

BOOK REVIEW

Murder at Jagged Rock: A Translation of Sophocles' "Women of Trachis," by KEYNE CHESHIRE. The Word Works, 2015. Pp. 112. ISBN 978-091-53809-85.

The Old West, or the Wild West, is the closest thing America has to a mythical landscape. It is no wonder, then, that classicists have seen themes of Greek tragedy and epic re-imagined in the American Western. Keyne Cheshire, a professor of Classics at Davidson College, has written an adaptation of the *Trachiniae* set in the Old West.

This is not the first "plain talk" adaptation of Sophocles's tragedy. Ezra Pound in 1954 wrote a translation to reflect the language of the present day, and other translators have rejected the pseudo-Shakespeare of Victorian classicists to render the play in more contemporary speech.

Here are Deianira's first words in Greek:

λόγος μὲν ἔστ' ἀρχαῖος ἀνθρώπων φανεῖς,
ὡς οὐκ ἂν αἰῶν ἐκμάθοις βροτῶν, πρὶν ἂν
θάνη τις, οὐτ' εἰ χρηστὸς οὐτ' εἰ τῷ κακός.

According to Cheshire, a literal translation would go like this:

Word indeed is ancient of people spoken
that not could life you know of mortals, until
dies someone, neither if good nor if for him bad.

This is a bit of a straw man; even the most tradition-minded translator nowadays would not write such gibberish. Michael Jameson, in the most recent edition of the University of Chicago Press's *Complete Greek Tragedies*, rendered the lines thus:

It was long ago that someone first said:
you can't know a person's life before that person
has died, then only can you call it good or bad.

Here is Pound's version:

"No man knows his luck 'til he's dead."
They've been saying that for a long time...

Finally, here is Cheshire:

Real old sayin' folks just love to rattle off:
you can't tell about a person's life until
they's dead—can't tell if it was good or bad, that is.

This brief excerpt gives the reader a sense of the language of this version. It is faithful to the sense of the Greek text and written in a loose hexameter. At the same time, it is rendered in a recognizably American vernacular, down to the names of the characters and places. The name of Trachis in the pulp-fiction title is now "Jagged Rock." Deianira is "Deanna Kilman," Hyllus is "Willie," Lichas is "Lucas," and Iole is "Violet." Only Heracles/Hercules retains his classical name, although in a performance made at Davidson in 2011, he is called Herman and the drama is "The Passion of Herman Kilman."

The classicist will note that Deanna's last name is the literal meaning of "Deianira." The adaptation of names is one of the translation's most attractive features, always done with sensitivity to the meaning of the Greek. In her opening monologue, Deianira had spoken of the home of her father Oeneus in Pleuron; in Cheshire's version, Deanna lived in "Sidersville" with her father "Enos Vintner." Some plot points are likewise modernized: Deanna kills herself with her husband's gun rather than his sword. The Chorus—often a difficulty for naturalistic interpretations of Greek tragedy—become the "Girls of Jagged Rock and the Kilman Slaves" who sing songs reminiscent of country/western folk songs. Readers curious to hear the songs in performance can hear a rendition by Keyne Cheshire and Davidson College students on Vimeo.com. The composer is a member of Davidson's class of 2011, Jon Springfield. The music is pleasant to listen to without being banal.

At the same time, the folksy talk and American setting are jarring when the translator retains the mythology and religion of classical Greece. In her opening speech, Deanna describes being courted by the river god Achelous (here called Sorrows River) who took the forms of various creatures. However "mythic" the American West may be, its rivers remain rivers and its animals remain animals, not

gods. It is likewise unconvincing for Americans to sing "paeans" to Apollo and Artemis and to describe themselves as being in a Bacchic frenzy.

How one responds to this version depends much on one's relationship to the Old West. To many, it will feel as remote as Sophocles' Athens. Both filmmakers and contemporary novelists such as Cormac McCarthy have enjoyed considerable success imagining Westerns in terms of Greek tragedy. Doing the reverse is considerably more problematic.

MARIANTHE COLAKIS

Townsend Harris High School, MColakis@schools.nyc.gov