Practitioners Voices in Classical Reception Studies

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in interview with Lorna Hardwick
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LH Ian I'd like to start off by asking you about your general approach to the place of translations in the study of classical texts and how you would set about using and evaluating them.

IR In some ways the translation is, I suppose, necessary rather than useful, certainly from the point of view of a university teacher in classics, given that most of our students here in Glasgow do access the classics more through translations - they're a fact of life. I think there are different criteria that one uses in selecting and evaluating them – it does depend on what you're trying to do with them. There are big differences between performance texts and texts you might want to study. And I think something our students get very anxious about is what they lose by not having access to the original text and a number of them, particularly as they go on actually, get quite alarmed about what they are missing by using the translations, and so part of it is actually about giving a sense of security to the students when we teach with them. But that's very different from seeing a performance.

LH: As far as the students are concerned do you encourage them to compare different translations – translations dating from different literary periods? Or do you find that makes them more alarmed?

IR [Laughs] I think it does. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't do it. There are some courses here where that happens. It's not something I've spent a great deal of time here doing, though I have in the past. I think a sense of discomfort and alarm is always good in a student, to some extent, as long as there is always a support network around it. This is something we tend to talk about explicitly in trying to thrash out what you can and can't do with a text and translation, and what kinds of translation and looking actually at the sort of translation you've got in front of you. Because students get access to, I mean even on just the drama course, to the difference between say a Penguin, and Oxford World Classics and the Loeb. The Loeb Aristophanes – the students say 'we think this is the best translation', which is probably actually true in some ways… for a complete set. I think they feel quite secure with it, they know what's going on.

LH I'm very interested in this question of the balance between security, and raising literary and cultural awareness and so on. When you're choosing a translation to work on, with beginning students especially, do you go for something which seems to have an identity of its own in literary terms, a value in literary terms, or are you looking for something that closely follows the ancient text.

IR I suppose I tend to follow more the ones that tend to have a close relationship to the original text. And it's also partly because I have anxieties about classical texts where, shall we say, there is a definite literary identity. I mean, maybe the Fagles translation is good example where there is. We had a dispute in the department recently, about the text which should be used for Homer, about whether it should be Fagles or whether one of the more literal ones. I think Michael Silk's made some arguments about translation and the idea that a faithful translation doesn't necessarily mean it's a literal translation, and I have a lot of sympathy for that idea, but it's actually finding the ones that are faithful in that way, and that's the problem.

LH Yes, and it then requires more sophistication from students, and more experience from students, to actually be able to discuss those kinds of more nuanced issues.

You mentioned just now that performance translations of drama raised additional issues – what do you think the most important of those are?

IR I think there is a tendency in the production of Greek drama to be archaeological in the approach, which is a bit odd when it's on a proscenium arch stage, but still…. If it's going to be a piece of living drama for a contemporary audience then it needs to be in some kind of relationship with contemporary stage vernacular, or stage rhythms or idioms. To be honest, it's not something I thought immensely about, until I started to get involved in this project and when it became much clearer to me that seeing a translation on stage is very different to seeing a living play on stage, and I think that's what a performance text needs to be aiming at. And that may mean being quite violent to the actual literal syntax, and the literal translation in order to create something that

sounds like English. And not a periodic latin-esque English, which has its tradition in English, but is not really the current vernacular.

LH You've talked about the particular project you've been involved with, which was your work with the David Greig playtext of *The Bacchae* which took the Edinburgh Festival by storm, last year, in 2007. How did you get involved in doing the translation for that?

IR Well, the director , John Tiffany, is an old student of the department, and phoned up Dr. Knox, one of my colleagues here, and said 'do you remember me?' in a slightly sheepish ex-student way, and 'would anyone be interested in doing a translation' and Ronald sent me, as the drama person, an email saying would you be interested, saying no-one else would be, which is rather odd as I don't see why no-one would be interested, particularly with the National Theatre of Scotland, given its role in …. I mean it's really quite high profile in Scotland. It's really awfully important.

LH And David Greig had done previous work with Greek drama.

IR Yes, although I have to confess I had never seen a David Greig before this time out. So I didn't know his previous work because I don't think he'd used a commissioned literal translation previously.

LH So you expressed interest in participating – what happened then?

IR Oh, we met for coffee, we had a long coffee, I met David and John together to talk about what their aims were in doing the play. I think that was in fact the single most important meeting we had. It was about an hour and a half – talking about John's ideas particularly, for the play, and David talked about what he needed, as a writer. And he was saying that at that point he didn't particularly have a clear idea of what he wanted to do with the *The Bacchae*.

LH Right, because he doesn't have Greek presumably?

IR No.

LH Was he fairly familiar with the play?

IR Well, he knew the play pretty well when we talked, and there were a number of issues around some of the contextual stuff about Greek drama…and historically… and one of the things they kept saying, they really stressed, when we met, is that they wanted to be authentic, they wanted to be faithful and they wanted to be as close to the spirit of it as they could be. And to what it would have been like to watch Greek drama without it being an archaeological activity.

LH So the relationship with the audience would be an important part of the translation, both in terms of communication and also in terms of providing a sort of analogue with the relationship between the Euripides and the Athenian audience?

IR Yes, very much, and it's a modern analogue for Greek drama, particularly with the Chorus. They needed a translation quite soon, so that the composer could get to work on the lyrics … or get to work on the music to go with the lyrics for the Chorus. I think that was one of the things that attracted me to the project …. I mean I hadn't committed myself until we actually met … that it was going to be a full scale musical production as well as a dialogue. That really did attract me to it.

LH What sort of time-scale did you have to work to?

IR It must have been the beginning of January or beginning of February. I'd made certain over-optimistic claims about how quickly I could do it …. thinking I could knock it off in maybe 10 weeks … but it took a little bit longer. I mean, as far as I recall, it was something like April, and I didn't get it to them until May.

LH What then happened about the rehearsal process … were you also involved in that and were there any adaptations that had to be made in terms of your translation to Greig's acting script to what the actors actually worked with?

IR When David emailed me a couple of times to query some stuff, particularly the sewing up in the thigh, which he got very, kind of, anxious about, is this true, and is this actually right, and what does it mean, and why. I think I referred to Dodd's analysis of this and so on, and then we had another meeting in Edinburgh, at the Traverse, where we talked about the draft that David had come up with, and we talked about some of the issues arising from that. Particularly David and

John were both anxious about … they were very anxious that it would get trashed by classicists in some ways. There was a certain sense in which they wanted a 'bill of health' I suppose … or at least if they were going to get into trouble for it then it was for things they were prepared to get into trouble for. And we had a long discussion about *thyrsus* and the translation for *thyrsus*, which David went for as Bacchic spear, and it was making some of the innuendo a bit more explicit than it is in the text. But they were aware of that and that was one of the things they wanted to be clear about – that what they had done to the text was … what they thought they had done to the text if you see what I mean.

LH Some of which presumably might have been for theatrical reasons…

IR Oh yes, they said that for a contemporary audience they felt it needed to be slightly more upfront than it would be in the original text and that was really a translation from one tradition to another than an attempt to recast it.

LH You mentioned this question of directors and writers slightly looking over their shoulders at what the classics establishment might say. Which actually I find incredible, because surely theatre practitioners do what they do…

IR Well, partly it's John Tiffany's relationship with the department, and he wanted to do Greek drama because he wanted to show how it should be done rather than necessarily how he'd been taught it. Perhaps it's this idea of authenticity…. which is not the same as, shall we say, what critics would expect of Greek drama.

LH Yes!

IR I think that was one of the things they were very clear on. That they wanted to strip away a lot of the, kind of, baggage around Greek drama and go back to something as close to what it was. So, yeah, not in an archaeological spirit but in its analogical spirit, and in that sense it was useful for them to have that kind of 'bill of health' shall we say.

LH Yes, I can see that. But surely in the end some of the decisions had to be theatrical and aesthetic? For instance, I wanted to ask you about when you were dealing with areas of the text that were problematic or corrupt, particularly the epiphany of Dionysus, and so on. I mean, you can't sort of flag up a surtitle saying well, for academics … it has to stand on its own. How did you set about deciding what do over such things?

IR Well, it must be one of the most heavily footnoted translations in history! I'd never done a literal translation before and I didn't know what they expected… so, it's not going to win any prizes I think as a translation in its own merit, but I kept very closely to the lines, and also even the word order in some places, as far as it made sense in English. I tried to keep the word order and the emphasis of the original text, and also there are a number of points where I just couldn't translate it literally because it wouldn't actually make sense. And so there are extensive footnotes which say 'this is what it actually says… what it actually means' and so on. I translated all the extant fragments as well, and so they had all that material as well as the existing text, at the end of the play. And also fairly extensive notes on what we think happens there, and why, and so on. They did cut the ending quite radically, well not radically, but they did cut quite a lot out of the ending.

LH So you were in a sense also acting as an academic advisor, and interpreter, as well as translator.

IR yes…

LH Some people say that any act of translation is also one of commentary anyway so…

IR Yes, there were occasions where I said this is the text I'm using, and there is this other one and it means this in the other version… I thought my role was to give them as much information as possible , to try and make it as transparent as possible. And while my translation is obviously going to push it in a certain direction, to try and be completely honest and upfront about what was there and to try, if you like, be as neutral as possible – a filter between David and Euripides . But really also all the sort of stuff that they really wouldn't get if what they were going to use instead was an out of copyright Victorian translation … which just fills me with horror…. I mean, I'm sure they would have done good work with it…. so, the sort of things they wouldn't get off the shelf.

LH And you mentioned they discussed with you the kind of audience they had in mind and you said why using an out of copyright Victorian translation would, you know, not play well in a modern context, quite apart from doing violence to the text. But what kind of audience do you have in

mind . I mean it was commissioned really for an Edinburgh International Festival production – did that influence you at all? What expectations did you bring to it, what sort of frame of reference and knowledge did you think the audience might have?

IR We did talk about …. when we had this meeting in the coffee shop, about how we saw the play, particularly John and I, I suppose at that point, and particularly seeing it in a Scottish context , that was one thing that really did come out of it at that meeting, and carried through to the performance. Very much in terms of Scottish masculinity, and what John described as quite conservative trends in Scottish culture, I mean they are there, some of Scottish Labour has a very conservative aspect to it. So, some of the ways in which Pentheus was characterised as very West of Scotland masculinity, was very much up there in the air when we talked about it. And I think again, when we talked about the way we saw the play in terms of masculinity and power and so on, and politics, that was one of the reasons why I was attracted to do it , not simply because it was the National Theatre of Scotland but also because I was very much sold on the way they wanted to do it , and the way they saw it, and bringing out those kinds of issues seemed to me to be very important. I don't necessarily think that coloured my translation that much…. One of the things actually that coloured my translation… because I work on comedy much more than tragedy … one of the goons, the spear carriers in the messenger scene is described as a henchman in the play script and that's one of mine. So the *dramatis personae* in my translation has a slightly comic air to it. Also, one of the things I'm always quite keen on with *The Bacchae* was emphasising the comedy in the Tiresias and Cadmus scene and I can't claim any great influence there because I think John had a very clear idea of how he wanted to do that stuff.

LH Yes, and they played it as a music hall ….

IR And it was something I was very much in sympathy with … so it was coming out of that meeting …. It didn't affect what I was interested in the play for. I don't think my conversation pushed them in any direction.

LJ Can I ask you, when you actually saw the thing being staged, and you saw the very positive audience reaction … I remember on the occasion I saw it the *parodos* was actually applauded… how did that relate then to the earlier work you'd done - were you pleased with the production…. were there things you would have like to have seen done differently? Were there ways you might have changed your own approach with the advantage of hindsight?

IR In the middle of the various meetings we had, I went down to London when they were rehearsing it, in Hammersmith, and I spent a day with them . I talked to them there, and I talked to the cast , and I saw the rehearsals, particularly the chorus actually. So I knew roughly how it was going to go, in various ways, although I hadn't seen any dress rehearsals, for example, so I was very nervous. I hadn't been this nervous since, I don't know, possibly since my viva. It was a really new experience for me, something you wish you had a stake in, being up there on the stage, I mean it was the first time for me. So, I got terribly, terribly nervous. It was a slightly weird position… not being massively involved, in the production side of it… or only tangentially … so having no clear idea of what the final shape of it was going to look like …

LH Did you know how stunning the special effects were going to be?

IR No, no. The wall of flame was a complete…

LH And the flowers… the flowers popping up…

IR John had said that he was going to do the flame, or a flame effect, and they had really turned the wattage up on the flamethrowers. When I saw it the chorus were done with, either with a piano, or even without a piano, and basically the composer was drilling them when I was down there and I think they were actually far more scary without the musical accompaniment. I think the musical accompaniment slightly killed, slightly drowned the chorus and I think it would have been even more powerful if they'd stripped it down even more with the chorus.

LH When you say stripping down, that also strikes a note with me because one of the things that came over quite strongly to people who knew the play before was the way in which some of the mythological context was stripped away. I'm thinking particularly of the prologue for instance which is actually much shorter in the production and went direct to what was going to happen rather than all sorts of mythological illusions which maybe will puzzle people. Did that come from your recommendation or was it something that evolved in rehearsal?

IR Oh no, that was a policy decision on David's part. One of the things he was quite explicit about was that … one of his guiding principles was that he would cut out anything that would be inexplicable to a modern audience. He was very much trying to make it intelligible to pretty much an ordinary audience.

LH It's very interesting this question about what modern audiences expect, isn't it. One of my colleagues who was reporting back to me on audience response, said that on the occasion that she went there were people who were 'quite shocked by the level of violence' and so on, at the end of the play, and were actually commenting on the fact that this must be because 'the author had messed around with the Greek', the Greeks didn't do things like that… the expectation being that the Greeks were rational and so on…

IR Yes… My favourite response was Michael Billington in *The Guardian*. He complains about when Pentheus says to Dionysus that 'you're not bad looking at least where women are concerned', and that whole scene where basically there's an extended riff on his hair and appearance – which is actually cut quite a bit in the translation, and not all of it's in the Greig version – and Billington complains that this is camping up. And I thought you don't know the text do you, you've no idea what *The Bacchae* is actually about. I thought a certain amount of the critical response was doing almost exactly what everyone was hoping which was that they didn't really know what Greek drama was about. I think that's exactly what they were after, which is to say, to go back beyond expectations.

LH I think that's a very interesting point because its come up, I think, on several occasions recently with political reaction to translations and productions of Greek drama – for instance of some of the criticism Tony Harrison got for his *Hecuba*, for being anachronistic. But the way in which that play approached sending up the democratic process, and so on, was when actually it was being at its most Euripidean – but it didn't square with what critics expected. So I think it's quite interesting that Euripides should be being particularly prominent at destabilising that kind of expectation.

IR Yes, by being most faithful it's being most radical….

LH Yes, yes, which is a nice irony.

IR Yes, and I think it's good for us as classicists because I think it shows what we can bring to the process – which is…. mainly by giving people a safety blanket and saying look actually this stuff is as radical as you're saying or making it… but … well, more so

LH Exactly, more so….

IR In a sense I think my role in the whole translation and what sort of consultation I did on it, was very much to kind of egg them on I suppose

LH Interesting. Clearly it's a lot of work for academics who are involved in this kind of way. Did you feel that you gained from the experience?

IR Oh, totally. I think one of the things…. having been in Oxford with Oliver Taplin and then being supervised by Oliver …. Performance is something one always talks about – but there is a complete difference between talking about it in the abstract and then actually seeing the difference that performance can do to the stuff you've actually had a hand in and seeing how actually it can create meaning – or steer meaning – in a way that brings out the meaning in a much more strong way than it does on the page. And I think that is something that really came out for me watching the performance.

LH So is that going to feed back into your teaching?

IR Oh, very much so, yes. The level two courses I did on *The Bacchae* the next term was very much influenced by my experience. But also… my honours course on interpreting Greek tragedy which is quite theoretical, that's been very helpful for that too.

LH And what about future research directions too. I mean will that actually feed into the way you formulate research questions, or the areas you choose to investigate? Or is it too early to say?

IR I don't know. I'd be more happy – more confident – doing translation than reception. So I don't know if that side of things would feed into my research. I think I would be much more alive to the performance dimension. I think there is a danger of paying lip service to it, and I think I'm going

to be much more alive to the visual and the issues around movement and gesture than I have been. I think that's coming through when teaching at the moment.

Actually the mask project that they did here in Glasgow was also sort of relating to this.

LH The Richard Williams one?

IR Yes, those two elements I suppose, are coming out more in my teaching side that perhaps my research side. I think I'm doing more reading … more into Greek tragedy than comedy, and I think in the future that may come through more.

LH What about plans for the future, for more translations in the future – whether for performance or for other purposes? Do you think you will do any more?

IR I'd love to! I think this is a bit more starting at the top and working my way down… I think not all the ones I'll do afterwards will be such high profile. A local community group has asked me to do one for the West End festival next year, so I may well do that but I need to have a chat with them about what they want..… But that's not going to be a literal translation that's going to be the actual performance one … which will be more of a challenge I think… and that's on *The Trojan Women*

LH Which would be a logical next step really….. from what you've been doing with this one

IR Well, … the only thing is we have a tradition in the department to …. the staff student committee…. have a tradition of doing a play every year and this year was *The Trojan Women*. We used the Penguin translation … I started a translation but never really finished it so we ended up going back to the Penguin … so I'm now trying to approach *The Trojan Women* without those rhythms in my head because I've got the Vellacott translation bouncing around in my head still for the moment. I'd like to do more , I think next time we do a staff student play we might put it on at the Gilmore Hill and actually advertise it properly as this year it went rather well.

LH So, a new tradition of the Glasgow Greek play….

IR Yes, well, definitely not in Greek…well it might not be Greek it might be Latin as well…. I think I'm at least going to try to translate the play for this year. Anyway we'll see how it goes. It depends partly on how keen the students are. If they want to go public…

LH It seems to be quite a major feature of recent productions of Greek plays at commercial theatres that academics in various ways are quite closely involved. I thought it was interesting that in the publicity for the David Greig *Bacchae* , and in the published playtext as well, your role was very fully acknowledged…. in the programme … and there was input from you and so on. And that's not always the case and it was actually good to see that kind of collaboration getting a bigger profile. How important do you think it is to have scholars to prepare close translations for reworking by dramatists that don't know Greek or Latin ?

IR Well,…. I think there are a number of issues there. One is that they were actually very generous, and I'm certainly not expecting same amount of profile out of it– I must say I was very alarmed to see my name in the subway going to work, that was slightly freaky…. and they said to me a) you'll get paid and b) we'll make sure we credit you .. and I said … and this may sound trite…. That's not why I'm doing it…. It's more for the outreach role. I'm very keen to see classical plays put on and performance and all the rest of it. Or are we as intermediaries? I went to see an *Oresteia* in Edinburg on Saturday which was an experimental piece of theatre and they were talking in the notes about how they'd used an 1866 . It was the Lazzi theatre company doing… Oh - I'm not sure – it was a verse translation. [Ed's Note: Based on an original translation by Robert Potter, 1866, the Lazzi Experimental Arts Unit adapted the trilogy to a solo performance given by Scottish actor Sandy Grierson, directed by David WW Johnstone (Source: company website - www.lazzi.co.uk/oresteia.htm)]

What they were trying to do was very different to what we were trying to do with *The Bacchae* clearly. I don't know if you know the experimental theatre episode in *Spaced* … which is quite a funny take on experimental theatre…. But it was taking quite a fossilized version of Greek tragedy and trying to apply a radical theatre with appropriate 'hedging' in quotes.

LH So they particularly wanted a translation text that was going to sound distant and alien and…

IR Well, one of the things that came up in it was that there were a number of passages where they were clearly using language where they were not making sense in contemporary terms. I mean,

a lot of the judicial language had been translated in a way that would make sense in the 19th century but would not necessarily make sense to a 20th … 21st century audience.

LH You mean in the *Eumenides?*

IR Yes, well it was very odd because they'd condensed it all down to a 50 minute thing with Orestes in pain and that was basically the thrust of it. The audience needed to know the plot in order to understand the torture chamber …it was an extremely elitist piece of theatre in all sorts of ways which were kind of annoying. I think that in some ways the dish-making factory that we have of saying that you can go to these texts and you can find all sorts of radical things in them does mean that…. I guess you get better theatre out if than if you… are trying to radicalise something by, if you like, coming from the outside and not being sympathetic to it. And I suppose it's that sympathy that is the key thing….. The only thing is, it does rather put quite a lot of onus on the translator you… to be quite self-effacing. If you're doing a literal translation where you're not trying to interpose yourself, you want to give the playwright as much rope as possible and as much space and as much freedom to take it in the direction they want to take it, but with all the information at their fingertips. And so the final version is *their* responsibility but you're giving them as much information and power as possible. I suppose that would be one way to say it.

LH And finally, just to finish… a lot of your academic work has been with comedy , and you spoke just now about feeling drawn perhaps now more to tragedies as a result of this particular experience. What strikes you though about the differences in challenge between translating comedy for performance and translating tragedy for performance. I know it's an impossible question….

IR That's horrible…. It's always the *Lysistrata* isn't it… if it was just Aristophanes then I mean one of the things is the choice of play and some of the plays would be really difficult to make sense of … for an audience to make sense of. I'm working on *The Knights* this Easter and so it's in my head…. Obviously the translation from one political context to another is difficult, with the distancing that there is in Greek tragedy, that makes it much easier for a modern audience to have access to. So, I think there would need to be a lot of negotiation about just what you're actually doing with the characters.

LH As soon as you've got contemporary issues, you know, the Athenian audience was expecting clearly contemporary humour in the comedy. If you tried to translate that into modern terms, even in the run of a play things can get outdated.

IR Of course there are a number of very contemporary satires I mean I've just been doing a few things on contemporary politics. They do date very quickly and I think it would be an interesting challenge to do it, but again, what are you trying to do? Are you trying to do it as an archaeological exercise or are you trying to do it as a translation into a modern political context? Those in a modern political context are very difficult to achieve. But again that is a question of, are you going to be doing a literal translation and be clear that ok so this character is Kleon and he equates to... well, I'm not sure there is a modern analogue, and so on and so forth…. And the council chamber equates to this or the character who sits in the council chamber is … I think it would be slightly more heavily footnoted, especially if you're doing a literal translation it would be an extensively annotated one. I think it would be an interesting challenge on the playwright side. And one of the things you always get… I mean the number of *Lysistratas* that I've seen is immense compared with anything else. And there other plays you could do, the *Ecclesiazusai* would easily be doable, or the *Thesmophoriazusae*. But in terms of the ones that tended to get a lot of exposure in terms of, especially around the time of the invasion of Iraq, there were a number of *Lysistratas* in Glasgow, for example.

LH I think that is something we certainly might look forward to seeing you involved with in the future.

Ian Ruffell, thank you very much.