Metre and Translation in Pound's Women of Trachis

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Metre and Translation in Pound's
Women of Trachis

Marianina Olcott

In Guide to Kulchur Pound states that... "if one greek [sic] play can claim preeminence over the best dozen others (which probably it cannot) that play wd. [sic] be the the Agamemnon."¹

But when he turned his own hand to translating a Greek tragedy, the play he chose to confront was The Women of Trachis, a play infrequently studied² and even less frequently performed, by a playwright, Sophocles, whom Pound came to appreciate only in later years.³ Furthermore, that the play was translated during Pound's ten-year incarceration in St. Elizabeths Hospital in a ward for the criminally insane should alert us that this opus should not be dismissed as a mere hobby nor as something dashed off to set the academic establishment aflutter, although it certainly did.⁴ Rather, Hugh Kenner and Eva Hesse have remarked on Pound's personal involvement with the material. To Kenner, "We cannot doubt that the Mask Heracles is Pound's persona, strange, remote, primitive..." And Hesse calls Pound's version of the play "stark autobiographischen."⁵

In Heracles' death agony, then, we are perhaps meant to see expressed symbolically the agony of Pound's own situation. Here is not the place to argue either Pound's position or the government's. Rather I would like to consider the play from Pound's view of reality however distorted that point of view may be. For example, that Heracles' agony is the tragic consequence of a love potion gone wrong may perhaps for Pound have stood for the tragic mistake of his own predicament. Indeed, Heracles, the central figure of The Women of Trachis, represents the tragic hero as suffering
in ways no other Greek dramatic figure does.

In opening portions of Sophocles’ play, a messenger announces that Heracles is on his way home, having successfully accomplished the last of his twelve labors, the campaign against King Eurytus (1.80ff;180 ff); from this time on Heracles is destined, according to a prophecy from Zeus, to live in peace and security or to die. Pound’s own situation could obviously have found a parallel in that of the ancient hero.

Having survived World War II, which could be seen as a parallel to the completion of Heracles’ labors, Pound is brought home to stand trial for treason. Next, convicted of treason, he is imprisoned in a hospital for the criminally insane. A typical day at St. Elizabeths, which brought constant assault to Pound’s sensibilities, which might well find a parallel in Heracles’ death agonies that are the tragic consequence of his wife’s mistake. She, Deianira, in an attempt to rekindle Heracles’ love, sends to him, on his triumphant way home from his last battle, a garment dipped in a love potion that she believes will help her to recapture her husband’s attentions. In reality, the potion, brewed from the blood of the centaur Nessus, will cause Heracles to die in agony as he curses his wife. Thus the play revolves around twin ironies; first, that of a man who thought as he proceeded home triumphantly that his sorrows had ended. And so they had. But their end was death not happiness. The second irony concerns Deianira who hopes to regain his love, but instead gains only his curses (and those of her son, also) and causes his death.

Perhaps Pound saw in this double tragedy aspects of his own situation. Like Heracles, his own “labors” had not come to a happy end: ten years in St. Elizabeths would forever haunt him. And it may be that in the tragedy of the cursed and rejected Deianira he saw reflected his own humiliation and rejection. Clearly if Pound’s choice of The Women of Trachis was a way for him to express through the metaphor of the play this tragic phase of his own life, that translation warrants much more serious and extensive discussion than it has so far been given.6

The Critical Literature

Critical literature on Pound’s The Women of Trachis has been both scarce and sporadic; usually one finds such comment only in brief references in books or articles devoted to Pound.7 Succinct dismissals marked the popular critics.8 The two most extensive discussions of Pound’s translation are Hugh Kenner’s review of the work in Poetry, July, 1957, and two articles by H. A. Mason “The Women of Trachis,” Parts I and II.9 Neither author, however, comes to grips with the value of Pound’s translation in any systematic way, preferring for the most part merely to quote other translators’ renderings of select passages as examples of bad translation. But aside from a few references to the actual Greek,9 Mason, whose
appreciation is more concrete in its approach than Kenner's, never systematically compares the various translations using the Greek text as arbiter, even though in his view:

The surprising merits of Pound's "Women of Trachis" will come out best when the Greek text is printed opposite Pound's...¹⁰

Any precise estimation of Pound's achievement demands a close comparison of the Greek with Pound's translation. Furthermore, comparison must be made not only with the text of the Greek but also with the meres of the Greek. Finally, the best way to estimate Pound's accomplishment as translator is to view his renderings of the choral lyrics rather than the iambic portions of the dialogue because, as Mason has noted,¹¹ Pound achieved only a qualified success with the latter. Despite the opening remarks to Pound's translation, where the editor, S. V. Janowski, states:¹² "Pound's choruses are a creation of his own in both language and in rhythm," it is my contention that Pound did not use his words without connection to the text. Rather, Pound presents an acceptable rendering of the Greek text of the choral lyric portions. Certainly, his is no freer than the other translations offered for comparison. But perhaps what is more important and least analyzed is his ability to represent so well the metres of the choral lyrics of the Greek original.

While his own poetic sensibility led him to appreciate the rhythms of the Greek original, that same sensibility cautioned him against trying to render those metres in a language, English, inappropriate to the complexity of the Greek. Rather, Pound in his translation both of Greek text and Greek metres "interpreted" that text in what he himself described as:

... an absolute rhythm... a rhythm that is in poetry which corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed. A man's rhythm must be interpretive; it will be, therefore, in the end his own, uncounterfeiting, uncounterfeitable.¹³

Thus since Sophocles' rhythms were impossible to copy exactly, Pound as the translator needed to interpret the rhythmical text in his own terms, but in terms that somehow still reflect the Greek original. His achievement, then, in The Women of Trachis is not so much concerned with the text of the Greek as with the rhythmical text of the Greek choral lyrics.

The choral section chosen for comment, 517–530, is crucial to the understanding of Sophocles' play; for in it the chorus offers to the audience the myth of Heracles' fight with the Centaur Nessus who has just attempted to rape Deianira, Heracles' young bride. And it will be the
blood of the dying Nessus which Deianira, who has been fooled into thinking it is a powerful love charm, will use in an effort to recapture Heracles’ lost love but instead she will tragically destroy her husband. Thus, this epode is well suited as the focus for our discussion because of the tone of doom that also characterized Pound’s own situation.

In so far as translation from the Greek is concerned, a consideration of an extremely literal translation, 1 A, (see illustration) will show that R. C. Jebb’s translation,14 3, and Jameson’s,15 5, are very close to a literal reading of the Greek. However, they lack the terseness of that language. For example 1.519 in the Greek reads:

ταύρειων τ’ ἀνάμυγδα κεράτων.

These three words are rendered by Jebb as:

and the noise [not in the Greek] of a bull’s horns therewith.

Jameson’s economical and apt “and confusion of bulls’ horns” 1.2, is marred by the insistent use of “and” five times in his translation while the Greek uses the less obtrusive postpositive δὲ as a connective only three times. Although Storr’s translation, 4,16 “crash of horns” is equally terse, subsequent lines are flawed by his frequent departures from the Greek original. For example, lines 5, 6, and 11 of his translation have no counterpart in the Greek text. In addition in numerous places, Storr adds words to complete his translation. Admittedly Pound’s rendition of the Greek noun 1.525 ἀκοίταυ (which literally means “bed-fellow” or “husband”) by “to stave her and prove her” 1.13 is a bit strong and can also be faulted for over-expansion. However, this phrase of Pound’s does capture some of the intent of the scene as a whole. On the other hand, Pound’s rendition of ἀμφινείκτητον 1.527 by “prized for a day” 1.16 is clearly an improvement over Jameson’s prosaic “over whom they fought” 1.10. Storr omits the word entirely while Jebb’s “the prize of the strife” is somewhat archaic. Finally, Pound’s rendition of ἐβοπίς 1.524 by “wide-eyed” 1.9 is clearly superior to Jameson’s “with the lovely eyes” 1.7. Meanwhile, both Jebb and Storr omit that word entirely from their translations.

**Metric Superiority**

When attention is turned to metrics, Pound’s superiority to the other translators as a transmitter of ancient rhythms becomes immediately obvious. And it is in this last area that the strongest claims can be made for Pound as an outstanding translator of Greek poetry. A close comparison of the metres of the other translations will show that only Pound’s rendi-
Comparison of Translations

The table above shows the different translations of the phrase "When a hammer strikes" from the original "When a hammer strikes". The translations provided are from various sources and reflect different interpretations of the phrase.

From the table, it can be observed that there are significant differences in the translations, with some focusing on the action of striking while others emphasize the hammer itself. The translations also vary in length and complexity, with some being more concise and others providing more detailed explanations.

In conclusion, the translations of "When a hammer strikes" provide insight into the cultural and linguistic diversity of visual art and the ways in which different sources approach the translation of a single phrase.

[Table showing translations]
tion approximates the rhythms of the Greek. Jebb's translation can be at once discounted since it is prose. Jameson's rendition is reminiscent of Pound's own words from "A Retrospect":

Do not retell in mediocre verse what has already been done in good prose. Don't think that any intelligent person is going to be deceived when you try to shirk all the difficulties of the unspeakably difficult art of good prose by chopping your composition into line lengths.

For my own part, I have great difficulty scanning Jameson's version. As for Storr's remarkably Housmanesque rendition, perhaps the less said the better, but it may be noted that Storr's employment of rhyme a/a/a/a/b/b// is in complete contradiction to classical Greek and Latin poetry, neither of which ever employs rhyme.

When, however, we consider the scansion of the Greek text, we note an opening rush of double shorts balanced by a series of pendant closes (double long) in lines 517, 518, 519, 521, 523.

This rhythmic series called aeolo-choriambic by the ancient Alexandrian metricians is approximated quite well in Pound's translation 1.1 through 8. Here again a quote from Pound is appropriate:

I think progress lies rather in an attempt to approximate classical quantitative meters not to copy them. . . .

At 1.9 both Pound and Sophocles mark the shift in perspective from the males fighting to the maiden Deianira by a sharp change in rhythm. In the Greek, two successive bacchaeics with molossus 523–524 in an aeolic environment have already excited comment by the foremost modern scholar on Greek lyric metres, A. M. Dale. Here the slower rhythms of the Greek 1.523 are neatly approximated, in the succession of three stresses of the trochaic opening to Pound's 1.9. Pound's 1.12 continues the slower rhythms of the Greek with a series of four stressed or long syllables, "who shall have her?"

Line 13 "to stave her and prove her" appears to be influenced by the Greek meters of 526 and 527. And Pound's 1.14, 15, and 16 echo the scansion of the Greek metrics l. 530. Again a quote from Pound finds illustration in this section:

. . . I believe in an absolute rhythm. A rhythm, that is in poetry, which corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed. A man's rhythm must be interpretative. . . .
Finally once again Pound’s own words on the art of poetry may be applied to him as a transmitter and translator of Greek choral lyrics by way of showing his notable skills. To read aloud Pound’s version of the epode 516–530 provides a clear expression of what Pound meant by melopoeia:

Melopoeia is that kind of poetry wherein the words are charged, over and above their plain meaning, with some musical property, which directs the bearing or trend of that meaning.

Melopoeia is admirably reflected in many of Pound’s lines, such as:

Slug, grunt and groan....

and

But the wide-eyed girl on the hill
out of it all,
frail.

Notes

3 E. Pound, The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound; T. S. Eliot, ed. (New York: New Directions 1968) 27n. “E. P.’s later and unpublished notes revise all this in so far as they demand much greater recognition of Sophokles.”
4 See B. Dick, Classical World 54, 1961, (236–237)
7 For example, Hesse, op.cit, 30, 107 et passim. Kenner, op.cit. 150, 217.
8 From The Times, Nov. 23, 1962, see above. “It is difficult to decide
whether the thing produced amounts to any thing but Pound foolishness."


10 See Mason, Trachis Pt. II p. 144 et. seq.

11 Mason, Anthology; p. 287. There is no doubt that the dialogue portions of the play do not present a uniform excellence in Pound's translation. Mason's discussion of Pound's qualified success in translating the iambic dialogue portions is recommended.


13. Pound, Literary Essays, p. 9


16 F. Storr, Sophocles: Trachiniae in Complete Plays; (New York: Loeb Classics 1924).

17 E. Pound, Literary Essays, p. 5.


19 Pound, Literary Essays, p. 13. Pound dates the comment "20 Aug. 1917".


21 This reference is from Pound, Literary Essays, p. 9; the ensuing is from p. 25.