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FACOLTÀ DI SCIENZE LINGUISTICHE E LETTERATURE STRANIERE
UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

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“SHELLEY READS SCHLEGEL”

WILL BOWERS

QUEEN MARY UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Shelley read Schlegel's lectures *Über dramatische Kunst und Literatur* on his journey to Italy in 1818, and they provided both a spur and a foil to his dramatic thought, and specifically to his ideas on Greek drama. By placing Shelley's reading of Schlegel at his crossing of the Alps and his time in Milan, we can reconsider his labour in the spring and summer of 1818, a strangely unproductive time for the poet, which only produced a few lyrics, some scenes for the incomplete play *Tasso, Mazenghi*, and the translation of Euripides' *Cyclops*, but which also contained what Kelvin Everest has called a “period of sustained immersion in Greek” that laid the foundation for *Prometheus Unbound* and the “Discourse on the Manners of the Ancient Greeks”.

Keywords: Percy Bysshe Shelley, Schlegel, translation, drama, Euripides

In the spring of 1816 August Wilhelm Schlegel's 1808 lectures *Über dramatische Kunst und Literatur* were the talk of Regency literary culture. Following an 1815 English translation by John Black, Schlegel's work garnered much praise in the major Romantic periodicals including the “Augustan Review”, “Edinburgh Review”, “Monthly Review”, and the “Literary Panorama”¹. In the wake of these positive reviews, Shelley read Schlegel on his journey to Italy in 1818, and the lectures provided both a spur and a foil to his dramatic thought, and specifically to Shelley's ideas on Greek drama. Shelley had been able to read Greek since his time at Eton, and Hogg relates that at Oxford he had “read more Greek than many an aged pedant”². Following his expulsion Shelley questioned the value of a classical education, most stridently in an 1812 letter to William Godwin, which Jennifer Wallace argues is a reaction against “his school-enforced intellectual diet”³. At Marlow in 1817, under the aegis of Leigh Hunt, who was writing the poems on Greek subjects that became *Foliage* (1818), and Thomas Love Peacock, whom Mary Shelley described as “talk-

¹ A.W. Schlegel, *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, J. Black trans., 2 vols, Baldwin, Cradock & Joy, London 1815. All further references are given as *Lectures* or given in parenthesis in the text by volume and page number. “Augustan Review”, March 1816, pp. 297-308; “Monthly Review”, October 1816, pp. 113-128; “Edinburgh Review”, February 1816, pp. 67-107; “The Literary Panorama”, November 1818, pp. 3785-3793.

² T.J. Hogg, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2 vols, Moxon, London 1858, Vol. 1, p. 127.

³ J. Wallace, *Shelley and Greece: Rethinking Romantic Hellenism*, Palgrave, Basingstoke 1997, p. 32. See P.B. Shelley, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, F.L. Jones ed., 2 vols, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1964, Vol. 1, pp. 315-319.

ing of nothing but Greek letters & type”⁴, Shelley’s attitude appears to have softened. But Shelley was not yet the philhellene he became in Italy, and his interaction with Schlegel provides part of the explanation for the centrality of both things Greek and things dramatic to Shelley’s next six years. By placing Shelley’s reading of Schlegel at his crossing of the Alps and his time in Milan, we can reconsider his labour in the spring and summer of 1818, a strangely unproductive time for the poet, which only produced a few lyrics, some scenes for the incomplete play “Tasso”, “Mazenghi”, and the translation of Euripides’ *Cyclops*, but which also contained what Kelvin Everest has called the “period of sustained immersion in Greek” that laid the foundation for *Prometheus Unbound* and the “Discourse on the Manners of the Ancient Greeks”⁵. I will begin by establishing the primary sources that impacted on Shelley’s reading of Schlegel; I will then trace how Shelley appears to have been influenced by these lectures, before finally considering Shelley’s pronounced disagreements with Schlegel in 1818, and how these disagreements manifest themselves in Shelley’s maturing Hellenism.

The evidence for Shelley’s reading of Schlegel comes from six entries in Mary Shelley’s journal, which begin on 16 March 1818 (“Shelley reads Schlegel aloud [to] us – We sleep at Rheims”) and end on 21 March (“we Shelley reads Schlegel aloud – we arrive at Lyons at half past eleven”)⁶. These sparse entries are revealing: first, they show that the communal reading that had been central to the Geneva summer was continued in the group’s next trip abroad (and would continue into the Pisan circle of 1822); second, they make it almost certain that Shelley was reading aloud from Black’s English translation, as neither Claire Clairmont nor Mary Shelley could understand German at this point. In six days on bumpy roads Shelley could not have read aloud all two volumes of *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, as it runs to more than 600 pages and covers drama from Aeschylus to Alfieri. What part of Schlegel was he reading? Although there is no way of knowing for certain, there might be a clue in Mary Shelley’s journal six days later. As the party reaches Les Écheltes and the Chartreuse massif rears up before them, Percy Shelley writes in his wife’s journal, “The scene is like that described in the Prometheus of Aeschylus”⁷. Aeschylus’ play had been on his mind for at least two years: Thomas Medwin claims Shelley extemporised a translation of *Prometheus Bound* to Byron in Geneva in 1816, and there is also an extant translation of *Prometheus Bound* ll. 1-134 in Mary Shelley’s hand that is thought to be a transcription of Shelley’s extemporising at Marlow in 1817⁸. A letter to Hogg from Milan shows that Aeschylus was not the only dramatist on

⁴ M. Shelley, *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, B.T. Bennett ed., 3 vols, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1980-1988, Vol. 1, p. 10.

⁵ P.B. Shelley, *The Poems of Shelley*, Vol. 2, K. Everest – G. Matthews ed., Pearson Education, Harlow 2000 (Longman Annotated English Poets), p. 372.

⁶ M. Shelley, *The Journals of Mary Shelley 1814-1844*, P.R. Feldman – D. Scott-Kilvert ed., 2 vols, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1987, Vol. 1, pp. 198-199.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

⁸ T. Medwin, *Medwin’s Conversations of Lord Byron*, E.J. Lovell Jr. ed., revised edition, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1966, p. 156. See F. Rognoni, *Appunti sul mito di Prometeo nel romanticismo inglese*, “Aevum Antiquum”, 12-13, 2012-2013, pp. 317-322.

Shelley’s mind during the crossing: “I have read some Greek but not much on my journey – two or three plays of Euripides – and among them the ‘Ion,’ which you praised and which I think is exquisitely beautiful”⁹. One of the other plays was probably the *Cyclops*, which was in the same volume of Shelley’s three-volume Euripides as the *Ion*, and which he would translate in the summer of 1818¹⁰. So, on his journey to Italy Shelley was reading Euripides and thinking about Aeschylus: both authors, and these specific works, are discussed in Schlegel’s first five lectures.

If Shelley did read from these opening lectures on the drama of ancient Greece during his journey, it would go some way to explaining his description of a ballet at La Scala in his first letter from Milan:

The manner in which language is translated into gesture, the complete & full effect of the whole as illustrating the history in question, the unaffected self possession of each of the actors, even to the children, made this choral drama more impressive than I should have conceived possible¹¹.

Shelley’s slightly odd appreciation of a ballet based on *Othello* as a “choral drama” suggests he had been watching with Schlegel in mind, especially the section in Lecture 3 when the German laments that we “have no suitable singing or dancing” (1, 80) to realise the choral drama in modern tragedy. The language of this description is one of a number of instances in 1818 in which Shelley’s thoughts on drama show his reading of Schlegel. Some of the similarities between Shelley’s and Schlegel’s writings are commonplaces in Romantic thought on Greek culture, such as the analogy they share between Greek sculpture and Greek drama¹². But a more singular example of Schlegel’s influence is found in some remarks that Shelley placed in the blank half page at the close of the *Agamemnon* in his copy of Aeschylus:

This, & the two following plays, may be considered as the distinct acts of one great drama – the two first end with an expectation – in the first the wicked triumph & the reader is excited to a desire of moral & poetical justice¹³.

In these jottings Shelley clearly remembers his Schlegel, and is in part paraphrasing the German’s remarks at the opening of Lecture 4 on the *Oresteia* as “a complete trilogy” (1, 94) in which he claims: “we may consider the three pieces, which were connected together even in the representation, as so many acts of one great and entire drama” (1, 96). Shelley accepts Schlegel’s claim that the *Oresteia* was not formed simply for all-day entertainment,

⁹ P.B. Shelley, *Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 15.

¹⁰ Shelley read Euripides in *Euripidis Tragoediae Viginti cum variis lectionibus*, J. Barnes ed., Bliss, Oxford 1811[-1812], 6 vols bound as 3, and these two plays appear in Vol. 3.

¹¹ P.B. Shelley, *Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 4.

¹² Cp. Schlegel, *Lectures* 1, 67, 91; P.B. Shelley, “A Discourse on the Manners of the Ancient Greeks Relative to the Subject of Love”, in *Shelley’s Prose; or, The Trumpet of a Prophecy*, D.L. Clark ed., Fourth Estate, London 1988, p. 217.

¹³ *Aeschylus Tragedies*, C.G. Schütz ed., Bliss, Oxford 1809, p. 276. Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodleian Shelley adds. g. 1 Aeschylus.

but also to provide a sustained dramatic narrative whereby “several tragedies may be connected together by means of a common destiny running throughout all their actions in one great cycle” (1, 94). With these parallels and the earlier description of the ballet in mind, a new inflection can be given to Shelley’s second letter from Milan,

I have devoted this summer & indeed the next year to the composition of a tragedy on the subject of Tasso’s madness, which I find upon inspection is, if properly treated, admirably dramatic & poetical¹⁴.

A number of critics have reflected on this letter, but their usual focus has been on the figure of Tasso and his earlier significance in Byron’s *Lament of Tasso* (1817), or on the theme of madness that is central to *Julian and Maddalo* written in early 1819¹⁵. But of equal importance to the subject and themes of this proposed work is the ambition to write a drama at all, and in considering what might be a “proper treatment” for it Shelley had some guidance from Schlegel.

Schlegel got Shelley thinking, and rethinking. Angela Leighton has gone as far as to argue that the language of the *Lectures* “prefigures” moments in “A Defence of Poetry” and that Shelley’s choice of “A Lyrical Drama” as the subtitle to *Prometheus Unbound* was inspired by Schlegel¹⁶. But, as was often his way, Shelley also contested a number of the central tenets of the lectures, and these discernable points of friction produce the creative spark for much of his mature thought on drama and on Greece. In a fine example of what Michael O’Neill has called Shelley’s urge “always towards a fusion or redefinition”¹⁷, we see Shelley accepting elements of Schlegel’s arguments but then recasting them to come to an opposite, and more radical, synthesis. One telling difference is found by comparing Schlegel’s and Shelley’s statements on their audience’s relative unfamiliarity with the Greek language. Schlegel takes a rigid view on the need for language learning in his second lecture:

In the majority of my hearers, I can hardly suppose an immediate knowledge of the Greeks, derived from the study of the original language. Translations in prose, or even in verse, which are nothing more than dresses in the modern taste, can afford no true idea of the Grecian drama [...]. So long as we have to struggle with difficulties, it is impossible for us to have any true enjoyment of art. To feel the ancients as we ought, we must have become in some degree one of themselves, and breathed as it were the Grecian air (1, 44-45).

Shelley takes up this point in his “Discourse on the Manners of the Ancient Greeks”:

¹⁴ P.B. Shelley, *Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 8.

¹⁵ See, for example, C. Baker, *Shelley’s Major Poetry*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1948, pp. 127-134; A.M. Weinberg, *Shelley’s Italian Experience*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 1991, pp. 57-68.

¹⁶ A. Leighton, *Shelley and the Sublime: An Interpretation of the Major Poems*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1984, pp. 76-77.

¹⁷ M. O’Neill, *Emulating Plato: Shelley as Translator and Prose Poet*, in *The Unfamiliar Shelley*, T. Webb – A.M. Weinberg ed., Ashgate, Aldershot 2008, pp. 239-255 (p. 241).

Let us see [the Greeks'] errors, their weaknesses, their daily actions, their family conversation, and catch the tone of their society [...]. There is no book which shows the Greeks precisely as they were; they seem all written for children, with the caution that no practice or sentiment highly inconsistent with our present manners should be mentioned lest those manners receive outrage and violation. But there are many to whom the Greek language is inaccessible, who ought not to be excluded by this prudery to possess an exact and comprehensive conception of the history of man¹⁸.

Shelley agrees with Schlegel's first and last points – that many people don't know Greek and that there is a need to show the Greeks as they were – but the difference between them, as to whether translation can or cannot convey a real or genuine sense of Greek literature, is a sharp distinction. Schlegel's Hellenism is conditioned by his need “to feel the ancients as we ought”, and he goes on to suggest that there must be something morally beneficial in studying a culture whose “elevated character is imperishable”, especially if those studying are “a noble race of men related to the Greek (which the European undoubtedly is)” (1, 45). Shelley's approach is much more flexible and eccentric: he suggests we should attempt to appreciate the entire gamut of Greek life, and he cautions us to avoid only those works of Hellenic culture that serve to instruct “present manners”.

A simple way Shelley challenges Schlegel's staid and somewhat prudish views of Greek literature is in the texts that he chooses to read, study, and translate. *Prometheus Bound* and the *Persae* inspire Shelley's two longest Hellenic works, *Prometheus Unbound* and *Hellas*, but neither work is typical. For Schlegel the lack of dramatic action in the *Persae* produces “undoubtedly the most imperfect of all the tragedies of the poet that we possess” (1, 111), and the Romantic reception of *Prometheus Bound* saw it as an impure tragedy with its satirical chorus and “the entrance of the crazy old maid Io [who] must have been intended for comic effect”¹⁹. The Euripides that Shelley read on his journey, and which he found “exquisitely beautiful”, is a particular point of contention: for Schlegel the *Ion*, with all its self-referential tricks and lack of tragic force, “can hardly be satisfactory to our feelings” (1, 174), and the *Cyclops* “is a mixed and secondary species of tragic poetry” (1, 186), which is too coarse to be good. These plays display a generic mixing that Schlegel is firmly against: he rails against Euripides because this mixture results in representations of the Greeks “as they actually were” (1, 144). Shelley's desire to see the Greeks' “errors, their weaknesses”, makes Euripides a particularly important source for his Hellenism, and in notes relating to the “Discourse” he refutes Schlegel's attitude to Euripides:

One of the chief objections to Euripides, & the reason why Sophocles was considered so holy and chaste a person – a circumstance which the learned critic Schlegel could hardly have been ignorant of when he abuses Euripides for his licentiousness was, as Athanaeus tell us φιλομειραξ δὲ ἦν ὁ Σοφοκλῆς, ὡς Εὐριπίδης φιλο γύννης²⁰.

¹⁸ P.B. Shelley, “A Discourse”, p. 219.

¹⁹ *Monthly Review*, October 1816, p. 116.

²⁰ Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodleian MS. Shelley adds. e. 6, p. 68. The quotation is from Athenaeus, *The Learned Banqueters*, Book 13.603e. “Sophocles was partial to boys, in the same way that Euripides was partial

Shelley's quotation addresses Greek attitudes towards pederasty, which he would discuss in more detail in the "Discourse", but he also raises the third-century biographical myth that the licentiousness in Euripides' plays was a dramatization of the playwright's own life. Shelley mocks Schlegel for being blind to the life of Sophocles while he "abuses Euripides": is it reasonable that chastity is retained in sexual relations with boys but lost with women? By calling Schlegel "learned" we see a rebuke wrapped in complimentary terms, as it is in this stanza when Nature addresses Wordsworth in "Peter Bell the Third":

'Tis you are cold – for I, not coy,
 Yield love for love, frank, warm and true:
 And Burns, a Scottish Peasant boy, –
 His errors prove it – knew my joy
 More, learned friend, than you (ll. 323-327)²¹.

In this delaying sarcastic refrain, Nature makes clear that to be learned is to be prudish, and to be preoccupied with intellectual pursuits over the physical pleasures that characterize Burns. For Shelley, Schlegel is too learned a critic, who cannot comprehend the full extent of what the Greeks can be: moving beyond the formal heroism of *Agamemnon*, *Ajax*, or *Electra*, allows a reader not only to observe, as Schlegel did, but to enjoy "the light way of living of the Greeks [...] the hilarity of disposition, so foreign to everything like stately dignity" (1, 188).

Shelley's Hellenism – in its eccentricity and wit – is in direct opposition to the "learned" Schlegel. The rest of this essay will be devoted to how this opposition expresses itself in the translations and original compositions that Shelley wrote in Italy. That the first of these was a translation from Greek drama, Euripides' *Cyclops*, is in keeping with Shelley's claim in the "Defence" that the drama was the form "under which a greater number of modes of expression of poetry are susceptible of being combined than any other"²². Michael Rossington has discussed how this claim gives an "elevated position to dramatic poetry"²³, and this remark recalls Schlegel's claim that the ideal dramatist "does not lower himself to a circumscribed reality, but elevates it on the contrary to a higher sphere" (1, 107). But Shelley's line from the "Defence" might also be read as a levelling ambition, and read in this way his attitude towards the drama can be seen in similar terms to his attitude to the Greek language in the "Discourse", which "in variety, in simplicity, in flexibility, and in copiousness excels every other language in the western world"²⁴. Shelley's focus in the "Discourse", and that of his subsequent critics, is on the Greek "manners" mentioned in the title, but critics have

to women" (Athenaeus, *The Learned Banqueters*, S. Douglas Olson trans., 8 vols, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2007-12 (Loeb Classical Library), Vol. 7, p. 53).

²¹ P.B. Shelley, *The Poems of Shelley*, Vol. 3, J. Donovan – C. Duffy – K. Everest – M. Rossington ed., Pearson Education, Harlow 2011 (Longman Annotated English Poets), pp. 116-117.

²² P.B. Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, D.H. Reiman – N. Fraistat ed., Norton, New York 2002, p. 521.

²³ M. Rossington, *Tragedy: The Cenci and Swellfoot the Tyrant*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, M. O'Neill – A. Howe ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford 2012, pp. 299-308 (p. 299).

²⁴ P.B. Shelley, "A Discourse", p. 217.

reflected little on what Shelley thought was the Greeks' manner (the way in which they spoke, and what their sense of humour was). One way that Shelley attempts to mimic this manner is in his construction of blank verse dialogue, in particular his preponderance for stichomythia (dialogic exchanges in which the actors speak in alternate lines). It was a technique that Euripides mastered and that was much disliked by Schlegel, who complained of its “immoderate length” in which “questions and answers, or objections and reflections, fly about like arrows, and many of them so unnecessary that the half of these lines might well be spared” (1, 151). The *Ion*, which Shelley read on his crossing, contains the most stichomythia of any extant Greek drama, and its longest example displays the potential for play and suspense as Xuthus and Ion learn of their familial bond (*Ion* ll. 517-562). It is a type of dialogue that Shelley delights in during the translation of the *Cyclops*, particularly in the long stichomythia at the first meeting of Silenus and Odysseus (ll. 94-155). In this passage Shelley rarely diverges from the content of Euripides' original, but he is also careful to show his fidelity to the manner of their exchange, as he tightly controls the pace, through questions and awkward interruptions, to keep in flux who controls the argument. The technique of quick alternating blank verse that Shelley had appreciated in the *Ion*, and had mastered as a translator of the *Cyclops*, became part of his original poetry. In the fragments of Shelley's incomplete drama on the life of Tasso, which he struggled with between May and June 1818, there is an extant scene that begins:

Pigna Who denies access to the Duke?

Albano His Grace
Is buried in deep converse with the dead.

Maddalo No access to the Duke! You have not said
That the Count Maddalo would speak with him?²⁵

Although this is a rough draft, Shelley is trying to replicate the power dynamics and modulation of tone that he had seen and translated in his Greek studies. In Shelley's own Greek lyrical drama, *Prometheus Unbound*, this technique is used to powerful effect. Shelley begins *Prometheus Unbound* II, iv with Asia and Panthea reaching the cave of Demogorgon. The dreadful omnipotence of Demogorgon is proven by his ability to deaden the panicked Asia's questions with short and metrically complete responses: it is through Demogorgon's cold command of stichomythia that Shelley maintains the agency of the nameless God²⁶.

Shelley was just as concerned with the language and register of his Hellenism as he was with being true to how the Greeks spoke. A small but telling way that Shelley takes up his own challenge to show the Greeks “precisely as they were” is his choice to transliterate Greek in the *Cyclops*. During the first meeting of Odysseus and Silenus, in which Odysseus offers him a drink from his wineskin, Shelley chooses to render the Greek exclamations into a Latin alphabet with great success:

²⁵ P.B. Shelley, *The Poems of Shelley*, Vol. 2, p. 367.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 555-558.

παπαιάξ, ὡς καλὴν ὀσμὴν ἔχει.

Oh my, oh my! What a fine bouquet it has! (Kovacs)

Papaiapax! What a sweet smell it has! (Shelley)

βαβαί· χορεύσαι παρακαλεῖ μ' ὁ Βάκχιος. ἄ ἄ ἄ.

Oo la la! Bacchus invites me to the dance! Tra la, tra la, tra la! (Kovacs)

Babai, great Bacchus calls me forth to dance! / Joy, joy! (Shelley)²⁷

Shelley maintains the senseless wonder of Silenus without reducing him to the somewhat camp exclamations of David Kovacs' recent renderings into English. Shelley's decision to keep the Greek sounds also allows him to maintain Euripides' original alliteration of βαβαί and Βάκχιος in the second example. These transliterations are part of the playful texture of Shelley's *Cyclops*, in which the meaning and power of words is constantly under examination. We see this in Shelley's delight in the exchange of homonyms. In the preparation for cooking the soldiers we are told the cyclops "made red hot / The points of spits" (ll. 389-390), while later Odysseus warns the noisy chorus, "dare not to breathe / Or spit or e'er wink" (ll. 643-644) as he prepares the point to blind cyclops. In his first speech to Odysseus, the cyclops claims he cannot wait until Odysseus and his men "shall fill / My belly, broiling warm from the live coals" (ll. 228-229), which is later volleyed back to the cyclops by Odysseus as he convinces him not to share his wine with the warning that "village mirth breeds contests, broils, and blows" (l. 548). Shelley's tricks attempt to achieve the flexibility in English that he had praised in the Greek language, so that in his *Cyclops* these exchanged homonyms pave the way for the central absurd exchange of Odysseus calling himself Nobody, and Polyphemus' plaintive final revelation that "'twas Nobody / Who blinded me" (ll. 693-694).

As well as capturing the flexibility and copiousness of the Greek language, in these translations Shelley also pursues his desire articulated in the "Discourse" to represent a broader part of Greek life, to show "their daily actions, their family conversation and catch the tone of their society"²⁸. Shelley insists that this more open approach to the Hellenic world was a useful counter to the "prudery" of established thought, and crucially he believed this tone could still be expressed in translation. One of Shelley's most remarkable attempts to capture the Greek everyday is in the use of domestic diction, as when the cyclops "placed upon the fire / A brazen pot to boil" (ll. 388-389),

And when this god-abandoned cook of Hell
Had made all ready, he seized two of us
And killed them in a kind of measured manner,
For he flung one against the brazen rivets
Of the huge cauldron-belly, and seized the other

²⁷ Kovacs' translation and Greek text are from Euripides, *Cyclops, Alcestitis, Medea*, D. Kovacs trans., Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1994 (Loeb Classical Library). All quotations from Shelley's "Cyclops" are from *The Poems of Shelley*, Vol. 2, pp. 371-412.

²⁸ P.B. Shelley, "A Discourse", p. 219.

By the foot's tendon and knocked out his brains
 Upon the sharp edge of the craggy stone,
 Then peeled his flesh with a great cooking knife
 And put him down to roast. (ll. 393-401)

Shelley opts for overtly literal compounds – “god-abandoned cook of Hell” and “Cauldron-belly” – to give an earthly tone to Odysseus’s tale. Choosing “belly” for κύτος is not only an accurate translation for a term that means both the hollow of a container and the stomach of an ox, but it also hints at the soldiers’ ultimate destination after being digested by the Cyclops. This play with words also occurs in the two uses of “brazen”, which can be simply read as meaning made of brass, but they also hint at the boldness of the “measured manner” with which the gruesome task is performed. By being alive to the detail crafted into the original Greek, Shelley translates this meticulous butchery in clear and homely diction for comic effect, to create a scene so everyday that we can momentarily forget the brutality of putting a skinned man “down to roast”. This revelling in everyday language for weighty matters of Greek lore is at its most blatant in Shelley’s translation of the Homeric “Hymn to Mercury”, which he completed in July 1820²⁹. The poem begins with a song in which the singer praises his “plastic verse”, a plasticity that extends to the verbal texture of the poem, which narrates the birth of Mercury and the council of the Gods, while also talking of May’s “Perennial pot, trippet and brazen pan” (l. 78), calling Mercury “A scandalmonger beyond all belief” (l. 444) and having him greet an old man “Halloo! old fellow with the crooked shoulder!” (l. 111). Shelley’s attempt to capture an easy demotic speech also expresses itself in the use of idiom, a habit that begins in his translation from *Prometheus Bound*, which concludes with Ocean warning Prometheus that when Jupiter hears of his actions “The cause of your present labour, will seem child’s play” (l. 314)³⁰. Idiomatic phrases appear again in the *Cyclops*, as in Silenus’ warning “Let me advise you... do not spare a morsel / Of all that flesh. What, would you eat your words / And be a vain and babbling boaster, Cyclops?” (ll. 303-305). As Timothy Webb has noticed, this is a mistranslation: the original sense of Silenus’ speech is that if you eat Odysseus you too will become clever with words³¹. But the impetus for this error makes it all the more remarkable: Shelley is prepared to sacrifice accuracy, in what is generally a translation of great fidelity, in his attempts to catch in English the tone of Greek speech.

After a long passage correcting the blemishes and inaccuracies of Shelley’s *Cyclops*, A.C. Swinburne apologises for his sacrilegious criticism by praising the translation, “for its matchless grace of unapproachable beauty, its strength, ease, delicate simplicity and sufficiency; the birthmark and native quality of all Shelley’s translations”³². In Swinburne’s appreciation of the “native quality” of these Greek translations, he credits Shelley with

²⁹ P.B. Shelley, *The Poems of Shelley*, Vol. 3, pp. 508-543.

³⁰ F. Rognoni, *Appunti sul mito di Prometeo*, p. 331.

³¹ T. Webb, *The Violet in the Crucible: Shelley and Translation*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1976, p. 97.

³² A.C. Swinburne, *Notes on the Text of Shelley*, in Id., *Essays and Studies*, Chatto and Windus, London 1875, p. 211.

fulfilling his goal as laid out in the “Discourse”: to capture the Greeks precisely as they were. The praise of the “simplicity and sufficiency” of a work in Greek put into a modern language would have been anathema to Schlegel, who claimed translations “can afford no true idea of the Grecian drama”. Schlegel’s role in the development of Shelley’s thought on drama and the Greeks was essentially a catalytic one: the German’s systematic examination of the ancient drama provided a spur to wider reading while the muse had apparently abandoned Shelley for the first half of 1818. It seems hardly surprising that Shelley, who preferred the *Trionfi* to the *Canzoniere* and the *Purgatorio* to the *Inferno*, could not swallow the conservative approach advocated by the learned Schlegel. But Shelley’s eccentricity was not merely a pose, nor was it confined to his choice of reading: the remarkable quality, the birthmark, of Shelley’s approach to Greece and its drama after 1818 is the levelling and capacious attitude formed in opposition to Schlegel.

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