## *SIXTEEN*

# *Review*

*SOPHOCLES, WOMEN OF TRACHIS. Translated by C. K. Williams and Gregory W. Dickerson. Oxford University Press, 1978.*

*SOPHOCLES, OEDIPUS THE KING. Translated by Steven Berg and Diskin Clay. Oxford University Press, 1978.*

With the publication of these two volumes, the Oxford series *Greek Tragedy in New Translation* is roughly one-third of the way along its course: eleven down, twenty-one to go. It is a distinguished enterprise; on the whole, the translators have amply satisfied the demand of the general editor, William Arrowsmith, for "language, rich and vivid as poetry," which "is equally effective as dialogue actors can speak, naturally and with dignity." The project has even higher ambitions: "Its aim is to re-create the entire extant corpus of Greek tragedy as though it had been originally written by ancient masters at home in the English language of our time." This is a job for poets, and though there are a surprising number of Greek scholars who are also published poets (six of the eleven translations have only one name on the title page) the work often has to be done, as in the case of the two Sophoclean tragedies under review, by a poet in collaboration with a scholar.

Such collaboration is not necessarily a matter of sweetness and light. That there were impediments to the marriage of true minds in the Williams-Dickerson team is admitted by Mr. Arrowsmith in his foreword, which explores in eloquent terms the problems presented by such an operation—"like marriage, tandem translation is a tricky, even risky business"—and it is an open secret that the honeymoon in the Berg-Clay ménage was short. The poet, intent on creating dramatic poetry in his own idiom, will tend to follow his muse where she leads; the scholar, anxious trustee of the ancient legacy and apprehensive of the judgment of his colleagues, will try to restrain the poet's more erratic flights. From this tension (present also but perhaps less violent in the mind of the scholar-poet) Mr. Arrowsmith hopes to see emerge what he claims to have found in the Williams-Dickerson *Women of Trachis*: "hard-won unity, as real as it is precarious, in which it is possible to feel

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both the turbulence of the original and the poet's final successful effort to bring that turbulence under firm artistic control." For these two translations, Mr. Arrowsmith's claim is only partly justified. Though both are phrased in vivid and forceful English and run trippingly upon the tongue (in the actors' dialogue, at any rate; the choral odes are another matter), they have their failures too, and some of them stem from what looks remarkably like a lack of firm control.

It must be conceded that the problems facing a translator of Greek tragedy are numerous and formidable, especially formidable when the poet is Sophocles. His dramatic style, pitched midway between the opulence of Aeschylean imagery and the comparative sobriety of Euripidean rhetoric, can conjure out of highly formal language the illusion of passionate, unpremeditated speech; it can also invest a simple statement with reverberating ironies as well as a characteristic grave music. In addition, the tragic genre itself presents sobering challenges. The spoken sections of the play are encased in lines which are metrically as inexorably regular as the Alexandrines of Racine (by comparison, Shakespeare is a maverick), and extended passages of dramatic dialogue consist of line-for-line exchanges. The sections which were sung (some of them, the choral odes, were also danced) are framed in rhythmic structures of an intricate exactness which is completely alien to the genius of English verse.

C. K. Williams's attack on the first of these problems, the style of Sophoclean dialogue, is to sacrifice everything else for speed and directness; his speakers are no-nonsense characters whose language rarely rises above the level of the prosaic and the colloquial. As a result he is at his best in the speeches of the interfering messenger, the lying herald, and above all the brutal dying Heracles, whose paroxysms of rage and agony, modulating to a tone of otherworldly authority when he finally accepts his destiny, are successfully brought over into English. But Mr. Williams's Deianira lacks the radiance Sophocles has given to so many of her lines. "I'm afraid / " she says, "to say how much I miss him / until I'm sure it's the same there." This is an honest translation, but no one could guess from it what exquisite cadences haunt the three lines of Greek it represents and how subtly the Greek words suggest passion and reticence combined.

Steven Berg is more ambitious; his dialogue, though still direct and forceful, is pitched in a higher poetic key. And there are passages where he succeeds brilliantly. In the counterspeeches of Oedipus and Tiresias, for example, he manages to transpose into speakable and memorable English both the fierce eloquence of Oedipus' accusation and the demonic authority of the blind prophet's reply. But Mr. Berg has the defects of his qualities. Even in this scene there are a few self-indulgent touches: a

superfluous image at the end of Tiresias' speech ("an ember of pain. Ashes"), a three-line expansion of the hint of desolation conveyed to the Greek audience by the one word *Kithairon* (some explanation was justified, but not three lines). Elsewhere and often, Mr. Berg allows himself much more license: "I am afraid, afraid / Apollo's prediction will come true, all of it, / as God's sunlight grows brighter on a man's face at dawn / when he's in bed, still sleeping / and reaches into his eyes and wakes him." The Sophoclean original runs: "Yes, afraid that Apollo will turn out to be correct." This interpolation is all the more distressing because it interrupts a swift sequence of dramatic revelations which in the original is couched in the cut and thrust of single-line dialogue.

In their approach to this problem, the strict regularity of the iambic speeches, Mr. Berg and Mr. Williams both renounce any attempt to reproduce the form of the original; they use an elastic line. Mr. Berg's, in fact, runs the gamut from one syllable to twenty. This freedom of maneuver removes the temptation to pad out the line, a temptation to which earlier translators often succumbed in their efforts to reproduce, line for line, those series of rapid question and answer which sometimes strike the modern ear as faintly comic. (Housman's brilliant parody of the results was enough to put an end to the practice: "*Alcmaeon*: A shepherd's questioned mouth informed me that— / *Chorus*: What? For I know not yet what you will say. / *Alcmaeon*: Nor will you ever if you interrupt.") Both our translators sacrifice formal balance for dramatic economy and cut to the bone where they think they see fat. In the *Women of Trachis*, for example, Heracles asks his son Hyllos if he knows the daughter of Eurytus, and Hyllos answers: "You mean Iole, if I am not mistaken." Mr. Williams translates: "Iole." In *Oedipus the King*, Kreon leads up to his defense against Oedipus' charges with a series of rhetorical questions to which the answer, as both men know, is "Yes." "Are you married to my sister?" asks Kreon, and Oedipus answers with a line which would not be unfairly represented by: "A negative answer to your inquiry is out of the question." Mr. Berg translates: "I married Jocasta." If these exchanges had been written by Euripides it is likely that there would have been cause for surgery, but Sophocles is a subtle operator and should be approached with caution. In the first case, the hesitation and apparent obtuseness of Hyllos is fully dramatic; he has promised his father a favor, but now, with the mention of the girl who has, in all innocence, destroyed his parents, he half foresees the outrageous demand which is to follow. And the periphrases of Oedipus' reply reflect a sarcastic impatience with Kreon's pettifogging courtroom techniques.

It is, however, in the translation of the allusive, lyrical odes that the poets come into their kingdom; here the more literal the rendering



the less effective it is likely to be. Paradoxically enough, Mr. Berg, who is so generous with his own contributions in the dialogue, here shows restraint; except for some overemphases and undue expansions in the climactic ode which comes after the revelation scene, he has written moving poetry which re-creates much of the power and beauty of the original. Occasionally, in fact, it comes close to perfection, as in the lines on the plague: "and lives one after another split the air / birds taking off / wingrush hungrier than fire / souls leaping away they fly / to the shore / of the cold god of evening / west." The principles which underlie these lyric translations are explained in the preliminary notes, which contain a valuable discussion of the nature of Greek choral poetry and the aim of the translators: "to reproduce in English, which has no tradition for this kind of song, the essential gaps and ambiguities of Greek choral song by a kind of Broken Poetry."

Mr. Williams, too, explains his method; it is perhaps significant that the "we" of the Berg-Clay discussion is replaced by the first person singular. Sounding the familiar note that we have lost the music and the dance which made these choral poems so powerful a medium for the ancient dramatist and citing the notorious difficulty of producing effective unison delivery from a speaking chorus, he attempts to "make at least a facsimile of the basic musical experience of the chorus . . . by using many repetitions, generally of single words, but, occasionally, of phrases and whole line units." He also breaks the choral utterance down into extremely short lines, each of which "represents an *individual* voice, coming from a spatially distinct point on the stage." For this particular idea, he gives credit to an exercise developed by Peter Brook: the words of a Shakespearean line are distributed among a group of actors, one word each, and they "attempt to reproduce the line as it would be spoken by an individual."

What the effect of the resulting compositions would be on stage I have no idea, but in cold print they do not inspire enthusiasm. The repetitions are exhausting. "O let him / let him get / here. Here! Let / the oars not / stop, never / stop, not / until / he gets / here, not./ Let him leave / that island, island— / fires, / leave the / sacrifice he's / doing / and get here, get / here, get here, / here." Space forbids reproduction of the typography; some idea of the look of the page can be obtained by imagining the mouse's tale in *Alice* extended over several pages (though without the steady reduction in type size). Occasionally, as in the rendering of the great opening chorus on the mutability of all human fortune, there are lines which can stir emotion, but there are many more which inspire only dismay. "Now watch / this! Watch / this have me! / I'm letting it / have me! / It has / me. Look! / Soaring! ME!/ Can't think! / JOY! ME!" It is true that the original here is not

Sophocles at his greatest, but it deserves a better version than something that sounds like a series of captions for Jules Feiffer's spindly danseuse in one of her self-admiring ecstasies.

These two translators are the most daring and experimental the series has so far presented. It is the fate of such innovators to rise high above the norm when successful and fall just as far below it when they fail. Messrs. Berg and Williams are no exception. Like the little girl of the nursery rhyme, when they are good, they are very, very good . . .

It would be unfair to conclude without mention of the scholars. Gregory W. Dickerson and Diskin Clay have added valuable notes on the plays, many of which will command the attention of their professional colleagues, and they have written perceptive and innovative introductions. These lucid but profound explorations of the Sophoclean tragic vision are the distillation of their long study of the text, and they are authoritative critical statements: Mr. Dickerson's a revealing vindication of a play which has been strangely neglected, Mr. Clay's an arresting reassessment of an acclaimed masterpiece.

# *Part IV: Euripides*

*By the same author*

*THE HEROIC TEMPER*
*OEDIPUS THE KING (translation)*
*OEDIPUS AT THEBES*

# *WORD AND ACTION*

## *Essays on the Ancient Theater*

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*Bernard Knox*

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