

### *Traduttore, Traditore?: Appalachian Dionysia*

In summer 2011, a classicist, a theatre specialist, a nutritionist and a mathematician received a \$10,000 grant from the Appalachian College Association for fostering undergraduate research through our Festival of Dionysus. The goal of the festival was to create an interdisciplinary research experience between faculty and students. The festival comprised various elements, such as a tunnel and temple of Asclepius (based on those at Pergamum, which some participating students had visited earlier in the summer) and a magnificent feast for 200 which boasted only foods available in fifth century Athens. A production of the *Oresteia*, adapted and translated by classics majors and staged by drama majors was the central point of the whole festival.

Since any full production of the *Oresteia* is some five hours long, and demands the translation of almost 3000 lines of highly complex Greek, some radical textual surgery was required and the students began with extensive discussion about the goal of our translation, which was carried out in a special topics advanced Greek seminar. In earlier, more conventional classes, students had been encouraged to make comprehension of the Greek and rendering it in a form as close as possible to the original language their primary aim in translation. Once the twin goals of this translation had emerged as clarity for the spectator, especially non-specialists, and a focus on the action of the trilogy, students saw that they would have to balance basic comprehension and accuracy with a strongly communicative focus – what do I need to convey here in the bigger context of the play? How are the audience likely to receive this orally? Do I need to simplify names, or add glosses to aid the comprehension of non-specialists?

Using a common domain translation of the trilogy, we edited ruthlessly: our eventual *Agamemnon* was just 711 lines long, and the *Choephoroi*, 469, by the shocking expedient of omitting the *kommos* scene more or less entirely. *Eumenides* proved harder to cut and was allowed 709 lines. From there, students pieced together a text, translating the lines of Greek which remained over a period of about ten weeks. Such extensive cuts certainly caused some unease in us all, but pragmatic considerations prevailed, given that the students had to produce a complete, workable, speakable text in ten weeks, meeting in class for two and a half hours a week.

“Traduttore, traditore”. The production had real strengths and real (and, given its function, perhaps unavoidable) deficiencies. There was a clear value in presenting a complete, if radically abbreviated, version of the trilogy, particularly since this “all-action” *Oresteia* became for us all an interesting exercise in exploring ideas of drama as that which is done, while also setting limits on simplification. Clearly, any *Agamemnon* needs a powerful Clytemnestra, the return of Agamemnon, his murder and Clytemnestra and Aegisthus triumphant over the bodies at the end. But to retain these elements and little else makes an *Agamemnon* so compressed that the grandeur and increasing menace of the play is entirely gone. Similarly with the language: although we simplified syntax and vocabulary to a great extent, for our goal of clarity, it became increasingly clear that over-simplification creates a horribly banal text. So both the demands of language and plot provided some interesting internal correctives to our initially intense emphasis on clarity and simplification. Our production undoubtedly lacked in some measure Aeschylus’ stateliness and sense that Zeus is operating on his own time-scale, rather than that of the human characters, because there was never a very long wait for the next action

and much of the complexity of the imagery in the play was lost through our cuts. But over all, the benefits of the exercise outweighed the disadvantages. The translators gained a real sense of accomplishment and a deeper sense of their role as communicators between the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE and the 21<sup>st</sup> CE, and a greater competency and confidence in Greek. For the department, it made us visible, particularly beneficial for a small department in times of straitened budgets. This paper will include examples of the translation and the process by which Aeschylus' text was abridged and will include a short clip from the production, as well as brief advice for anyone tempted to try a similar exercise.