

The Word and the Take: Writing for the Mask

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After working on translation of Greek and Roman plays over recent years, and on the history of translation into English of Greek tragedy and comedy for the last five, I have become aware how few translators pay, or ever have paid, much attention to the fact that the surviving classical canon, tragedy and comedy from Aeschylus to Terence (Seneca is a special case), was composed exclusively for the masked player. Not that this will make much difference to most contemporary directors who have no intention of confronting their audience with actors in masks, so that the whole idea of the mask becomes just one more arcane convention to ignore or sidestep. And for a modern audience, this is probably no bad thing. With a few notable exceptions, attempts in recent years to return to the mask in Greek tragedy have not been distinguished for demonstrating why an ancient actor would have found it virtually impossible to comprehend that anyone performing without a mask could even claim to be an 'actor'. So, why should we expect translators to tackle what is regarded, if noticed at all, as a directorial matter? Part of the answer resides in the unresolved issue of how the actor in ancient Greece balanced the demands of a concentrated physical performance with a text which, in the written form we now have, is dense, complex and subtle: especially as some of the most active surviving mask traditions in Asia, where we might look for a parallel, disassociate the word from its physical presentation. What is seldom recognised by the classical scholar is the number of stage situations in Greek tragedy where the mask is a part of the classical dramatists' inbuilt *mise-en-scène*. It is in language within such moments, I would suggest, that we can gain some additional understanding of what ancient playwrights expected from their players, and how that was cultivated.

Some of this may seem hardly to be a new search (see Easterling and Hall 2002). A major area, however, has been understated. Much of Greek tragedy consists of extended speeches where the speaker (or speakers, because the chorus too are involved here) will present an argument, a statement of intent, a description, or a reflection, while others present will listen. Working out the possible *cheironomia*, deictic or gestural language, for the speaker is interesting enough - it was probably linked in classical times to oratorical practice - but it is seldom in Greek tragedy that the speaker is the sole focus of attention. It is just as important for an actor to discover how to *listen* in the mask as to *speak* in it. The same principle applies for comedy, though this is not the place for such an extended debate.

With the Greeks, as few of even the most text-bound would any longer deny, we are in a stage world that leans heavily on the semiology of space, objects and personal relationships, the key to uncovering which may well lie more in the expression of the visual arts of sculpture and vase-painting than in the written word on the page. Nonetheless, it is in the texts that we may trace some of this 'vocabulary' of deictic language. Identification, for example, of an immediate target, a change of direction, or the anticipation of a new development are frequently signposted by the insistent use of pronouns: 'This man' (*houtos*), 'that thing' (*ekeino*), the first person singular of a verb, 'I', the first person plural, 'We'; and so for the second person, 'You'; third, 'She/He/They'. Many of these are part of the gestural presentation of everyday life, and of unmasked stage life. Anthropologists, Desmond Morris among them, have pointed to national characteristics being exhibited in physical as well as vocal distinctions, with the inhabitants of the southern Mediterranean being more open and graphic than those in the colder north. In masked drama exhibition through gesture takes on a quality akin to, though not exactly the same as, the visual dimension of language, as 'signing' serves for the deaf.

In Greek tragedy a surprising amount of dialogue involves connecting the speaker to another person or place; or, perhaps, disassociating from, especially where choruses disclaim knowledge or responsibility. This is a real problem for any translator of the tragic repertoire who feels a strong obligation to the original playwright. When, for example, Creon in the *Oedipus Tyrannus* asks the Chorus in what frame of mind Oedipus was when he accused Creon of being complicit with Tiresias in a plot to dethrone him, the Chorus reply '*ouk oida...*' 'I do not know; what the rulers do, I cannot see. But **this man himself** [Oedipus] is just now coming from the house.' Of course, you can't translate it like that. Nor indeed can you easily dictate, as a translator, how the focus of attention will be shown to shift from the internal to the external.

The climactic scene of the same play, arguably, is not Oedipus's full realisation of the truth about his marriage to his mother (1182), but Jocasta's in the previous scene, some 160 lines earlier. Here there is no verbal language for which to find the deictic equivalent because Jocasta's moment of truth occurs when other people are speaking and can only be through reaction to what she hears. She is merely a witness to a conversation between Oedipus and a Messenger at the moment she becomes aware of his

identity. It is what may be called, in football parlance ‘an off-the-ball incident’. The mask, though, makes it easier for actor and audience, if only because listening in a mask can highlight such a moment of recognition through the stillness that will frame it.

Some actual illustrations from the texts may be helpful here, or, rather, moments where physical actions are implied by the text. It is tempting to invoke whole scenes from Euripides that expose masked playing such as, for example, the ‘escape’ scene in Rhesus where Odysseus and Diomedes are challenged by a group of sentries (the Chorus) and make their getaway through creating a diversion, based on the fact that the whole scene is happening at night; or the letter scene and its repercussions early in *Iphigenia at Aulis*; or Evadne’s suicide in *Suppliant Women*: but these are extended sequences rather than ‘moments’ and hence deserve a more thorough examination than would be helpful to the broad argument.

Instead, let me draw attention to some brief passages in which each of the tragic playwrights seems to indicate not only *where*, but *how*, he originally expected the masked actor to play. The ones chosen are turning points, usually involving some form of *anagnorisis*, such as Jocasta’s crisis in the *Oedipus Tyrannus* to which I referred above. By ‘turning points’ I mean instances of change of mind or direction. In each case a transliteration of the Greek is provided alongside a confessedly dreadful translation, but as literal as is feasible while conveying the sense and pointing out in bold possible deictic equivalents.

A. Aeschylus *Lib-Bearers*, 164-179, Electra and Chorus

Transliterated

EL: echei **men** êdê gapotous choas patêr;
neou **de** muthou **toude** koinônêsate.
CH: *legois an; **orcheitai de kardia phobô(i).***
EL: ***horô** tomaion **tonde** bostruchon taphô(i).*
CH: *tinos pot’ andros ê bathuzônou korês?*
EL: *euxumbolon **tod’** esti panti doxasai.*
CH: *pôs oun? **palaia para neôteras mathô?***

EL: *ouk estin hostis **plên emou keiraito nin.***
CH: *echthroi gar hois prosêke penthêsai trichoi.*
EL: ***kai mên hod’** esti kart’ **idein** homopteros –*
CH: *poiais ethairais? touto gar thelô mathein.*
EL: ***autoisin hêmîn** karta prosperês idein.*
CH: *môn oun Orestou krubda dôron ên **tode?***
EL: ***malist’ ekeinou** bostruchois proseidetai.*
CH: *kai pôs **ekinous deur’** etolmêsen molein?*
EL: *epempse **chaitên kourimên** charin patros.*

Literal Translation

Father has, **on the one hand**, received the earth-drunk libations.
On the other, share with me, **here**, something new.
Speak. But **my heart dances with fear.**
I see this cut-off lock on the tomb.
What man’s? Or from a low-girdled girl?
This is easy for anyone to guess.
How then? Let me, **old as I am**, be instructed by **someone younger.**
No one **could have cut this, except for me.**
For those who might mourn with hair are enemies.
And yet this, now **I look at it**, is of the same plumage.
Like what sort of hair? For this I wish to know.
The same as ours, very similar to look at.
Could **this** be a secret gift from Orestes?
It looks **most like that man’s** hair.
And how could **that man** have dared come **here?**
He sent the **clipped hair**, in honour of his father.

B. Aeschylus *Libation-Bearers*, 225-234, Orestes

OR: ***auton men oun horôsa** dusmatheis **eme;***
***kouran d’idousa tênde** kêdeiou trichos*
*ichnoskopousa t’ en stiboisi tois **emois***
*anepterôthês k’adokeis **horan eme.***
skepsai, tomê(i) prostheisa bostruchon trichos,
sautês adelphou summetron t’ômô(i) kara(i).
idou d’huphasma touto, sês ergon cheros,

spathês te plêgas, en de thêraion graphên –
endon genou, chara(i) de mê ‘kplagê(i)s
phrenas;
*tous philtatous yar oida **nô(i)n ontas pikrouis.***

Seeing me, on the one hand, you are slow to learn;
But seeing **this lock** of mourning hair
and scanning the track **in my footprints**,
you took wing and seemed to **see me.**
Look at the cut, placing the lock of hair
of your brother matched to my head.
And look at this piece of weaving, the work of your
hand,
the strokes of the batten and the animal design -
Be within [control yourself]. Don’t lose your mind
from joy.
for I know our ‘dearest’ are most bitter **to us.**

Hesitation is not that common a feature of tragic characters, at least in public. When decisions are made they may be the result of off-stage deliberation, but they tend to be direct. There are major exceptions. Aeschylus seems to explore possibilities in this recognition-scene in *Libation-Bearers* when Electra informs the Chorus that the two recognition-tokens, the lock of hair and the footprints, must be evidence of the arrival of her brother, Orestes. But when a man confronts her, claiming to be Orestes, doubt sets in, until, that is, he produces the third token, her piece of weaving. The whole process of a woman confronting a man in Greek drama should involve layers of status and complex social *mores*, but this moment in Aeschylus is simply character-driven. All three tokens are shown through the text to draw attention to the physical being - hair which the audience have already seen cut/detached by Orestes from beside his mask and placed on the tomb; footprints (not real), unwittingly left by Orestes, but perceived by Electra when she looks down to the ground - a specific movement in a mask - and given authority, not by the size of her feet or those of her brother, but by the place where he has stood and in a pose that she can replicate; the cloth, the third token, is the work of her hands and looks forward to the way in which Sophocles will concentrate on such props as the urn in his *Electra*, bow, sword, poisoned robe in his other plays.

It is worth recalling, incidentally, that, though these tokens may draw attention to mask language and deictic action in Aeschylus, Euripides was to ridicule them, in the name of realism, in his own (masked) *Electra* fifty years later. And when Tony Harrison provided the translation for the masked Peter Hall *Oresteia* in 1981, he omitted the references to the footprints. Whose decision this was remains unclear.

All three Aeschylean recognition-tokens, then, are physical recognitions, and all are ‘discovered’ through masked playing. When objects are as significant as they often are in Greek tragedy they are usually made so by the masked reaction to them: or what we might call a ‘take’, a reaction not only in the direction of the object of recognition but an acknowledgment of such to the audience.

Sometimes the ‘turning-point’ may involve a literal turning point, as in the next two examples. In Sophocles’ *Electra* Orestes, after killing his mother, toys with Aegisthus. A corpse is wheeled out under a sheet. Aegisthus believes it to be Orestes. The body is in reality that of Aegisthus’ wife, Clytemnestra, whom Orestes has just murdered.

C. Sophocles *Electra*, 1468-1480, Aegisthus and Orestes

AEG: *chalate pan kalumm’ ap’ ophthalmôn, hopôs*
to suggenes toi kap’ emou thrênôn tuchê(i).
 OR: *autos su bastaz’. ouk emon tod’, alla son,*
to tauth’ horan te kai prosêgorein philôs.
 AEG: *all’ eu peraineis; k’apipeisomai; su de,*
ei pou kat’ oikon hê Klutaimestra kalei.
 OR: *hautê pelas sou; mêket’ allose skopei.*
 AEG: *oimoi, ti leussô?*
 OR: *tina phobê(i)? tin’ agnoeis?*
 AEG: *tinôn pot’ andrôn en mesois arkustatois*
peptôch’ ho tlêmôn?
 OR: *ou gar aisthavê(i) palai*
zôn tois thanousin hounek’ antauda(i)s isa?
 AEG: *oimoi, xunêka toupos; ou gar esth’ hopôs*
hod’ ouk Orestês esth’ ho prosphônôn eme.

Take every covering from the eyes, so that
 my relation can happen to benefit from my grief too.
Lift it yourself; it’s not mine but yours
to look at these things and speak lovingly.
 But you advise well; and I am convinced. **But you,**
 if she is anywhere in the house, call Clytemnestra.
This woman is close to you; no longer look elsewhere.
Alas, what do I see?
 Whom do you fear? Whom do you not recognize?
 Into the middle of what men’s traps
 have wretched I fallen?
 Do you not realise that for a long while
you, living, are conversing with the dead?
 Alas, I understand the word. It is not possible that
this is not Orestes who is speaking to me.

This is not a difficult scene to direct. Indeed, it should be director-proof. Sophocles has done the work. But he has done it partly through the masked reaction embedded in the text. Much depends on the position of Orestes and, indeed, Pylades, either facing Aegisthus across the covered body, upstage of him or behind him. Aegisthus is so engaged with the sheeted figure which he believes to be Orestes that that is his whole focus. When Orestes indicates that Aegisthus should uncover the eyes (i.e. the face, hence the corpse’s mask), Aegisthus agrees. As Aegisthus reaches forward, Sophocles cheekily has him pause and ask Orestes (*su*) to fetch Clytemnestra. Orestes’s response leads to Aegisthus drawing back the cloth, and seeing his dead wife. Again, there

seems to be a need for a ‘take’, Aegisthus registering what he sees (the dead Clytemnestra) before taking in the implications – the man in front of or behind him is Orestes. This ‘take’ again could have been – we can do no more than suggest - out front to the audience. Mask-playing tends to need the frontal ‘take’ because the mask in profile is inevitably weaker than the frontal mask, and the turn upstage registers so little. In the movement which follows a freeze, anyway, the head usually leads, while hands and feet follow. So, a possible pattern of reaction for Aegisthus may focus, in order, on corpse covered, Orestes, corpse covered, Orestes, corpse as he uncovers it, freeze, ‘take’, then Orestes (and Pylades).

The fourth passage would appear to involve an acting move that is not commonly used in Greek tragedy, though regularly in classical comedy and certainly in subsequent unmasked farce, the false exit, where a character starts to leave, then turns back, either as the result of an afterthought, or because of the intervention of another character. The following sequence from Euripides’s *Bacchae* looks like an example of the latter – and Euripides, I would suggest, writes it in. This is not the ‘drag’ scene’ where Pentheus, under the influence of Dionysus, has been persuaded to dress up as a woman and is worried that his seams are not straight – abundant deictic language there – but the earlier scene where Dionysus first exerts that power of his to take over and dominate Pentheus’s rational processes. After threats from the king to call out the army against the women of Thebes, Dionysus offers to bring them back himself. Pentheus suspects a trick and responds:

D. Euripides *Bacchae*, 807-11, Pentheus and Dionysus

PEN: *xunesthe koinê(i) tad’, hina bakcheuêt’ aei.*

You have agreed these things in common, so that you can always revel for Bacchios.

DION: *kai mên xunethemên touto y’, isthî. tô(i) theô(i).*

Indeed we have agreed this at least, know, with the god.

PEN: *ekpherete moi deur’ hopla, su de pausai legôn.*

Fetch my weapons here for me, but you, stop talking.

DION: *a;*

A;

boulê sph’ en oresi sugkathêmenas idein?

Do you want to see them in the mountains, sitting together?

PEN: *malista,...*

Very much...

The key is that ‘a’ from Dionysus, about which I have written elsewhere with reference to translating (Walton 2007, 83-4). In the context, there is little arguing that this single letter marks the moment at which Dionysus takes control and Pentheus begins to succumb to his influence. But what is the deictic input? It seems to me, though this may be the modern director talking, that Dionysus calls for his weapons and heads for the exit. At the very least he has replaced the concentrated confrontation between himself and Dionysus with an order to his soldiers, implying a move away. He is called back by Dionysus with the single exclamation ‘a’.

Now elsewhere a single ‘a’ can represent anything from a dramatic clearing of the throat to a cry, something loud enough and commanding enough to change what is happening. It is an exclamation that elsewhere in tragedy is used to indicate surprise, discomfort, anger, warning, reproof, pity or contempt. It is used mainly in the direct speech of dramatic writing, occasionally in Homer, hardly ever in prose. It is what Cassandra says while castigating Apollo in *Agamemnon* (1087); Orestes when he breaks off in *Libation-Bearers* as he first becomes aware of the Furies (1048); Oedipus stopping the Shepherd from striking the Messenger who is revealing the truth about Oedipus’s exposure (OT 1147); Neoptolemus when Philoctetes threatens to shoot him (*Philoctetes* 1300); Menelaus in *Helen* when the *concièrge* threatens to attack him (445). It is an actor’s noise, a mask noise, an indication of a ‘take’.

What is unusual about the *Bacchae* example is that here the ‘a’ involves not a ‘take’ by the speaker of the ‘a’, Dionysus, but by the character on the receiving end, Pentheus, who is stopped in his tracks, and for whom, the ‘take’ may well seem to be a ‘freeze’, followed by a ‘take’ and a turn of the head.

Certainly *something happens*, in the moments before *endon genou* in *Libation-Bearers* (233); *oimoi ti leussô* in Sophocles *Electra* (1475); and after ‘a’ in the *Bacchae* (809). Those ‘somethings’, less deictic than sub-textual, must involve mask reactions. Finally, the extension of this pointing of a ‘take’ is the even more blatant indication of the ‘double take’, the comic device of ‘seeing’ (the ‘take’), but failing to register, then the delayed reaction (the ‘double-take’). One play offers no fewer than six potential examples, Euripides’ *Helen*, a play in which there are effectively two Helens, though only one appears on stage. There is the Helen who was seduced by Paris and caused the Trojan War, in this version of the myth a lookalike fashioned from mist,

though substantial enough mist to keep Paris happy for ten years: and the real Helen who has spent the last seventeen years in chaste seclusion in Egypt, victim of a conspiracy by Hera. The first double take occurs when Teucer enters, admires the set, then catches sight of someone who looks exactly like Helen. He doesn't say 'a' but 'ea':

E. Euripides *Helen*, 71-2, Teucer and Helen

TEU: <i>ea;</i> <i>ô theoi, tin' eidon opsin? echthistês horô</i> <i>gunaikos eikô phonion, ...</i>	Ea; O gods, What sight do I see? I see the image of the most hateful woman....
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When Helen subsequently encounters her husband, Menelaus, (a neatly delayed meeting), her first reaction is:

F. *Helen* 541, Helen and Menelaus

HEL: <i>ea, tis houtos?</i>	Ea, What man is this?
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But Euripides seems aware that a playwright needs to keep a step ahead of his audience and this 'ea' is because she *doesn't* recognise him – he has been shipwrecked and looks unkempt. When Menelaus sees Helen his reaction is startled, but not a double-take because the recognition dawns on each of them only gradually that they are being reunited with their spouse:

G. *Helen* 548-9, Helen and Menelaus

MEN: <i>hôs demas deixasa son</i> <i>ekplêxin hêmîn aphasian te prostithês.</i>	In showing me your form, you create amazement in me and speechlessness.
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A third recognition is by the hapless Messenger who is uncomfortably trying to explain to Menelaus that his wife has disappeared into thin air. Then he catches sight of Helen and responds, with some relief:

H. *Helen*, 616, Messenger, Helen and Menelaus

MESS: <i>ô chaire, Lêdas thugater'; enthad' êsth' ara.</i>	Oh, hello, daughter of Leda; you were here then.
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A 'take' again, perhaps out front, but Euripides ringing the changes, so as not to repeat himself. Later in the play another 'ea', this time when the suspicious pharaoh comes home and can't find Helen at the tomb where she had taken refuge. Take or double-take:

I. *Helen*, 1177-8, Theoclymenus

THEO: <i>ea; ...tumbou gar kenas lipous' hedras...</i>	Ea; ...leaving the seat of the tomb empty...
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A few lines later and Helen emerges from the palace, Theoclymenus realising that the explosive reaction of the intervening six lines, was unnecessary.

J. *Helen*, 1184-5, Theoclymenus, Helen

Enter Helen

THEO: <i>epischet'; eishorô yar ous diôkomen</i> <i>parontas en domoisi kou pheugontas.</i>	Hold on; For I see that the one I was seeking is here in the house, not escaped.
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All of this amounts, at the very best, to conjecture – quite enough has already been written in recent years in attempts to second-guess original staging from 2,500 years ago. But some things, I would argue, are recoverable from reading the original text as being created specifically for the masked player in the fifth century BC, offering, if not a reconstruction of the first performance, at least some sense of the range expected of their players by the tragic playwrights.

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