

Thoughts of a serial translator

I will begin by referring to two articles on the same subject which appeared in the same journal, one of them forty years ago, the other one well within the last forty weeks; and if I do not say that the later one has rendered the earlier obsolete, it is only because I, as the author of the first article, have long been only too well aware that it had never been obsolete in the first place, and the author of the second was if anything unduly charitable in making one reference to it. I am speaking of course of James Robson's superb article "Transposing Aristophanes: the theory and practice of translating Aristophanic lyric" in last October's issue of *Greece and Rome*, in which he analyses the main competing (and often coexisting) principles of, and approaches to, the translation of poetry with particular reference to Aristophanic songs. I am very pleased that James's article came out in time for me (a) to make use of it (such use as I can) and (b) to make sure that I talk about something else.

But what? I called myself, in the title of this lecture, a serial translator. I certainly am a recidivist in regard to this activity, in more than one sense. I have published a lot of translations of Greek drama: by my reckoning I have been solely or jointly responsible for twenty volumes, covering altogether eighteen extant plays and eighty-five fragmentary ones (though of some of these, I must admit, like Aeschylus' *Atalanta* and *Lemnian Women*, I didn't actually translate anything). And like my good friend and sometime editor Jeff Henderson, I have translated some plays of Aristophanes three times over (one of them, as in Jeff's case, inevitably being *Lysistrata*). But I'm afraid that one thing I have never done is attempt to theorize what I was doing. All the same, I have been aware that at different times I was doing different things for different purposes, and I can distinguish four kinds of translations that I have done over the years.

Firstly, what one might call "early Penguins", represented in my case by the *Lysistrata* volume produced by "the young Sommerstein" (to quote James) in 1973 and the *Birds* volume (shared with David Barrett – *Birds* itself was actually his) which followed in 1978, both broadly following the model set by Barrett in his 1964 *Frogs* volume and the spirit which then seemed characteristic of the Penguin Classics series as a whole.

Secondly, a couple of much later Penguins, the "revised" (more truthfully, rewritten) *Lysistrata* volume of 2002 and an Aeschylus volume of 2009. Both moved strongly in the direction of closer translation and fuller annotation, and in the Aeschylus volume I actually used my Loeb translation virtually unchanged.

Thirdly, bilingual editions of complete plays. I made a false start with a Loeb Aristophanes – and the Harvard trustees, I now feel, did the right thing, if probably for the wrong reasons, in decreeing that it should never see the light of day – and then started again with better results.

And fourthly, bilingual editions of fragmentary plays – though the treatment of these in the Loeb Aeschylus is, as I am sure you know, incomplete, since it includes neither text nor translation of the many very short fragments. I should have asked to be allowed to include them; Jeff would surely have agreed, since it's what he did himself for Aristophanes. For thirteen Sophocles plays, on the other hand, David Fitzpatrick, Tom Talbot and I have been able to present (we hope) all the evidence.

I shall have something to say about all these, and I'll start by going back to that forty-year-old article of mine, which also appeared in *Greece and Rome*. It was written *after* I had completed my first Penguin volume – in fact, a few weeks after it had been accepted for publication – and at a time when I still expected my future would lie in the field of linguistics, not of classics. At a time, too, when my knowledge of the world of academic Classics was entirely confined to Cambridge, and to a

Cambridge where all Classics undergraduates either arrived with A level Greek, or set about learning the language right away. So when I considered the possible reading publics for a translation of Aristophanes (and it would have made no difference if I had been writing about any other ancient dramatist), I had very little to say about students, and that little was not particularly clear; I spoke of

the student who wants to know more about ancient literature but is not yet (and in too many cases may never be) competent to study it in the language in which it was written.

I don't now know for certain who that was meant to refer to (and whoever it was, I shouldn't have used the word "competent"), but it's hardly an appropriate way of talking about any sort of ancient world student. So I was probably thinking of students in other disciplines, such as English or drama. A year later I became a lecturer in Classics, and within a few years we had large numbers of students on Classical Civilization or Ancient History courses who were required, at that time, to learn Latin or Greek but certainly not both (though a few dedicated ones did). They needed texts in translation. And for their needs the Aristophanic Penguins, whether mine or David Barrett's, were utterly unsuitable: for all the talk of "faithfulness" in my 1973 article, they too often, and usually without warning, stepped over the line that roughly separates "paraphrase" from "imitation" (to use the terms that James Robson adopts from Dryden), so that (to paraphrase James in another sense) the monolingual Anglophone reader has no way of knowing which features derive from Aristophanes and which from Sommerstein or Barrett. Consequently I spent a quarter of a century warning my students against my own translations – those ones, anyway – until Penguin asked me to do a revision, and, as I've already mentioned, I did something considerably more drastic, "aiming", in the words I used at the time, "to bring [the translation] closer to the original and to update it in the light of progress in scholarly understanding of the text and action". That's a very long way from anything I'd have dreamed of saying in 1972/73. This time I put the student front and centre, and the question that I was constantly asking myself was "is this going to mislead them?" The lyrics, and the parabasis speeches, were still in strictish metre and largely in rhyme, but there was much more determination to include, so far as one possibly could, all that was in the Greek and exclude all that was not. In my 1973 paper I quoted three versions of the antistrophe of the *parodos* of *Clouds*, one of which was my own, of which I was apparently very proud since I put it at the very end of the paper. It consisted of three four-line stanzas, the first of which was:

Come, my sisters, where Athena
Rules the loveliest land in Greece,
Where reside the glorious Mysteries
That to troubled hearts bring peace ...

The last line there is about as misleading as you can get, and overall it's hardly an exaggeration to say that only about half of that stanza has anything to do with the Greek text, which in 1982 I translated more literally as follows:

Rain-bearing maidens,
let us go to the gleaming land of Pallas, to see
the lovely land of Cecrops, home of fine men;
where are the august rites none may speak of, where
to receive the initiates the temple
is opened at the holy Mystic festival ...

So in 2002 I stretched the antistrophe to four stanzas (I really should have tried to do the same to the strophe) to include what had previously been left out:

Maids of Rain, come now where Pallas
 Rules the loveliest land on earth,
 Rich and shining land of Cecrops
 Full of men of valiant worth;

Where the initiated worship
 At the great Eleusis shrine,
 Through its open gates beholding
 Secrets of the world divine ...

Well, I tried harder, anyway. Again, though, I was following a trend: in the intervening years the Penguin series had moved a long way towards closer translation, and also towards fuller annotation. In 1973 I had provided fifteen pages of endnotes; in 2002 there were forty-seven.

But I will focus principally today on the genre to which most of my translations have belonged, the bilingual edition. The main bilingual series with English translation are of course the Loeb series and the Aris & Phillips series. The Loeb series, one might crudely say, are designed for handy reference, with the original text available for comparison and checking, and (in most cases) with only such annotation as can conveniently be placed at the foot of a page. The Aris & Phillips volumes have introductions and commentaries (though, as I have explained elsewhere, it took quite some time to work out the appropriate scope, density and level of sophistication for these), and a reader who has chosen to buy, or even to borrow, such a volume can reasonably be expected to want to consult this exegetic material.

I suppose I can see the rationale for James Robson's view that the translations in these series "sit at the 'metaphrase' end of the spectrum", which he defines elsewhere as "word-for-word translation". Indeed my 1982 and 2003 translations of the choral passage from *Clouds* make quite a good exemplification of his distinction – Dryden's distinction – between metaphrase and paraphrase. The 2003 rendering contains just about all the basic semantic elements present in the Greek text, but they are sometimes in quite different relations; for example, the elements making up the phrase σέβας ἀρρήτων ἱερῶν are scattered across a whole stanza in the words "worship" (and that's a verb instead of a noun), "secrets", and ... well, I suppose σέβας is represented by "great" and "divine". In 1982, by contrast, the phrases and their grammatical relationships are closely reproduced, and some special effort is even made to preserve their sequence (thus "to receive the initiates" is placed at the beginning of its clause when it might have come more naturally in the middle – after "opened" – or at the end). This is certainly hewing much closer to the expression of the original than Dryden in his Virgil, or Pope in his Homer, ever thought of doing. I've no doubt that both of them, from time to time, asked themselves "Is this going to be misleading?", answered themselves in the affirmative, and adjusted their renderings accordingly, but to say the least, their misleadingness threshold will have been much higher than that of almost all Loeb or Aris & Phillips editors. And yet Dryden and Pope would undoubtedly see themselves as paraphrasts rather than simply imitators; from which it follows that the average Loeb or A&P translator, however careful of English idiom, must be a metaphrast.

In translating for a bilingual edition, one must have in mind two kinds of user, whom I will call Type N and Type Y, after the initials of two short words that appear frequently next to radio buttons in on-screen questionnaires. Both types alike may be academics (in various disciplines), teachers (of various subjects), students, or none of these – though the ratio of N to Y increases progressively as we go across that spectrum. Type N users are James Robson's "monolingual Anglophones": they do not know, or at any rate do not have effective command of, the original language of the work they are reading, but want to engage with it seriously, and look to the translation (plus any auxiliary

material that accompanies it) to supply them with as reliable a picture as possible of what the text would convey to a person hearing or reading it in the original. Type Y users would be able to read the text in the original if they wanted to, and can always refer to it, but look at the translation first to save time and/or to make sure that they don't completely misconstrue the text (and I must say that I have seen plenty of academic publications whose authors could have benefited by doing this).

Having said that, however, three other points can be made. One is that a translation that meets the requirements of the Type N user – crucial among which, you will remember, was reliability – will almost automatically meet the requirements of the Type Y user as well; which implies that translators, even in bilingual editions, must always be thinking primarily of the Type N user. The second is that if one is going to satisfy, and not mislead, the Type N user, one will need substantial annotation – particularly for Old Comedy, as was already true for native Greek-speakers, let alone others, in the time of Plutarch. The Loeb series has sometimes been rather stingy in this respect, and I was glad to be allowed greater latitude. The third point is that since many Type N users won't be likely to refer very much to the left-hand page, they might as well be given the alternative of having the translation without the original – which was one of the reasons why, following an example set long ago by Betty Radice, I presented virtually the same translations of four Aeschylean plays a second time in the Penguin series. Sales of this, I must admit, have been disappointing. This may be just because there is not now much general interest in these four plays (the Oxford Archive database is revealing: for all four together, a total of 63 productions are recorded since the turn of the millennium, compared with 171 productions of *Agamemnon* with or without its sequels); I would rather hope, however, that it was due to the competition of Chris Collard's excellent translation of the same four plays, with much fuller annotation, in the World's Classics series, which had appeared in paperback earlier the same year.

One difference between my volume and Chris's was that as an appendix to each of the four plays, I included a dedicated section on the other plays that were produced together with it, explaining what was known or could reasonably be inferred about the plot of each of them, and presenting the surviving fragments of these plays. In a sense this was only a revival of an initiative taken by Gilbert Murray in his OCT and sadly not imitated by his successors; but it is also a small part of a major explosion in published translations of dramatic fragments, a trend which was noticed by David Harvey in a survey article in 2005 and has continued since. The Loeb series now contains four volumes of tragic fragments (Euripides requires two) and four of comic fragments (covering the whole of Old Comedy); the Aris & Phillips series has editions with translation and commentary of thirteen fragmentary plays of Sophocles and seventeen of Euripides. For comedy we also have two wide-ranging anthologies, *Broken Laughter* by Doug Olson (the translations are in an appendix) and *The Birth of Comedy* by Jeffrey Rusten and his collaborators, and there are now an ever-increasing number of editions, with translation (mostly German or Italian) and full commentary, of the fragments of individual comic dramatists or groups of dramatists, and even of some single plays. As I was preparing this lecture, there landed on my desk a 342-page edition (by Michele Napolitano, Mainz 2012) of Eupolis' play *Kolakes* (*The Flatterers*), which defeated Aristophanes' *Peace* at the Dionysia of 421. This is a comedy of which we possess twenty-one substantial fragments (totalling just over fifty words) and fourteen more of one or two words each (and those last fourteen aren't even formally included in the edition – though all are duly referred to at some point or other). We can expect much more to come from Bernhard Zimmermann's *KomFrag* project (<http://www.haw.uni-heidelberg.de/forschung/forschungsstellen/kofrgrkom.de.html>).

Indeed it is now easier to identify which areas of fragmentary Greek drama have *not* yet received sufficient attention. So I shall point to two such areas – and they are very nearly the only two. One relates to the so-called “minor” tragic dramatists (that is, all of them other than Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides) and the many tragic fragments whose author is unknown (quite a number

of which, of course, may well in fact be by one or other of the big three). The other relates to the hundreds of fragments of Menander's plays which we know, not from papyrus copies, but from ancient quotations; so far there are accessible translations only of a few dozen of these, in the World's Classics volume by Maurice Balme (I do not of course count the profoundly flawed edition – to put it very mildly – by J.M. Edmonds from half a century ago), and it is very much to be hoped that a complete edition, with English translation, of these fragments will be undertaken before long.

Meantime, what is there that I would wish to say about the translation of dramatic fragments? It will have to be mainly tragic (and satyric) ones, as that is all that I have done; on comedy I will say only that while it is always hard to translate a joke into another language, it is several times harder to do so when (as is often the case) we only have half of the joke and none of its context, and may not even be sure whether it is a joke at all. And I am thinking, as previously, of the kinds of reader that I was discussing before, Type N or Type Y as the case may be, but at any rate not the sort of high-powered specialists for whom one writes, shall we say, a 342-page edition of a 70-word corpus.

I could talk of many things, but I've decided to concentrate on one thing alone, indeed on one word: that word is context. It is now increasingly recognized that the worst thing one can do with a dramatic fragment is to present it as if it had never had a context. Every passage which we know as a fragment was actually spoken by some character or other (where "character" includes the chorus) and in some specific situation (where "situation" includes the words that have been said as well as the events that have taken place), and we cannot hope to understand the fragment fully unless we know, or can reasonably infer, who did say it and in what context. I have frequently tried to push the evidence in this connection as far as it can carry us – too far, in the eyes of some critics; but I discussed that issue in another lecture. Today I want to look at a particular fragment whose context was spectacularly ignored, by a great and highly influential critic, very early in its reception history, in a way that has coloured its interpretation, and crucially also its translation, ever since, even after the context, long unknown, was rediscovered.

The great and influential critic was Plato. In books two and three of the *Republic*, as you know, he has Socrates denounce the canonical giants of Greek poetry for the alleged impiety and immorality pervading their work; and in the case of tragedy, he takes all his examples not from the controversial and increasingly popular Euripides (as many of his readers might have expected), but from the revered, if no longer much performed, Aeschylus, just as he takes all his epic examples from the even more revered Homer. Having established that God (or the gods, it makes no difference to Plato) is good, and therefore cannot be the cause of anything bad, he condemns Homer for saying that Zeus is the dispenser of good and bad fortune alike, or that he and Athena caused Pandarus to break the sworn truce at Troy, and so on; and he continues (380a-b):

Nor must we allow the young to hear that, in the words of Aeschylus,

θεὸς μὲν αἰτίαν φύει βροτοῖς,
ὅταν κακῶσαι δῶμα παμπήδην θέληι.

Rather, if anyone composes a poem on the subject of these lines, the sufferings of Niobe, or on those of the house of Pelops or the Trojan War or anything else of that kind, either he must not be allowed to say that they were the work of a god, or if they are ... he must say that the god was doing what was good and just, and that [the mortals concerned] benefited by being punished. What the poet must not be permitted to say is that those who are punished are wretched *and* that this was the doing of a god.

I have not so far translated the Aeschylus quotation, but I shall try to do so now in a neutral way, modifying the rendering given by Timothy Gantz in an article to which I shall return:

A god creates a cause (or guilt) for mortals, when he wishes to ruin a house entirely.

Now in modern times, up till the year 1933, the context of this Aeschylean sentence was not known. It was rightly assumed that it probably came from his play *Niobe*, in which was presented the consuming grief of Niobe after the death of her children, which, as virtually all sources from Homer on agree, was a punishment for her boasting about their number or excellence and claiming to be the equal or superior of the goddess Leto as a mother; and it seemed from Plato's words that in Aeschylus' treatment of the story, some god (Plato does not say which god), having some kind of grudge against the family to which Niobe belonged (perhaps specifically against her husband Amphion), *caused* Niobe to utter this rash boast in order to have a reason for destroying the family. The little word μέν, signalling that there is a contrasting statement to come, might have engendered some caution in interpretation, but there was no way of knowing what the contrasting statement might have been.

Until 1933. In that year was published a papyrus (PSI 1208) which confirmed that our fragment did indeed come from *Niobe* (for the papyrus included another passage cited elsewhere as coming from that play) and included parts of the five lines that followed it. No complete verse of this section could be read, but among the phrases that were clear in the next few lines were "being mortal, one ought ...", "not be rash in speech", "in prosperity they never hoped/expected", and "she was elated" (by something to do with beauty): quite enough to make it clear that, whatever role a god or gods may have had in setting up Niobe for her terrible fall, *she* is being blamed – blamed for letting her good fortune tempt her into rash boastfulness – in full accordance with what I like to call (showing my age) the Maradona Principle that the involvement of divine hands does not relieve human ones of their responsibility.

The young Hugh Lloyd-Jones (I can play that game too), editing the papyrus fragment for an augmented Loeb edition of Aeschylus in 1957, made no comment on these particular lines, but he did of course have to translate them, and when it came to the word αἰτίαν he had to make a choice between the two renderings I offered above (or their equivalents). And this is what he chose:

A god causes a fault to grow in mortals, when he is minded utterly to ruin their estate.

So too the somewhat older Denys Page, almost simultaneously and (it would appear) independently, in the introduction to his edition of *Agamemnon*:

In the words of Niobe, 'when the god desires utterly to destroy a family, *he creates a fault in man*' [italics his]

– though you will be relieved to learn that "he is not moved by wilful malice" but is punishing "those – or their unfortunate posterity – whose conduct offends against his rule of law".

Twenty-four years later, in his important article "Divine guilt in Aeschylus", Timothy Gantz was considering the same passage and, not being an editor, he was able to mention both possible renderings of αἰτίαν. But he then promptly forgot all about one of the renderings, and, what was worse, he only looked at part of the context:

The fragmentary context ... does soften some of the severity of Plato's judgement: in particular the phrase μή θρασυστομ[εῖν] ["not be rash in speech"] suggests a reference to

[Niobe's] original offence. Nevertheless, the notion of the gods creating a transgression is surely a surprising one. Did not Niobe herself conceive the insults she directed against Leto? ... Could Zeus have caused Niobe to err?

The idea that Zeus is “creating a transgression” depends entirely on the assumption that αἰτία means “guilt” or “fault”, and on the further assumption (likewise shared with Lloyd-Jones and Page) that the dative βροτοῖς is to be understood as a locative (all three scholars render it with the preposition “in”). The trouble with this interpretation is not that it makes the passage theologically shocking, but that it makes it logically incoherent. It is no use telling people that they ought to avoid rash speech, or blaming Niobe for being carried away by pride in her beauty or fertility or whatever it was, if they are going to be puppet-mastered anyway by some god or other into committing an offence for which this god can then punish them. That, therefore, cannot be what the speaker here means. Certainly the god (who may be either Zeus or Apollo) wants to destroy Niobe's family, because of some wrong done either by her husband Amphion (as the speaker of this fragment seems to think) or by her father Tantalus (who in fr. 159 admonishes himself “Learn not to give too much honour to anything that is human”) or, quite likely, both; but to make any sense of the passage, we have to assume that what he does is to bring it about that she commits an offence *which she could and should have avoided committing*. In other words, what the god did was to place her in a situation where she was *tempted* to offend: he gave her great prosperity, great beauty (perhaps), and a great number of splendid children. And to that temptation she succumbed; or, as Aeschylus might have put it (and indeed did put it elsewhere, with reference to Paris), “miserable Temptation forced her way in, the unendurable child of scheming Ruin”.

Surprisingly, one finds what is, at least in this respect, a rather better translation of the key expression in Weir Smyth's original Loeb, published seven years before the papyrus became known:

God planteth in mortal men *the cause of sin* whensoever he wills [what, not “willeth”?] utterly to destroy a house.

But we won't end this history of misinterpretation unless we get rid not only of “guilt” or “fault”, but also of the insidious preposition “in”. Niobe's offence, like every event that raises serious issues about the justice of the gods or of the world, had multiple causes, and some of the causes were in her, that is, in her character; but the cause that a god had created to be a snare to her was not in herself but in her circumstances – the exceptional good fortune that she enjoyed. That dative βροτοῖς is not a locative; it is a dative of disadvantage. I am not entirely satisfied now with my own 2008 rendering:

When god wishes to ruin a family completely, he plants a cause among its members –

though I did add a footnote saying that “the context suggests that this refers to a cause *of temptation* ... rather than a character flaw”. Perhaps the way forward might be to exploit *both* senses of αἰτία and speak of the god, rather in the manner of Weir Smyth, as creating “a cause of guilt” for the members of targeted family. At any rate, what I am trying to show is that even outstanding scholars like Lloyd-Jones, Page, and Gantz can be led astray by tralatitiant translations; how much more, then, the average Type N user? And that if they can go wrong like this in a passage where the context, or at least a crucial part of it, is available, there is all the greater risk, when the context is *not* directly available, of forgetting what a difference it may make.

I have therefore adopted whenever possible the practice, introduced by Collard and his collaborators in the Aris & Phillips Euripides, of signalling clearly to the reader, not just in a commentary but by a short note attached to the translation itself, the speaker and context of each

fragment, to the extent that they can be established with reasonable probability. This can often throw light, not only on the interpretation of a fragment, but on the structure of a whole play or a substantial part of one. Consider for example the first fragment in the recent Sophocles volume by Talbot and myself (though this particular section was all mine). It is Sophocles fr. 201f in *TrGF*, cited by Stobaeus from Sophocles' *Eriphyle* – which I argue, on grounds that needn't concern us here, to have been the same play as *Epigonoï*, covering the successful expedition of the sons of the Seven against Thebes, led by Alcmeon the son of Amphiaraus, and his murder of his mother Eriphyle on his return. The fragment seems at first sight like a boring tragic cliché:

How can I, a mortal, fight against the power of the gods, in a situation in which hope is of no avail against a terrible fate?

But this question doesn't – or didn't, when the script was complete – exist in a vacuum. It was asked by a particular person, thinking of his *own* situation, not just of the human condition in the abstract; and we know it is *his* own situation, since he refers to himself with a masculine adjective and participle. So the speaker must be a man faced with a “terrible fate” which he sees no real hope of avoiding; which, among the major characters in the story of Alcmeon, Eriphyle and the Epigonoï (and it is major characters who are normally given first-person reflections of this sort), can only be Alcmeon himself. The “terrible fate” will be his duty to kill his mother, enjoined upon him by his father Amphiaraus after Eriphyle had tricked him into going to a war which he, as a prophet, knew would lead to defeat and to the end of his own earthly life; in some accounts this solemn injunction was reinforced by the response of an oracle which he had consulted, so that to refrain from the matricide would be an act of disobedience both to his father and to the gods. The next question is: when and to whom would he have said this? He could not have said it in addressing, or even in the presence of, anyone whom he could not absolutely trust to keep his secret. This makes it likely that the chorus were not yet present: Alcmeon could of course have sworn them to secrecy, but it is not clear how they could be motivated to accede to such a request, and it would be much more straightforward for the dramatist to make Alcmeon explain his predicament before their appearance on the scene. So the passage probably comes from the prologue (in the broad Aristotelian sense). It could be soliloquy, but another possibility is suggested by the *Epigoni* of the Roman dramatist Accius, in which there was a scene between Alcmeon and his brother Amphilocheus with no chorus present, and in which, very likely in this same scene, Alcmeon said that he had been told he would have no end to his miseries unless he took revenge for his father. So perhaps in Sophocles' play Alcmeon was trying to persuade Amphilocheus to join in his revenge plan, in what one might call an Ismene or Chrysothemis scene. The place for all this detailed discussion is, of course, in an introduction or commentary; but its outcome can be briefly indicated in a note appended to the translation:

Probably Alcmeon, recognizing (or arguing) that he has no choice but to obey his father's command to kill his mother.

Translations are essential to the wide dissemination of knowledge and understanding of the ancient world – to outreach and impact, as we are now supposed to say – and, provided that quality is maintained, we can hardly have too many of them. I try to encourage students to consult more than one translation in the hope of picking up from each of them some nuances that the others have either not noticed or not been able to capture. I have only touched on a few of the topics one might want to consider around and about my theme, and I will be very happy to discuss others (or even the same ones) afterwards if you want me to. Meanwhile, I'm glad to have been a serial translator, and glad to have been given the opportunity of sharing with you some of my thoughts on the problems of the job.