian Muses once gave birth
to Harmony with golden hair.

Comparison of Renderings

As will be clear, Ocaso Press's rendering tries to do something different, not replicate features of the original, but create something that works in the English literary tradition as Euripides does in the Greek.

No translation carries over all the features of the original, and it may help to compare the trade-offs made by various renderings. If we take lines 1057-69 in Kovac’s numbering, part of that repetitious, disputed passage where the hitherto resolute Medea seems to lose her way:

Gilbert Murray

Ah, Ah, thou Wrath within me! Do not thou.
Do not. . . . Down, down, thou tortured thing, and spare
My children! They will dwell with us, aye, there

Far off, and give thee peace. Too late, too late!
By all helps living agonies of hate.
They shall not take my little ones alive
To make their mock with! Howsoe'er I strive
The thing is doomed; it shall not escape now
From basing. Aye, the crown is on the brow.
And the robe girt, and in the robe that high
Queen dying.
I know all. Yet . . . seeing that I
Must go so long a journey, and these twain
A longer yet and darker, I would fain
Speak with them, ere I go.

Murray's language is of the period, and though rhyme is strictly observed, it does not lead or enforce the sense. Unity comes from the elevated diction and consistency of tone.

Diane Arnson Svarlien

Oh no, my spirit, please, not that! Don't do it.
Spare the children. Leave them alone, poor thing.
they'll live with me there. They will bring you joy.
By the avenging ones who live below
in Hades, no, I will not leave my children
at the mercy of my enemies' outrage.
Anyway, the thing's already done.
She won't escape. The crown is on her head.
The royal bride's destroyed, wrapped in her robes.
I know it. Now, since I am setting foot

on a path that will break my heart, and sending them on one more heartbreaking still, I want to speak to my children.

Here it is the undignified jumble of cliché that does the mischief. Medea is a semi-divine princess to whom the commonplaces of human decency do not apply: she needs to speak with the majesty of such an elevated being.

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Verse Choices for Meda Translation: Free Verse

Why not dispense with metre, as is common today, and write some form of free verse that gives the closest access to the original Greek? Because:

1. Any English translation that respects the features of the original Greek is likely to be as highly structured as its source, i.e. not free verse.

2. Greek tragedy belongs to the classical tradition, which expresses given truths in the public arena. Contemporary literature, by contrast, is commonly a retreat into the writer's consciousness — to make autonomous creations that incorporate diverse aspects of modern life (Modernism), or freewheeling creations constructed of a language that largely points to itself (Postmodernism). Free verse in its discontinuous prose varieties may be admirably suited to contemporary poetry, which often poses as individual voyages of discovery, but it renders universal truths with difficulty, if not abhorrence.

3. Good free verse with a convincing exactness of idiomatic expression, the lines seeming exactly right in the circumstances — appropriate, authentic and sincere — is exceedingly difficult to write. Most free verse today, claims notwithstanding, is a mixture of metered verse and prose, or a mosaic of prose fragments.

4. None of the free-verse translations of Greek tragedy known to me is very successful. One of the best is C.K. Williams' version of Euripides' The Bacchae: certainly very readable but not quite fish nor fowl. Lines 21-7 illustrate the mixture of verse and prose:

When I had taught my dances there, established
the rituals of my mystery, making
my divinity manifest to mortals.
I came to Greece, to Thebes, the first Greek city
I've caused to shriek in ecstasy for me,
the first whose women clothed in fawnskin and in
whose hands I've placed my ivy spear, the thyrus.

Blank Verse

Blank verse was the great standby in translation from classical languages, at least until recently, but tends to produce rather undistinguished lines if generated from prose translations. {5}

A safer approach is to work from the original, as has been done in these examples from Catullus:

(C1: 1-4) Whom else could I present little book
to, all the roughness pumiced off
but you, Cornelius, once kind enough
to think these little trifles worth your time?

(C63: 84-90) In anger so the goddess spoke, and loosed
forthwith the beast. It roared and tore away

and went on bounding through the thickets till
it reached the wet, soft margin of the sands
and saw frail Attis near the ocean waves.
It roared and went for him, when Attis fled
to wood's deep darkness, a perpetual slave.

(C101: 1-4) Over many seas and peoples I have come,
brother, bearing these sad funeral offerings,
to make a last obeisance to the dead
as though my breath could stir the silent ashes.

The range that blank verse commands should be apparent, but the difficulty with Euripides (besides the effort required from this translator, who is not a good linguist), is the perplexing nature of the original, the meaning over many stretches being a consensus of scholarly research and conjecture, i.e. not directly given to sympathetic reading.

Rhymed Verse

Heroic verse was popular on the eighteenth-century stage, but has been used infrequently since. What was adopted here is a little different — a more idiomatic diction, less noun and adjective inversion and fewer end-stopped lines — but does echo some of its strengths:

Serviceable:

The style can cope with practically everything, and even the most mundane thoughts become verse, avoiding the ever-waiting dangers of prose banality:

193. when clearly they could never quell the fire
of pain with dance and music of the lyre.

Neatness:

520. How hard to heal that grievous sin
that pits in battle kin with kin.

Power:

518. Great Zeus, if gold's so marked, why can't we see
the glint of counterfeit in husbands too?

Compactness:

1168. She got up, skipped about the room, to be
a queen delighting that her white feet made
an embassy for what the clothes displayed.

Pathos and lyricism:

1073. How sweet the touch is, and how soft the skin,
how fragrantly the breath wells up within.
Go in, my children, yes, now go away.
I cannot bear to look at you, but pay
the first instalment I must undergo
of endless torments that my actions sow.

Rhythmic subtlety:

57. In me Medea's grief has given birth
to troubles petitioning both heaven and earth.

Narrative ease:

1171. But as again the mirror turned to show
the long smooth tendons of the legs below
there came a change, a sudden change, and she
could feel her skin discolouring, and see
her legs begin to shake.

Equally apparent are the difficulties:

Rhyming couplets may appear artificial or contrived to readers unfamiliar with pre-Modernist styles. So the following, which is neat but hardly colloquial:

51. Recounting troubles to your own tired ears
has left Medea's service in arrears.

Over-regular

The translation lacks the variety of the original Greek, particularly in the Chorus sections.

Over-controlled

The prose meaning has to be entirely recast to meet the couplet form, usually some process of rearrangement, contraction and expansion. The odd phrase is sometimes left out, or a simple phrase expanded inordinately. An extreme instance, here to make the speech equal in line length to the original, is:

201. It is the feast's abundance fills their thoughts,
and that forgetfulness which pleasure courts
until the very sense of it is lost.

Professor Kovac's prose translation simply runs:

The abundance of the feast at hand provides mortals with its own pleasures.

Verse Quality

In summary, this translation runs smoothly, but rarely rises to the compelling inevitability we expect of poetry. Though it's not difficult to go beyond what the text strictly says, the rendering then becomes more the translator's play than Euripides'. In general, matters are left in the middling position illustrated by this couplet, clear but restrained by rhyme needs:

47. still young, they're simply led in their beliefs,
and do not dwell too much on other's griefs.

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