

**Walton, Michael J. *Found in Translation: Greek Drama in English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 320 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0521861106. *Euripides Our Contemporary*. London: Methuen, 2009. 250 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0520261822.**

J. Michael Walton is in a unique position to be writing these two books that are long overdue. This is not to say that there have not been other books on translation and Euripides, but not from this perspective: from someone who has taught in a drama department (at the university of Hull) for thirty-eight years (1965-2003), been the series editor for Methuen's classical Greek dramatists (1987-2003), has been an actor and director and is familiar with bringing a play from the silent page to a living dynamic stage in the final production of that work for an extended run. He has directed more than fifty productions (thirty-three at Hull) with professional and student companies, besides writing thirty books, to say nothing of the translations (21) he is known and appreciated for, all of which makes him uniquely qualified to tackle these subjects with aplomb.

Many books on classical theater written by pure classicists are valuable, but only when the authors would stick to their fields of expertise, whether philological or theoretical. However well they promote ideas about the classical world and its culture, they should refrain from writing about dramatic performance, except from the amateur's point of view. When they cross into theater and set themselves up as experts in performance, they usually fail miserably. They are unaware, for instance, of how important it is to get an actor to move from place a to b in a dramatically efficient way or what the meaning of the stage gesture is. Most academic non-practitioners don't pay attention to how a translation sounds, or how those words fit an actor's mouth. All this is rectified in Walton's approach.

*Found in Translation* is a word play that takes "Lost in Translation" and reworks it to suit his theme. There is a conscious echo of the film *Lost in Translation* (2003), starring Bill Murray and Scarlett Johansson, a rather silly love story that reified the Japanese in stunning Orientalist fashion. The reworked title is a witty move because the book also shows how Greek Drama found its way onto the English speaking stage, and served the interests over the years of the various audiences, or didn't serve them, as the case may be. An example of the latter might be the once popular translations of Gilbert Murray, which T. S. Eliot found execrable.<sup>1</sup> Many translations miss

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1. T. S. Eliot, "Euripides and Mr. Murray," *Selected Essays* (London: Harcourt 1950) 46-50.

the poetry of the original, or use a stilted English, which doesn't work on stage with conscious archaisms, a disease in translation which infected many who think that if Greek tragedy doesn't sound a bit lofty, or like Shakespeare, it's not a proper translation. Walton discusses the question of archaizing. He also points out the dangers of the other academic disease, the search for "authenticity," about which no two commentators agree (24-25). More lamentable is that "the original [Greek] is the province of a diminishing few" (24), and a combination of this knowledge with practical knowledge of the stage is even rarer.

Some translations, especially of Aristophanes, were dictated by the prudishness of the time. I remember in Loeb "translations" from the Greek, the juicy parts were rendered in Latin (an incentive for sheltered school girls to hone their Latin). Stage directions in modern translations can also make or break a performance. Canny directors should have more leeway.

Walton also investigates the earliest translations into English. He points out that credit for the first translation usually goes to the *Jocasta* of George Gascoigne and Francis Kinwelmershe in 1566, but Walton opts instead for Lady Jane Lumley's *The Tragedie of Euripides called Iphigeneia translated out of Greake into Englishshe*, which is tentatively dated to the 1550s, and predates Gascoigne and Kinwelmershe's *Jocasta*. Walton's extensive research on early translations into English shows, and the reader reaps the benefit. Having been fortunate to have read a bit of Lumley's "translation," I would argue it was a version, but then the numbers of "translators" who have made mistakes or consciously altered the Greek, if they knew any Greek at all, are legion. There is the old sexist joke that a translation is like a woman: if it's beautiful, it's not faithful, and if it's faithful, it's not beautiful. I won't comment on the truth of that, but instead quote the Italian *traduttore, traditore*: "a translator is a traitor," I would say by necessity, otherwise leave the work in the original Greek. Walton admits in his introduction that "Direct translation of Greek plays into English for performance had to wait, with a few exceptions, until the twentieth century."

Then after deftly tracing beginnings, Walton goes on to the moderns, even including more that could be called versions. It is amazing how many Greekless authors feel they can surpass the Greek originals by using their own ideas to inspire them. Some people have called this process defacing monuments. The modern Greeks are rightly intolerant I've found.

Walton shows that a translation is only the first step in the success of a performance. As he says, "The challenge in recreating a Greek play today is to make the original live, but through the creative act of a contemporary

production” (25). His references are always wide-ranging showing not only his extensive knowledge of international drama, but also how a director and the actors and the staging can make or break a performance all over the world.

There are useful chapters not only on history and theory, but the specific needs of the major playwrights from ancient Greece whose work survives, namely Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, besides the comic tradition (mainly Aristophanes and Menander, Old and New Comedy). He brings once again his wide experience of performances he has seen, and knowledge of others. His appendix of translations into English is wide-ranging, including even ancient work in mime (e.g. Herondas).

Fundamentally, *Found in Translation* is delightful for the reader and anyone who wants to tackle a performance of Greek tragedy and have access to translations that satisfy the theatrical needs. Walton argues also that at this time more than ever, translations deserve to be brought up to date, and dramatic snuff, to better serve audiences.

The title of *Euripides Our Contemporary* pays homage to Jan Kott and his *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1964). Walton truly shows how living and vital Euripides can be for moderns. The issues are still the same, corrupt politicians, the problem of democracy, women’s place in society, the value and drawbacks of war, and many other themes. He points out that Euripides speaks a modern language by comparison with the other playwrights (for which people like Nietzsche faulted him). His plays deserve proper translations and also proper productions.

Walton has sections on the playwright that breaks traditional images. Euripides does this in his plays which fit the themes of “Family Sagas,” “Women and Men,” and the comic tradition, Euripidean plays that are leading to New Comedy, one of which is our only surviving Satyr play (*Cyclops*). Women are particularly highlighted by Euripides: some critics consider him a misogynist; others think he has created some of the greatest roles for women in the entire western dramatic canon (Medea, Trojan Women, Iphigenia, Hecuba, Electra and Helen, for instance). Walton opts for the latter.

The next major section is “Powerful Forces: The Grand Passions,” and that covers war, revenge, madness, and the role of the gods, who sometimes appear the maddest of all. The concluding section is on Theater, and what is Theatrical: Illusion and Reality, and Great Roles (out of nine, only two are men). Then Walton stages a brilliant coup when he brings in Euripides’s legacy, in playwrights that owe Euripides a major debt (Shaw, Strindberg, Brecht, Pirandello, Anouilh, Sondheim, Frisch). He concludes with a plot

summary of all the surviving plays and select bibliography that is useful in identifying some of the major writing on Euripides.

Obviously anyone reading this will see that many of the plays overlap the various categories. This does not detract from the book, but sets the reader thinking about the original category chosen and how Euripides addresses these major issues. This is a book important for practitioners, directors who are about to stage a particular drama, for students in courses trying to understand these plays, and the plot summary is useful for selecting dramas by someone who doesn't know, or who has forgotten what plays and what themes Euripides wrote.

This volume is also reader friendly. If one needs an illustration, I quote his conclusion in which his breezy expertise thoroughly amuses besides informing the reader that Euripides is truly our contemporary:

Searching for disciples of Euripides has been no more than a pastime, but one with point if it makes it possible to see Euripides, not as a limited example of a primitive and dead culture, but as the master among the Athenian playwrights for his ability to speak to subsequent generations and, more than any other, to show us to ourselves two thousand years on, warts and all. Not today's playwright, Euripides is still a playwright for today. (212)

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