

The Translation

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This production of *Antigone*, like an ancient Greek one, employs masks, music and dance—but of a style completely different from the ancient ones (what little can be reconstructed of them); the translation is a more complicated matter.

Sophocles' language is famously difficult, bristling with syntactic oddities, and his plots proceed with disorienting speed. The adaptation by David Feldshuh (to whom I served as occasional consultant on the Greek) started with a close reading of scholarly opinion (the Cambridge commentary by Mark Griffith), then a comparison of the practice of 11 recent translations; it is faithful in the sense that no character is altered, and no difficulty in the action (and there are many) is disguised or omitted, but it is different from a textbook translation, even that of Robert Fagles used for the Cornell First Year Reading Project.

It seems to me that Feldshuh has followed Douglas Parker's description of his own very successful translations of Greek drama (in his case Aristophanes): "a central demand on a translation that aims to be freestanding, that is capable of performance, is to produce in the audience *the impression that they know what is going on*. This must be done without footnotes." For example, the long messenger speeches that report offstage words and actions, are sometimes shared partly with the characters themselves by Feldshuh.

Sophocles' choral songs are notoriously full of perplexing allusions, and here Feldshuh has taken the greatest freedom. One stanza of the final choral song, which gives mythical parallels to *Antigone's* fate, runs in Fagles:

The yoke tamed him too
young Lycurgus flaming in anger,
king of Edonia, all for his mad taunts
Dionysus clamped him down, encased
in the chain mail of rock,
and there his rage
his terrible flowering rage burst—
sobbing, dying away...
At last that madman came to know his god.

Feldshuh writes:

The story goes: an angry king taunted
Dionysus. Denied his ecstasy.
The king was tamed by madness. He learned
the power of the god. That king was royal like you.

The names and extended metaphors are omitted, but the core story remains, with an opening ("the story goes") and closing ("royal like you") that address *Antigone* directly and are repeated in each of the three parallel stanzas.

The dialogue, on the other hand, omits none of the verbal pyrotechnics of Sophoclean speeches—he was famous for his arguments—and even expands them on occasion. The exchanges sometimes reflect Shakespearean cadences and even specific phrases, though not archaic or allusive. As Parker again writes of his own method, “the fundamental process was to learn everything about a passage, then forget the original, and remake it in English poetry.”