

Oliver Taplin, Academic, Translator and Writer

in interview with Lorna Hardwick

Magdalen College, Oxford, 30th June 2008

- LH Oliver, thank you very much for agreeing to talk today. In our discussion I'd like to ask you about three aspects of your work. Firstly your approach to translation in your capacity as a scholar, researcher and teacher; secondly your work with non-academics especially theatre; and thirdly your own creative work.
- LH Firstly then, as an academic what has been your view on the status and utility of translations of the Greek and Latin texts. What types of translation do you think are most useful and how might they be evaluated.
- OT Well, I suppose ... I would think different translations for different publics, for different audiences, and the kind of translation I'm most interested in personally is the kind of translation that reaches, if you like, the reading or the theatre-going or the literate public, rather than that which reaches students and pupils. So I'm interested in translation that makes accessible ... Having said that I want to some extent to put on one side what one might call cribs or close literal translations. Not because they're not valuable – they can be immensely valuable, particularly to people who are learning languages and arguably to people who are doing exams, people who want to have a fairly word-by-word translation, or a fairly word-by-word version. So they have their value. But I think in the English tradition that they are over dominant. I can recommend a good, literal, so-called faithful, translation for just about every major classical author. We're not short of those and for tragedy, which I'm particularly concerned with there have, just within the last few years, been about four such translations – the Penguin, the Loeb, the Everyman and so on. So it's a kind of translation that has a place within education. Far more difficult and far more important is the translation that goes outside the educational world, if you like preaches to the unconverted, rather than to the converted. And that's the kind of translation that I've become interested in trying to do for myself and in trying to assess for others. The kind of translation that – I'm talking particularly about poetry, poetry of any kind, whether dramatic poetry, epic, lyric, whatever – that actually manages to transmit, carry across something of the poetry, something of the colour and music of the original Greek or Latin, though I know much more about Greek than I do about Latin. So I would maintain within translation that very rough division and of course there have been some marvellous things which have tried to straddle the line. If you think of Arrowsmith's translations of tragedy, for example, or Lattimore's Homer, they can be used as cribs. At the same time they are attempting to get across something... what for shorthand I'll call the poetry ... of the original. That is the fundamental division I recognise. It's interesting – I was talking to a German colleague who has started up a series, commissioned professors, to do extremely close, almost word by word, literal prose translations of Greek tragedy, because they don't exist in Germany. What exists in Germany are lots of high flown attempts at translating into verse, translating into poetry – often rather archai-ising – and he says what people really need is a close word by word translation. Here in the Anglophone world we're in exactly the opposite position. We've got good **conscientious**, careful, thoughtful, prose translations. What we lack, at least for tragedy, are translations which at least try and get across what I'm calling the poetry.
- LH Yes, and given this importance of the theatre poetry what's your view of the particular problems that are involved in trying to produce a verse translation in English that in any way communicates the poetry of the Greek.
- OT Are we now homing in on tragedy when you're asking that question because obviously that epic...
- LH Yes where in tragedy it comes up in an especially fruitful way.
- OT It seems to me that the first thing is to recognise ... for the translator to recognise, and for the reader to be able to work this out instinctively and without being given footnotes

to say it: there are two, or arguably three, expressions. There is the spoken mode of expression, which is regular line by line expression, more or less the same metre line by line. Then there is the sung mode of expression whether it's sung as usual by the chorus or whether it's sung by an individual. Then there is a third, what one might roughly call a recitative – if you think of a Bach Passion one actually begins to get something of the same modes, perhaps less of the spoken mode. But how does one find what Brodsky called 'metrical equivalences' for the modes? For myself ... no, I'm not talking at this stage about myself, am I, I'm talking about what other people do. So I'd like to see a translation that does bring out those differences, and has a way of marking lyric as lyric, and has a way of marking spoken, what in the original are iambic, but iambic in the Greek sense – which is not a straightforward equivalence to the English sense – a translation that brings those out. Then a translation that attempts something of the register. The spoken metres are not ... the straightforward spoken language ... they're not a long way away from it, and that the metres of the lyrics are considerably more freer in their use of language – between their use of association – and much more unpredictable in their jumps of trains of thought. So bringing out the ways the spoken parts of tragedy are on the whole reasoned, argumentative, with trains of thought one can follow even if they are trains of thought that are rhetorically specious. While the lyric parts are ... it's their very nature they follow this kind of flight of thought. So you're never quite sure where they're going, you're never quite sure what their relationship to the play is. You're constantly being challenged to work out the relationship. Now I think it's almost thing number one for me, that a translation of tragedy should be able to bring out those distinctions.

- LH Looking at epic for a moment, still remaining in the Greek area, what do you think are the particular challenges of translating epic to communicate the flavour, the sense of the poetry in the Greek.
- OT I think there really is a range possible there, and of course there is a range possible in all translations, but the most obvious one with epic would be, does the translation attempt to bring out in any way the repetitiveness, the formulaic nature of the original language. Does it use the same phrase ... to translate the same phrase ... every time that phrase occurs – does it on the contrary try to obliterate that, the formulaic character of the original – is a decision that has to be made very early on. And then I think with the metric – with the measure, perhaps that's a better word – the measure and musicality of translating epic, again for the equivalence, is there some kind of longer line that has shape, that has a shape that's not too rigid. I mean, if it actually comes out in the shape of let's say, the Kalevala metre – the Greek fourteen syllable metre – then there is a terrible danger of it becoming pretty monotonous. At the same time, a prose translation is a different kind of translation as I was trying to say at the beginning. So these are the kind of challenges that are facing the translator of epic. I've been looking a little bit at the Fitzgerald translation of Homer, because in some ways it surprises me that a man who is a good poet in his own right, and is certainly someone who's thought a lot about poetry, should actually go for blank verse for epic. He does it well, particularly with the *Odyssey*, it's much more effective with the *Odyssey*. But at the same time it brings in a kind of pithiness. That's a strange choice. But in a way a strange chain to dance in – strangely restrictive. But then of course he did have Pope, and his heroic couplets, as an amazing model of how much flexibility one can get out of what appears to be a very fixed metre.
- LH While on the subject of these kinds of translation, have you got any views about the extent to which students now, who are studying in classics or, for example, English literature, have you got any views about the extent to which they should actually be able to engage with translations, compare different kinds of translations.
- OT Mm, yes, that's a difficult one isn't it? Anyone who's taught students who are working in translation knows ... well, firstly how immensely rewarding they can find it, and what an amazing amount they can find... which is valid, if you like, for the original. But also how they can chase Will o' the Wisps, and find some interesting little verbal touch in the translation, that is purely in the translation and has no presence whatsoever in the original, in which case they're making something out of the translation. Not always something that's terrifically valuable – but they're doing good practical criticism if nothing else of the translation. It's just then what becomes of the relationship between studying

from the translation and studying from the original. Comparing translations I think is a very valuable activity. It isn't done all that much – or at least not in my experience. It is quite difficult, I suppose. Let's put it this way, if you compare four translations with no reference to the original, then that is a very different exercise from comparing four translations with the original as, if you like, a control. But I think in many ways comparing four translations is more valuable than let's say comparing three sonnets that are all about the autumn.

LH What about students whose main focus is the study of the ancient languages, whether it be Greek or Latin. Do you think there is value in asking them to engage with different kinds of translations – perhaps drawn from different literary traditions?

OT To engage, not making their own translations but with..... well, yes I think there is. I've seen that in a small way in our Classics and English course here. Where, for example, in the Epic paper they're given more than one translation and asked to comment on it in a contextualising way. What it seems to me to be not terrifically valuable is to say, well this translation has not brought out the alliteration of the P's in the word and this translation has.... well anyone who's thought about translation at all knows that the whole time translations are 'winning some and losing some' and the better translations win more and lose less possibly, though sometimes the important victories, the wins, are won at the expense of very considerable losses. Everybody knows, who's thought about it, that's what's going on. So it's not immensely valuable for students merely to document and catalogue, particularly the losses, which is what they tend to do, when comparing with the original. They say 'oh dear he's completely failed to notice something or other'.

LH I want to ask you next about the work you've done with non-academics – with practitioners, for example, in theatre. Now your own academic research has been responsible for a much improved awareness of the importance of performance. And in order to work on that you have engaged very closely with the ancient texts and also with other sources of evidence and the context of production. I want to ask you firstly what your experience has been in advising theatre directors and so on, and then to talk a little bit about the role of the translated text in the modern production – how it has actually got to the stage.

OT I'm putting on one side those few, very interesting and fortunate occasions where I've been able to produce translations myself for the theatre. I'm talking about now advising or talking with people who are putting on productions of other translations. To a large extent I've found that my most productive input has been talking with the Director before rehearsals begin, or during the course of rehearsals. In actual rehearsals there's less of a role – there's so many other things going on in rehearsal I've never ... but I've found if I sit through three hours of rehearsal probably the most I can do at the end of that is point out something that seemed to be emerging in stage terms and particularly perhaps in stage terms in relation to the text, which might not have been apparent to the directors and the actors. To say I thought it was interesting the way the motif of something or other was coming through in the way you moved, or something of that kind. So I think actually my input in rehearsal, apart from being asked how on earth do you say this name, and that kind of thing, I couldn't say it's been that big. I've had more role in talking with the Director and what I've usually been able to do, in a terrifically unpredictable way, is the director talks about their interpretation or asks questions and I, more or less, pour out ideas and some of them they pick up and some of them they don't. But I think actually my input has been more in terms of what one might call theatrical motifs, theatrical shaping, than it has actually been in relation to the text. For example, I had quite a lot to do with the Royal Shakespeare Company when they did *The Thebans* with Timberlake Wertenbaker's translation – a very measured translation, very, very, carefully worded, quite austere. I think to some extent there was the feeling 'keep off the translation'. I was not there to intimidate the translator – that was not why the professor had been called in. When I worked with Katie Mitchell on Ted Hughes's translation of *The Oresteia* that was different again. Because I felt there was a contact tension between what Katie Mitchell might have commissioned if she'd commissioned her own translation and this translation she'd been given. Ted Hughes was dead. There was no changing it. Ted Hughes is a great figure – it was amazing he produced this

translation towards the end of his life. It was not our role to change it or to iron-ise it or undermine it.

- LH Did it concern you at all that Hughes, for all his poetic genius was not actually working directly from the Greekwas in a sense creating something that wouldn't normally be described as a translation?
- OT Yes, well that did come through sometimes. I did work out that he was working primarily from Vellacott's Penguin – I won't say he was working exclusively from that. The only time that came up was when ... if something looked worth following and Katie Mitchell would say 'what about making something of this?' when I knew it was something which had no equivalent in the original. All I could say was well, that doesn't have any equivalent in the original. That is no way a prohibition of making something out of it because she wasn't working with the original she was working with a translation. But I suppose it was a factor for her to know whether or not it was in the original.
- LH You mentioned the kinds of questions that theatre directors in particular might want to ask. I mean, from your experience are they primarily questions about the ancient context, about ancient theatrical conventions, and so on? Or are they questions that are more specifically oriented towards helping the director do what he or she wants to do in terms of production concepts?
- OT I think one gets both. They are often very interested, even though this may not be explicitly or evidently reflected at all in the final production. They're usually fascinated to know about the original theatrical contexts – about the director as choreographer, and things of that kind. Adrian Noble got particularly interested in the festival context and tried in a strange way at Stratford to bring out something of the sort of festival atmosphere and festival feeling. And questions about which bits were sung and which bits were spoken and things of that kind and questions about the function of the Chorus and so on – they always come up. But at the same time, in some ways, it gets most interesting when talking about themes, issues, and poetic themes. I mean one where I feel I had a really significant input – I don't want to claim credit for it but there's no doubt I had a role in it – was talking with Katie Mitchell. Obviously anyone putting on *the Oresteia* becomes very aware of image clusters, networks of metaphor, and so we started talking about those, and I started talking about clothing, and clothing being thrown to the ground and things of that kind, and the sacrifice of Iphigenia and her robe flowing like blood to the ground. I was actually with Katie Mitchell when she had, what for her was an inspiration about how to handle things, which was to have Clytemnestra, having kept all her daughter's little clothes, all the little dresses she wore before she was sacrificed. And it started with having them around the bathroom, in the tableaux after the murder. And actually if you look at photos of that there are little girls' dresses hanging over the edge of the bath and so on. But then it also turned into the purple cloth which has become an iconic moment really of that production which anyone who ever saw it will never forget. So in a small way there, by talking in my quite professorial way about the clothing detail of *The Oresteia*, that did turn into something – but through the creativity of the director. I mean I couldn't claim for a moment that was my idea. I simply supplied some kind of catalyst for the idea.
- LH I'm really interested in what you say though about the role of the specialist academic as part of the creative process, rather than as somebody who is standing aside and saying, 'oh, you can't do that, it would be a howler'. Is there any sense in which directors are concerned about what classicists might say if they stage a Greek play – or have we got beyond that now.
- OT I don't think they give a damn on the whole. And some of them explicitly say as much. I mean I have heard a director say – a rather good director, certainly a famous one – say, 'I just am not interested in what this play meant in 5th century Greece. It's of no interest to me whatsoever, I'm interested in what it means now.' There are some serious flaws in that attitude but that is what was said. Some directors do much more homework than others on what one might call academic matters – Peter Hall is quite conscientious in doing his background reading but the most academic of the major directors that I've ever encountered is Peter Stein. Peter Stein does a lot of background reading. But Staniewski, for example, of Lublin Gardzienice in Poland does a lot of work with vases and a lot of work, particularly iconographic and musical and gestural background. So,

academic consideration... academic raw material goes into the cake mixture. And that's where I've been able to help. I've been able to say, why don't you add a bit of cinnamon or whatever to the mixture. But whether they care what classicists say about what comes out of the cake, what the cake turns into - I doubt it. I mean we're a very small bunch of people - and we're famous for complaining...

LH Do you think though there's a reciprocal gain. I mean have you found, as a scholar, as a researcher, that you have actually gained in your own work from working with practitioners and experiencing how the play can communicate theatrically.

OT Well, obviously it's given me a lot of insight in reception and in performance reception. I suppose it's one of the things that put me on to becoming interested in performance reception, which led to what is a phenomenon largely of the last 12-15 years when people realised that there's an enormous amount to be learnt from looking at how ancient plays have been turned into modern productions. As for my interpretation, as it might be, in a historicizing context with a high powered undergraduate ... much more difficult to pin down. I think it's just given me some feel for theatricality and some feel for what can be turned into performance. But it would be quite difficult to make a list of the insights. It's just an underlying awareness I think.

LH A third major dimension to your work in recent years has been your own work with texts, creating translations or indeed material that goes further away from being strictly called a translation. What was it that really stimulated you to take that path.

OT I think that probably goes back to my early.... I mean I don't know quite when I first developed an interest in translation but I certainly was already interested in translation when I was an undergraduate. Certainly I've never been.... I don't belong to the generation... I certainly don't belong to the type of classical scholar who's ever had any kind of supercilious attitude towards translation, I've always regarded translation as a noble calling.

LH What kinds of translation were you interested in doing as an undergraduate?

OT Well, I remember having a go at translating *Antigone*. In fact the other day I saw the folder with my drafts in it - but I didn't dare open it. But when I was an undergraduate, and this was lucky - also I found these the other day - [R.L.] Lattimore came to Oxford for a term, some kind of visiting professor, and ran a translation class. And what he got us to do each week was he gave us a passage about 20 or 30 lines long to produce our own translation. He didn't lay down any rules or anything, and then he would read it before the class and write on it in his neat handwriting and so on and that did help me to see we were doing something serious here and that different people did it in different ways. So that was a privilege which helped me but I think, for myself, I've really not had enough time over the years. I've been doing too many other things and I've nearly always had to put it on the back burner, so to speak, so that's something I'm going to do one day. I've now reached the stage in my career where I shall actually have the time, and it's not just a matter of hours it's even more a kind of strange concentration of which I've not had enough time to summon up until now. So that my career as a translator if it's going to take off lies in the future much more than in the past. Although I can remember as an undergraduate I had a go at translating Catullus and I put it in the college magazine - I edited the college magazine and published my own translations, probably the only way to get them published! But I remember enjoying translating Catullus very much. And right from the very start I suppose I've taken as axiomatic that I have to try and translate poetry into verse, to call it poetry is perhaps arrogant, but I've never translated it into prose. I mean, I can translate it into prose - I can do a crib as well as the next person but it's not what I'm interested in doing. So, I've always had an interest in translating poetry into something that aspires to be poetry. The first opportunity I had to do this seriously I practice was when I did radio programmes about the *Odyssey*. I was very determined to do my own translations and to have them performed on radio and that got the Getty Museum to commission me to do I then gave a lecture at the Getty about how I took Homer to have been originally performed to large festival audiences, and somebody at the Getty picked this up and ran with it, and I'm immensely grateful to him and commissioned 4 hours worth of *Odyssey*, which was put on way back in something like 1993. That was the first really substantial, several thousand lines of Homer. Which I loved doing, and felt I had found a voice.

[Note from OT, added August 2010: This was revived, in a shortened form, at Stanford University in Summer 2010. This has encouraged me to go back to this project, and revise it to create a performance version of *Odyssey* books 5 to 12.]

- LH Can I ask you, both when you were referring to the Catullus and now again with the Homer, you know, with a gap of some years in between...
- OT A lot of years in between, yes.
- LH ...but you talked about the poetic quality of what you were trying to create. Now when you're moving something from an ancient language into modern English, are you conscious of the influence, the sound, of a poetic tradition in the English language that in a sense your translation, if it's going to have a poetic quality, has to engage with?
- OT Yes. Well, I think to what extent it's conscious and to what extent it's gone into my subconscious is very difficult to sort out. I'm not very well read in English poetry, but I suppose I'm better read in English poetry than most classical scholars, and it does depend on what kind of metric one is using. So for the Homer I went for quite a long line with sound patterns in it. Now there I'm not sure I'd any particular model. I means some people say well its remarkably like William Carlos Williams, and I was surprised because I'd never read any. So I mean with the Homeric translation I was *slightly* influenced by Tony Harrison's *Oresteia*, with its use of alliteration. Because I did produce a lot of sounds patterns, but they weren't nearly as *heavily* alliterative as that, but I was influenced by that. I can't really have been influenced by Anglo-Saxon poetry because I'm not at all well read in Anglo-Saxon poetry. So for the Homer translation, I did to some extent, find a voice of my own, I think. Much, much harder to do for tragedy. My only other significant piece of translation I think which has been performed, which is a kind of anthology, called *Swallow Song* which consisted of extracts of, particularly of tragedy, I suppose about three quarters of it was tragedy, and the other quarter were bits of lyric poetry, bits of Sappho, bits of Theognis, lyric and iambic poetry. And for the lyrics, there I think I have gone for a ... and even for my tragic lyrics as well ... I do tend to go for a stanza form with rhyme, and something of a ballad stanza, so there I am aware of some of the poetry I know best in English, even if it sounds an odd collection of names to say, you know, Hardy and Edward Thomas and Auden, and I think again Tony Harrison's translations of tragedy have all gone into the mix there. Possibly with Homer I worked out a new attempt of a music of my own – with these I feel I am more in a poetic tradition. And in using rhyme of course I am following in very much an English tradition so there's no direct equivalent of that anyway.
- LH you mentioned the way in which you were bringing together extracts from different Greek authors – What was the underlying rationale for your choices of those excerpts and the way in which you combine them? Was it primarily auditory or was it thematic or both or...?
- OT No, to some extent it was a commission, as these things so often are. I mean, what I do next if someone commissions me to do a translation for performance, I'll do it. If they want me to do my least favourite play I'll do it....
- LH So what's your least favourite play....? (laughs)
- OT I'm just trying to think what that might be...(laughs)
- LH well, we'll wait and see.
- OT It depends what day of the week it is!
But that [*Swallow Song*] was actually commissioned to be on the theme of childhood. Turned out in the end to be more on the theme of parenthood than of childhood. And I developed it along with the Greek director Lydia Koniordou, who was also the main actor in it. So that was a kind of collaborative anthology around the theme of childhood. And in the end we put a lot of the more musical, let's say that's actually scored into music and sung, near the beginning to get a kind of lyric childhood opening. And then as it went on it became more grimmer and more political, as it went on, until it eventually reached some very political Theognis, and Oedipus, and then a big piece of Euripides' *Ion* was used to slightly lighten the ending. So I don't think one could say it started from a concept, the truth is it started from a commission. But I had a say in which bits of which plays we did.

- LH You spoke just now about the different working patterns and cast of mind and intellectual energy that's needed for this type of work as opposed to, you know, your research and scholarship work. Could you say a little bit more about that – which parts of you are stretched.
- OT Well, I think in a way that's something I'd rather talk about when I've done more. because so far, I've done considerable chunks of Homer, another Homer project which perhaps I'll talk about in a moment because it's closer to adaptation... or as close to adaptation ... than it is to translation, the anthology for *Swallow Song*, and then I am translating Sophocles and I have already translated *Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Oedipus the King* as I call it, and I'm more than half way through *Ajax* or *Aias* as I prefer to call that. There's no problem getting people to publish translations in my experience. They're falling over each other to publish translations and it is actually for the World's Classics, but my primary thing is to have my translations performed. And I realise in translating Sophocles, it's brought home to me translating Sophocles for the World's Classics, if I get a commission to perform one of these, I'm going to have to re-jig it quite seriously.
- LH In what respects?
- OT Well, I tried with *Oedipus* to produce a performance version as well as meaning which would also be a reading version, and I found it hard without knowing who was going to be performing, what kind of space they were going to be performing in and so on. To some extent it's trimming. To some extent, there are things when you translate *everything* some things get spelled out in a bit too much length or with a bit too much.... Even in my World's Classics translation I've cut down on proper names, cult names and place names and so on, because they can be quite alienating. I think for a performance version I would do so even more, I wouldn't hesitate. That brings in the whole thing of course of the extent to which you want to alienate – the extent to which you want to foreignise or domesticate. I prefer, if you like, to foreignise through ways of saying things rather than through what one might call ... shall we say allusions that need footnotes. Of course when you do your World's Classics you expect it to have footnotes that explain the allusions. So it's not that I'm against foreignising, on the contrary certainly I don't want to be a domesticator. So, coming back to how the performed version is different I have to get into a different mind set. When I'm translating for a reader and try to think how am I going to produce something to grip the reader, going to carry the reader, is going to convey some sense of measure and music... when I'm asking how do I do that to an audience there are different things that are required I think. When I'm translating for a reader, I still translate out loud to myself a lot – anything I draft I then have to read out loud because I think that is ... most poets do that, let alone a translator.
- LH Do you think people reading in the study, as it were, ought to be encouraged more to read out loud?
- OT I wish they would. In the Preface to my World's Classic, if it ever comes out, or whenever it comes out, I shall certainly encourage people to do that. I'll say look I think you'll get more out of this if you read it [out loud]. Perhaps I could give them an example of that from the spoken parts of my Sophocles where on the whole I've followed an iambic metre ... but not blank verse because I think blank verse brings so much baggage with it and I just find myself falling into Shakespearian terms of phrase and terms of phrase in the way I don't want. I saw a performance of Gilbert Murray's *Hippolytus* and I was surprised how much Shakespearian pastiche there was in that. I don't want that so I've actually done that into iambic ... 8 iambs to a line or, actually it's usually a line that falls into two metres so double 4 ... so it doesn't break out of the blank verse while at the same time occasionally tapping into the shape of a blank verse.
- [Note from OT, added August 2010: Further experience (including translating Euripides' *Medea* for Chicago) has led me to drop this metric of a regular number of syllables from each line. While varying line lengths, I have, however, stuck with the base iambic pulse.]
- Now, for certain major characters I'm giving them what you might call major metrical quirks, so that Ajax has a tendency every now and then to end a line, with a kind of stretched out – what one might call a double long syllable – and so instead of ending on a light heavy it ends on a heavy heavy. To get something across of Ajax's character and

bigness. Now, I hope that a reader will sense that – I mean a silent reader. Because if somebody reads it out loud they will definitely sense that because they'll find themselves drawn up by it. So I'd like to think of people reading it out loud and I think for what it's worth my kind of translation is better out loud than it is read.

[Note from OT, added August 2010: I am now less convinced about this 'metrical characterisation', and have more or less abandoned it.]

- LH You were mentioning just now that you've got a programme of work that you are wanting to move into and that some of it is shading into adaptation rather than translation . Could you just sketch out for us what you have in mind?
- OT I have three different projects to think about as far as translation is concerned. One is to translate tragedy, although I'd love to translate comedy if I'm asked to and I'd like to think I'd be quite good at it but I've never tried it yet in anything other than in little quotations. And as I say I will plug on with Sophocles World's Classics but if someone commissions me to do something else then I will dump the World's Classics and go and do that. So that is a project of translating tragedies which I think many of which have not been translated into something with measure and always need translating afresh. So that's one thing. The second thing is that I would like – I don't think I would have this done in 18 months – I would like to produce an anthology of Greek poetry. I've always loved poetry anthologies and I think a lot of people read from anthologies, for good or for ill. I love reading poetry to children and the best way of reading poetry to children is in anthologies. I'd love to produce an anthology of Greek poetry of all kinds, from Homer down to the end of antiquity and need to think hard about organising principles and so on – how to order that and how to bring out the different metrics. The third project is one on which I have already embarked which is I have produced a kind of first draft of a trilogy of plays made out of the *Iliad* – which is something Aeschylus did. I've got a first draft and I think it would come along a lot if I had it workshopped by actors ... The first play is 'Achilles return to battle' seen from what one would call the Achillean side and the second one is seen from Hector's side and then the third play brings the two sides together and interweaves them. So it is a re-jigging. Actually probably 90% of it is actual *Iliad* but re-ordered, if you like, from a point of view ... It's reached a stage where I need to hear it . I mean at the moment for example there's very little distinction between the way people talk and maybe there should be more. There's too much narrator at the moment. I had the idea that somehow there could be Messenger speeches – but too much of it's done that way. I need somehow to find a way of reducing to dramatizing it more. So there's a lot of work to be done on that but I would very, very much like to produce some kind of stage version of the *Iliad*. Might not even be a trilogy in the end but that's the way I started doing it. I think the *Iliad* is intensely performable.
- LH Which is another interesting convergence between practice and research actually which is increasingly becoming part of classical reception and then feeding into classical scholarship .
- OT Yes. But if someone want me to produce portions of the *Iliad* by rhapsodes to be performed by a soloist I could do that. You know I translate Homer quite fast and almost I have to translate it relatively fast – I mean I'm not saying I write it down at a writing speed but it flows, it flows. Translating tragedy is a much more laborious business. So if somebody commissioned and said please do us a three hour chunk or a one hour chunk of the *Iliad* for solo performance that would be easy. Somehow I've found my theatrical interests drive me to make the *Iliad* theatrical
- LH Well, performance poetry, yes. I can't let you go though without taking up your mention of comedy, and just asking you which of the Comedies would you particularly like to translate, and what do you think the challenges would be?
- OT Yes, well OK, it is Aristophanes I'd particularly like to translate although I wouldn't refuse a commission to translate Plautus let's say. Though I think my Latin is pretty rusty. There's almost any Aristophanes play I'd be happy to have a go at. But if I was asked to choose one I've got a particular soft spot for the *Peace*.

[Note from OT, added August 2010: I have recently produced a version of *Peace* – and much enjoyed doing it. Now all I need is a theatre to perform it!]

I think that's a beautiful play and perhaps an undervalued play – but I'd love to have a go at *Birds* I'd love to have a go at... I wouldn't call it the *Women at Thebes* whatever I would call that play ...and *Frogs* and *Archanians*. Most of them I'd be delighted to have a go at. What I said there about titles is quite interesting actually if I could just digress for a second. A good example of over-literalism is people insisting on calling the *Trachiniae*, you know if they put on a Sophocles' *Trachiniae* and insist on calling it 'The Women of Trachis' or 'The Trachinian Women'. It's incredibly off-putting to any modern theatrical audience. Why should they hesitate to re-title. I have actually, to put it on record, that I did actually succeed in doing that – it was me, in collaboration with Katie Mitchell who gave titles, gave the title of 'The Home Guard' and 'The Daughters of Darkness' to the two parts because it was divided into two parts and we were talking about you can't call it the *Choephoroi* you can't call it the *Libation Bearers* and or the *Kindly Ones* or whatever so we thought up between us ... I can't remember I can't tell you which of us actually... we agreed on those two titles for the two parts. So perhaps I ought to confess those are our impositions on the Ted Hughes' translation.

LH Which indeed have dramatic implications putting it into two parts ...

OT Yes, well that had been decided I think Katie must have decided that. But then having got them into two parts, what we were going to call the two parts ... I mean I don't think *Agamemnon* is a terrifically revealing title for the *Agamemnon*...

LH I can't wait to find out which comedy you're going to be persuaded to do....

[Note from OT, added August 2010: see above on *Peace*, which I have called *Good morning, Irene*.]

OT If somebody gave me an opportunity I'd be delighted.

LH That's certainly something I'd want to take up with you next time.

OT if I can find a commission by then. I have been saying for quite a long time that Aristophanes is ripe for more theatrical recognition than it is receiving.

LH So that sounds a very positive note on which to end this discussion – you're clearly going to be busy for the next 18 months. Thank you very much for talking to us today.