

BOOK REVIEW

Lorna Hardwick. *Translating Words, Translating Cultures*. London: Duckworth, 2000 (in the series “Classical Interfaces”). Pp. 160. ISBN 0 7156 2912 3. Paperback. £9.99

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What exactly does (or should) translation from one language into another try to do? Attempt to convey to readers of the target language (the language *into* which one is translating) something of the strangeness, difference and historicity of the original in the source language (the language *from* which one is translating)? Or must translation try to bridge the gap between source and target language, by rendering the original in a thoroughly contemporary style and diction, as if this were a work being written now for the first time? And related to these the further questions: how closely should a translation render the genre, language, metre, style and content of the original? How far can a translation depart from the original without ceasing to be a translation – in other words, where is one to situate the border between “translation”, “version” and “adaptation”?

This book’s approach to such questions is discursive rather than normative. Hardwick offers no grand theory of translation; she describes rather than prescribes. *Obiter dicta*, however, such as “the main function of a translation from classical poetry...is to provide a contemporary means of understanding and responding to the ancient work” (pp. 11-12), together with her choice of translators for discussion – Christopher Logue, Tony Harrison and Derek Walcott, among others – suggest the direction of her sympathies. Hardwick’s way of proceeding is to look in some detail at a particular instance of a translation/version/adaptation of a classical work, and while so doing to comment on the implications this has for our understanding of translation as an art. Quite reasonably, she does not attempt to cover all aspects of so enormous a field. Hardwick concentrates chiefly, instead, on translation from Homeric epic and Greek tragedy into English, mainly in the second half of the 20th century, but with some glances back to the 19th century and earlier.

Gavin Douglas’ 16th-century Scots translation of the *Aeneid* provides Hardwick with the starting-point for her discussion of various issues raised by the practice of translation. She briefly sketches the themes that will be examined in greater detail later in her book: the tension between accuracy to the letter of the original and the need to convey a foreign culture to an audience that may be very unfamiliar with it; the role translations play in the shaping and reshaping of national and cultural identity; the shift that is currently taking place from narrow notions of “fidelity to the original” to broader ideas of “equivalence”.

Turning to issues of translation in the 19th century, Hardwick argues that this period was not, as is often alleged, a “dark age” of translation. On the contrary, how the classics should be rendered was a much-debated topic. The very public disagreement between Matthew Arnold and F.W. Newman about translating Homer is

well known. Less well known is the work (discussed in some detail by Hardwick) of four female 19th-century translators of the classics, Elizabeth Barrett (Browning), Anna Swanwick, Augusta Webster and Amy Levy. Their versions were often reviewed by male contemporaries with patronizing condescension – as witness the following comment on Webster's *Medea* translation: "the subject if not grand, is one of general interest...it is also one which a lady might naturally be expected to handle with success as she must be able to enter fully into the feelings of the unfortunate heroine in her distressing condition" (quoted by Hardwick, p.36). But, as the author interestingly shows, these women used their translations sometimes to express their own feelings and perspectives on their male-dominated society, and sometimes to gain public recognition for, and so to promote, other educational or social work with which they were concerned.

When does a translation cease to be a translation and become a "version" or a "work deriving from the original"? This question becomes particularly urgent in the case of a poet such as Christopher Logue, whose work Hardwick discusses. In his versions of parts of the *Iliad* – *War Music* (based on books 16-19), *Kings* (based on books 1 and 2), *The Husbands* (based on books 3 and 4) – Logue, who does not know Greek but works from other translations, freely expands and cuts the Homeric text, sometimes introducing into the narrative new characters of his own invention. (This sort of procedure, stemming from Ezra Pound's *Homage to Sextus Propertius* and *Cantos*, may be thought peculiarly modern, but in fact it is not. Already in the early 18th century La Motte had produced a French *Iliad* in which he condensed 4000 lines of fighting into 400, and introduced scenes such as the Marriage of Peleus and Thetis, the Judgement of Paris and the Rape of Helen on to the Shield of Achilles.) Translations always lie at some point on a scale between literal fidelity to the original and very free interpretation of it. Logue's poems, dwelling as they do on aspects of war which are there in the *Iliad* but are not Homer's main subject, clearly lie near the latter end of the scale. These are poems to be read for their own sake as independent works. Knowledge of the *Iliad*, while it enhances our understanding of Logue's work, is not essential to such understanding.

Hardwick's chapter four, "Translation as Critique and Intervention", should be of particular interest to local readers since it discusses, among other things, South African versions and adaptations of Greek tragedy. But first Hardwick examines the practice, developed in the former German Democratic Republic by Brecht and others, of using versions of classical texts as "interventions", that is, as reflections on and critiques of contemporary social and political conditions. In a full discussion of Heiner Müller's dramatic work, especially his *Philoktet* and his monumental *Medeamaterial*, Hardwick shows how subject-matter that might otherwise have been censored or suppressed in East Germany could be publicly presented in the state-sponsored theatres because it came in a classical guise. This then leads into an examination of similar phenomena in South Africa. Hardwick argues, citing Piet Conradie's work, that modernizing, "interventionist" productions of Greek plays in this country were initially met with a "sense of aesthetic shock" which may have been a "symptom of cultural, political and ideological rejection" (p. 76). In apartheid South

Africa, Athol Fugard's *The Island* had used Sophocles' *Antigone* to reflect on the arbitrary and unjust wielding of state power. Making use of a study by the late Margaret Mezzabotta, Hardwick also discusses the recent multi-media, multi-cultural adaptation of Euripides' *Medea* by Mark Fleishman and Jennie Reznick which employed mime, dance, and a mixture of English, Tamil, Xhosa and Afrikaans. (A photographic still from their production illustrates the cover of the book.) As is almost always the case with "interventionist" stagings of ancient drama, this one too met with a mixed reception by the critics.

In a substantial and interesting chapter on contemporary Irish literature, Hardwick shows the complexities involved in translation of the classics by Irish authors. In many colonized countries the classics were resented as a form of culture imposed by the European colonizer. But by contrast in Ireland, where the classics have been part of an indigenous Irish culture for more than a millennium, to be educated in Greek and Latin literature was traditionally seen as a form of defiance of the English occupier. Hardwick examines the critical debates around the many recent Irish plays touching on classical themes, such as Brian Friel's *Translations*, Tom Paulin's *The Riot Act* (based on Sophocles' *Antigone*), and Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* (using the *Philoktetes*). She shows that, whereas many critics accept that using classical models can open up new possibilities of understanding the contemporary Irish situation, others maintain that such a procedure may be negative and fatalistic, implying that nothing really changes – tragedies have happened before, are happening now, and will happen again.

From considering Seamus Heaney's version of the myth of Philoktetes, Hardwick moves on to an examination of the role of the character "Philoctete" in *Omeros*, Derek Walcott's Caribbean "epic" (put in inverted commas because Walcott himself deprecates the label). She discusses Walcott's translational procedures in general, the uses that he makes of classical, especially Homeric, material in his poem. Unlike some classicists who have been excessively keen to privilege the Greek and Latin background to *Omeros*, Hardwick rightly points out that the poem's relationship to the classics is uncomfortable, complex and ambivalent. As she says, *Omeros* deliberately subverts the assumption that its author's "epic voice is simply derivative or is unproblematically influenced by ancient epic" (p. 108). Walcott's poem presents a new and intriguing confrontation between the classics on the one hand, and the experiences of colonized and post-colonial peoples on the other – a confrontation that should be of particular interest to classicists in a South Africa that has, in a sense, only recently been decolonized.

Translation is at the best of times a complex business. But the complexities multiply when the translation is not only from one language into another, but also from one ancient genre into a different modern one. In the last two chapters of her book Hardwick considers two renderings of epic into dramatic form, and one adaptation of tragedy into verse-film. She discusses first the versions of Homer's *Odyssey* written for the theatre by, respectively, Peter Oswald (first staged by the Gate Theatre Company and performed nationally in the UK during 1999) and Derek

Walcott (first produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford-upon-Avon in 1992).

Oswald's version interpreted Odysseus' journey as a psychological voyage of discovery, with a Chorus representing the various voices inside the hero's head. But his play did not really attempt to engage with the differences in ethos between the audiences of archaic Greek epic and late 20th-century European drama. Walcott, by contrast, is acutely aware of such differences and responds to them within the text of his play. We see this, for example, in his choice of a blues singer, Billy Blue, to represent the figure of the ancient Greek oral poet, and especially in the role given to Penelope, who comes across as a far more independent and assertive figure than the Homeric heroine. Also, Walcott makes an issue of the hanging of the disloyal maidservants – always a stumbling-block for modern readers of the *Odyssey* – as opposed to Oswald who omits any mention of the episode.

The last work of “translation” Hardwick discusses in her book is Tony Harrison's *Prometheus* which, combining film with poetry, reflects on issues of technology, art and oppression against the backdrop of the British Miners' Strike of 1984. Harrison's work is a peculiarly complex one which, as Hardwick demonstrates, engages not only with Aeschylus' tragedy but also with the tradition, well established in Western art and literature, of using Prometheus as a cultural icon. The Titan has been viewed variously as a culture-hero, a creator, an opponent of tyranny, and as a suffering Christ-like figure. Harrison uses this multi-layered icon in an “interventionist” way to make a strong statement about political and economic oppression in the 20th century.

In her book, while not neglecting the debate about what exactly constitutes “translation”, Hardwick refuses to get bogged down in definitions of terms. She concentrates more fruitfully on the phenomena, actual works deriving from the classics, without bothering too much about whether they should be termed “translations”, “versions”, “adaptations” or “re-workings”. The great virtue of her book is that it moves discussion of translation beyond matters of detail – language and technique, questions of a narrowly defined “fidelity” – towards larger, more interesting issues of the social and ideological impact of translations, and the role they play in creating social, cultural and national identity. If I have any criticism of the book, it would be that, although the author sketches well the debates stirred up by various instances of translation, she does not often make explicit what her own position is. As I indicated at the start of this review, readers are left rather to infer her views from comments made in passing, and from her choice of translators and translations for discussion. This reviewer, at least, would have liked a few pages of general synthesis and overview. But this quibble aside, Hardwick's book is a stimulating and informative one, well abreast of the very latest developments in poetic and dramatic translation of the classics in Britain, Ireland and elsewhere. The book will be read with profit and enjoyment by most classicists, and particularly by those concerned with the *Nachleben* of classical poetry and drama in the 20th century.