Introduction: 'Summon the Presbyterians'

MA UBU: You are married, Mister Ubu?
PA UBU: Too true. To a vile hag.
MA UBU: You mean to a charming lady.
PA UBU: An old horror. She sprouts claws all over, it's impossible to get one's hand
up her anywhere.
MA UBU: You should give her a hand up kindly and gently, honest Mr Ubu, and, were you to do so you would see that she is just as appealing as Aphrodite.[1]
(Alfred Jarry, *Ubu Rex*, translated by Cyril Connolly)

Most of us wedded to translating Greek tragedy or comedy have experienced Ubu's marital problems. Translating anything from one language and culture into another is tough enough. Translation of drama adds a new dimension of risk; translators of classical plays find claws sprouting wherever they lay a finger. Ubu's wife (who is appropriately enough disguised as a ghost) offers scant consolation to anyone who recalls the fate of most mortals who tried to get their hands up a goddess.

The title of this Introduction reflects the complexity of finding language in a theatre that is becoming ever more cross-cultural, something which, for better or worse, seems to be inevitable. At the XIth International Meeting on Ancient Drama in Delphi in 2002 one of the most exciting productions was a Beijing Opera performance called *Thebais*, based on Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* and Sophocles' *Antigone.* Subtitles were screened in modern Greek and in English. At one point Creon gave an instruction to the Chorus, subtitled into Greek as *Kaleste tous presbuterous*, 'Call the elders'. The English below it read 'Summon the Presbyterians'. Sometimes what looks like the obvious translation is actually the most misleading, a 'false friend' as it is known to translators. When the culture is at least two and a half thousand years old the problems of transference are inevitably magnified. Many of those who have made a study of such issues over the last three hundred years have

tended to come up with proposals about Greek drama in English tied only to the nature of language. The performing arts have never been at their most creative when following literary formulae and many productions in the early part of the twentieth century seem to have suffered accordingly. Too many of the kisses proffered in the hope of miraculous transformation have resulted, not in the frog becoming a prince, but in the princess turning into a frog.

It is a matter both of the classics and of drama. Within the translating community those who know Greek and Latin are naturally enough more sympathetic to the special nature of dealing with the classical world. They are frequently the least sympathetic to the tightrope that the translator for performance is constantly walking.

Even the word 'translation' is difficult to pin down, though based on Latin – Latin authors being well versed in translation from the Greek. The English covers a multitude of sins. If you pick up a copy of *The 1811 Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, with its subtitle of *Buckish Slang, University Wit and Pickpocket Elegance*, you will find 'Translators' between 'Tradesmen' (described as 'Thieves'), and 'Transmography or Transmigrify' ('to patch up, vamp or alter'). Translators are defined as 'Sellers of old mended shoes and boots, between coblers [*sic*] and shoemakers'. In the theatre they may lay claim to being a bit more than that: original artists, perhaps, but therein lies a conflict of interests. What is the purpose of translation? What are the function and responsibilities of the translator; and 'the rules of engagement', if any, in transferring a play from one era to another? And why do most of the theories and methods of procedure that can be applied to translation in general prove inadequate for the translation of a stage work? That is what this book is intended to be about.

Most of today's translators from Greek tragedy or comedy for performance are aware of the need to leave open that 'performance door' which much literary and literal translation from the past seems to close. There may be a positive virtue in the fact that so many translations will have dated within ten years, but bring an immediacy which ensures that the plays of the Greeks are accorded the same respect which has for years been taken for granted for plays of the Renaissance: namely, that they reflect both the time *in which* they were first performed, and the time *for which* they are now being revived. There are special questions, in translating as well as in directing plays from the classical period, as to how you cultivate a cultural context into which they will fit both theatrically and historically. How do you find a voice that will speak of centuries before

Christ in tones that the twenty-first century of the Christian era will comprehend? How should an English-speaking Electra sound? Will that be the same in a play by Aeschylus, by Sophocles and by Euripides? And in New York, Dublin or London? As significant, perhaps more so, is the question of how does the contemporary translator tackle all those aspects of the stage play that only come alive through performance: iconography, nuance, subtext, irony? Are there any guidelines or parameters in trying to ensure that Greek plays are made to live for an audience of today? Or is it a free-for-all?

One of the factors that make Greek playwrights difficult to translate is that they were, in their own day, the *avant-garde*. Aeschylus uses coinages which are not found anywhere else in surviving Greek literature.[2] Sophocles incorporates emotional contrasts which have their physical, hence visual, counterparts. Euripides uses a mixture of colloquial and forensic language to make the plays sound as though spoken by fifth-century Athenians, not miscellaneous Greeks from that distanced and unfocused past which was the Greek confluence of myth and history. Aristophanes has gods talking to prominent figures of state, who talk to fictional Athenians, who talk to dogs, clouds and birds, who talk to stage-hands or the audience. Menander makes domestic issues universal as, years later, will Chekhov or Ayckbourn. All of them were breaking new ground, pushing forward the possibilities of the stage. One of the priorities for any translator of Greek plays, surely, is to have such a firm grasp of the playwright's distinctive features, as well as of the broad political and theatrical conditions for which each of them was writing, that their equivalences are anchored solidly in the past before being transmitted into the present. To this may be added the variety of metre used in tragedy and in comedy, from the iambic trimeters of dialogue to the subtle and varied lyrics of choral interlude and formal (probably sung) lament.

Direct translation of Greek plays into English for performance had to wait, with a few exceptions, until the twentieth century.[3] From Gilbert Murray, the professor of Greek who became closely associated with the Vedrenne-Barker management at the Court Theatre, the debate began about what was the 'right' way of rendering these ancient classics into a form that was speakable, playable, and sufficiently faithful to the original work (though not necessarily always with that order of priorities). As you might anticipate, in the collision of academics with critics – never mind with creative artists – the result has been the kind of Babel identified by George Steiner in his study of the history of translation.[4] But maybe a

theatrical Babel was what was necessary to free Greek drama from the stranglehold of linguistics, and return it to its rightful position as a performing, rather than a literary art. In Athens theatre was an art form akin to those of sculpture, painting, architecture and music. It was a synthesis of all the arts, statues that move, pictures that change, architecture that frames, music that highlights; amongst which poetry and rhetoric must take their place, but they must take that place alongside music, dance, acting and visual stagecraft. Perhaps on the theatrical tower of Babel the table is a round one where language has to take its seat as an equal among many, instead of demanding to be at the head.

Stage translators are well aware that playwrights make and fashion plays rather than simply rendering them on paper. Menander, as the probably apocryphal story goes, was asked by a friend how he was getting on with his new play and replied in words to the effect of 'Oh, I've finished it. All I have to do now is write it.' A play is an artefact; if it happens also to be a poem, or a piece of fine prose, well and good. It was Arthur Miller, a playwright much influenced by the Greeks, who suggested that there was no need for a great playwright to be a great writer. The Greek canon consists of great poems and pieces of great literature, as does the Jacobethan: all the more reason for translators to search as strenuously for the dramatic qualities as well as the literary, and work with directors at finding a context which may not be wholly dependent on the original. This is what the French critic Patrice Pavis calls 'relativism': the issue, if you like, of 'referential' and 'emotive' meaning. At one level, as Israeli scholar Yurit Naari put it, it adds up to translating the word 'sword' as 'rifle'; at another, it means keeping the *word* 'sword', but giving the actor a rifle. In an essay called 'The play: gateway to cultural dialogue', Gershon Shaked affirmed categorically that:

> The past is a closed world unless we translate it into the present. The political regimes, ways of behaviour, transportation, communication, and architecture of the past are all insufficiently understood in the present. Therefore they are reinterpreted: candles become electric lights, swords and bows become rifles and mortars, human labour becomes machines, slave society becomes capitalism.[5]

This may help bring the past into the present. But if the past is a closed world, may not theatre perform an equal service by helping to reveal that closed past? Or absorb it? The stage is a place of metaphor and icon. Greek tragedy and, to a lesser extent comedy, offer a fund of *exempla*.

It doesn't need much imagination in an audience to see that the Trojan War can be any war. You don't need to know that Paris and Alexander are the same person, or that Helen was abducted as the bribe in a beauty competition, to understand that war can degrade both the losers and the winners, or that some people are born survivors. Those are the messages to be found in Euripides' *Trojan Women.* Sometimes the 'local' details are almost peripheral. Medea's personal conflict can be seen today as a war of the sexes, or a class war, or the battle for survival of all those who find themselves classified as outsiders. All such concerns can be found in Euripides' *Medea* of 431 BC.

Klaudyna Rozhin offered an insight when she wrote in an Introduction to her English translation of a Polish play, 'The cultural context of the play is a framework built of objects, processes, institutions, customs and ideas peculiar to one group of people amongst whom the play is set.'[6] She was writing about a Polish play set amongst immigrants in New York, so that for most of the characters, with varying degrees of fluency, the receiving language was itself a secondary and unfamiliar language which she had translated from Polish into Polish/English for a New York production. Does not the translation of an ancient Greek drama today – tragedy or satyr, comedy old or new – deal with similar propositions? Greek plays were created for a specific place, a special occasion, for performance in masks, and so on, a 'framework built of objects, processes, institutions, customs and ideas'.

An encouraging note for the status of the translator was struck by the remarkable writers' agent, Peggy Ramsay, when she described translation as 'a privileged form of conversation with an author'. It is about the nature of that privileged conversation that this book has been written. There is about Greek tragedy and comedy a sense of immediacy which is sometimes difficult to identify and harder to represent. The Greek playwrights had no idea that their work would last. Usually they expected a single performance. *The Oresteia* for Aeschylus was Michelangelo's snowman. The artist Serena de la Hey who works in Somerset creating sculptures from material which cannot last has suggested that 'There's a wonderful sense of freedom in something which is there for a very short time.' Greek playwrights of the fifth and fourth centuries BC did not know they were creating dramatic poems for posterity. They did believe that, if they allowed the attention of the audience to flag for even two minutes, those two minutes were gone, not to be recovered. For the creative artist such impermanence must clarify the mind with all the intensity of approaching death. Except in some areas of performance art,

contemporary theatre is insulated from that sort of moment of truth. Capturing a similar momentum is a real challenge for a translator.

In the rest of this book I want to consider three main areas. First of these will be the history and theory of translation of Greek drama into English, and the manner in which many translations have reflected as much the historical period of the translation as the time of the original play. The second will cover specific aspects of Greek tragedy and comedy, including verse and prose, the language of grief, the language of the mask, stage directions, stage action, irony and deception, unfamiliar concepts, subtext and dialogue. The third will deal with the special nature of dramatic translation, the differences between tragedy and comedy, and the variety of plays which claim to be 'versions' or 'adaptations'. Three tragedies are chosen as 'test cases' and other tragedies and comedies (though by no means all) provide examples.

The topic turned out to be far larger than anticipated. A whole thesis could be written comparing eighteenth- and nineteenth-century translations of a single Sophocles play. This is not the place for a detailed analysis of why translation should have proved more popular in certain periods than in others, beyond pointing to the burgeoning movement towards a wider access in education from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards. Certainly the repertoire of the public theatres had precious little to do with it until comparatively recently. Nor is there as much speculation here as I would have liked on why certain plays have proved more attractive to translators than others (over eighty have tackled *Prometheus*, *Agamemnon*, *Antigone* and *Oedipus Tyrannus*), and in some periods rather than others (at least six new translations of *Medea* in the 1860s, twelve of *Alcestis* between 1870 and 1890). The recent publication (2005) of *Greek Tragedy and the English Stage 1660–1914* by Edith Hall and Fiona Macintosh puts flesh on many of the bones I worry at here.

Paring everything down to manageable proportions has resulted in referring to far fewer translations than are available, good, bad and indifferent. Apologies are due to the authors of those many excellent translations which have not been specifically mentioned. I have used only published translations and tried to avoid my own, or those on which I have collaborated. As the prime reason for instigating a new translation has to be a belief that yours will be better than any previous one, I wanted to look at the questions without suggesting there were answers up my sleeve. This is not a search for the 'best' translations. All I can hope is that the book will in some small way illuminate the nature of drama and its relationship to its own time as well as to the contemporary audience.

For the sake of the general reader words and passages in Greek have been transliterated into an English equivalent, though this leads to a number of distortions. The length of 'e's and 'o's, where Greek has two letters, one short, one long, is indicated by the use of a macron over the long vowel. Titles of plays and characters in quotation have been kept as they are to be found in the relevant translations and, as most of these use the latinised versions (e.g., 'Oedipus' rather than 'Oidipous'), that convention has been continued in the main body of the text, though this too involves an unavoidable element of inconsistency.

As for the Appendix of translations (complete works by Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Menander and the third-century BC writer of Mimes (*miamboi*), Herodas), this too proved more difficult than anticipated even with the benchmark for inclusion being a fairly rigid adherence to the original (though less so with Aristophanes). This has allowed the inclusion of some turgid historical efforts while ruling out all manner of popular 'versions' of Greek originals from Todhunter to von Hofmannsthal, Cocteau to Jeffers, O'Neill to Paulin. There are some marginal inclusions by fine poets who have no Greek – Seamus Heaney, Brendan Kennelly, Ted Hughes, Blake Morrison amongst them – where reference to their work has been included in the main argument of the book.

A layer of complexity was provided by the absence in many early editions of a formal publisher and sometimes a date, compounded by a certain coyness amongst translators, especially those from 1820 to 1860, over admitting their identity (though seldom their provenance). The prolific 'First-Class Man of Balliol' (who turned out to be Thomas Nash) may have declared in his Preface to *Hecuba* (1869) that his translation 'is not solely as an antidote to the piebald and treacherous version now in use' (that of Theodore Alois Buckley – academic condescension towards the largely self-taught Buckley is not entirely unique in the history of scholarship), but was certainly not inclined to expose himself to similar ridicule; nor were the various 'Graduates' of Oxford, Cambridge, Dublin, or 'One of the Universities', those identified by initials only and the 'Anons' (some of whom are here unmasked). Details of the lives of major translators, Potter, Wodhull, Cumberland, Theobald, Mitchell, Frere, Buckley, Swanwick, Campbell, Way and others have necessarily been reduced to a minimum and must await another book. The large number of comparisons, some as little as a single word, means that identification is sometimes by publisher rather than translator. The Appendix should be used in association with the Index of translators for finding or comparing

individual plays discussed in the main text. See also the preamble to the Appendix.

Errors there will be and omissions, for which my apologies, tempered at least by the possibilities that may have been uncovered for further and more reliable research. A number of mistakes have been corrected from the existing data bases, and some translations unearthed that have been overlooked. A few of the recorded translations (especially from Foster, 1918), proved impossible to locate, including some of those listed by the Cambridge publisher, J. Hall and some of the *Kelly's Keys to the Classics*, but I have at least looked at the vast majority. It has been a salutary experience which served to increase my respect for most of those who have shared this elusive craft.

CHAPTER 1

Finding Principles, Finding a Theory

> The theorists, like Gibbon's Byzantine heretics, contradict one another at every turn; and what is worse, they show the most lamentable discrepancies between theory and practice.
>
> (Peter Green, 'Some versions of Aeschylus', *Essays in Antiquity*, London, 1960)

In a recent book on translation for the stage the Finnish scholar Sirkku Aaltonen made a welcome attempt to show how and why translation theory may meet some of the concerns expressed by Peter Green forty years earlier in his essay about translations of Aeschylus.[1] That translators from the classics should have proved wary of modern theoretical formulae which appeared to offer a general analysis of the processes involved in transferring material from a source into a target language is unsurprising.[2] Just as much suspicion has been accorded by those who translate for the stage who point out, with reason, that the translating of a play is no more than an early station in a progress which ends up, via directors, designers and players, as a new artistic entity. The position of the classical play, a tragedy by Aeschylus, Sophocles or Euripides, or a comedy by Aristophanes or Menander, involves leaps of faith and imagination and a whole new series of definitions. Green's conclusion that 'Translation is not, at any level, an ideal art; it is a crutch for human infirmity' does at least help to focus the mind on what happens in the process of taking the text of a Greek tragedy from the fifth century BC and renewing it for a reader in the twenty-first century AD, never mind for a contemporary audience.[3] A consolation in any search is the fundamental imperative that drove Aeschylus and is shared by today's translator/director/performer. Whatever else can be discovered by scholars and critics in the extant written text, Aeschylus' own priority had to reside in the immediacy of performance before an audience as diverse in experience, intellect and concentration as might be expected in any modern theatre.

Aaltonen was not writing exclusively about classical theatre but, in a wide-ranging review of stage translation, she uses classical examples on a number of occasions. She reminds us that 'theatre translation is not necessarily synonymous with drama translation', and that the act of translation is closely involved with theatre praxis. 'Readers are tenants who move into texts and occupy them for a while. In the theatre there are many tenants, and just as many meanings to be taken of texts.'[4] Her subsequent engagement with the various aspects of intercultural theatre and 'cultural collage' illuminates much of the frequently dense but sensitive areas of appropriation thrown up in recent years both by translation and by direction of classic texts.[5]

The brief here being to identify specific questions raised by classical theatre, it may be useful to look at where the theoretical study of dramatic translation currently stands. Where such a study comes from and how is more complicated. A selective, indeed idiosyncratic, trawl through a wide variety of approaches and proposals will result in few rules for the dramatic translator – rules, as Susan Bassnett has pointed out, are no longer appropriate – but may help to draw attention to what is distinctive in Greek tragedy and comedy and what may be worth preserving for the contemporary audience or reader.[6]

After the death of Aeschylus, the proposal that his plays might be revived at a major festival required a decree of state. Such discrimination was short-lived. In the century following the death of Sophocles and Euripides revivals of their work became commonplace alongside new versions of the old myths, influenced by and full of resonances from the works of the masters. The history of the drama bears witness to the process of renewal of an old theme being valued more for its diversion from the original than from its closeness to it.

The extent to which the first Roman tragedies of dramatists such as Livius Andronicus and Ennius of the third century BC were based on actual Greek models is simply unknowable. The influence of Euripides is claimed for Seneca in the first century AD but, whatever his merits or lack of them, as a tragedian little seems to have been bequeathed by Euripides beyond a passing similarity of plot outline. Nothing more survives than the odd fragment from the very early Latin tragedians, enough to make it almost a relief that it is Plautus rather than either of them who supplies the first literature in Latin. Plautus was both original and not original; for his plays and those of Terence we do have some indication of what translation meant for the Romans.

All surviving Roman comedy, twenty full plays of Plautus and six of Terence, was based on Greek comedies from anything between 80 and