



I like to Take a Greek Play

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So I would suggest that there are two main things at stake in theatre translations of Greek tragedy. The first is in translation and theatre practice, and is the balance between alterity and familiarity in how theatre poetry and ancient drama conventions are perceived and communicated. These depend partly on the assumptions made about audiences and their environment, and partly on whether the practitioners see themselves as responding primarily to the ancient story/myth or to the Greek playwrights (who of course were themselves responding to and refiguring those myths). The second thing at stake is how scholars analyze and evaluate modern theatre translations, and how they situate them on larger maps. One way of doing this is to categorize in terms of how the theatre translation relates to the source text.²⁰ However, an approach focused on this relationship does not fully allow either for the decisive role of the spectator or for the immediacy of theatre performance. Researchers have to take account of this and need to develop methods for tracking how audiences interact with the processes of translation. Theatre translation is a connector between ancient and modern audiences, but its operation is not confined by linear temporalities of transmission nor constrained by a settled relationship between ancient and modern or, indeed, between text and performance. It shifts perceptions of both ancient and modern, and this makes it important for the understanding of cultural change.

I Like to Take a Greek Play

Charles L. Mee, Jr.




I like to take a Greek play, smash it to ruins, and then, atop the ruins, write a new play. The new play will often take some of the character names of the Greek piece and some of the story—even some of the ruined structure. But it will be set in today's world.

I feel no need to be faithful in any way to the “original.” Indeed, I often wonder if what I start with can really be considered an original anyway. The plays of Euripides are based on, or inspired by, earlier works themselves. He, Aeschylus, and Sophocles, like Shakespeare, wrote only adaptations. Only God, once upon a time, ever created anything *ex nihilo*. The rest of us all rewrite what we have been given.

Then, too, my plays, like all plays, are drawn from a consciousness formed by the world I was born into. Whatever I do will be inescapably informed by the history and culture that I have inherited.


In using this great cultural heritage—as much as I admire and respect it, as much as it nourishes and gives life to me—I admit I feel no obligation to bring faithfully forward into the present any vestige of what the Greeks thought or felt or said or did. Others feel that, I know—and I’m grateful for the work they do, I live off the work they do—but I don’t feel the same impulse myself. My impulse is toward utter faithlessness. My impulse is to pillage the Greeks shamelessly, ignorantly, carelessly, without always pausing to understand the people and work I am pillaging, and to use

²⁰ See J.M. Walton, *Found in Translation: Greek Drama in English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 182–83.




what I steal for my own purposes. If I feel any obligation, it is an obligation toward the present and future, not the past, as I try to remake the world along lines that seem more convivial today.


And so I pick and choose what I want from the Greeks, or from what I carelessly or incorrectly understand to be the Greeks. Sometimes I even pause and try to understand the Greeks correctly, since I know if I see things correctly, I may pick up some useful ideas from that as well as from my incomplete, superficial Greek tourism. I pick and choose what I love most. And there is much to love.




I love, first of all, the explanation the Greeks give of what it is to be a human being, and what causes human beings to do what they do. In most of the Western world for the past century, we have been reductionists. We have said, with Freud, that human beings are fundamentally psychological creatures, formed and impelled by the events of early childhood that occurred within the walls of their earliest homes. The Greeks had a more complex understanding of what it is to be a human being: they thought events were caused by the gods, by fate, by chance, and, yes, by character, too. But their explanations were what historians have recently taken to calling multifactorial explanations. And when we think about people and their actions in this more complex way, it prepares us better to understand ourselves and our world than the reductionist explanations of Freud. We see now that we are formed by history and culture, gender and genetics, politics and economics, race and chance, as well as by psychology.



In keeping with this taste for complexity, the Greeks also felt that the theatrical form ought to be more complex than the one we have become accustomed to since Ibsen; that is, the play as a text placed onstage. Greek theatrical events were a combination of music, movement, and text. And this taste for a more complex theatrical form is something else I like to steal. It has at least the possibility, as a container, to carry a more complex view of the world than nineteenth-century naturalism can.



And then, too, the Greeks love a story that has a son murdering his mother, a father sacrificing his daughter, a brother cooking his nephews and serving them up for dinner to their father. These, they say, are what human beings are like. These are the sorts of problems these human beings create—not something that can be easily set to rights before the final commercial break at the top of the hour. Now take this as your raw material and see if you can make a civilization out of it.



I could be wrong about all this. It could be that the Greeks thought none of these things. But I don't care really: I love the Greeks for the way I see them, not for the way they may have seen themselves.

I think the structures of the Greek plays were like Rolls-Royces. They work perfectly. Shakespeare must have realized this; he must have looked at the Greek plays and thought, *Yes, I see, they alternated scenes: principals advance the plot, the chorus comments; principals advance the plot, the chorus comments. . . .* But I imagine Shakespeare thought that the chorus does not speak with one voice. The chorus is like the crowd of people on the street in the evening television news. The television reporter puts the microphone first in front of one person and then another. The first person says what she thinks, the second says what he thinks. Taken altogether, this is the voice of the community. But it is composed of individual voices. And so, Shakespeare thought, *I can have principals advance the plot, and then I can explode the chorus into the secondary scenes and subplots filled with Dogberry and gatekeepers and servants.* And so you look at Shakespeare's structures and you see they are Greek structures exploded.

And then you look at Pina Bausch, and all she has done has been to return the evening to the chorus as a whole, with principals lost among the chorus, emerging from time to time for an individual moment, and then dissolving back into the community as a whole.

The reason I don't love Ibsen and Arthur Miller—as truly great as they are—as much as I love the Greeks, Shakespeare, and Pina Bausch is that Ibsen and Miller lost the chorus, they lost the community, they lost the music and the dance and the spectacle and just shut us up in a middle-class living room with a nuclear family—the world of Freud. And, while that world might be an interesting microcosm, while it might go deep into psychology, still, ultimately it feels reductionist compared to Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Shakespeare, Bausch, Pippo del Bonno, and Alain Platel.

And so while I pillage the Greeks, at the same time I pillage Bausch, del Bonno, and Platel and throw it all into my plays. And then too, any play I am working on at any given moment may be influenced by a book I happen to be reading, though I may not be thinking of it as I write, and by something I heard someone say the last time I was in Paris, by a certain moral sense my grandmother passed down to me, and by the peculiar pattern of neurons inside my head—a combination of things that may be, finally, unique, and that does, in the end, produce something unique. So, it may be that the plays I write, finally, are both an adaptation and an original at the same time.

I am not quite sure what to call what it is that I do. Of course, it could be called “translation” if we use that word in its broadest sense, although using the word so broadly risks losing more understanding than we gain. We run the same risk with the word “adaptation.” If we call the plays of Euripides and Shakespeare original plays, then we can call these plays original, too. But none of these words seems to capture what I do, finally, quite as well as “theft.” These days, of course, we don't use that word. We prefer to say “appropriation,” or, in Brooklyn, where I live, we call it “sampling.”

Translating Greek Theatre

David Wiles

The days are long gone when Gilbert Murray, as a professor of Greek, could produce translations for Granville-Barker to direct at the Royal Court Theatre. Deliberately archaized, his lyrical translations were accepted by public and actors alike as the right way to do Greek tragedy. The Murray texts moved well, spoke well, evoked a utopian past, and had the weight of academic authority to legitimate their cultural status. Eliot, on behalf of Modernism, demolished the Romantic enterprise. For Eliot, the past could only be salvaged as “fragments . . . shored against my ruins.”²¹ The Murray/Granville-Barker project became untenable, both theatrically and philosophically. There was no longer a normative poetic idiom available to the theatre, and the business of translation diversified.

²¹ T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (1922), in *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (London: Faber, 1974), 79.