

J. Michael Walton. *Translating Classical Plays: Collected Papers*. London and New York: Routledge, 2016. 270pp. ISBN 9781138124325. £85.00 (hb). ISBN 9781315648231. £24.49 (eb).

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J. Michael Walton has dedicated a lifetime to reviving classical plays – as a translator from classical Greek, as a translation and theatre historian, as a practitioner and as an inspiring teacher in (and chronicler of) the Drama department at the University of Hull. For the Routledge Monographs in Classical Studies series he edited his collected papers from the last two decades, forming a surprisingly coherent quasi-monograph that testifies to its author's vigorous and rigorous engagement and passion for performance translations of ancient Greek and Roman theatre. It is also an enjoyable read seasoned with humour, serious business balanced out by historical anecdotes, and with an acute sense for live performance.

There is a consistent groups of scholarly interests in Walton's career – from his first monographs on *Greek Theatre Practice* (Westport, 1980) and *The Greek Sense of Theatre: Tragedy Reviewed* (Methuen, 1984) to his key monographs *Found in Translation: Greek Drama in English* (Cambridge, 2006) and *Euripides Our Contemporary* (Methuen, 2009). With Marianne McDonald he co-edited two volumes: *Amid Our Troubles: Irish Versions of Greek Tragedy* (Methuen, 2002) and the seminal *Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Theatre* (Cambridge, 2007). These combine his philological expertise with theatre and translation history and his experience as theatre practitioner. The new Routledge volume, *Translating Classical Plays*, is in every way a summative point that weaves together the individual strands of Walton's interests.

The methods of approach used can be grouped in two basic categories: the historical account of a translation, adaptation or a version; and a comparison of passages in different versions. However minimalistic this may seem, these graphic methods have enormous potency in making far-reaching points for contemporary practice in translation and performance. In translations (and most adaptations) of classical Greek and Roman plays the stories remain the same (more or less): what changes is the understanding of dramatic situations and the momentum they have; the level of explicitness in culturally specific matters including swearing, sex or prejudice; and then the 'give' that the translation provides to its actors – to deploy the term Walton borrows from Tom Stoppard (129) – “with the opportunity of character, situation and even humour” (132). A more theoretical or analytical approach unravelling what this metaphorical 'give' might comprise is not pursued by Walton – whether it's more or less synonymous with Brecht's concept of *Gestus* which has been applied to performance translation by Maik Hamburger and the late Alessandro Serpieri. Nevertheless, Walton is alert to the much-contended distinction between page-oriented and stage-oriented translation. His position is faithful to the latter:

For the most part it should be up to directors to decide if and how Greek tragedies and comedies are worth renewing, and for an audience to take from the whatever they find which touches them in their own lives. (67)

It is the live, contemporary and essentially radical theatre practice that Walton takes for the ultimate authority but he also documents – minutely and with a pluralistic generosity – a rich history of translations that were made in different times, in different cultural and political contexts and with different agendas. In so doing, the books a mine of examples that testify to the position of performance translation as a highly creative effort. Despite the British trend of translations from a literal or ‘new versions by’, Walton argues for a central position for the performance translator:

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This claim is well substantiated and supported, and agrees with similar developments in drama translation theory, such as in Anna Cetera’s book *Enter Lear: The Translator’s Part in Performance* (Warsaw, 2008).

An ethos that runs through all of the essays of the book is a plurality of opinion and views – which, combined with a lively style, makes for an enjoyable reading. Although Walton is looking for rules or guidelines for an effective performance translation,

the intention is more to provoke discussion rather than provide solutions to the problems. The nature of translation and the nature of the theatre both show there are no definitive systems and no easy answers, whether a translation is commissioned for a specific production by a specific director, or for publication, where it may lie comatose on the shelf waiting, like Princess Aurora, for her prince to fight his way through the forest and wake her with a kiss. (125)

The discussions go beyond the conventional casuistry of drama translation scholarship and yet Walton never goes into analytical theory or abstraction although his examples would offer many an opportunity. While I would personally like to get more under the skin of the problems, Walton’s organic approach would probably deem such subcutaneous dissection invasive. His discussions never threaten to break up what someone might see as the fragile life of creativity. Walton encourages it and his approach emphasises that there is free, unbound and artful play behind every performance translation through which a classical play is given a new life in its richness and mythical fame. According to Walton, the performance translator is the one primarily responsible to offering her or his collaborators in the theatre ‘enough give’ to play with the material and to create *through* it:

The translators of stage plays have a number of issues with which to contend, not least because they are trying to make available to directors, actors and designers, not the single truth of a fixed entity, but the multiple, perhaps cubist, vision of the playwright who allows for the interrelation of the practitioners and the nature of audience reception. In addition there is the requirement to create characters who are consistent enough for actors to play them. (106)