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How to cite:

Parker, Janet (2009). 'Translation reveals the other': Bacchae and a pedagogic model of reception. In: de Faria Coutinho, Eduardo ed. Discontinuities and displacements: studies in comparative literature. Beyond Binarism (I). Rio de Janeiro: Aeroplano.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

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**‘TRANSLATION REVEALS THE OTHER’: *BACCHAE* AND A PEDAGOGIC  
MODEL OF RECEPTION**

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Hermeneutic work is based... in the play between the traditional text's strangeness and familiarity to us... (Gadamer *Truth and Method* pp.290, 295)

And so, do we laugh or cry as the crisis-male falls? As Pentheus is dismembered? I don't know. He's trying his hardest, he really is. (end of 'Pentheus: Sympathy & the Transvestite' University of Cambridge final year English student writer)

There are many ways of mediating texts from other cultures and in other languages to readers and students in the 21st century: in performance, in translation, with hypertext tools, in parallel or edited texts. This paper is concerned specifically with translation as a process of encounter across time and culture: translation as intercultural and interlingual meaning-making. Drawing on the experiences and writing of students of Greek Tragedy, it argues that such texts exert a 'despite and because of' power, one that draws in and repels, both invites and foils recognition.

Concerned with students reading Classics 'through' translation, it concludes that this iterative process of intercultural meaning-making provides a model of reception that is neither presentist nor historicist, neither essentialist nor denying the original text any claim. It is a model of 'Receiving the Other'.

## **Translating, Reading, Receiving the Other**

The [hermeneutic] circle...describes understanding as the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter (Gadamer p.293)

A reading is a performance of the singularity and otherness of the writing that constitutes the work as it comes into being for a particular reader in a particular context.....

‘Otherness exists only in the registering of that which resists my usual modes of understanding... registering alterity is a moment in which I simultaneously acknowledge my failure to comprehend and find my procedures of comprehension beginning to change as a process’. (Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* pp. 82, 28)

We all, even those of us with language skills, ‘read’ a Classic text - perform an intercultural act – in translation. Attridge talks of relating to a singular and alteriously other text: seeing the effect of encountering the work of art to be challenging to and transformational of what Gadamer calls *Bildung* (the individual’s formation by and in her culture; her sense of cultural location). This is to problematise the basic process of translation, usually conceived of as translating from the foreign to the home culture. But both these writers see the value of the Classic to be its ‘undomesticatability’.

My students’, and this paper’s, concern is with the reading and reception of infinitely, challengingly other, yet communicating texts. The texts are not just alien – finally uncontextualised fragments of a culture with values, mimesis, ethics and conceptual frameworks different from ours – but they are *challengingly* alien. They

demand yet resist comprehension, students say. They demand to be read, they say things that students, translators, audiences feel compelled to engage with. In Attridge's words, they perform their singularity and otherness, with the result that the self's comprehension is changed and challenged. They demand transformation as well as translation.

This is just what the word "Classical" means: that the duration of a work's power to speak directly is fundamentally unlimited. (Gadamer p.290)

This is to propose that a hallmark of the Classic, any Classic from any period, in any language and from any culture, is that it is a text which operates on the reader in the way argued here. That is, which acts on the reader's sensibility and identity- and paradigm-forming capacity by playing on as it instantiates radically 'other' values and worldviews. A text moreover that draws in and affects the reader in the processes adumbrated by Attridge and Gadamer above, so drawing her into its own 'horizon' and fracturing her individual cultural location. And finally that the Classic text is quintessentially alterious: that it is one which transforms the reader's sense of self and understanding of the self's relationship to the world by encapsulating and presenting a disturbingly opposite sensibility. The claim for the Classic text that it, in Attridge's words, 'resists my usual modes of understanding....registering alterity is a moment in which I simultaneously acknowledge my failure to comprehend and find my procedures of comprehension beginning to change as a process' is a large and multifaceted claim, based in reader reception and hermeneutic theory, which I want here to try to explore in practice and in theory.

### **Reception: a Third Way?**

This is the antinomy of philology: *antiquity* has in fact always been understood *from the perspective of the present* - and should the *present* now be understood *from the perspective of antiquity*? (Nietzsche 1875 'We Philologists')

'modernity *requires* the study of antiquity for its self-definition: only so can it misrecognize itself in its own image of the past, that of a so-called classical antiquity' Porter 2003, 'The Materiality of Cultural Studies', 64.

This is to see the Classic as something that communicates, that is active, or at least activatable, in the present, rather than as sealed in a culture needing expert excavation and mediation. There has been a fascinating exchange between two of the UK's most prominent Classicists, published in the Council for University Classics Departments *Bulletin* 2005 (<http://www.rhul.ac.uk/Classics/CUCD/martindale05.html> and <http://www.rhul.ac.uk/Classics/CUCD/rowe05.html> ) between Charles Martindale (author of many seminal books including *Redeeming the Text* (Cambridge 1993), founding member of the *Classical Reception Studies Network* and editor, with Richard Thomas, of the influential *Classics and the Uses of Reception* (Oxford 2006) ) and Christopher Rowe (joint editor with Julia Annas of *New Perspectives on Plato, Modern and Ancient* (Harvard University Press 2002), and co-author of Plato's *Lysis: Cambridge Studies in the Dialogues of Plato*.) The bibliography is important because the debate defines two poles in the argument about the status of the Classic text. For Rowe, the task is to strip away the [mis]readings of centuries of translation and reception of Plato, to 'bore down to' the 'truth'; Martindale builds on Jaussian

*Rezeptionsästhetik* 'the understanding that classical texts are not only moving but changing targets':

'My own view is that reception, on a Jaussian model, provides one intellectually coherent way of avoiding both crude presentism that assimilates a text to contemporary concerns and crude historicism. Antiquity and modernity, present and past, are always implicated in each other, always in dialogue - to understand either one, you need to think in terms of the other.'

For 'A text - is never just "itself", appeals to that reified entity being mere rhetorical flag-waving - rather it is something that a reader reads, differently - there is no Archimedean point from which we can arrive at a final, correct meaning for any text'

Rowe replied

We just insist that, if readers follow our argument, they will see more clearly what Plato's text is saying - where the clarity is a matter of things *coming out right*, of our being able to see how Socrates gets from *here*, precisely, to *there* rather than somewhere else. ..[the stripping away of receptions] *explains more* of the *Lysis* than any other, and one that moreover appears to have hardly less power when it comes to the explanation of other Platonic dialogues'.

Concerned as I am with the 'othering' as well as the reception of Classic texts, both these models of texts fail the test of explaining what happens when I or my students read a Classic text. Martindale offers readings of readings, Rowe a powerful essentialist and 'more true' reading, Batstone goes further:

The point of reception is the ephemeral interface of the text...at the point of reception the text comes alive as the consciousness of the reader...We lose

ourselves in the horizon of the other (Batstone in Martindale 2006 17, citing Gadamer 1976 101 and Kristeva 2002 xviii)

No we don't! [Lose ourselves]. Not I and my students, anyway: we are drawn in, revolted, puzzled, saddened, antagonised, horrified, upset, intrigued.....any verb of continuously mutating engaged motion. Aristotle talked of the generation of fear and pity in tragedy, well describing the contrary movements of reader and text two millennia later – being repulsed (horror, fear) and being drawn in (pity and sympathy). That is the effect of these very 'other' texts.

### **Foreignising/domesticating translation**

Foreignising or domesticating – the terms are taken from Venuti's seminal *Rethinking Translation* – are categories of effect, whereby the reader of the translation is encouraged to exoticise or feel at home in the translated text. For those that use them, they are exhaustive categories: all translations fall into one or other categories. A translator is of course free to foreignise or domesticate, a theatre director to stress the exotic or the continuities: as Tony Harrison memorably said, the Classic text is a dead stock from which the translator/gardener grows new blooms (Harrison 2000). Communicability, vitality, immediate effectiveness are all important, and may be achieved by communicating the timeless elements of the strange stories or by 'alienating' the audience from the start, as in Ariane Mnouchkine and Peter Stein's stunning productions.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Illustrations and discussion in, eg, Macintosh, F et al (2005) edd. *Agamemnon in Performance 458 BC to AD 2004* (Oxford: Oxford UP)

But for the student, undertaking the task of translation over a semester or year rather than one visit or one performance, the task is different, I suggest. After initial and necessary dependence on translations (her own, if she has the language skills or can use a parallel text, a montage of 'literal' and 'literary' if not) she has to come to read not in but through the translations she uses. This is to see both colourful versions (imitations, as Dryden calls them) and the translationese of the Loeb Classical Library both the Tony Harrison/Peter Hall's Royal National Theatre and the University of Chicago Press' Lattimore's *Oresteia* for what they all are – translations. To offer students multiple options makes the point that the modern reader of Classical texts cannot simply reach across time and language as if across an airy chasm. They must actively translate for themselves, an iterative and challenging process in which both they and the text become active in rather than passive to the act of inter-temporal and inter-cultural reading.

The point is that she herself must, finally, come to terms with those elements of the text that she recognises, makes her feel 'at home' or at least in communication with – the domesticating dynamics *of the text* – and those that she finds strange and estranging – the real alienation effects, *Verfremdungseffekten!* of and in the text.

### **Translating, Receiving, Engaging with the *Bacchae***

Venuti talks of domesticating and foreignising techniques which I here apply to illuminate, rather, the effect of the dynamics of drawing in and thrusting away in my and my students' readings. Batstone says 'We lose ourselves in the horizon of the other' to which I answer, no, rather the effect of the 'other' text is to 'fracture the idiocultural carapace', as Attridge, and I would say Gadamer, say.



Large claims, for an alternative line from Gadamer to Attridge and my students *not* via Jauss' *Rezeptionsästhetik*. I will try to justify these claims by looking at students' critical-creative writing of that most 'other' play, Euripides *Bacchae* – about the destruction, madness, human sacrifice and child murder wrought by the foreign god of ecstasy (*ekstasis*, standing outside) when his claims were denied him. One piece of writing ends:

The truth is, he loves the feel of a women's silken panties. Beneath the six-pack and the shaven chest, he wants to shave his legs too, and wear heels, and floral print dresses. I know men like this, and see them preening themselves ('Pentheus, coyly primping' l.924) and longing to understand how women work, and why they will never sleep with him - despite his gym regime - and thinking he might understand if he pretends to be one. And so, as he tries to sneak into the world of girly chats, accessories ('But to be a real Bacchante, should I hold / the wand in my right hand? Or this way?' l.941) and even, maybe, the ultimate unknowable: what women get up to with each other ('But if I climbed that towering fir that overhands / the banks, then I could see their shameless orgies / better.' ll. 1061-3). He simply ends up more ridiculous than he ever was just being as good, or bad, a male as he could.

And so, do we laugh or cry as the crisis-male falls? As Pentheus is dismembered? I don't know. He's trying his hardest, he really is.

I [will] rest my case.

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