

Alexander Nevile's Translation of Seneca's "Oedipus"

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## ALEXANDER NEVILLE'S TRANSLATION OF SENECA'S 'OEDIPUS.'

THE Elizabethan translations of Seneca's tragedies are generally admitted to be poor productions, though they are worthy of study in view of their influence on the development of the drama. Of the ten plays included in the collected edition of *Seneca his Tenne Tragedies*, published in 1581, the translation of the *Oedipus* by Alexander Nevile has received the most praise, on account of the supposed youth of the translator. According to the title and dedicatory epistle the play was 'Englished' in 'the yeare of our Lord MDLX' when Nevile was in his sixteenth year. This statement has led critics to compare the *Oedipus* favourably with the other translations, made by men like Heywood and Studley, who were Fellows of colleges at Oxford and Cambridge. 'Notwithstanding the translator's youth,' said Warton, 'it is by far the most spirited and elegant version in the whole collection, and it is to be regretted that he did not undertake all the rest,' and this verdict was reprinted in the introduction to the Spenser Society's edition of the *Tenne Tragedies* in 1887. A German scholar, Ernst Jockers, echoes this praise in his dissertation on the translators: 'Nevyle ist ohne Zweifel der begabteste von sämtlichen Uebersetzern. Seine Uebersetzung zeigt dichterischen Schwung und jugendliche Lebendigkeit!'

Considered as the work of a schoolboy of sixteen, the translation as it appears in the 1581 edition is sufficiently creditable, though it contains a number of small errors. There are extant, however, two copies (in the British Museum and the Bodleian Library) of Nevile's *Oedipus* as it originally appeared in 1563, and a collation of this edition with that of 1581 shows at once that the critics' praise of the youthful translator was not altogether deserved. No hint is given in the *Tenne Tragedies* of any revision of the translation, and in the case of plays translated by Heywood, Studley, and Nuce there is no alteration of any importance. The title, dedication, and preface of the *Oedipus* would lead the reader to imagine that Nevile's translation had been reprinted in the same way. The extreme rarity of the 1563 edition has caused it to be

<sup>1</sup> *Die englischen Seneca-Uebersetzer des 16. Jahrhunderts* (Strassburg, 1909), p. 43. See also J. W. Cunliffe, *Influence of Seneca on Elizabethan Tragedy*, p. 5.

overlooked by writers on this subject, who have assumed that its text was substantially the same as that contained in the collected edition of 1581<sup>1</sup>.

We find, however, that Nevile practically rewrote the translation for its appearance in the *Tenne Tragedies*. Almost every line contains some alteration. The versification of the original edition was extremely irregular. Intermingled with the regular fourteeners which formed the staple metre were lines containing twelve or sixteen syllables, or even short unrhyming lines of four or more syllables. Whenever the school-boy translator found himself with more words than he could fit into his rhyming couplets, he adopted the simple device of enclosing the superfluous syllables in brackets to show the reader that they were hypermetrical. Most of these irregularities are smoothed out in the 1581 edition, and changes other than metrical are also made. Speeches are altered, and assigned to different characters<sup>2</sup>, lines are inserted or omitted, and there are a large number of purely verbal changes.

The extent of the alterations may be gauged by a comparison of two or three parallel passages :

1563 EDITION.  
(Sig. A 1.)  
The night is gon. & dredfull day begins  
at length to appeare.  
And Lucifer beset w<sup>t</sup> Clouds, hymself  
aloft doth reare.  
And gliding forth with heavy hewe. A  
doleful blase doth beare (in Skyes).  
Now shal the houses voide be sene, with  
Plagues deuoured quight :  
And slaughter y<sup>t</sup> the night hath made,  
shall daye brynge forth to lyght.

(Sig. A 2.)  
This feare and only this my (*read* me)  
dryues from fathers kingdoms great.  
Not lyke a wanderyng Vacabounde the  
wayes unknowen I beate,  
But all mystrustfull of my selfe thy  
lawes (O Nature) for to keape  
I sought the meanes. Yet feare I still  
and fear into my mynde doth creape  
Though cause of Dread not one I se yet  
feare and dread I all.

1581 EDITION.  
(Fol. 78.)  
The Night is gon : and dredfull day be-  
gins at length t<sup>r</sup> appeere :  
And *Phoebus* all bedim'de with Clowdes,  
himselfe aloft doth reere.  
And glyding forth with deadly hue, a  
doleful blase in Skies  
Doth beare : Great terror & dismay to  
the beholders Eyes.  
Now shall the houses voyde bee seene,  
with Plague deuoured quight.  
And slaughter that the night hath made,  
shall day bring forth to light.

(Fol. 78 verso.)  
This feare, and onely this me causde my  
fathers kingdome great  
For to forsake. I fled not thence when  
fear the minde doth beat.  
The restless thought still dreds the thing,  
it knows can neuer chance.  
Such fancies now torment my heart, my  
safety to aduance,  
And eke thyne euer sacred lawes (O  
Nature) for to keepe

<sup>1</sup> In a previous article in the *Modern Language Review* (July 1909, 'The Elizabethan *Tenne Tragedies of Seneca*') I made the same assumption. This was corrected, however, in my *Elizabethan Translations of Seneca's Tragedies* (Cambridge, 1912).

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Iocasta's speech in Act 1, r. 22 is given to Oedipus, and 'you' is accordingly changed to 'I,' and 'that' to 'this.'

## 1563 EDITION.

And scante in credit with myself, I seke  
 my fatal fall  
 (By Dome of doulful Destinies)  
 For what shuld I suppose the cause?  
 A Plage that is so generall...

(Sig. B 2 verso.)

*Oedipus.* For feare my body chilles alas  
 and trembling al I stande  
 In quaking dred. I seke & toile  
 these mischiefes to withstande.  
 But al in vayn I labour I it wil  
 not bee I see.  
 As longe as meare repugnaunts  
 thus together mixed bee.  
 My mynd desirous still (Oh god)  
 the truth for to vnfold.  
 With doubtfull Dred is daunted  
 so, that it can scante vphold  
 (Itself.)  
 O brother deare if eny meanes or  
 waye of health thou knowe.  
 Declare it out and sticke not nowe  
 the truth to me to showe,  
*Creon.* Syr if it pleas your noble grace,  
 the annswers hidden lies.  
*Oedi.* Who doubtful helth to sick mē  
 brings all health to them denies.  
*Creon.* *Appolloes* vse it is the truth with  
 darksom shades to duske.  
 And *Oedipus* of gods it hath,  
 things doubtful to discus.  
 Speke out and spare not man.  
*Creon.* The mightie God comaundes  
 To purge the Princes seat forth-  
 with and that strayght out of  
 hande  
 That vilayn vile requited be, with  
 plages and vengeance dire.  
 Who firce with bloody hands of  
 late, my brother *Laius* slue.  
 Before that this performed be, no  
 hope of mylder ayer.  
 Wherefore do this O king, or els,  
 of hope and healthe dispaier.  
*Oed.* Durst eny man on yearth attempt  
 that noble prince to slaye?

## 1581 EDITION.

A stately Scepter I forsooke, yet secret  
 feare doth creepe  
 Within my breast: and frets it still with  
 doubt and discontent,  
 And inward pangues which secretly my  
 thoughts a sunder rent.  
 So though no cause of dred I see, yet  
 feare and dred I all,  
 And scant in credit with my selfe, my  
 thoughts my mind appall  
 That I cannot perswaded be though  
 reason tell me no,  
 But that the Web is weauing still of my  
 decreed wo.  
 For what should I suppose the cause?  
 a Plague that is so generall...

(Fol. 81 verso.)

*Oedipus.* For feare my body chilles, alas,  
 and trembling all I stand  
 In quaking dread. I seke and  
 toyle, these mischiefes to with-  
 stand.  
 But all in vayne I spend my  
 thoughtes it wil not be, I see,  
 As long as all my sences thus by  
 cares disturbed bee.  
 My mynd desyrous stil (Oh God),  
 the truth for to vnfold,  
 With doubtfull Dread is daunted  
 so, that it can scant vpholde  
 Itselfe. O Brother deare, if way  
 or meane of health thou know,  
 Declare it out and sticke not all  
 the truth to me to show.  
*Cre.* The Oracle (most noble king) ys  
 darke, and bidden lies.  
*Oed.* Who doubtful health to sicke men  
 brings, all health to thē denies.  
*Cre.* *Appolloes* vse yt is the truth in  
 darkesome dens to hold,  
*Oed.* And *Oedipus* of Gods it hath  
 thinges hidden to vnfold:  
 Speake out, tell all, and spare not  
 man: all doubttes I can discus.  
*Cre.* *Apollo* then (most noble King)  
 himselfe commaundeth thus.  
*By exile purge the Princes seat, and  
 plague with vengeance due  
 That hapless wretch, whose bloody  
 handes of late King Laius slue:  
 Before that this performed bee, no  
 hope of milder ayer:*  
 Wherefore do this (O King) or  
 else All hope of helpe dispayre.  
*Oe.* Durst any man on earth attempte,  
 that noble Prince to slay?

## 1563 EDITION.

Shewe me y<sup>t</sup> slaue that I may him  
 dispatche out of the way.  
*Cre.* God graunt the sight be good (Alas)  
 the heringe is to terrible.  
 My sences all amased stand, it is  
 a thing so horrible.  
 That I abhorre to speke my mynde,  
 O god for feare I quake  
 And euen at the very thought my  
 lymys begin to shake.

(Sig. B 8.)

Som horrible mischief great, alas,  
 these fearfull signes declare.

(O *Iupiter*)

Whats that y<sup>e</sup> Gods wold haue  
 reueld and yet do bid beware  
 (To vtter it,)

They are ashamed : I know not  
 what. Come hether quickly  
 bring.

Some salte with the. Goe it vpon  
 the wounded heifer fling.

## 1581 EDITION.

Shew me the man that I may him  
 dispatch out of the way.  
*Cre.* God graunt I may it safely tel :  
 the hearyng was to terrible  
 My senses all amased are : it is a  
 thing so horrible,  
 That I abhorre to vtter it (oh  
 God) for feare I quake  
 And euen at the very thought my  
 lymys beginne to shake.

(Fol. 84.)

Some dyre and blouddy deed (Alas)  
 these hydeous signes declare.

Whats that the Gods would haue  
 reuealde, and yet doe bid beware  
 To vtter it? By certaine signes  
 their wrath is oft descride :

Such signes appeere, and yet they  
 seeme their fury great to hide.  
 They are ashamde : I wot nere  
 what. Come hither, quickly  
 bring

Some salt with thee, and it vpon  
 the sacrifice goe fling.

The reason for these changes is evident. In the eighteen years which had elapsed since the first publication of Nevile's translation, English poetry had made marvellous progress. The standard of versification had been raised, and the halting metre which had been tolerated in 1563 would not pass muster in 1581, even as the work of a youth of sixteen. It may be urged that the same reason ought to have produced revised versions of the other plays, but these did not contain such glaring irregularities, though they are devoid of poetical merit. Moreover, Heywood and Studley, who were responsible for seven out of the ten tragedies, were in a very different position from Nevile when the 1581 edition appeared. Both had been forced to give up their university careers, and had devoted themselves to the promulgation of their religious opinions, Heywood as a Jesuit priest, exiled from England, and Studley as a Puritan whose views were unacceptable to Whitgift, the Master of his college. Nevile, on the other hand, had remained a scholar, and was now secretary to the Archbishop of Canterbury. He was the author of various Latin works, and his brother was one of the most prominent Cambridge dignitaries. A drastic revision of the early translation was necessary, but even when this was complete Nevile seems to have felt that the result was not altogether creditable to his mature scholarship, and he therefore sheltered himself behind the title and dedication which ascribed the work to his sixteenth year.

It is worth noting that the 1581 edition insists strongly on the fact, not mentioned in 1563, that the translation was made as early as 1560. In the list of plays and translators at the beginning of the *Tenne Tragedies*, the only translation of which the date is given is Nevile's *Oedipus*, to which '1560' is added. The title of the 1563 edition runs thus:

'The Lamentable Tragedie of Oedipus the Sonne of Laius Kyng of Thebes out of Seneca. By Alexander Neuytle. Imprynted at London in saint Brydes Churchyarde: ouer agaynst the North doore of the Church: by Thomas Colwell. 1563. 28 Aprilis.'

In the *Tenne Tragedies* the play appears with the following title:

'Oedipus. The Fifth Tragedy of Seneca, Englished. The yeare of our Lord M.D.L.X. By Alexander Neuytle.'

The alterations in the dedicatory epistle to Dr Wotton are even more significant. In the 1563 edition the epistle opened without any reference to the translator's youth:

When first right honorable Syr, I trauayled in the translation of this present Tragadie, Written by the moste graue, vertuous & Christian Ethenicke (For so doubteth not *Erasmus* to terme him) *Lucius Anneus Seneca*: I minded nothyng lesse, then that at any tyme thus rudely transformed he shoulde come into the Prynters hands.

In the 1581 edition these opening sentences have been thus rewritten:

This sixteenth yeare of myne age (righte honorable) reneweth a gratefull memory of your great goodnes towards me: (for at Baptisme your honor vouchsafed to aunswere for mee): and causeth mee thus boldly to present these greene and vn-melowed fructs of my first trauailes vnto you: as signes and testimonies of a well disposed minde vnto your honor. Albeit when first I vndertoke the translation of this present Tragedy, I minded nothing lesse, than that at any tyme thus rudely transformed it shoulde come into the Printers hands.

Nevile's claim to be regarded as a youthful prodigy must therefore be dismissed, and it is difficult not to suspect him of an attempt at deliberate falsification. His behaviour raises interesting questions as to the amount of revision which an Elizabethan author might legitimately bestow on his work without making any acknowledgment of the change.

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