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J. Derrick McClure

Edwin Morgan's *Phaedra*: Apotheosis of Glesga?

A notable event in modern Scottish theatrical history was the production of Racine's *Phèdre* at the Edinburgh Royal Lyceum, in September 2000, in a new Scots translation by Edwin Morgan. The production was well received and the play immediately established as a landmark in Scottish drama; but its importance is far from inhering only in its stature as a play: it is one of the most audacious moves yet made in the developing status of the Scots tongue.

At first sight, such a claim may well seem exaggerated. The collective achievement of poets, fiction writers and dramatists from the Scots Renaissance to the present has re-established the literary credentials of Scots beyond the reach of controversy. It has demonstrated the multiform nature of Scots and the remarkable number and variety of dialects, sociolects, styles and registers that can come under that heading; and demonstrated also that any and all of them can be drafted into service in all genres of literature. Specifically in the field of drama, until within living memory (as everybody knows) the genre in which Scotland had signally failed to develop a major national tradition, Scots in many of its varieties has by now become fully established: outstanding plays in registers ranging from classical literary Scots to contemporary urban demotic have been, and continue to be, written and produced in respectable numbers; and it may be realistically hoped that the long-awaited Scottish National Theatre, the launch of which is imminent at the time of writing, will enable Scotland's dramatic repertoire to become a vital and permanent, instead of struggling and sporadic, presence on the national cultural

scene. In this context, a new play in Scots, even one by a writer of Morgan's stature, hardly seems to amount to a revolutionary event.

Furthermore, it is equally well known that the healthy state of the Scottish theatrical scene at the turn of the twenty-first century is, and for long has been, largely due to the stimulating presence of an abundance of translations from plays in many languages and from many periods. The scene may be said to have been set by Robert Kemp's translations of Molière's *L'École des Femmes* and *L'Avare* as *Let Wives Tak Tent* (1948) and *The Laird o Grippy* (1955); and the parade of outstanding Scots dramatic translations thus initiated has included such landmark texts as Douglas Young's two renderings from Aristophanes, Victor Carin's transmutation of Heinrich von Kleist's *Der zerbrochene Krug* (1811) to *The Chippit Chantie*, first produced at the Royal Lyceum, Edinburgh, in 1968, and the remarkable set of translations from the Montreal *journal* of Michel Tremblay by Bill Findlay and Martin Bowman. And from a longer perspective, translation, though not of drama, has formed an integral part of the Scots literary achievement almost throughout its history: Gavin Douglas's *Eneados* (1553) and William Laughton Lorimer's *The New Testament in Scots* (1983) are among the greatest individual works in the language, of their own periods or any other; the translation of both earlier and contemporary poets was an essential aspect of the work of the Castalian Band; almost every one of the mighty company of post-MacDiarmid makars, includes a number of translations in his output. Morgan himself is a translator of extraordinary range and versatility, though using English as his medium much more frequently than Scots; and though all would have expected another Scots translation of a classic play from him to be a major work, it was not to be taken for granted that it would constitute a radical new development in the literary progress of Scots.

The key factor is the nature of Morgan's original, and the relationship between its linguistic medium and that which he as translator has chosen as his target language. A recent anthology of Scots dramatic translations includes as an appendix¹ a list of "Scots translations, adaptations and versions of classic plays, 1945 to 2005," in which, the present translation excepted, the name of Racine does not appear. (The contrast with Molière, from whose works the list includes almost as many translations as from all the other dramatists combined, could hardly be more striking!) At the outset, it is evident that Morgan is breaking new ground by the mere fact of choosing him as a source. And Racine, notoriously, is not a dramatist who translates easily. Linguistically, it is in his work that the French language reaches its apex of refinement: one of the aspects of his greatness is his ability to utilize the intonational cadences of French and its vocalic and consonantal music within the strict confines of his

¹*Serving Twa Maisters: Five Classic Plays in Scots Translation*, eds. John Corbett and Bill Findlay. Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 34 (Glasgow, 2005), 331-8.

verse form; another is his exploitation of the subtle overtones of its grammatical as well as lexical features—as in the famous passage in *Phèdre* where a sudden and terrible heightening of the emotional tension is signaled by the change in a character's speech from *vous* to *tu*;² another is his skill in evoking emotions of the highest tragic intensity through the medium of an unbendingly formal register and rigidly disciplined style. Culturally, his plays are quintessential products of the elegant, graceful and sophisticated court of the *Roi Soleil*, conceived and written for an audience of learned and cultured aristocrats from whose artistic tastes anything remotely plebeian or vulgar had been refined away: an idiosyncratic and unrepeatable milieu, ensuring that the problem of cultural translocation, integral to literary translation, is present to an extreme degree. Morgan, in the introduction to the published play, reminds us that Racine's theatre was 'a robust, even boisterous place ... Racine attracted a popular as well as an aristocratic audience.'³ The fact remains, however, that his plays contain no scenes couched in familiar, colloquial language, no characters whom the groundlings would recognize as humorously or ironically imitating their own or their neighbors' habits, none of the physical action which the less sophisticated members of the audience might find immediately appealing. The force of this as an argument for radically changing the register in a translation is therefore debatable at best.

By the first principles of literary translation, therefore, the linguistic aspect of the task should—or so it would naturally be assumed—be accomplished by rendering Racine's French into a comparably formal and dignified register of the target language, handled with a comparable degree of verbal discipline, by a translator whose skill in exploiting the subtleties of sound, rhythm, syntax and vocabulary matched Racine's own; and the cultural, by evoking as far as possible a comparable period in the history of the target culture; of if no such thing is to be found, at least by avoiding the suggestion of a pointedly dissimilar one: a familiar strategy in such cases is to use a language register as free of any specific cultural associations as possible. Those principles would be expected to apply in translating Racine into whatever language. In the specific instance of translating him into Scots, the first could readily be fulfilled. Literary Scots of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is entirely capable of sustaining a formal and dignified register, and such has been used for worthy translations of classical literature: on a small scale, Douglas Young's render-

²Il.iii.670. The edition which I use is *Racine: Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. Pierre Clarac (Paris, 1962). Morgan and the other two translators to be mentioned later in this essay appear to have assumed this device to be simply impossible to imitate in Scots or English.

³Edwin Morgan, *Jean Racine's Phaedra... A New Verse Translation* (Manchester and Edinburgh, 2000), p. 7.

ings of Homer, Catullus and Dante⁴ and Tom Scott's of the Anglo-Saxon *Dream of the Rood* and of Dante and (in part) Villon⁵ provide excellent examples; and Robin Lorimer's version of *Macbeth*⁶ demonstrates that it can be sustained for an entire drama. The second expectation, by contrast, is impossible of fulfillment. The courts of the Stewart monarchs were of course the focal points of a brilliant national literary culture; but by the nature of monarchy in Scotland a Versailles-like courtly world could never have come remotely near to developing. On the other hand, the use of a literary and somewhat archaic register of Scots would be the obvious solution, albeit a negative one, in suggesting a setting chronologically and socially remote, though to an undefined extent, from the world of present-day readers.

Morgan does precisely the opposite of what might be expected: instead, he selects as the basis of his medium a form of Scots as close to the contemporary spoken language as Young's or Scott's are distant from it; and a form, at that, which is inseparably associated, in both literature and life, with the convivial, rowdy, vulgar, materially impoverished though physically and verbally energetic culture of the Clyde conurbation. Though the play is described on the front cover as "translated from the French into Scots," it actually recalls a form to which attitudes enshrined in Scotland's educational system have traditionally grudged recognition as Scots at all: there are even today die-hard Scots language purists among whom this attitude still lives. As will be demonstrated shortly, the language of the play is something more than a purely realistic reproduction of Clydeside basilect; but it is certainly based on this, and evokes it with vigor and conviction. Since a near-equivalent of the play's original background was impossible to find, a less venturesome translator might have settled for a neutral register: Morgan with cheerful defiance makes Racine speak in a voice as remote from his own as the world can show. This is not the first time he has played such a trick; but even making Leopardi's moon, instead of [*venire*] *a dar di colpo in mezzo al prato*, "[whummle] wi a scult amang the stooks"⁷ is hardly such a seismic cultural shift as the change from

Le dessein en est pris: je pars, cher Théràmène,
Et quitte le séjour de l'aimable Trézène.
Dans le doute mortel dont je suis agité,
Je commence à rougir de mon oisiveté.

⁴In *Auntran Blads: An Outwale O Verses* (Glasgow, 1943), pp. 38-43.

⁵Tom Scott, *Collected Shorter Poems* (Edinburgh and London, 1993), pp. 84-8, 45-6 and 24-9.

⁶R. L. C. Lorimer, *Macbeth: Translated into Scots* (Edinburgh, 1992).

⁷In *Flinder [Odi, Melisso], Collected Translations* (Edinburgh, 1996), p. 328.

Depuis plus de six mois éloigné de mon père,
 J'ignore le destin d'une tête si chère;
 J'ignore jusqu'aux lieux qui le peuvent cacher.⁸

Nae merr pussyfootin. Ah'm aff, Theramenes.
 Troezen's awright as toons go, but Ah canny stey.
 Ma thochts ur ay walloch in roon an roon.
 It's bad, man, bad, aw that daein nuthin.
 Hauf a year an merr ma faither's missin.
 Ah love him an Ah don't know why he's scarpert
 Or whit he's daein or wherraboots he's livin—

Morgan, indeed, emphasizes with almost obtrusive clarity, in the written text of his play,⁹ the identity of the speech form in which it is cast. Some, though not all, of the distinctively Scots vocabulary items in the play are specifically from the blunt, earthy register associated with modern urban speech: *riddy*, *mankit*, *poachle*, *tail-toddle*: Theramenes draws a rebuke from Hippolytus early in the play by suggesting that Theseus might have a *sly wee lumber*. In contrast to the familiar orthographic conventions of literary Scots, Morgan employs the now well-established and readily comprehensible set of spelling practices by which the western urban demotic is represented in literature. Where a general Scots spelling suggests the local pronunciation, it is used with its expected sound value: *aff*, *stey*, *ither*, *daith*, *jyned*, *lauchin*, *hauf*, *auld*, *dee*. Where the spelling customarily used in Scots is shared with English, even if that spelling could represent (and is normally understood as representing) the Scots pronunciation, it is replaced by a form which exclusively suggests the latter: *gote*, *loass*, *boay*; *wahnt*, *sayed*; and in the same way a general Scots form which *could* represent the local pronunciation is replaced by a phonetic spelling which could *only* represent it: *yiss* instead of *uiss*, *lukk* instead of *luik*, *pair* instead of *puir*. Pronunciation features of the sociolect which are traditionally stigmatized as “careless” by prevalent educational assumptions are clearly indicated in the spelling: some of these are in fact common to several forms of Scots (*wull*, *stull*; *strinth*, *twinty*), others are fairly recent developments specific to this one (*hree*, *hink*, *nuhin*, *sumhm*; *wan*, *wance* or *wanst*). Finally, eye-dialect forms—mis-spellings of which the implied

⁸I.i.1-7. The corresponding passage in Morgan is on page 11 of the published edition. Throughout, references for passages from the original play are given as act, scene and line numbers, those to the translation as page numbers.

⁹The text may not be entirely perfect: *saw stowed* on p. 27 should certainly be *sae stawed* and *saw low* on p. 33 *sae low* (or possibly *sae law*, but *low* is more likely in this speech form); but it is safe to assume that such accidental departures from the author's intention are extremely rare.

sound value is precisely the same as that of the standard (Scots or English), regularly used in literature to suggest illiteracy on the part of the quoted speaker—are brought into service: these include non-standard spellings for words which, being unstressed, have no clear or fixed pronunciation in any accent or dialect (*ur, wiz, diz, kin* [can], *zat* [is that])¹⁰ and spellings which indicate the normal pronunciation if anything more accurately than does the standard (*diffrint, desprit, constitchencies; canny* (and the like) instead of *cannae*).

As well as pronunciation, such grammatical forms as *mines, theirsels, merr preferabler, brung, like you done, she seen ye, Ah've saw, whit wid Ah no huv did*, common but traditionally regarded as sub-standard, firmly locate the dialect both geographically and socially. Its idiom is conveyed in Morgan's text as boldly and uncompromisingly as its pronunciation: expressions with a familiar Scottish flavor such as *let that flee stick tae the waw, yir birse is up noo* or *Ah kid pit his gas at a peep* mingle with such ubiquitous modern colloquialisms as *loss the heid, loss the place, that's gote ye, that's no oan, cosyin up tae me, pit ye in the picture, Ah dinny kid masel, Ah'm ahead a masel, in wan tick, Ah'm wae ye aw the wey*. The contemporaneity of the setting is emphasized by metaphorical expressions which, with reference to the original, would be wholly out of context and in some cases wildly anachronistic: *no on the cairds, ye rubber-stampit his ain account, saft an meltin as sherbet, tae buttonhole Theseus, jyned the mafia*: occasionally this imparts an ironic humor typical of Morgan's Glasgow if not of Racine's Versailles, as when *La charmante Aricie a-t-elle su vous plaire?* (I.i.137) becomes *Aricia, aye? Wi magnets in her poakets?* (p. 15); at least once the discordant effect surely transgresses the limits of tolerability, as when the (at best) homely and friendly or (at worst) Harry-Lauderish overtones of *sotterin parritch* are associated with the turbulent sea as Hippolytus's monstrous nemesis emerges.

Certainly the language of the play is more than Clydeside demotic *pur sang*: closer observation reveals that the basilect has been expanded and its expressive range augmented in a number of ways. An almost subliminal French coloring is achieved not only by the retention of the phrase *coup de foudre* from the original (IV.v.1195), an interpolated "*Vive le roi!*" and Theseus's bitter hurling of the words *morgue* and *hauteur* at his son (in a passage where neither word occurs in the original), but by the use of established loan words like *lourd* and *joug*: the most interesting example of this is Morgan's retention of the word *farouche*, often cited as encapsulating a key aspect of

¹⁰For a full discussion of this device, which has attracted much less critical attention than both its illogicality and its pervasive frequency would seem to invite, in a Scottish literary context, see the present writer's "The Spelling of Scots: A Difficulty" in *Englishes Around the World: Studies in Honour of Manfred Görlach*, ed. Edgar Schneider, 2 vols. (Amsterdam, 1997), I, 173-84.

Hippolytus's personality, which in fact is *not* a naturalized loan in Scots but, by its sound and meaning, might be thought to fit very well into the language. Words from a more literary register of Scots appear unobtrusively: gently old-fashioned words evoking, in a modern literary context, the more formal writings of the post-MacDiarmid makars (*begrutten*, *wanhope*, *wanchancy*, *saikless*, *feerie-fairy*; or Phaedra's description of herself as a *gyre-carlin* where the original simply has *monstre*); words instantly recalling Burns (*cranreuch*, *houghmagandie*) or MacDiarmid (*heich-skeich*, *clyack-sheaf*); stereotypical Scotticisms (*pauchtie*, *gilravaged*, *whigmaleerie*); highly expressive words once much commoner in speech than they are today (*nyauvin*, *dwaiblie*, *glunch*, *screenge*). The last, in Phaedra's *Ma bluid screenges tae ma hert* (p. 32), dramatically increases the force of *Vers mon coeur tout mon sang se retire* (II.v.581); *houghmagandie*, in the unusually literary line *tae pang the gant a his houghmagandie* (p.49, translating *Pour parvenir au but de ses noires amours*: IV.i.1007) puts a word used by Burns for deliberately humorous effect in the mouth of the furious Theseus—with a temerity entirely typical of Morgan's method throughout the play.

Quite frequently a pattern of alliteration, assonance or internal rhyme raises the language above its base level (*doon tae the deeps o daith, sae straucht an strick an steive*): often such patterns occur with strongly-marked and semantically powerful Scots words, and serve to underline a rhetorical flourish or a detail of characterization, as when Hippolytus is described as *dowf an dowie*, when Phaedra is said to *cryne an dwyne*, her passions to *roose an roil* and her love to *clairt an clag* its object, or when Oenone's foreboding *Mon âme chez les morts descendra la première* (I.iii.230) is naturalized as *But Ah'll be mellin wi the mools afore ye* (p. 19). In Oenone's

As lang as there's a lowe in ye tae fan
Fae crottlin greeshoch intae bleezin life! (p. 18)

alliteration (*lang - lowe*) and assonance (*greeshoch - bleezin*) highlight the words of a metaphor which recurs later in the play, in Phaedra's *Whit greeshoch hiz he blawn oan in ma hert[?]* (p. 56).¹¹ Hippolytus's *Monsters molocated*, *bandits banjaxed* (p. 13), referring to Theseus's achievements, takes this device to a parodic level with the use of ludicrous words from a playground register; the intention being surely to suggest frustrated mockery of his own lack of a heroic past to compare to his father's. Many lines stand out because of a metrical pattern as well as for sounds and vocabulary: *in yer een*

¹¹The corresponding lines in the original are *Tandis que de vos jours, prêts à se consumer, / Le flambeau dure encore, et peut se rallumer* (I.iii. 215-6) and *Quel feu mal étouffé dans mon cœur se réveille!* (IV.v. 1194). The repetition of a key word to emphasize a link between the two passages is thus Morgan's embellishment.

are lound an daurk wi skeerie glints (p. 15: a truly superb rendering of *Chargés d'un feu secret, vos yeux s'appesantissent*: (I.i.134)) the scansion is unusually regular and graceful; by contrast, in *An gart ma gantin stang rin bluid again* (p. 22) the momentary halting effect of the cluster *-n st-* and the demoted syllable *rin* combine with the obtrusive reverse rhyme *gart - gant-* and the later recurrence of [a] and [g] in a line whose metrical and segmental dissonance painfully underwrite the speaker's distress.

A more idiosyncratic, and indeed very odd, means of imparting a literary flavor to the language is the occasional, but unmistakable, use of direct quotations. The precise implications of this device are not easy to determine. On the level of simple realism, it is conceivable that such people as use the language of Morgan's characters in this play might compare each other to Casanova, Galahad or Lothario, or might (even today) have enough knowledge of Burns to mention *the haly table* or quote *Forwart though Ah canny see, A luk an fear* (p. 48) or of *Macbeth*¹² to say *Ah huv supped fu wi horrors noo* (p. 58) or

How come, fur aw we wahnt it, therr's nae airt
Tae fin the mind's construction in the face? (p. 50)

—but surely no stretch of imagination could impart credibility to *Facilitate their descendin intae Avernus* (p. 60) uttered in a Glasgow demotic accent.¹³ Literary cross-references of this kind are of course common in poetry and notably so in modern Scots poetry; but their presence in a translation of a drama is far more puzzling. Actual realism cannot be the effect aimed at here; nor can it be imagined that Morgan's purpose was to hook up his translation, so to speak, to the world of great literature: Racine's place in the pantheon does not need to be underpinned by making him quote Virgil, Shakespeare and Burns. A mere literary in-joke seems an undignified thing to add to a translation of *Phèdre*, yet these quotations hardly suggest anything else.

Yet notwithstanding all these elaborations, the language of this play is more insistently "Glesga" as contrasted with any other possible form of Scots than in comparable examples of recent dramatic translation. Liz Lochhead's *Tartuffe*, in which several registers of Scots and English are imaginatively de-

¹²Absurdly, the play often used to introduce Scottish schoolchildren to Shakespeare—the rationale being that it is "Scottish" in content!

¹³The corresponding lines in the original are *De noirs pressentiments viennent m'épouvanter* (III.vi.995), *Mes crimes désormais ont comblé la mesure* (IV.vi.1269), *Et ne devrait-on pas à des signes certains / Reconnaître le coeur des perfides humains?* (IV.ii.1039-40), *Et leur osent du crime aplanir le chemin!* (IV.vi.1324). The general similarity in sense of the original to the translated lines is clear enough; but hardly an obvious warrant for the use of quotations in the translated version.

ployed to excellent dramatic effect, approaches the same register in some scenes and speeches:

Naw ye willny, jist t'annoy them, jist fur spite
 Ye'll see her morning noon an' night.
 But that's no a'. Ah'll chinge ma will—
 Soart ma cheeky bitch o' a daughter, if she's still
 Under the illusion that she cin defy me,
 Well, Ah've the whip haun, she'll be taught a lesson by me.
 Ah'll mak you ma yin an' only heir
 So she'll mairry you or starve...¹⁴

Here too, regular Scots spellings (*haun, mak, mairry*) combine with forms specific to this dialect (*naw, yin*), with phonetic re-spellings (*willny, jist, soart*) and with eye-dialect forms (*fur, Ah'll, cin*); and words suggestive of the region (*so[a]rt* in the sense of “get even with” or “put in one’s place”) or of a vulgar register (*cheeky bitch*) serve to locate and define the character. On the other hand, in this play such a specifically urban vernacular is used only sporadically and for effect: other speeches are in a “thinner” Scots, a more traditional register, or in English. Morgan’s own version of Edmond Rostand’s *Cyrano de Bergerac* is linguistically more consistent and is stated to be based on an urban Glaswegian Scots, but even a speech like:

Ya snubby-honkered bap-faced nyaff, this thing
 Ah cairry is a thing Ah'm proud tae sing,
 For a big nose is ay a sign o wan
 That's kind and crouse and guid tae ivrywan,
 Witty and free, no yella—jist like me!
 —What you, ya chancer, you could niver be!¹⁵

by avoiding such orthographic forms as *an* (instead of *and*) or *kid* (instead of *could*) places less emphasis on the auditory quality of the dialect. In this play of rapid action, abounding high spirits and quick-fire comic exchanges full of backchat and put-downs, the associations of the Glasgow vernacular are admirably appropriate; yet it is in a play which contrasts totally in all those respects that the translator insists most forcefully on identifying this as his medium.

The world to which *Phèdre* is now transferred is, linguistically at least, the setting evoked in the novels and stories of Allan Spence or James Kelman: a world of flymen and hardmen, be vies and hoolies, rammies and tankins,

¹⁴Liz Lochhead, *Tartuffe: A Translation into Scots* (Edinburgh and Glasgow, 1985), p. 41.

¹⁵Edwin Morgan, *Cyrano de Bergerac: A New Verse Translation* (Manchester, 1992), p. 23.

malkies and chibs. It is, certainly, a world in which emotions can reach fever heat: furious quarrels and exchanges of insults, often as inventive as in the days of Dunbar and Kennedy, abound in dramatic presentations of urban working-class life; but it is not a world of high tragedy: the prevailing moods in literary evocations of Glasgow life and Glasgow language are boisterous energy, reductive humor, virulent personal antipathies, squalid meanness and grim despair; and tragedies, when they occur, result much more often from violent crime or sheer accident than from passionate love and heartbreak. It is the polar opposite of an aristocratic society: ridicule of social pretensions is almost a cultural hallmark, and a stock situation in stories or plays is the antagonism between the plebeian, demotic-speaking characters and establishment figures, such as teachers, employers or social workers, who speak English. Something of this attitude is conveyed in Theseus's *Whit's the Amazon for snob?* (p. 52), which has no equivalent in the original. Whatever the social assumptions underlying his classical sources, for Racine such figures as his Phèdre, Thésée, Hippolyte and Aricie were monarchs and nobles as he knew them at the court of Louis XIV; but now they converse in the language of tenements and pubs. The adjective *radge*, regularly used of Phaedra by herself and other characters, in its strongest sense¹⁶ conveys the precise combination of overwhelming passion and sexual lust; but the use of such a word in the original play is utterly unthinkable. And, intriguingly in the present context, it is a strongly masculine and macho world: not one in which a love-maddened queen would be *expected* to appear. (It goes without saying that a Phaedra would not, in reality, be expected to appear in any context whatever: the discussion is of literary credibility.) In a different medium, the recent cinematic translocation of *Romeo and Juliet* to the contemporary world of American urban gangs administered a shock of comparable intensity; but there the cultural deracination was more superficial as the actual words of the original play were substantially unaltered. The metamorphosis of the same play into *West Side Story* is from that point of view a closer parallel;¹⁷ but there too the resemblance is incomplete for the opposite reason: the essential elements of the story remain, but its verbal exposition is wholly unrelated to its source. Neither of these, that is, is a translation as Morgan's play is one: a work which is, and is presented as, a rewriting of an original text in a different language, and therefore necessarily a translocation of it into a different culture. And the question whether a cultural shift as extreme as this does not transgress the limits of what is permissible in translation is fundamental and immediate.

¹⁶That is, as opposed to its frequent use as a casual insult.

¹⁷Or, as an example from closer to home, William McIlvanney's re-working of the *Hamlet* theme in a contemporary Glasgow and Ayrshire setting in *Remedy is None*.

A possible response might be that Morgan's version is not a translation at all, since besides the obvious lack of verbal correspondence with the original, some integral features of Racine's style have vanished without trace. Such alterations, however, are definite advantages in the new literary format of the play. Morgan's lines, though most frequently pentameters, are by no means consistently iambic: his dramatic medium is a five-beat line with no fixed pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables, thus departing from the long-established convention of translating French alexandrines by the verse form with equivalent status in the English dramatic tradition; but on the other hand, his medium, though not comparable to the strictly-disciplined verse of the original, is highly successful in its own terms, lending itself to fluent and realistic cadences. He does not emulate Racine's use of end-rhyme, but this may well have been a wise decision: not only because plays in rhymed verse, in the absence of such a tradition in English (let alone Scots) inescapably have an alienating effect (however minor and transitory) on audiences, but because the frequency of trick rhymes as part of the stock-in-trade of Scots poets, from the Vernacular Revival onwards, might have made the danger of an incongruous impairment of the tragic dignity of Phaedra all too difficult to avoid.¹⁸ In literary contexts, in fact, the word *translation* is almost as flexible as the word *Scots*. No translator has ever been called upon to aim at complete literal fidelity to the original: not, at any rate, if his aim is to produce a work of literature (as opposed to a gloss or crib) in the target language; and the same consideration applies to style.

And in respect of actual verbal equivalence, if Morgan's technique has patently not (even as an ideal) been to render each word in Racine's French by a corresponding word in Scots, on a less mechanical level almost everything in the Scots text can be seen to correspond, with astonishing consistency, to something in the French. Each of the idiomatic West-of-Scotland expressions in the list cited earlier has been suggested quite specifically, in its context, by a word or phrase in the French: *let that flee stick tae the waw* represents *épargne-moi le reste*, *yir birse is up noo* is for *votre colère éclate*, *Ah kid pit his gas at a peep* for *j'ai sur lui de véritables droits*; *loss the heid* is suggested by *mes sens égarés*, *loss the place* ("he hud loast the place") by *je l'ai vu se confondre*, *that's gote ye* by *ce reproche vous touche*, *that's no oan* by *l'artifice est grossier*, *cosyin up tae me* by *soupirer pour moi*, *pit ye in the pictur* by *vous devoir avertir*, *Ah dinny kid masel* by *sans vouloir me flatter*, *Ah'm aheid a masel* by *je me suis engagé trop avant*, *in wan tick* by *un moment*, *Ah'm wae ye aw the wey* by *je t'avoueraï de tout*.

¹⁸Contrast his translation of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, where, even more exuberantly than Rostand, he indulges in imaginative joke-rhymes: *loa't'll—boattle, aristo—swizz to, nummers—heid bummers, doublet—unstubble it, frog-eyes—choc-ice*, and so on.

In this respect it is of interest to compare Morgan's translation to two other versions of the same play written for stage performance by poets of unquestioned stature, namely those of Robert Lowell and Ted Hughes. The result of the comparison is to demonstrate that the version which shows the greatest degree of closeness to Racine's actual words is not the American or the English but the Scots. Almost any passage of any length would illustrate this: I select Theseus's speech in Act IV, scene 3:

*Misérable, tu cours à ta perte infaillible !
Neptune, par le fleuve aux dieux mêmes terrible,
M'a donné sa parole, et va l'exécuter.
Un dieu vengeur te suit, tu ne peux l'éviter.
Je t'aimais ; et je sens que, malgré ton offense,
Mes entrailles pour toi se troublent par avance.
Mais à te condamner tu m'as trop engagé :
Jamais père, en effet, fut-il plus outragé?
Justes dieux qui voyez la douleur qui m'accable,
Ai-je pu mettre au jour un enfant si coupable!* (IV.iii.1158-66)

Morgan:

Rin aff then, wretch, rin, damned an doomed !
Neptune hiz gien me his haly, hellish wurd
Oan the banks o the Styx, an his wurd he wull kep.
Avengin godes canny be jouked, ma son.
Ah loved ye; an stull, fur aw ye've gane wrang,
Ah've a curmurrin at ma wame fur ye.
But oh, ye sealed yir ain fate, did ye no?
Shairly nae faither hid merr cause tae act.
Godes an judges, am Ah no hert-sair?
Tae hae engenrit sic an unco chiel! (p. 54)

Lowell:

You go to your inevitable fate,
Child—by the river immortals venerate.
Poseidon gave his word. You cannot fly:
death and the gods march on invisibly.
I loved you once; despite your perfidy,
my bowels writhe inside me. Must you die?
Yes; I am in too deep now to draw back.
What son has placed his father on such a rack?
What father groans for such a monstrous birth?
Oh gods, your thunder throws me to the earth.¹⁹

¹⁹Robert Lowell, trans., *Phaedra* (London, 1963), p. 67.

Hughes:

Yes, go, you filth. You will not escape.
 Destruction is hurrying towards you.
 The god of the oceans
 Swore on that river in Hell
 To give me satisfaction.
 A god of vengeance out of the seas pursues you.
 And yet in spite of your nature,
 So strangely diseased,
 I loved you. My bowels are twisting
 With a horrible foreboding.
 You forced me to curse you.
 How many fathers have known this?
 You gods, you see what I suffer.
 How did I sire this deformity?²⁰

None of the translators retains the forceful effect of an opening expletive, and Lowell loses the sense of it altogether (his replacement of it by the affectionate-sounding *child* seems inexplicable): *you filth* is assuredly more virulent than *wretch*, and it is somewhat surprising that, with all the wealth of Scots insult terms to choose from, Morgan here has selected a word which is not particularly Scots at all, and which in Scottish usage often has overtones of meanness and selfishness, wholly out of place in the context. On the other hand, Morgan's *rin aff* and repeated *rin*, besides obviously using the exact translation equivalent of *courir*, conveys the contempt as well as the fury in Theseus's dismissal. Hughes has an appropriate verb in *hurry*, but his "destruction is hurrying towards you" could hardly be more wrong, given that the original refers to Hippolytus hurrying to his destruction and not the reverse. Morgan's *damned an doomed* conveys the full menace of *perte infaillible* as neither Lowell's *inevitable fate* nor Hughes's *destruction* does; the former is almost neutral in its implications and the latter fails in the essential suggestion of an inescapable destiny. The full sense of Racine's *le fleuve aux dieux mêmes terrible*, with its marvelously exact placing of the emphasis by a syntactic dislocation, evades all three translators: Lowell's *the river immortals venerate* comes literally closest but lacks an equivalent for *mêmes* and diminishes the force of *terrible*; Hughes's *that river in Hell*, though menacing in itself, loses Racine's sense entirely. Morgan's shift is ingenious: his translation in effect transfers the attributes of the Styx to Neptune's oath, the adjectives in *his haly, hellish wurd* conveying the semantic fields of *dieux* and *terrible*. His identifying of the Styx by name is of a piece with his procedure throughout: on several occasions a mythological reference conveyed by a circumlocution or by an unfamiliar name in Racine is given in a specific and

²⁰Ted Hughes, trans., *Phèdre; In a New Version* (London, 1998), p. 57.

well-known form, *Alcide* becoming Hercules and *les colonnes d'Alcide* the Straits o Gibraltar, *le dieu des morts* King Pluto, *le fils d'Égée* Theseus,

Par vous aurait péri le monster de la Crète,
Malgré tous les détours de sa vaste retraite (II.v.648-50)

You wid've stoapt the Minotaur in its tracks
For aw the raivellins a the Labyrinth (p. 35)

and so on: a concession, no doubt, to the lamentable diminution of classical knowledge among even the literate public.

A possible cavil at this point might be that the Christian overtones of Morgan's *damned* and *hellish* are out of place in a tragedy set in the world of pagan mythology; and this is not answered by the fact that he has used them as parts of arresting consonance patterns. A more relevant point is that those and related words have been used as simple expletives for so long, not only in the speech-form which Morgan is evoking, that their original religious significance has been atrophied almost to vanishing point: an argument which is less applicable to Hughes's *river in Hell*, where the word is used literally.²¹

Only Morgan retains the sense of *et va l'exécuter* (*his wurd he wull kep*): both the other translators appear content to leave as an implication the notion that a god's word is inviolable. His rendering of the next line radically changes the grammar and, arguably, loses something of the immediate menace of Theseus's prediction by making him state a general truth instead of referring to the present situation, but the semantic elements of the original are present. Lowell's separation of *death and the gods* and interpolation of *invisibly* depart much further from the sense; and Hughes loses *tu ne peux l'éviter* entirely. (The sharp home-thrust of the Scots monosyllable *jouked* is also a score for Morgan here.) Between *fur aw ye've gane wrang* and *despite your perfidy* there is little to choose, each reflecting the original in its own linguistic medium: here it is Hughes who takes the greatest liberties with Racine in altering *ton offense to your nature, so strangely diseased*; and the entire sentence *and yet in spite of your nature, / So strangely diseased, / I loved you* is nonsensical as a translation: how could Theseus's now-extinguished love for his son have been in spite of a turpitude which he then did not (even mistakenly) believe existed?

Though Morgan is the only one of the three who does not retain *mes entrailles* as the grammatical subject, this is well-judged: *bowels*, in modern English, has obtrusive medical overtones (reinforced by the implications of

²¹The same argument can hardly be used to justify the adjective in "Oh the *satanic* wanhope o the pact!" (p. 66, for *Ah! de quel désespoir mes vœux seraient suivis!* :V.v.1487), which seems both inconsistent with the surrounding register and discordantly out of place in respect of the connotations which it has in modern usage.

writhe and *twist*), and Morgan has had the tact not only to use a less precisely-focused word but to place it in a syntactically less conspicuous position, and to associate it with a less violent verb. More open to criticism is his next line: *ye sealed yir ain fate* loses Theseus's specific reference to himself as the agent of Hippolytus's fate, which Hughes's concise *You forced me to curse you* vigorously emphasizes. Similarly, though the use of *shairly* satisfactorily conveys the questioning tone of the next line, the force of *outragé* is gone, as it is even more completely in Hughes's version; and Lowell's—surely rhyme-forced—*What son has placed his father on such a rack?* is scarcely equivalent. Only Morgan, though, retains the sense of both words in *Justes dieux*, albeit by changing the phrase to a hendiadys, and his use of an expressive Scots idiom, couched in a rhetorical question, excels Hughes's *you see what I suffer* in force and Lowell's fanciful last line in closeness of translation. Finally, though the force of Morgan's conclusion is dependent on the word *unco* being understood as "unnatural, outlandish" and not merely "strange," his choice of *chiel* (a word often used affectionately) for *enfant*, which neither of the others translates directly, perhaps hints as the French does at the paternal relationship which has been monstrously betrayed.

By no stretch of the imagination can any of the three translations be said to be literally close to the original, a fact which surely illustrates the extreme difficulties presented by this play and this playwright. But the paradox of Morgan's version is that of being the one which combines the greatest degree of closeness in literal meaning with the greatest degree, by far, of cultural remoteness in the overtones of the translator's medium.

George Steiner,²² while expressing high praise of Lowell's version as a work of dramatic poetry, severely criticizes his presenting it as a translation of Racine: not only in respect of specific errors of interpretation and overall absence of any close verbal correspondence to the original, but because the entire tone and manner is antithetical to Racine's style. Lowell's *Phaedra* has "an unsteady and capricious bearing on the matter of Racine... To link this version with Racine implies a certain abeyance of modesty. But modesty is the very essence of translation" (Steiner, pp. 242-3). Modesty, the translator's virtue of resisting the temptation to let his own literary personality eclipse that of his original, is even less in evidence in Morgan's version, firstly in that Lowell is writing within the magnificent and long-established tradition of English dramatic rhetoric (as Steiner puts it, "Marlowe, Tourneur and Webster glow behind Lowell's diction," p. 242), whereas Morgan, using a medium in which a tradition of dramatic rhetoric of any comparable kind can hardly be said to exist, has virtually created the register single-handed; secondly, in that the cultural translocation inherent in Morgan's version is far more specific and

²²George Steiner, "Two Translations" in *Language and Silence: Essays 1958-1966* (London, 1968), pp. 239-48. Henceforth Steiner.

more insistent than in Lowell's. It could readily be argued, and the argument on its own terms would be hard to counter, that there is a radical impropriety in offering a version so culturally dissimilar to its model as a translation. Yet this cannot be the sole basis on which the nature, and the success, of Morgan's venture should be assessed. The translation must be seen as an attempt to extend—indeed, to shatter—the cultural bounds within which the Western urban demotic form of Scots operates as a literary medium. Gavin Douglas, in referring to the Scots into which he translated Virgil as his *bad harsk speich, and lewit barbare toung*, was implicitly contrasting it with Latin and would have said the same, *mutatis mutandis*, had he been writing in any other vernacular language. Morgan's dialect still has the aura of a *bad harsk speich and lewit barbare toung* among forms of Scots, and his attempt to claim for it the status of a medium fit to translate a great French classical drama, and to prove that it can be this simply by doing it, is a move of which the boldness would be hard to overstate. The venture having been made, it now remains to be seen whether the importance of Morgan's *Phaedra* in the literary history of Scots, and this form of Scots in particular, will prove commensurate with the translator's ambitions.

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