20

Translating Greek Drama for Performance

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I speak a little warily, as someone with small Latin and no Greek.[1] Thereby hangs a rather tragic tale, because I liked Latin and was reasonably good at it, until a timetable clash at grammar school forced me to drop it in the fifth form, year 11. Had I done it for O-level, who knows, I might have gone on to study it at A-level, along with Ancient Greek, and my whole career might have been different – then I could stand here speaking from a position of authority, instead of, as I fear it is, one of at best amateurish enthusiasm and at worst sheer effrontery.

Let me begin with something where I feel on firm ground – an experience not of adapting but of being adapted. A memoir I wrote about my father has recently been turned into a film. I feel fortunate in what the screenwriter, producer, director and actors have done with my book.[2] But being alive and able to raise my voice, as Goldoni, Kleist, Sophocles and Aristophanes haven't been able to with me, I did query some of the changes being proposed to the original, one of them in particular. In the memoir I describe how, after my father died at home, my mother wanted his body and face to remain uncovered until the undertaker came to remove him the next day. It was unconventional behaviour, perhaps, but I completely understood her reasons for it – 'why would anyone,' I wrote, 'except in the movies, draw [the bedsheets] over his head and shut out before time what will soon be unseeable forever'. When I was sent the penultimate draft of the screenplay, however, I discovered that the screenwriter had my mother and me doing exactly what we hadn't done either in life or in the book, that's to say draw the sheet over my father's head. This was an untruth too far. And – almost as bad – a movie cliché. I made my objection. The screenwriter made the change. And the film, I think, is the better for honouring what was in the original.

I find that image – the sheet being discreetly drawn over the corpse – suggestive in a couple of ways. First, as a reminder that the customs surrounding dead bodies are still important to us today, just as they were in the age of Sophocles, whose Antigone, Ismene and Creon argue over the rights and wrongs of covering the corpse of Polyneices. Second, the image strikes me as a metaphor for the whole question of adaptation. I think we all disapprove of the way that some translators – not necessarily Victorian ones, either – have handled classical authors, Aristophanes in particular,

shying away from the naked truth of his language for fear the British public, over two thousand years later, will find it too troubling, too obscene. Perhaps they have a point: a Tory councillor in Bury St Edmunds tried to prevent my version of *Lysistrata* being performed there this autumn, feeling that such filth wasn't the right way to commemorate the theatre's re-opening after extensive refurbishment. Still, the procedures of the abridgers and prettifiers remind me of how after my mother died in a nursing home a yellow rose was placed between her hands, a prettifying symbol of which she, as a doctor, wouldn't have approved. When an ancient Greek play is being adapted, we want to feel the raw power, the cold truth, the uncomfortable reality. Because of course respecting the primary text means respecting its lack of respect – the departure from the norms of its time that made it a classic in the first place. Those giant phalluses in *Lysistrata* must remain in any modern production; and Oedipus must appear in all his eyeless bloody horror – the shocks registering now as they did then, without being exaggerated on the one hand or tamed on the other.

Still, a naked translation of a classical play – in the sense of a word-for-word literal transcription – can never work on the stage. Literalism is a lifeless corpse – what one wants from a play in a dead language is to see not just the life it once had but the life it still has in another language. So my concern in adapting classics for the stage has been to produce texts which are speakable rather than – as some versions I have come across can be – unspeakable; texts that actors can stand and deliver without sounding as if their mouths are full of mothballs; texts that have drive, energy, resonance and the inflexions of contemporary speech and/or authentic dialect; texts that are playscripts not scholarly translations. Of course to produce such scripts I first have to immerse myself in already existing English translations – preferably annotated scholarly translations – in order to understand what it is I'm adapting. But there comes a point when you have to set aside your inhibitions about line-by-line fidelity and let rip.

My task has been made simpler in that the five classics I've so far adapted – three of them ancient Greek, one eighteenth-century Italian and one nineteenth-century German – have all been for a single theatre company, Northern Broadsides, whose founder, director and lead actor, Barrie Rutter, is a man with a clear mission. That mission is to take plays on tour around the country, sometimes to unusual venues, including disused mills, warehouses and cattle markets: the 200-seat theatre at the company's home base in Halifax is a dank vaulted basement that used to be a turning space for the railway engines that fetched and carried to Dean Clough, once the largest carpet factory in Europe. Northern Broadsides reach audiences which theatre doesn't always reach but there's no dumbing down: Rutter's only interest is in producing Shakespeare and European (preferably ancient Greek) classics, almost always written in

verse form. It is a populist mission but also a purist one. The commitment is to live theatre: no video screens or pre-recorded music, only the actors' own faces, gestures, voices and instrumental skills. Props are minimal: the blind Tiresias gets a white stick but that's about it.

Writing for Northern Broadsides I'm writing for the stage rather than writing for the page. The difference is important and it was brought home to me by the only two bits of adapting I've done which weren't for Northern Broadsides. With the first, I translated five poems by the German Friedrich Rückert on the death of children (two of his own children having died from scarlet fever) which Gustav Mahler set to music for his *Kindertotenlieder* (1905); the commission was for a musical play about Mahler created by the Canadian director Robert Lepage.[3] Without using rhyme, I tried to represent the meaning of the euphony in the German original, in those sounds *gegangen* and *gelangen* and *verlangen*, or *schon* and *hoh'n*, the repetition being kind of mantra of denial from the bereaved father, who wants to believe his children aren't dead but just out walking. For the stage version, I wanted room for a sense of hopeless repetitiveness to accrue, but when I later included the translation in my *Selected Poems* (1999) I reworked it, paring it right down, because the reader, unlike someone in an audience, has time to sit and linger over the words – so the final version has only thirteen lines, just as Rückert's did. I also hoped the reader might linger over the phrase 'pipe down' and make a subliminal or conscious connection with the Pied Piper, who led children away onto (and under) a hill:

> I often think: they're out walking, that's all.
> Any minute they'll be back.
> It's a lovely day. Relax.
> Listen hard and you'll hear their cries.
>
> Pipe down. They're out walking.
> And off they've wandered
> Further than usual, up the hill,
> We'll soon catch up with them.
> They're run ahead, that's all.
> When the sun's out on the hill,
> We can catch up with them,
> Listen hard and you'll hear their cries.
>
> It's a lovely day, up on the hill.

Writing for the stage is different from writing for the page: the effect has to be immediate, in the moment, and can't be dwelt on or revisited. I found this again when I was commissioned to transform Jules Verne's novella *Dr Ox's Experiment* (1872) into a libretto for an opera of the same name by the composer, Gavin Bryars.[4] With a libretto, however singable

the words, only a tiny percentage of what you write will be caught by the audience. The great advantage of the theatre, or at any rate Northern Broadsides theatre, is that you know every word will be heard.

But what is it that an audience does hear? Carlo Goldoni, whose *Servant of Two Masters* (1745) I reworked in 2006 as *The Man with Two Gaffers*, says in his *Memoirs* that for a translation to work the thoughts, imagery, erudition, phrasing and style 'must be adapted to the taste of the nation into whose language the translation is made'.[5] Ibsen said more or less the same thing when he wrote in a letter of 1872 that 'a poem ought to be translated in the way the poet himself would have composed it, had he belonged to the nation for which he is being translated'. On that basis, when I resituated Goldoni's play in nineteenth-century Yorkshire, I changed names as well as places: instead of a Venetian merchant called Pantalone, we have a Dales farmer called Towler; instead of fricandeau, hotpot; instead of the Rialto, the Leeds-Liverpool canal. But above all it was the language that had to change, which gave me an excuse to draw on a two-volume dictionary of dialect words in use in Craven in the early nineteenth century. Since Goldoni's Venetian plays were written in dialect, and he so cherished the city's street-talk that he had plans to compile a Venetian dialect-dictionary, I felt that was apt. And there was the hope that, though my English-language audiences would have to do some translating too, they'd relish, as I had, the discovery of evocative dialect words. 'Bummelkites' for blackberries. 'Cobby' for lively. 'Gut-scraper' for fiddler. 'Lig-a-bed' for lazy. And so on.

I'd previously used dialect – taken from a different dialect dictionary – in my first collaboration with Northern Broadsides, a version of Heinrich von Kleist's comedy *Der Zerbrochene Krug*, normally translated as *The Broken Jug*, which, it so happened, I knew from studying German A-level at grammar school. (See, there were compensations in dropping Latin.) Kleist wrote the play early in the nineteenth century (it was first performed in 1808) but set it in Utrecht in 1770; it centres on a local judge called Adam, who's both hearty and manipulative, Falstaffian and Machiavellian, and the guilty party in a case over which he's presiding, which involves the breaking of a jug. My first draft version of the play stuck closely to the original – too closely for Barrie Rutter, who had read a long dialect poem I'd written called 'The Ballad of the Yorkshire Ripper'. Use that kind of idiom, Rutter urged me; 'It's the music of the monosyllable we want to hear.' So that's the music I tried to write, switching the play from early eighteenth-century Utrecht to early nineteenth-century Skipton (the town where I'd studied Kleist at grammar school), and allowing the characters to speak in the regional vernacular. Neither this adaptation nor the Goldoni was a nostalgic venture to revive lost folk-speech, but a recognition that dialect words are at best simply more alive and expressive than their smoothed-off estuary-English equivalents. Is there a better word for a hedgehog than a 'prickyback' or for diarrhoea than 'scutters', or

for a cup of tea (that traditional accompaniment of conversation) as 'chatter-watter'?

Anyone coming to adapt Kleist's play will want to shift the time and setting and idiom to provide an alternative, more readily recognizable historical context; a 1994 version by the novelist John Banville moved the play to Ireland during the famine and made the visiting magistrate an Englishman. Changing the plot or structure of a play is a different matter. During rehearsals of *The Cracked Pot*, Barrie Rutter, in the role of Judge Adam, worried that for a play centring on a crime and a court case there was no tension of a 'whodunit' kind – perhaps, he felt, I ought to rewrite the play to make his guilt less obvious. I was sceptical and we agreed to wait to see how the previews went. The moment the play had its first performance, we understood why Kleist wrote it as he did: the audience are never in doubt that Adam is guilty, but they enjoy watching him cover his tracks and feel complicit with his cunning, and that's where the pleasure of the play lies. Whereas in *Oedipus Rex*, the audience know what the hero doesn't (which adds to the sense of doom and tragedy), in Kleist audience and hero both know (which adds to the sense of comedy).

The classics always adapt; that's why they're classics. But the adaptor who doesn't respect the spirit of the original is irresponsible and self-defeating. Often it's the local detail that carries the emotional kick and authenticity of a work, so ironing out the idiosyncrasies of an original for the sake of some global goo or Esperanto or readily attainable 'relevance' is counter-productive. If something seems obscure and archaic, don't just cut it – work at it and see if you can find some equivalent. On the other hand, you do want the freedom to make adjustments and even additions:

> He is translation's thief that addeth more
> As much as he that taketh from the store
> Of the first author.[6]

So Marvell wrote, but I confess to having added a speech for one of the characters in *The Cracked Pot*: everyone else in the small cast had his or her set-piece or aria and it seemed odd for this character not get one too. You should also be ready to exploit not just the particular talents of your cast (which in the case of the current production of my version of *Lysistrata* includes their musical talents) but also the opportunities which a production will throw up. A week before *The Cracked Pot* Barrie Rutter had his hair shaved off, in preparation for the part of Judge Adam, who must sit in court bare-headed having lost his wig. It wasn't the most successful of shaves: the barber had left nicks and scratches on the glazed white dome of Rutter's head. But since in the play Adam has taken a battering the night before, we made a virtue of it, and I added a couplet, for when a horrified Adam looks at himself in the mirror:

> Crudding tuptails! I'm like a sheep that's just been fleeced: my skin's
> Riddled with cuts where t'farmer's shears have dug in.

The couplet isn't in Kleist, but it adds to the sense of place: Skipton is the gateway to the sheep-farming Dales.

Rehearsals are a testing period for any adaptation. However many drafts you've done, it's only when you stand people up that the words fall flat, because inert or forced or saccharine or (the great sin with Rutter) 'middle-class'. So I often find I'm rewriting up to the dress rehearsal – and beyond. That's the one advantage a living playwright has over a dead one, at least to a director. To the actors, forced to learn new lines at a late stage, it can seem a serious *dis*advantage.

After *The Cracked Pot*, it was natural to turn to *Oedipus*. Though one is a comedy and the other a tragedy, both have club-footed heroes who are guilty of the crime they are investigating. And themes of blindness, judgment and sexual transgression are common to both. Having no Greek, I did feel daunted when the idea was first proposed. But I was encouraged by reading the standard 1982 'Penguin' translation by Robert Fagles which, however accurate, had – it seemed to me – severe limits as a speakable or actable piece of theatre.

Working on the play in the spring of 2001 I had the excitement of discovering the way in which a classic, whatever its era, belongs to every other era. (People talk of 'contemporary classics' but the phrase is tautologous: classics are contemporary by definition.) The opening lines of the play describe a plague afflicting Thebes, and that spring Britain was struggling with a plague of its own, the foot-and-mouth epidemic. Sophocles speaks of dying cattle and blighted fields, and I knew that when the play toured in rural areas (one of the venues was Skipton cattle market), there'd be huge resonance in those lines.

> The place is falling apart, waste and rubble
> everywhere you look. Nothing works
> and no one visits. Barren harvests,
> cows with their ribs showing like roof-slats,
> vast pyres of mouldering sheep – that's the meadows.
> Here in town we've got it as bad or worse.
> Fever trickles in beads down lime-white cheeks.
> Babies whine for their mums and mums keen o'e'r
> their babies. The plague's left its mark on every door.[7]

In the spring of 2001, the plague meant foot and mouth. But by the time the play opened, two days after 9/11, the image of a ruined Thebes – reeking with smoke, ringing with cries, a panicked people massing in the squares – took on an additional set of meanings none of us could have anticipated. Jocasta, praying at a stone altar, resembled the bewildered relatives at Ground Zero. Oedipus' promise to find the perpetrator and

bring him to justice had the immediacy of a George Bush press briefing on CNN. And Tiresias' tirade against the hubristic Oedipus – when he tells him that his conspiracy-theories are foolish, and that the real culprit is himself – reminded me of the pundits who were saying that the US 'had had it coming'.

In my view, audiences should be allowed to make such connections for themselves, rather than being clubbed over the head with them. At any rate, with *Oedipus* I avoided specifying a time and place for the action; the characters kept their names but there was no mention of Thebes, let alone New York. My use of dialect was more sparing this time, too, since the universality of the play seemed resistant to anything too narrowly regional. There's a northern flavour at times, nevertheless. And in a sense that was the challenge I was trying to meet with this play, to see whether a northern idiom, usually associated with comedy and with low-life characters and 'bit parts', could achieve poetry in the mouth of a tragic hero. So the two great set-pieces in the play had nothing to do with any pressingly immediate historical parallel but with two great 'timeless' narratives, first Oedipus' account of how he unwittingly killed his father and, second, the servant's account of Jocasta's suicide and Oedipus' blinding of himself.

> ... I took to the road,
> sleeping rough, not caring where I ended up,
> so long as I avoided my parents
> and kept the gods from winning their bet.
> One day on my wanderings I happened on the spot
> where you say Laius met his death. A beck
> running by, a drystone wall, a hawthorne tree
> shaved slantwise by the wind: there I am,
> sun beaming down, scrats of cloud in the sky,
> minding my own, pondering which road to take,
> when along comes a coach party – a driver,
> two men on horseback, a messenger boy
> running ahead, and a man inside the carriage,
> just as you said. There's plenty of room to pass,
> but the driver and the bigwig inside
> scream at me to clear out the bloody way.
> If only they'd ask nicely I'd not mind,
> but when the driver tries to force me off the road
> I see red and fetch him one full in the face.
> and then the old fellow inside the carriage
> leans out and raddles me with a spiked club
> or something, and keeps thumping me over the head
> till I lose patience and learn him a lesson,
> my blows are flisky little tigs, that's all,
> but before I know it he's reeling under 'em,
> he's rolling through the door of the carriage,
> he's laid out on his back eyeing the heavens
> and the body I'm battering is a corpse.[8]

To me, Oedipus' story of how he came to kill Laius gains power from having a particular setting: seeing is believing, and it's as he revisualises the scene that the full appalling truth dawns on him. So though the language is spare, I've risked adding detail here – and risked turning a spot which Fagles refers to only as a 'triple crossroad' into a specific place I could almost take you to on the Yorkshire moors or 'tops'. There's a similar risk when, coming in on an argument between Creon and Oedipus, Jocasta exasperatedly bursts out 'What a family! Aren't you ashamed to make such a din',[9] which might be a line from a soap but is there to remind us that Sophocles' play is indeed, just as soaps are, a story about families.

Classics can reach us at any time, but we reach out to them most eagerly at times of crisis, as if to put our own troubles in a broader perspective. I found that to be the case, again, in 2003, with *Antigone*, which I was working on while the invasion of Iraq was unfolding on television. *Antigone* picks up the story of Oedipus a few years on, with the Thebans no longer huddled in panic but celebrating the quick conclusion of a war: the enemy has been sent packing and a new regime is in place. But winning the peace is less straightforward than appears. In his euphoria, Creon, as leader, overestimates people's willingness to pull together. There are still conflicting loyalties and pockets of resistance. And his brutal enforcement of a vindictive law – that enemy corpses be left to rot – becomes the trigger for further death and violence.

Antigone has had many different treatments down the years. But what struck me in 2003 was that it's a play about bodies. After the Somme, the Nazi Holocaust, Cambodia and Rwanda, we have, understandably, become fixated by images of the war dead – and preoccupied with the dignities and indignities of their disposal. Article 17 of the Geneva Conventions in respect of the war dead states that they should be 'honourably interred', according to their religion, and that any possessions found on them be placed in 'sealed packets', so that they can be identified. We know such standards haven't been met in Iraq or in many other wars. The ethos of Creon – that the enemy, deserving no better, be left to jackals and vultures (including the jackals and vultures of the media) – is hard to dislodge.

Good plays have their moment; with great plays, that moment never ends. One enduring aspect of *Antigone* is its concern with gender. To Ismene, being a woman is incapacitating ('women aren't built / to do battle. Men's wills are like iron. / To live with them, women have to give'[10]). To Antigone, femaleness is a mark of moral superiority – only women know how to look after bodies and do right by family, she believes. To Creon, masculinity means playing the hard man and making an example of Antigone; he accuses his son Haemon of effeminacy for taking her side and snarls at Antigone's feminine logic:

> I'll not take lessons from a girls' school.
> No woman's going to lord it over my rule.[11]

There are similar lines in *Lysistrata* – evidence, if we needed it, that the war of the sexes is a timeless phenomenon. But the problem with translations is that, by speaking in the idiom of their day, they quickly date – and therefore date the original, too, rather than allowing it its timeless moment. Here, for instance, from four of the best-known twentieth-century translators of Sophocles, is the opening of the famous choric ode to man:

> Wonders are many; yet than Man
> None more wonderful is there known. (Trevelyan, 1924)
>
> Wonders are many, but none there be,
> So strange, so fell, as the Child of Man. (Murray, 1941)
>
> Wonders are many, yet of all
> Things is Man the most wonderful. (Kitto, 1962)
>
> Numberless wonders terrible wonders walk the world
> but none the match for man. (Fagles, 1982)

As I understand it, the original Greek in the lines above rests on an ambiguity – the word *deinon*, meaning both 'wonderful' and 'terrible – which can't easily be expressed in English. But why do the first three sound pre-Wordsworth, never mind pre-Eliot and pre-Pound? The problem is their piety towards Sophocles' grandiloquence, which makes them invert normal word-order (and in Trevelyan's case quite a bit more besides) in the vain hope that it will add poetic lustre. Fagles, while avoiding such quaintness, is not much better – can wonders be said to 'walk'? – and a few lines on he too falls into inversion: 'the blithe, lightheaded race of birds he snares'. Blithe? Lightheaded? Race? You can already hear the clatter of tipped-up seats as the audience streams towards the exit.

The better versions of *Antigone* in recent years have come from poets, including Brendan Kennelly (1996) and Tom Paulin. Paulin's *The Riot Act* ranges from Northern Irish dialect (*eejit, scrake, stinty, sleaked, clemmed*) to the windy politico-babble of Creon, whose opening address sounds uncannily Blairite, even though Paulin's version dates back to 1985: 'Thank you all for coming, and any questions just now? We have one minute. (Flashes stonewall smile).'[12] There's no press conference in the original, of course, but Paulin isn't taking liberties with Sophocles, he's liberating him. Good translations and productions do this. Fidelity doesn't preclude a little invention, or a little cheek. In my version, the archaic 'Wonders are many' becomes the vernacular 'Wonders never cease'[13] – a wearily sarcastic phrase in modern idiom, but here I hope reanimated and purged of cynicism.

Having done earlier drafts of *Antigone* against the backdrop of the invasion of Iraq, I did the last ones during the Hutton Enquiry, the starting-point for which wasn't a war so much as a single, exposed dead

body, that of Dr David Kelly.[14] And the issue of weapons of mass destruction was still there when I embarked on my adaptation of *Lysistrata* two or three years ago. The play was first staged just a year after the disastrous Sicilian expedition in 411 BCE, in which thousands of young Athenian lives were lost – a military catastrophe and civic trauma on the scale of Vietnam or Iraq. The play contains two plot-hinges – first a sex strike (women refusing to sleep with men until they stop fighting), and second an occupation (women taking over an exclusively male domain – the Acropolis in the original – in order to starve the military of funds and equipment). Neither of these strands is difficult for a modern audience to engage with: in recent years, women have used sex strikes as a means of political persuasion in several countries, including Columbia, Turkey and Poland. And there was a famous anti-war occupation by women at Greenham Common in the early 1980s – one which formed the basis for Tony Harrison's version of *Lysistrata, The Common Chorus* (1992).[15]

Despite the Aristophanic play's sense of familiarity, it's a tricky one to adapt, something underlined by the fact that Harrison's play, though commissioned, was never staged. How, for instance, do you avoid the taint of misogyny in the presentation of the women? And how do get round the seeming illogic of the strike itself – the premise that a man cannot find sexual relief if his wife refuses him was clearly ridiculous in ancient Athens, where large numbers of rent boys and prostitutes were available, and it's no less ridiculous in the era of dogging and Internet porn. And if the men are away fighting, how will the sex strike affect them anyway?

The play's strain on credulity is something I learned about the hard way. I was originally commissioned to adapt it for television – but television being an overwhelmingly realist medium, the would-be producers wanted to use realist conventions (for example, they wanted each member of the largely anonymous male and female choruses to have a 'back story'), and when I didn't come up with the goods they dropped the project. And yet I thought I'd given the play a believable contemporary context by setting it in a northern mill-town where racial tension is rife: instead of the women of Athens and Sparta joining forces to stop their men fighting, in my version they're white and Muslim; and instead of them occupying the Acropolis, they occupy the factory at which most of the men earn their livelihood, thereby hitting them, as one of the women puts it, 'in their wallets as well as their bollocks'. I even, I thought, prevented such a setting seeming too local and small-scale in comparison to the original. Just as Aristophanes' women make startling discoveries about the world of politics when they enter the Acropolis, so the women in my version *Lisa's Sex Strike* discover that the components being manufactured at the occupied factory are being supplied to the arms trade, and are thus part of the global war between whites and Asians, Christians and Muslims, First World and Third.

All of this is pretty apposite and contemporary, especially when you

consider that in the original there's also an exchange about Lysistrata wearing a veil, which one of the male authority figures derides, in the manner of Jack Straw, prompting her to remove it and stick it on his head instead.[16] There was never any danger of the play not being topical. While working on it I assembled a mass of cuttings and news items about sex strikes, gang wars, veils, hoodies, Islamophobia, the British arms trade and even knitting as an expression of political activism. But what I'd neglected was the farcical and absurdist spirit of the original, so much so that I was in danger of turning a comedy into a tragedy. It was Conrad Nelson, the director of the stage version for Northern Broadsides, who brought that home to me, over the course of numerous rewrites. My prosily realist first drafts were gradually abandoned in favour of half-rhyming couplets; then the half-rhymes slowly became fuller. (The odd thing about rhyming couplets is that once they're established the audience almost stop noticing them, or start to miss them when they aren't there.) The sections of dance and music were also extended, which meant new songs had to be composed and lyrics written. Conrad's versatility as a composer, and our wish for the play to be both eclectic and multi-ethnic, resulted in an extraordinary mixture of musical traditions: a George Formby ukelele number satirising British 'bobbies' (policemen), a Bollywood ballad, an accelerating *Zorba the Greek*-type solo for the goddess of peace, a First World War marching song and, most spectacularly perhaps, a rap number in which a preening chorus of male workers celebrate their masculinity by stripping, to the amusement of the watching female chorus and to their own eventual humiliation.[17] In Jack Lindsay's 1925 version of *Lysistrata*, the men kick off their *Full Monty* routine[18] with the lines:

> Come, let vengeance fall,
> You that below the waist are still alive,
> Off with your tunics at my call – Naked, all.
> For a man must surely savour of a man. (Lindsay, 1925)

In our version, the male chorus is given more room to flex its muscles, but the message is the same: men rule the world!

> MEN Yo, we're the archetypal primate, Mr Macho Man
> The father figure for Goliath and c-Caliban,
> The proud descendant of the ape and the orang-utan
> Next to us the women pale cos we're the race called men
> Men are God's first creature
> His leading feature,
> Pure hunks of meat, dear,
> Nothing in the world tastes sweeter,
> Men began with Adam
> Who taught his madam
> To serve her lad
> We're the rulers of the world

> You can't thump us we're all pumped up with testosterone
> Don't be a prat or you'll be battered with this knucklebone
> Our booming voices carry miles without a megaphone
> We're made of stone, we're in the zone, we are the race called men ...
> Men, we sup our lager
> Just like our fathers
> Cos we feel harder
> When the booze is in our larder
> Men, including poofs, dear,
> Carry in their nuts here
> Something to fear
> We're the rulers of the world.
> Cos we're the undisputed owners of huge abs and pecs
> Sumo wrestlers run for cover when our stomachs flex
> In any bout we'll knock you out cos we're the stronger sex
> Beneath our vests we've massive chests, we are God's musclemen
> Men, we win each tussle
> Don't make no fuss, girl
> Come feel this muscle,
> It's the size of a double decker bus, girl
> Men, we box like Rocky
> Our cocks are cocky,
> No one dare mock
> We're the rulers of the world
> WOMEN Oh, we've listened to your rapping but it's just a rant.
> Now we wonder what you look like in your underpants.
> If we whip round, will you strip down for a raunchy dance?
> Please don't be shy, just show us why you are the race called men.
> Men, don't act like Jessies
> Come and impress us
> Let's see those chests puff,
> We want to see you with your vests off,
> Men, if you're not losers
> Show us your bruises
> Come light our fuse
> You're rulers of the world.

Perhaps the number that best illustrates the role which music can play in a production is a blues song which comes early on in what I think of as Act 2 of the play. This is the point at which, to her exasperation, Lysistrata's sex strike is collapsing, as the women, in their desperation for orgasm, seemingly attainable only through penetrative sex with their husbands, try to sneak off home. It's a scene that can seem both unfunny – all those Benny Hill *doubles entendres* – and misogynistic, and though we used some of the original gags (for example, with the first woman who says she has to go home because there are mothballs in her wool, we kept the joke, because she'd been established as a woman who loves to knit) some we quietly dropped. In the original Lysistrata's clinching argument is that if the women can only hold out a little longer, they've been promised

victory by the oracle; in our version, she reads out entries from a horoscope in a woman's magazine, *Heat*, on which the women have earlier sworn their oath. Our key departure, though, was to bring back Lampito – Lysistrata's Spartan ally, her key collaborator in organising the sex strike, who, so Lysistrata assumes, is still on her side. This assumption is quickly demolished as Lampito – Loretta, an Afro-Caribbean in our version – sides with the defecting women by singing of her sexual frustration. Here goes:

> Got the celibacy blues, girl, pining for my loving man.
> Miss the touch of him so bad, yeh, his sweet wet tongue and gentle hand.
> Without my man to bring me comfort, I cain't reach the promised land.
> Baby kisses on my belly, on my buttock and my thigh,
> His hairy chest against my nipple, my legs wrapped round him as we lie.
> Don't need no dope or whisky, one whiff of my man gets me high.
> Yes, when a woman's feeling lonely, there ain't but one known solid cure.
> Only a man can bring jouissance, only a man can bring amour.
> No dildo dong done ever come, man, nor do it make this girl come too.
> Just wanna lie back on the pillow with my hands behind my head
> Let my man make all the running till I'm clutching at the bed
> When I go down and kiss him back, hon, I'll give him love he won't forget.
> Got the celibacy blues, girl, pining for my loving man.
> Miss the touch of him so bad, yeh, his sweet mouth and gentle hand.
> I've tried so hard to keep my promise but I hate this loving ban.

One of the incidental pleasures of this production lay in exploiting the talents of the cast both to function as members of a chorus – speaking with one voice – and to emerge as individuals. So there's Loretta, who sings the blues. And there's a male factory worker who suffers from a condition akin to Tourette's syndrome, who in his struggles to get words out invariably stutters or stumbles into an f-word that's not the f-word he's looking for but does have its own kind of zany inventiveness – 'that fecund woman', 'just pistachio out of it', 'him and me are fitting twins', 'we're fruiting all in the same fishy fix'. (The language of Aristophanes' original play is incredibly obscene, so Greek scholars assure me, but obscenity is so integral to the English spoken by men and women in Britain today that it's no longer shocking or surprising to hear it onstage – and we wanted the demotic speech of our characters to be more inventive than the usual four-letter expletives.) Or there's Amit, tormented by his giant erection, who hankers nostalgically for a minuscule, detumescent penis – in a nice inversion of the usual male anxiety, he'd like nothing better than to be smaller. It's a play that allows you to have fun with stereotypes – of ethnicity and old age as well as gender – and if you miss that opportunity you're being untrue to the spirit of the original, much more so than if you tamper here and there with the play's structure.

I mention tampering with structure because with this play, more than any other I've adapted, we did tamper – just as we brought back Lampito, or Loretta, so we also brought back the key male authority figure (a

magistrate in the original, a factory owner in my version) who in Aristophanes disappears in the play's first half. 'The original is unfaithful to the translation,' Borges once said about a translation he particularly admired,[19] and we had the same heretical thought about *Lysistrata* – that the play lets itself down towards the end, but that with a change or two it could be made truer to Aristophanic spirit than Aristophanes himself was. So the factory owner returns to threaten the peace, thereby preventing the play from petering out and making the ultimate triumph of peace – in the play's song-and-dance-routine finale – all the sweeter.

I seem to be saying that it's possible to be true to the spirit of an original while making radical changes. And in the end, that's what I feel. The translator is sometimes spoken of as a sort of delivery boy – 'the mailman of human thought and sentiment' in George Steiner's phrase. But surely this allows too little to the translator, and even more so to the adaptor, who, unlike the mailman, has to know what's inside the package as well as delivering it to the right address. What's more, adaptors can never be anonymous; they'll always leave their thumbprints on the envelope. Rather than being mailmen, adaptors are mediators. On the one hand they're conscious of the original authors they're adapting, who peer over their shoulder as they work; on the other hand, they're aware of the audience to which the adaption is being aimed, who need to feel a sense of recognition or relevance or ownership if they are going to respond.

Put like that, adaptation sounds much like the process of writing itself, where the task is to make potentially obscure or private experiences knowable to others, so that an audience feel 'Yes, here's something I recognise and can relate to'. The adaptor works with a pre-existing text, of course. But poets or novelists have a pre-existing text, too, the Utopian model in their head of what the work should be. It's not a question of the author being free to imagine whereas the adaptor is shackled by duty to an original. Both will feel a notion of service, and a strange mixture of constraint and liberation, fidelity and freedom, euphoria and hard labour. When I wrote that memoir of my father, I had the task of making my family – with its idiosyncratic customs – intelligible to a wider audience, and in a way, bizarrely, when adapting classical plays I feel to be doing the same. At the root of both endeavours is the struggle to make the alien familiar – but not so familiar that the audience won't be provoked, entertained and disturbed.

Notes

1. This essay is a transcript of a talk given in Oxford, at the Archive of Performances of Greek & Roman Drama, on 26 November 2007.
2. The film, *And When Did You Last See Your Father?* (directed by Anand Tucker, 2007) was based on Morrison 1993.
3. Robert Lepage's *Kindertotenlieder* opened at the Lyric, Hammersmith on 14 May 1998.

4. The opera was first performed by the English National Opera on 15 June 1998.

5. Goldoni 1828: 143.

6. 'To his Worth Friend Doctor Witty upon his Translation of the "Popular Errors"', 1651, lines 13-15.

7. Morrison 2003: 7.

8. Morrison 2003: 34-5.

9. Morrison 2003: 28.

10. Morrison 2003: 69.

11. Morrison 2003: 85.

12. Paulin 1985: 17.

13. Morrison 2003: 77.

14. Dr David Kelly was a civil servant who worked for the UK Ministry of Defence. He was found dead in July 2003 in mysterious circumstances, shortly after appearing before a parliamentary committee investigating a scandal related to the government's information about alleged weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Lord Hutton was in charge of the enquiry into his death.

15. *The Common Chorus* is included in Harrison 2002.

16. In October 2006, the Labour politician Jack Straw angered some British Muslims by suggesting in a newspaper article that the custom of wearing the veil made community relationships more difficult.

17. There is a recording of the musical numbers in *Lisa's Sex Strike* available for consultation at the Archive of Performances of Greek & Roman Drama in Oxford.

18. The movie *The Full Monty* (1997), directed by Peter Cattaneo, narrated how six unemployed former steel workers begin an alternative career as male strippers.

19. Borges 1973: 140.

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