

BOOK REVIEW

Euripides' Medea: A New Translation. By DIANE J. RAYOR. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. xxxii + 100. Paperback, \$14.99. ISBN 978-1-107-65221-7.¹

Like patrons of ice-cream parlors, teachers and producers of ancient Greek drama have a sweet assortment of modern English translations from which to choose. In 2013 Diane Rayor's version of Euripides' *Medea* was added to the menu. Its fresh, colloquial flavor is designed to appeal to the general theater-going public in the United States.

The translation by Rayor, based on Mastronarde's edition of the Greek text (Cambridge 2002), is the fruit of her collaboration with the Heritage Theatre Group, which premiered it in the summer of 2012, at the Spectrum Theater in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Together with the translation are an Introduction (with five brief sections on Greek Tragedy, Social Background, Mythic Background, Euripides' *Medea*, and Translation), a Scene List, a Cast of Characters, a short essay entitled "On Directing *Medea*" by Karen Libman, Notes, and a Selected Bibliography. Rayor and Libman describe the thorough testing that the script received during the rehearsal process: if a line sounded awkward when spoken by the actors, Rayor would revise it, aiming, in Libman's words, "to produce the most accurate and sonorous language that could be heard" and "to create a theatrical and precise translation of the play" (65).

Rayor's translation is indeed "accurate" and "precise" insofar as it follows the Greek text line by line and does not stray far from the literal sense of the words. Rayor says that she prefers not to alter Greek idioms, believing that "it is the translator's responsibility to allow for options of interpretation as open and rich as those available to readers of the original Greek" (xxvi). On the whole this is good policy, but it does lead to some bizarre turns of phrase, such as Jason's ironic reply to Medea, "Sure, I think if I had told you about my marriage, / you would gladly pull your

¹ The reviewer apologizes for being so tardy with this review.

oar for it" (588–89); cf. "Fine support, I think, would you have given to my proposal if I had mentioned the marriage to you" (Kovacs); "Yes, of course / you would have been all for it!" (Arnson Svarlien).

At the same time, because Rayor's main concern is to have her characters speak plainly, naturally, and succinctly, she is not afraid to leave untranslated those words—be they conjunctions, particles, or personal pronouns—that she deems not strictly necessary. This cut-to-the-chase style can result in the loss of important nuances. At line 52, for example, Rayor translates the tutor's question to the nurse as "Does Medea wish to be left alone?", leaving it up to the audience to infer that the tutor means "to be separated from you"—even though Euripides himself makes the idea explicit with $\sigma\omicron\upsilon$; cf. "How can Medea spare your service?" (Kovacs); "How could Medea want to be left without you near?" (Taplin); "You've left Medea alone. Doesn't she need you?" (Arnson Svarlien). At other points, however, Rayor's decision to take some liberty with the text produces a powerful line. Medea's last words to her children (1077) are especially memorable in Rayor's rendering: "while anguish defeats me"; cf. "but am overwhelmed with my pain" (Kovacs); "I'm overwhelmed by pain" (Taplin); "Grief overwhelms me" (Arnson Svarlien).

Rayor adheres to the overall rhythmic patterns of the Greek verses, distinguishing iambic meter from anapestic and lyric, but otherwise writes in free verse, not attempting to make her English lines correspond in length with their Greek counterparts. She explains in her introduction (xvii) that the play is a mixture of spoken, chanted, and sung verses, and she indicates in her notes the moments at which the meter changes. While the three different modes of delivery do not leap out from the page, they would be obvious in performance.

For those interested in staging the play, the concise notes at the back of the book offer practical guidance as well as insights into ancient Greek language and culture. In her note on 232–35, for instance, Rayor emphasizes how unusually assertive Medea is in her diction and syntax: "Medea describes a woman marrying with active verbs (buy, take, win), when common usage calls for passive verbs. In the Greek a man *marries*, while a woman *is married* in an arrangement between her father and the groom." On 476 she mentions that the Greek line "contains seven sigmas, making a hissing sound"; a note like this, suggesting the venomous scorn behind Medea's words, is particularly helpful since Rayor only vaguely reproduces the special effect in her translation ("I saved you—as all the Greeks know").

The volume is attractively printed and has few typos.² Although Rayor's translation lacks the detailed introduction, full commentary, glossary, and index that would make it the best choice for, say, a course on ancient Greek literature, it could be used profitably in a course on the history of theater or a course in acting. Students would find the play both easy to read and fascinating to study; they might also enjoy performing selected scenes and enhancing them with their own musical compositions, perhaps as newfangled as Euripides'!

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² Read 1979 for 1997 in footnote 34 (xxv); in the Selected Bibliography Ebbott and Easterling are out of order, and there should be an entry for Graham Ley's *A Short Introduction to the Ancient Greek Theater* (University of Chicago Press, 2006), which is cited in footnotes 4 and 6 (xv).