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Essay 2 – Topic 4

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Comparing Interpretations

In the study of ancient literature, it is essential to read the ancient text. This becomes very difficult when not everyone who may want to read a work of Classical Greek drama is able to read ancient Greek. Therefore, readers must depend on a translator to deliver an accurate interpretation of the work. Due to this reader-translator relationship, it brings to question the magnitude of this dependence. In the name of artistry or personal taste, one translation can be drastically different from another. Which translation a reader chooses could utterly alter his or her impression of the original author and possibly all ancient texts. A comparison of David Slavitt and Herbert Smyth's translations of Aeschylus' *The Persians* shows how disparate interpretations of the same piece can be.

To evaluate the difference between translations, noting the difference between translators may be beneficial. Herbert Smyth was a Harvard professor of Classics who published his translation in 1926.¹ David Slavitt is a novelist and a journalist for Newsweek who published his translation in 1999.² An easily identifiable difference between the two versions is use of a more modern syntax by Slavitt. Additionally, Slavitt, who even claims to be presumptuous in his introduction, expresses and refers to many modern themes. A lot of "history" occurred between 1926 and 1999. Slavitt not only lets *this* history influence his translation of a play written over 2000 years before any of it happened, he includes portions of modern history in his version. It is doubtful that Aeschylus knew anything about dealings in Rwanda such that one of the chorus elders could refer to the conflict between the Hutu and Tutsi (Slavitt, 108). Nor, would it seem likely for the actual ancient text to contain any reference to New York,

¹Aeschylus. *The Persians*. Trans. Herbert Weir Smyth, Ph. D. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926. <<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>>.

² Aeschylus. *The Persians*. Trans. David R. Slavitt. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

California, Japanese peoples, or the political tensions in a Europe that will not exist for two millennia (40). Possibly, these references were added to the play for the sake of helping a modern audience relate to the text, but this shows how a translator's goals might affect the interpretation of a work of ancient literature.

Another discrepancy between the two translations relates to the length of each. As mentioned before, without the ability to read the actual ancient text, a reader also lacks the ability to check whether a part of the translation is congruent with the original. Smyth seems to have published a translation of the entire play, whereas comparison shows Slavitt has summarized many of the conversations, left out entire discussions, and added convenient remarks for the purpose of humor. For example, Atossa, the Queen Mother of Persia has many lines in Smyth's translation. Before the tidings of bad news is brought by the herald, she asks the chorus of elders about the location of Athens and a discussion ensues concerning the size of the Athenian army and the manner in which Greeks fight (Smyth, 230). This conversation is found nowhere in the translation by Slavitt. Moreover, Slavitt has added a Prologue to his version of the play. This narrator-of-sorts shares no part in the translation by Smyth, but Slavitt's Prologue appears in hundreds of lines as a mockery of the Aeschylean text. Speaking directly to the audience, his part includes such witty remarks as offering to replay a rather dramatic discourse of the Persian's defeat (Slavitt, 431), and, "He could do the whole Susa phone book..." when the messenger reports names of some of the fallen Persian warriors (309). Even with the addition of this prologue, Slavitt's translation is over one hundred lines shorter than Smyth's. It is possible that this brevity would be helpful in some situations, but it is also possible that this translation lacks many important aspects Aeschylus meant to convey to his audience. If the translator conveniently chooses not to include certain portions of the work, an entirely different play is set before the reader.

In order to make a translation flow with the same artistic style as the original, a translator takes certain liberties with the translation, such as word choice and use of idioms. As Slavitt's translation has a more modern syntax, it

also uses more idioms found in the modern American English language. For example, Darius shouting, “Spit it out!” at Atossa (Slavitt, 637). Then, later in the play, Slavitt’s translation takes a turn toward vulgar, when the chorus of elders become more foul-mouthed than might be expected from any type of public writing (914-961). Readers who are not familiar with Aeschylus from other translators may believe this is typical of ancient dramas, which it is obviously not as Smyth’s version shows with its lack of obscenities.

An important difference between the two versions of Aeschylus’ *The Persians*, concerns the portrayal of Greeks and Persians within the play. Smyth’s translation refers to Greeks directly very few times, but as his translation is more likely to reflect the actual words of Aeschylus, it would be much safer to assume Aeschylus refers to specific Greeks only a few times during the play. By contrast, Slavitt refers to Greeks more frequently throughout the text, but whether he is referring to modern Greeks, ancient Greeks, or even makes the distinction himself at all, is rather confusing. For example, Greeks are referred to as olive oil salesmen, pizza parlor owners, as men who wear skirts, and women with excessive facial hair (Slavitt, 115). This is a Persian character insulting the Greeks, but obviously, Aeschylus did not put those words into the chorister’s mouth. Typically, a reference to Greeks in Smyth’s translation would involve Persians saying directly, “Hateful, indeed, is Athens to her foes,” (Smyth, 286) or Athens “...is now the cause of our lament.” (890) Slavitt, however, refers to an Athenian sitting in the audience gloating at the pain of the Persians (Slavitt, 20). Slavitt’s Prologue also mentions “Athens’ appetite for Persian abasement” (373) and that Athens chooses how the history shall be told as the victor of the war (390). These references, being entirely different in nature, cause Slavitt’s play to seem rather derisive while Smyth’s version seems targeted more at an Athenian audience than the rest of Greece, though still directly focused on a Persian tragedy from a Persian’s point-of-view. Whichever tone Aeschylus wanted to convey to his audience, or whether it was both, is difficult to evaluate by reading one version without the other.

As Aeschylus was an Athenian playwright, his play would have been performed for a primarily Greek, primarily Athenian audience. The portrayal of Persians in his work directly reflects either what he thought of Persians or what his audience thought of Persians. In Smyth's interpretation, the central theme of Persian involvement in the play is to express their woe at a terrible and unexpected defeat. The characters lament at the loss of Persian royal power (Smyth, 584) and the loss of "all that once was Persia" to the bloody waters of the Hellenes (591). The sorrows grow throughout the play, ending with Xerxes almost whining at how wretched he has made Persia to be. In Xerxes' later remarks, he wails back and forth with the chorus of elders, telling them how badly he feels such that they should feel bad for him too (Smyth, 1040-end). Slavitt portrays the Persians as boasting popinjays for an Athenian audience (a group with personal foresight on the subject) and as a joke for his contemporary audience. For example, the choristers act like immature teenagers, chanting to the audience and using foul language (Slavitt, 124), while in Smyth's version they are the chorus of elders left in charge of Persia during Xerxes expedition (Smyth, 1). Moreover, the Prologue in Slavitt's version practically spells it out to the reader that Greeks watch the play only for the pleasure of seeing Persians crushed with despair (Slavitt, 20-73). He does not leave this for the reader's interpretation, but states it quite plainly such that no question of his intent remains. Smyth does not make any boldly noticeable moves to sway a reader's interpretations.

The Smyth translation differs from the Slavitt translation again in the portrayal of Darius. To the Persians, he was a God for not destroying Persia with senseless war (Smyth, 655) and was "envied of all" for his prosperous and happy life (713). If *all* envied him, then Darius was subject to the envy of Greeks as well as Persians. This would certainly be showing Darius a lot of respect for his abilities and accomplishments in life. Alternately, Slavitt portrays him as a "master of masters" (Slavitt, 622) worthy of the "reverence and honor due the greatest of nether gods." (605). The first words out of his mouth, however, include a comparison of his wife to fecal matter and insults to the men he

deemed friends (626). Unless such “artistic” use of language signifies to a modern audience that Darius should be highly honored, Slavitt does not emphasize the same interpretation as Smyth of the Greek’s respect for Darius.

In the conversation with Atossa on how this calamity may have occurred, Darius decides Xerxes was not thinking clearly in his reckless youthfulness (Smyth, 725-745). He also proposes the possibility that the temptation of the wealth he amassed during his reign had spoiled the boy (750), but Atossa assures him evil council caused his ambitions in Greece (755). From a father’s point of view, Darius is greatly concerned for his son, showing that Persians have families and feelings too. Smyth interpreted Aeschylus to have wanted the Persians to appear as people to which his audience could relate. In addition, mentioning Xerxes’ not thinking clearly (725), Smyth’s version adds a little humor, because it is easy to picture the Greeks thinking this after defeating the Persians a second time. Again, Darius’ admonition against ever invading the land of the Hellenes (790) shows Athenian wishful thinking, adding to the humorous effect. Slavitt, however, portrays Darius insulting Xerxes’ greed and accuses him of insanity (Slavitt, 655), showing a more authoritative and uncaring side of his fatherhood. Slavitt’s Darius then begins a tirade against the audience and Prologue, as though a play is not taking place at all (680-711).

Darius’ warning about dishonoring the Gods corresponds in both translations. Smyth’s Darius tells the elders and Atossa that Xerxes must have thought he could outsmart Poseidon and win victory without gaining favor of the Gods (Smyth, 750). Then, the Persian force sealed its fate by destroying religious icons in the Greek lands through which it marched, angering the Gods further (810). Darius even goes so far as to issue a warning that presumptuous pride only ends in calamity (820). Slavitt’s translation says much the same, though in his own style. The Darius in Slavitt’s version tells the chorus of elders the Persian’s folly in disrespecting the “measure and manners and order” of Greece (Slavitt, 722). Then, however, Darius foretells the future, mentioning modern cities and modern struggles in the world and ties the warnings into these references (728). While a reader may interpret both translations similarly,

Smyth's version requires a reader to piece Darius' dialogue and the rest of the play together to understand Aeschylus' warning. Slavitt directly states, "The overweening pride of Xerxes is not a particularly Persian failing," (690) to make sure no one misses the warning or its application to the modern world. By doing this, Slavitt denies the reader a chance to make the discovery that Aeschylus wanted his audience not to get a big head because the war could just as easily have ended the other way around.

The differences between Smyth's translation and Slavitt's rendition of Aeschylus' play make a reader question the validity of all published translations. Opinions on the subject vary, but deciding on which version a reader should rely for an accurate source is difficult to assess, because each causes the reader to consider different aspects of the story. The sympathy shown in Smyth's translation signifies the sympathy an Athenian would feel for a defeated country, a humane sympathy for those labeled not as enemy but as human being. Additionally, victory is all the sweeter when the defeated foe was an equal or a better opponent. The Athenians probably felt relieved to be done with a war, but knew the Gods had blessed them to help the Greek navy and army win against what would seem insurmountable odds. Slavitt insists this is not human nature to feel sorrow so quickly after such a brutal war, thus Aeschylus could not have meant to show sympathy towards the Persians at all. Instead, Aeschylus must have meant to poke fun at the enemy in order to please the audience through "schadenfreude." (Slavitt, 582) This interpretation reflects the evidence of extreme competitive spirit in Grecian culture. It is interesting to hear both points of view, but the method which Slavitt employs to tell the audience his perspective is disrespectful not only to Aeschylus, but to his audience as well. In the name of humor, it is acceptable if not advisable to publish a piece of this content, but to publish the work under the auspices of the University of Pennsylvania Press, as an original Greek drama may be *too* presumptuous.

These two translations of Aeschylus' *The Persians* show the magnitude of inconsistency writers convey with their interpretation of a work. Not only are characters portrayed differently, but critical elements of the plot also disagree.

Considering this, it may be necessary for a reader to compare two or more translations of a text in order to grasp at least in some way what the original author intended. Unfortunately, for those reading for enjoyment, this seems superfluous. In allowing a translator's freedom of creativity, the audience's interpretation is manipulated with an extreme effect being the loss of the original author's purpose and style. Perhaps the most ideal solution, however impractical it may seem, is for everyone to learn ancient Greek in order to formulate his or her own opinion of the author's intent. Otherwise, a reader can expect no more than a second-hand interpretation of the author's words and possibly a skewed image of his purpose.