

Phèdre: Translating A Trapped Tiger

BOYD TONKIN

Spend any time on islands and you find that winds have names and characters. The westerly that blew out of the Peloponnese across the Saronic Gulf and whipped the sea around *Aegina* into a choppy swell was an Italian wind, moody, mercurial but seldom furious for long. Would it manage to halt the excursion boat booked to take a cargo of theatre-goers, and maybe the odd star-spotter along for the ride, to see Helen Mirren in Ted Hughes's version of *Phèdre*?

In July, the National Theatre returned to the ancient site of Epidaurus to stage its adaptation of Jean Racine's final verse tragedy for the public stage, premiered in 1677, as a showpiece of this summer's Athens Festival. Nicholas Hytner's company transposed a production that began encased in Brutalist concrete beside the Thames into the acoustically precise, fourteen-thousand seated open theatre built around 330BC for a sort of sacred health spa in the forests of the Argolid. Their Greek journey gave another twist on the tale of this multiply-translated play. In the teeth of a baby gale, we did reach the shore at Nea Epidauros, its harbour flanked by gold-green orange groves that cry out for a Homeric epithet. But not before Racine's much-travelled verse had enjoyed one more metamorphosis. In demotic modern Greek, our group leader rattled through the plot over the PA as the *Anna II* carved and bumped through mutinous seas. "Very dramatic," said the tango teacher opposite who translated the synopsis for me. The plot, the trip? Both probably.

Racine's own play itself began with the intention to transform a source. As the playwright's bell-clear preface indicates (and how impossible to imagine Shakespeare ever writing anything like that), he thought of his writing as rewriting. He approaches the story of the love-struck stepmother – the wife of King Theseus and the daughter of Minos and Pasiphae, who falls for the proud and pure Hippolytus – as an interventionist translator or adapter.

His models came from tragedies by Euripides and – to a lesser degree – Seneca. Racine makes no bones about his own editorial steers. Victim of

Venus, bearer but not maker of the “sickness” of an illicit love inflicted by a jealous goddess, the doomed queen must have her reputation mildly cleansed. Unwilling to follow Euripides’s heroine further into the divine dementia of god-given desire, Racine has “taken care to make her rather less odious than she is in the classical tragedies”. So her servant-confidante Oenone, not the queen herself, suggests the accusation of attempted rape against Hippolytus: “This baseness appeared to me more appropriate to a nurse”. His Phèdre does less on her own account but is punished just as ruthlessly for it. For Racine, insecure artisan at the court of Louis XIV, and tormented offspring of a burdensome Jansenist theology, her fantasy of dynasty-breaking incest weighs as heavily as the reality would have done. To his Catholic-Puritan eyes, “The mere thought of crime is regarded with as much horror as the crime itself.”

Racine’s sonorous alexandrine tread compels wild passion to march in step with a society – and a faith – of rigid discipline. But for all the status of his tragedy as a cornerstone of the French canon, he failed to write the final word on Phèdre. Since the age of Sarah Bernhardt, modern actresses and their directors have re-valued her desire to a level that – for all his powers of empathy – Racine’s words and actions could never countenance. And, throughout the later twentieth century, a stream of English-language translations has, knowingly or not, modified the law as well the language of the play. To recent revisers its true scandal derives not from Phèdre’s lust but Racine’s surrender to the gods’ – or his God’s – brute implacability.

Phèdre has nagged like a spike in the sole of Anglophone poets. One by one they have been driven to lay transforming hands on a drama that, in the end, refuses to its heroine the Jacobean splendours of sin. She is not the Duchess of Malfi still. Likewise its verse, so controlled and controlling to the English-speaking ear, has been forcibly liberated by many rebel hands. A full half-century of anglicised *Phèdres* began with Robert Lowell’s in 1960, transferring into couplets “the glory of its hard, electric rage”. William Packard and George Dillon added their voices later in the sixties. Later still came Tony Harrison’s Raj-era transplant, *Phaedra Britannica*, John Cairncross’s sober blank verse, C.H. Sisson’s steely austerity, Ted Hughes’s own late-career, rough-handed seizure of this most alien masterpiece, Edwin Morgan’s drastic northwards shift into Glaswegian Scots and (from a fellow-dramatist for once) Frank McGuinness’s Irish snap and kick in 2006.

With Hughes biting and snarling in her mouth, Mirren stood and swooned, purple-robed on the rough earth circle of the Epidaurus stage. As she cried and railed against the toxic grip of love, Stanley Townsend's beefy Theseus laid his curse on the priggish Hippolytus and then lamented his rash appeal to Neptune's wrath. Margaret Tyzack's Oenone movingly took the rap for her mistress's moments of madness. Dominic Cooper's martial Hippolytus let his chaste guard fall as he succumbed to the rival princess, Aricia. This detail, by the way, comes from Racine the adapter. He can't quite swallow Euripides's portrayal of a temptation-immune paragon, "free of all imperfections". With Racine, you have to love, and then you have to suffer.

In this wood (quite) near Athens, Racine himself underwent a further translation. Largely thanks to Hughes's muscle-flexing, gnarly English verse, the tight rules of Versailles and the *Hotel de Bourgogne* vanished clean away. True, there was an uncanny aspect to hearing the troubles of Troezen replayed a few kilometres from that legendary site. And when Hippolytus plans a flight to Argos – he's almost there already. In the warm cicada-loud evening, the gods and heroes felt far closer than they ever would in Paris. In this context, the Yorkshireman's gem-studded flint of an idiom helped to propel Phèdre back into the Greek myth-world. Poetry and geography combined to squeeze Racine almost to the margins of his own play. As we lurched through spray and squall back to Aegina, the verdict came through. For all the starry fire-power of the cast and the rough-hewn grandeur of the verse, people felt as if they had watched a long and slow Greek tragedy in English rather than anything especially French. A matchless setting had, in the end, proved a prop for the belief that French neo-classical drama will never cross the mental channel that divides it from the English language and its verse. The wind that blows between them never seems to drop.

So this tragedy of the ultimate "other" woman also comes to embody a literary otherness that no translation ever seems to dent. My invitation to measure, if not span, the gap between these worlds of words first came when I studied Racine's *Berenice* at school. Our French teacher, a peppery and caustic Welshman, also belonged – bizarrely, we assumed – to an obscure sect of Biblical literalists. He taught Racine with a lip-smacking relish, glorying in the rule-bound rigour of verse and thought. Later, I spotted the affinity between Protestant fundamentalism and the Jansenist determinism of Racine's plays. Both make us free to choose our inevitable destiny. He told us about

Phèdre as well, and pieced together its poetic DNA from a single celebrated line. In Act One, the queen admits herself to be quite in passion's grip – but lays the blame on its heavenly transmitter. “*C'est Venus toute entière a sa proie attachée,*” *Phèdre* wails. How to render into English this master-key not just of Racine, but – as our teacher argued – of French neo-classicism as a whole?

John Cairncross offers the low-temperature, sub-Shakespearean blank verse of “Venus in all her might is on her prey”. George Dillon follows the hunt a little further with: “It is Venus, wholly fastened on her prey”. The verbally chaste C.H. Sisson for once deviates into novelty: “It is Venus motionless upon her prey”. With his eleven-syllable lines and four stresses to each, Sisson's verse approximates to Racine's alexandrine far more closely than his peers. But here the image descends from above, with the “motionless” Venus a planet of ill omen more than a feral beast. Ted Hughes, in contrast, unleashes a creature from his own trademark bestiary: “Venus has fastened on me like a tiger”. That animal has escaped from a Hughesian zoo. For Frank McGuinness, less explicitly, “Venus has caught her prey by the throat”. Edwin Morgan's Scots alone bends the clinching noun: “It's Venus skin tae skin claucht oan hur kill”.

What matters in Racine is the fusion of abstraction and intensity. Sisson calls him “a mind of great lucidity moving with consummate skill among all the storms and earthquakes of passion but never losing its poise”. His translators seem to have to plump *either* for the abstraction or for the intensity. For Sisson, the self-lacerating queen later in the play confesses that “I am nothing now but incest and imposture”. For Hughes, “I stink of incest and deceit”. Racine's original, however, gives us both the smell and the sonority: “*Je respire à la fois l'inceste et l'imposture*”. Sometimes, scanning the many versions of Racine, you suspect that the dichotomy of form and feeling, classicism and romanticism, can be a self-imposed obstacle for English-language writers as much as any objective schism.

The task of freeing up a supposedly buttoned-up and bloodless style may have other outcomes. Many of *Phèdre*'s Anglo-American interpreters have ostensibly set out to liberate the queen and her love from the cage of her fate, restoring to her plight a dignity that the plot tends to strip away. But might the quest to deepen the colour and widen the palette of Racine's language achieve just the opposite effect?

As we returned from Epidaurus, our host on Aegina – an Athenian

philosopher – said that she found Hughes’s final treatment of the queen crueler and harsher than Racine’s. Look at her dying monologue in both texts and you will see that this is absolutely right. Hughes embroiders the original, but in such a way as to intensify Phèdre’s self-mortification. Alluding to the back-story of husband Theseus, conqueror of the Minotaur in his labyrinth, Hughes makes her say: “I was the monster in this riddle”. That line has no counterpart in Racine. A little later, she confesses to the fear of Hippolytus disclosing “my shameless obsession, my shameless attempt / To force my lust on him”. Racine merely has the terse and neutral “*un feu qui lui faisait horreur*”, and CH Sisson the even briefer “my mad love”. Hughes opts to drench his heroine in shame. To Theseus in his closing speech, Phèdre’s action has been “*noire*”. Sisson makes it “foul”. But Hughes drastically alters the ancient theology of desire to render it as “evil”.

Hughes’s super-heated language comes on strong. Yet, by and large, such modern takes on this tragedy go hunting for a woman whose tsunami of passion simply isn’t present in her spoken lines. As sober Sisson says of his loyally measured responses to Racine, “if propriety is not a quality much sought after by writers of our day, that does not mean that it is not desirable”. Sisson, as Racine did but few moderns do, desires control. However, at one famous moment, Racine himself drowns all verbal propriety in an orgy of sensation. Beloved by actors, detested by generations of French schoolchildren, the ‘ *récit de Theramene*’ in Act Five has Hippolytus’s tutor tell us of the savage death of his hapless charge. In answer to Theseus’s misdirected curse, Neptune – who owes the king a favour – sends a monster from the deep. Wave-born, it overwhelms the prince’s company, riding on the shore, and panics his horses into bolting. Dragged in the wake of his steeds, Hippolytus is torn to pieces on the rocks.

Here, to the contemporary critic at least, Phèdre’s tidal surge of desire finds an ecstatic poetic equivalent. In Euripides, the wave-bred monster is a “bull” – like the one with which Phèdre’s mother, Pasiphae, once coupled to breed the Minotaur. Racine makes it half-bull, half-dragon (“*Indomptable taureau, dragon impetueux*”), horned and scaly, with land-bound thrust and seaborne slither disturbingly confused. Its long howls make the earth move. In Racine, “*Ses longs mugissements font trembler le rivage*”. To the ever-faithful Sisson, “Its prolonged bellowing made the shore tremble”. Hughes brings to a climax the elemental eroticism surging through this verse:

“Mouth hanging open, / and bellowing, like a heavy surf / Exploding in a cavern”. That certainly glosses Racine beyond the limits of a translator’s propriety. Yet it compellingly reads the speech as a displaced explosion of the desire that, in words and deeds, a neo-classical *Phèdre* can never show onstage. Beautifully spoken by John Shrapnel in the still night of the Argolid, it proved a show-stopping passage.

After that, sixty closing lines of exhausted diminuendo despatch Phèdre and Oenone to their unlamented deaths. When our host saw Mirren biting the dust of Epidaurus in her last grovelling agony, she said she thought of Sylvia Plath. I did not, at the time. Gender, of course, offers another prism through which this story moves back and forth through its translations of tongue, place and time. And when the poet and classicist Anne Carson traces the relay of its tellings back to Euripides in her *Grief Lessons*, she succeeds in reaching a place that no other interpreter has touched.

In addition to its singing and searing translation of the *Hippolytos* staged in 428BC, *Grief Lessons* prints as an appendix a fictional first-person apologia in which Carson voices a tetchy Euripides. He remembers that he had previously written another tragedy about stepmother and stepson, probably entitled *Hippolytos Veiled*. A few fragments of this work do survive. It flopped – as, incidentally, did Racine’s play, in competition with a rival rendering in 1677 by the now-forgotten hack Pradon. Euripides – in Carson’s words – scolds his Athenian public. In that first drama, “I gave you a woman, a real mouthful of salt and you like salt.” This Ur-Phaidra “came in as a free wave and crashed on your beach”. Yet she found no favour. “I don’t understand, could never have predicted, your hatred of this woman.” To Carson’s Euripides, the scandalised Athenians had rejected a “white hot” heroine who broke the moulds of both desire and shame. “What do we desire when we desire other people?” he asks. “Not them. Something else. Phaidra touched it. You hated her for that.”

In four blazing pages, Carson sketches the outline for another play, another queen entirely. She envisages the blueprint for a tragedy that no longer exists, and in the social arena of classical Athenian drama perhaps never could have existed at all. For this Euripides, the *Hippolytos* we now have, the source text of Racine and hence of all his myriad imitators, amounts to no more than a second-rate compromise. He damns it as a feeble piece that “goes through its tricks in a weak voltage of vicious reactions and

bad piety". Somewhere, now lost for ever, lurks "that first Phaidra, the pure chain-smoking nihilism of her, pacing the cage of her own clarity". Carson, like Hughes but not Racine, glimpses a tiger in this tale.

This first transgressive prototype of a queen whom Carson conjectures as "aggressive and lascivious" now hides behind her veil, beyond the chain of renderings. Only imagination, not translation, can ever lead her out of there. The "freest" version of her destiny, Carson hints, would be one that cut itself loose from the long convoy of re-interpretation and re-translation. It could be that she alone has grasped that the woman her recent renovators seek cannot be found within the verse of Racine's, or any other extant play. Her recovery, or discovery, would need an unmapped poetic voyage. No one, so far, has let us truly taste this "mouthful of salt".

Boyd Tonkin is the Literary Editor of *The Independent* and re-founded the annual Independent Foreign Fiction Prize in 2002.

The versions of *Phèdre* mentioned here include: Ted Hughes, *Phèdre: A Version of Racine*, Faber, £7.99, ISBN 9780571196050; Anne Carson, *Grief Lessons: Four Plays by Euripides*, New York Review of Books Classics, £30.99, ISBN 9781590171806