

TEACHING GREEK TRAGEDY IN TRANSLATION: A CONSOLIDATED APPROACH

J.H.D. Scourfield, University of the Witwatersrand

In a recent issue of *Akroterion* both D.B. Lombard and Margaret Mezzabotta suggest ways in which Greek tragedy might be taught to the Greekless student.⁽¹⁾ Lombard's interest is in dramatic composition; his aim is to demonstrate to the student, through examination of Aeschylus' *Libation-Bearers* and the *Electra* plays of Sophocles and Euripides, how important consideration of the way in which a dramatist handles given mythical material is to interpreting and understanding his play. Mezzabotta, who is concerned with drama students, stresses the visual dimension of tragedy. These approaches are not mutually exclusive. But each considers only a part of the picture. In this paper I wish to take a broader view: to attempt to identify the main problems in teaching Greek tragedy to students who know no Greek and, in doing so, to suggest remedies. I write with the South African context particularly in mind, but much of what I have to say should also be relevant to the teaching of Greek tragedy elsewhere. Equally, some of the points I make will also be relevant to teaching tragedy in the original.

That Greek tragedy is a fit subject for university study, in the original or in translation, I hope need not be argued. It is, in my view, one of the most important literary products of the ancient world, and, for that matter, of the whole of European civilisation. It possesses enormous power to enlarge our sensibilities and enrich our lives. Yet it is complex and difficult, even for the professional scholar who has a thorough knowledge of the Greek language and is well versed in Greek literature and thought. It is difficult not merely because we know so little about its origins and its function in society, but because the Greek view of the world is so unlike our own, and because the nature of the drama itself is unlike almost anything familiar to us from the modern theatre. Let us not, then, underestimate the difficulties for the non-expert.

For the purposes of this paper my non-expert will be an average first-year student, about eighteen years old, reading for a B.A. degree at a South African university. Such a student is likely to enrol for his or her course in a state of considerable ignorance about the ancient world. Here is the first problem. Not only will our student, in all probability, know nothing about Greek drama; he or she will also have little or no knowledge of the cultural context within which Greek drama belongs, and that is a serious handicap to understanding and appreciating it.

There are perhaps two main reasons for this situation. The first is obvious. The ancient world does not figure large in school curricula. Greek has almost totally vanished. Latin has become very much a minority subject. Classical Civilisation, Classical Studies without Greek or Latin, has not emerged as

(1) D.B. Lombard, "Teaching Greek Tragedy in Translation, with Reference to the Dramatic Adaptations of the Orestes-Saga by Aeschylus and Sophocles", M. Mezzabotta, "Greek Tragedy for Drama Students: a Practical Approach", *Akroterion* 31 (1986), 13-21 and 22-5 respectively.

a separate item of study. The one glimmer of light is that efforts are being made to have Latin set within the context of its society, not taught as a language divorced from it.⁽²⁾

The second reason is that the media in South Africa - that is, radio and television - perform only the barest educative function. Documentaries, discussion programmes, historical dramas, quizzes, are rare or of generally low quality. Young people are given neither material nor stimulation to expand their horizons. One result of this, vital for the Classicist to observe, is that, given the overwhelming concentration in school history syllabuses on South African history, wider historical perspectives and a sense of depth in time are, in many students, poorly developed.

The degree of influence which universities, and individual university teachers, can exert to put right these shortcomings is probably very slight. Closer links can of course be forged with schools, and to open up the Classical world to pupils in senior years, visiting them with talks and slide shows, or inviting them to open days in university Classics departments, can be of enormous value. But until much greater provision is made in school curricula for cultural studies of Antiquity, we cannot take for granted any background knowledge in university students taking a first-year course in Classical Civilisation, where I anticipate their meeting Greek tragedy for the first time.

The first requirement is clearly to fill this gap. The student will need two things above all: some knowledge of the history and culture of the fifth century, and some knowledge of Homer. **Eumenides**, for example, demands to be viewed in the context of contemporary Athenian politics, **Trojan Women** against the background of the Peloponnesian War. To appreciate **Ajax** or **Philoctetes** one must know something both about the Greek campaign against Troy and about heroic shame-culture values. Even **Medea**, in certain respects a strikingly modern and easily apprehensible play, cannot be fully understood without reference to Homer: **Medea's** actions have to be explained at least partly in terms of her personality, which possesses distinctly heroic characteristics.⁽³⁾

Now it is possible to interweave the interpretation of a tragedy with the cultural and historical information necessary for interpreting it; the latter does not have to be supplied in advance. Indeed, at the University of the Witwatersrand Classical Civilisation students are first introduced to the genre in a course component which takes five fifth- and fourth-century texts, including two tragedies, uses them as raw material for exploration of the thought-world to which they belong, and at the same time interprets the texts in the light of this thought-world.⁽⁴⁾ A component in the history of the period is taught concurrently. It is helpful, however, to be able to presuppose all this if the students proceed to further and more detailed study of tragedy. They are so equipped at Wits, where a unit in Greek tragedy forms a quarter of the second-year Classical Civilisation course. As for Homer, the *Iliad* is the first ancient text to be taught in the Classical Civilisation sequence.

(2) The Classical Culture component of the Latin syllabus introduced by the Transvaal Education Department for implementation in 1985 (Standards 6 to 9) and 1986 (Standard 10) forms an important part of the course, accounting for 25% of the total marks in matric, and a higher proportion in earlier years. Regrettably the history syllabus ignores ancient history almost completely.

(3) Cf. e.g. P.E. Easterling, "The Infanticide in Euripides' **Medea**", and B.M.W. Knox, "The **Medea** of Euripides", *YCS* 25 (1977), 177-91 and 193-225 respectively.

(4) For the approach see my article "Life, the Universe, and Everything: an Intellectual History of Greece for the Innocent", in a forthcoming issue of **Acta Academica** (University of the Orange Free State).

In the preface to **The Discarded Image** C.S. Lewis, noting the problems involved in reading medieval and renaissance literature with constant reference, at points of difficulty, to commentaries and other works of explication, expressed the hope that "if a tolerable (though very incomplete) outfit were acquired beforehand and taken along with one, it might lead in (to the literature concerned)."⁽⁵⁾ **The Discarded Image** is designed to be such an outfit. It seeks to describe the medieval conception of the universe, the model which medieval man took for granted and which underlies his literature: the medieval way of looking at the world, in other words: E.M.W. Tillyard's **The Elizabethan World Picture**⁽⁶⁾ performs a similar function for Shakespeare and his contemporaries. This is the sort of thing we should attempt to supply to the beginner or near-beginner in the study of Greek tragedy.

At the same time there is something which needs to be extracted; that is, an attempt must be made to erase as far as possible Judaeo-Christian preconceptions. One of the persistent difficulties I have encountered in teaching Greek tragedy is that students expect the attitudes of gods and men to match those of the God of the Bible and of people who, whether believing Christians or not, profess an essentially Christian public morality. Aphrodite's careless use of Phaedra as an instrument of punishment in **Hippolytus**, Athene's gleeful encouragement to Odysseus to exult over Ajax's fate in Sophocles' play, Dionysus' treatment of Pentheus (and Agave) in **Bacchae**: these acts are found the more distasteful because they are not what our society leads us to expect of divinity. Equally, some of the attitudes of human characters towards each other, and particularly the "heroic" notion, so familiar from Homer, that one should do good to one's friends and harm one's enemies, seem highly distasteful to many. Above all, there is a tendency to regard as admirable only those qualities of which a Christian society would approve, such as compassion and forgiveness. Hippolytus redeems his sanctimonious priggishness in the touching scene of reconciliation with Theseus which closes the play. Ajax, on the other hand, cannot be great because he displays neither remorse for his attack on the Greeks nor sympathy for his family; he prefers to die in bitterness and hatred. A correction factor must be applied to these moral prejudices, and the expectations to which they give rise.

So much for background. What of the problems of teaching in translation? The language and syntax of Greek tragedy are often difficult, especially in lyric passages. Should one then opt for a fairly literal prose translation, or for a freer rendering in verse? My inclination is always to go for a verse translation, as the higher level of diction will communicate to the student something of the tone of the original, and the difficulties of syntax, almost always more apparent in verse than in prose, will also be an indication that we are not dealing with straightforward, everyday language. A bad verse translation is of course worse than anything, but there are some English translations readily available which are good or at least adequate for an undergraduate's needs.⁽⁷⁾

But few, if any, ancient texts can be taught satisfactorily without occasional reference to the original. Little can be done to compensate for the fact that certain words and phrases in any translation are bound to awaken modern associations alien to the Greek text, but this is not as damaging as concealment in the modern language of important concepts apparent in the Greek. Let me give two examples.

(5) **The Discarded Image: an Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature** (Cambridge, 1964), p. ix.

(6) London, 1943.

(7) Though the translations vary in quality, **The Complete Greek Tragedies**, eds. D. Grene and R. Lattimore (9 vols., Chicago, 1953-9), is perhaps the most useful collected edition. It is this that I prescribe, and from this that the quotations from **Hippolytus** and **Antigone** below are taken.

"My Goddess Mistress, I bring you ready woven
 this garland. It was I that plucked and wove it,
 plucked it for you in your inviolate meadow...
 Its gardener is the spirit Reverence who
 refreshes it with water from the river.
 Not those who by instruction have profited
 to learn, but in whose very soul the seed
 of Chastity toward all things alike
 nature has deeply rooted, they alone
 may gather flowers there! the wicked may not."

(Euripides, **Hippolytus**, 73-81)

So Hippolytus to Artemis. If at first sight it looks straightforward enough, one should beware. "Reverence" and "Chastity" render αἰδώς and σωφροσύνη respectively, but neither is an equivalent. αἰδώς - an important concept in this play - is more than "reverence". "It is αἰδώς that prevents a man from breaking the taboo - αἰδώς, the feeling of "not quite liking" which inhibits his natural self-assertion or self-seeking in the face of the requirements of morality and the like".⁽⁸⁾ Equally, σωφροσύνη, while often used in the sense of mastery over sexual desire, is a word of wider connotation, something like "self-control" or "restraint", though it is a more positive quality than these words suggest.⁽⁹⁾

Secondly, Sophocles, **Antigone**, 7-8:

"And now, what of this edict which they say
 the commander has proclaimed to the whole people?",

which renders

'καὶ νῦν τί τοῦτ' αὖ φασὶ πανδήμῳ πόλει
 κήρυγμα θεῖναι τὸν στρατηγὸν ἀρτίως;'

πανδήμῳ πόλει: "the whole people"? To translate without including a word for πόλις must be a serious blunder in this play, in which the notion that one should be loyal to the πόλις is of great importance. An Athenian audience may have thought of their own city; it has been suggested⁽¹⁰⁾ that the word will for them have carried echoes of the Athenian democratic leader, ὁ προστάτης τοῦ δήμου.

Plainly, then, when the issue is important to the understanding of the play, reference will have to be made to the Greek text and the matter explained. This will also serve to remind the student that he is

(8) W.S. Barrett (ed.), **Euripides: Hippolytus** (Oxford, 1964), p. 171.

(9) Cf. Barrett, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

(10) By B.M.W. Knox, **The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy** (Sather Classical Lectures 35; Berkeley and London, 1964), pp. 82-3.

dealing with a translated text, not an original - a point which sometimes needs to be made fairly explicitly.

Textual explication of this kind should come easily to those of us who learned Greek by traditional methods, and probably began our study of tragedy by concentrating our efforts on the language and syntax, and perhaps the metre, of a Euripidean play. We will have set out to understand the speeches and the stichomythia, and perhaps the choral odes; but I doubt whether we spent much time putting the play back where it belongs, in the theatre. In recent years there has been a healthy swing towards this approach ⁽¹¹⁾ and my belief is that in teaching Greek tragedy in the 1980s, especially to students without Greek, this is the best line to follow. In the first place, it reflects the truth that Greek tragedy is not merely a collection of texts but a performing art. What we possess - thirty-three plays, complete or almost complete, and a large number of fragments - is the residue of an art-form that thrived in Athens for a century or more and held an important place in its social and religious life. Secondly, we live in an increasingly visual age, where, despite widespread literacy, the image has come to dominate the written word. The cinema, television, videotapes are enormously popular; advertisers sell products at least as much by means of images as by means of captions; audio-visual presentations are a common tool in business promotions; in schools and universities photographic slides are a valued teaching aid. Students brought up in such a society are, it seems to me, more likely to respond positively to a visual approach in the teaching of ancient drama than to any other. Besides, a text can be taught from a philological viewpoint only in the original; and to attempt a purely literary reading of, let us say, **Agamemnon** in translation without seeking to visualise it in performance is seriously to diminish the possibility of both understanding and enjoyment. It is not only drama students who will benefit from the visual approach.

If, then, we believe that the meaning of a tragedy must be sought in the combination of its verbal and visual elements, where should our teaching of it begin? The obvious place is with the ancient theatre itself, its physical characteristics and conventions. Comparisons with modern theatre are only marginally helpful, partly because modern theatre is of such a heterogeneous character, and partly because we cannot rely on every student's being properly acquainted with it. Cinema is one thing, theatre quite another, and opera, which in certain respects offers the closest resemblance to Greek tragedy the modern world can provide, is almost completely unknown to most. The Greek theatre must be taken by itself and described fully and accurately, with the assistance of plans or photographs or slides of the great sites such as Epidaurus. We have to draw attention to the absence of a stage as such, describe the σκηνή and its functions, say something about the ἐκκύκλημα and μηχανή and common stage-properties such as altars, statues, and tombs. We have to stress the size of the theatre and its probable implications for movement and gesture, point out the effects of wearing masks, and so on.

After this it makes sense to discuss the context in which the plays were performed, their association with the festivals of Dionysus. The abiding interest of many students in ancient religious belief may predispose them to suppose that the performance of a play at a Dionysiac festival was (like the dithyramb) an act of worship in itself. Such misconceptions need to be prevented or quickly dispelled; at the same time we must underline the essentially religious character of much tragedy, dealing as it does with the relationship between man and the supernatural powers, the gods and destiny.

(11) Mezzabotta, p. 25, gives a brief bibliography of some of the more important work. Oliver Taplin's **Greek Tragedy in Action** (London, 1978), deserves special mention: anyone embarking on the study of Greek tragedy would be well advised to begin with this book.

Then the formal structure of tragedy. Much confusion and unclarity can be avoided if the basic framework of a play is understood. Oliver Taplin's analysis of the structural framework,⁽¹²⁾ jettisoning the Aristotelian outline, dividing the play simply into acts and act-dividing choral songs, and regarding entrances and exits as pivotal points in the action, is enormously helpful. It is of course highly schematic, but it is against such a blueprint that a play's significant structural features can be most easily recognised and their importance best assessed.

After the provision of this external and internal background, the student should be in a position to read a play with some degree of understanding. Yet even now there must be caution, for translations in common use are frequently misleading in their interpolated stage directions. The handling of Clytemnestra's entries and exits in the Grene-Lattimore **Agamemnon**, for example, is appalling. We are to suppose that she first enters not at the end of the first act-dividing song, but during the anapaests that introduce it, only to stand in silence for 180 lines; that she does not depart at 354 (or 350), the end of the second act, but hangs around inconsequentially while the chorus sings another ode and the herald newly arrived from Troy ignores her; and that she "comes forward" to deliver a speech at 587, and "goes to the back of the stage" at 614 when it is done.⁽¹³⁾ To take on trust the stage directions of an editor or translator can be a risky matter.

This apart, the student will now be equipped to switch the text mentally into three dimensions. The words need to be seen as the tip of the iceberg. One has to imagine the music and dance of the chorus, conjure up the vocal intonation of the actors, their stances, gestures, movements, and physical interaction, consider what use the dramatist might have made of the space of the theatre.⁽¹⁴⁾ The limitations of a purely verbal approach should be plain in an age so conscious of body language.⁽¹⁴⁾ A play is something to be communicated, and communication cannot be reduced to words alone.

Equally, the student should be encouraged to develop an awareness of other kinds of visual significance, particularly, perhaps, that of stage-properties, which in Greek tragedy are not so numerous that we can afford to regard them casually.⁽¹⁵⁾ The red draperies across which Agamemnon walks to his death in Aeschylus' play are perhaps the most suggestive prop in the whole tragic corpus; but I wonder how many traditionally-trained scholars first read the play without so much as registering their existence? The blindness of conventional teaching is something we have to guard against.

(12) See **The Stagecraft of Aeschylus: the Dramatic Use of Exits and Entrances in Greek Tragedy** (Oxford, 1977), pp. 49-60, and **Greek Tragedy in Action**, pp. 19-21.

(13) For discussion of her movements in this first part of the play see Taplin, **The Stagecraft of Aeschylus**, pp. 280-302.

(14) A topical illustration of the importance of body language in communication came my way as I was preparing the original version of this paper (see n. 18). An editorial in the **Financial Mail** of 6 September 1985 (vol. 97 no. 10), pp. 36-8, included a psychiatrist's analysis of a speech delivered by an eminent politician at the recent National Party Congress in Natal. According to this analysis the politician's words were belied by his body language. Words and movement can tell different stories simultaneously.

(15) Taplin, **Greek Tragedy in Action**, pp. 77-100, offers an illuminating discussion of the importance of particular stage properties in the plays under his scrutiny.

In this article I have sought to sketch a method of teaching Greek tragedy in translation which will both stimulate the student and satisfactorily equip him to appreciate a play. It remains to draw attention to one commonly advanced criticism of the genre which no teacher can afford to ignore. On first meeting Greek tragedy, students are often struck, and disappointed, by the lack of action and the slow pace of development. The most rapid sequence in surviving tragedy is probably the second half of **Libation-Bearers**, but even this cannot compete with what can be found on the cinema screen. Here, as elsewhere, we have to contend with the problem of expectation. If you are used to Sylvester Stallone, you may not think much of **Prometheus Bound**. To appreciate Greek tragedy one has to acquire a quite different feeling for time, to be prepared for a gradual increase in tempo and a gradual heightening of tension, as in a Wagner opera ⁽¹⁶⁾ or a dramatic oratorio by Handel. Handel's **Hercules** is as dramatic a work as one could wish for; but the drama is internal rather than external, and the composer will not be hurried. No more could Sophocles, in **Women of Trachis**, on which **Hercules** is based, ⁽¹⁷⁾ and in the case of both, as with all art, the novice needs to be guided by those who, if their understanding is imperfect, know at least where improvement may be sought. ⁽¹⁸⁾

(16) Wagner, indeed, was a great admirer of Greek drama, and of Aeschylus in particular. M. Ewans, **Wagner and Aeschylus: the "Ring" and the "Oresteia"** (London, 1982), argues that the **Ring** cycle was deeply influenced by Aeschylus' trilogy.

(17) On the treatment by Handel and his librettist, Thomas Broughton, of Sophocles' play, see W. Dean, **Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques** (London, 1959), pp. 414-19. Dean is, however, somewhat hard on Sophocles.

(18) An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the Annual General Meeting of the Transvaal branch of the Classical Association of South Africa on 21 September 1985.