

Lauritsen, John (ed.). *Aeschylus. Oresteia: the Medwin-Shelley translation*. Dorchester, MA: Pagan Press, 2011. 192 p. \$14.00 (pb). ISBN 9780943742168.

Lauritsen, John (ed.). *Prometheus bound by Aeschylus, translated by Thomas Medwin and Percy Bysshe Shelley; Prometheus unbound by Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Dorchester, MA: Pagan Press, 2011. 210 p. \$16.00 (pb). ISBN 9780943742199.

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John Lauritsen has collected and presented in one paperback volume Thomas Medwin's 1830s verse translations of Aeschylus's tragic trilogy, the *Oresteia*. These translations of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, *Choephoroi* and *Eumenides* were previously available in hard copy only via remaining 1830s editions of *Fraser's Magazine*, a monthly general and literary publication with a Tory inclination. Medwin's *Agamemnon* was first published as a book, with preface and scholarly notes, in 1832 by William Pickering (London). The editions of *Fraser's Magazine* containing the translations of the *Agamemnon* (1838), *Choephoroi* (1832) and *Eumenides* (1834) and the book *Agamemnon* (1832) have been available digitally on Google Books since c.2008. Lauritsen's new edition is well printed on acid-free paper and in a clear font. The presentation and layout of the text from *Fraser's Magazine* has been reproduced very closely, which captures a good deal of the look and feel of the original letterpress publications, whilst at the same time being more easily legible. It ought to be noted that Medwin himself never collected his Aeschylan plays together as an *Oresteia*; this is the work of Lauritsen's Pagan Press.

Pagan Press was founded in 1982 "to publish books of interest to the intelligent gay man." We may therefore assume that the ideal reader of *The Medwin-Shelley Translation* might be "an intelligent gay man." I do not have the space or inclination to investigate here why the editor might not think the book of equal interest to men or women of diverse levels of intellect and sexual orientation. I suspect this tagline is either outdated or included for the sole purpose of provoking the kinds of publicity a self-publishing author might need to broaden a thin distribution of niche works. I cannot help but feel that the

rebranding of these translations made by Thomas Medwin as the work of the famous Romantic poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley, is another cynical and attention-seeking ploy.

In 2007 Lauritsen published *The Man Who Wrote Frankenstein*. This book made the case that it was in fact Percy Bysshe Shelley who wrote the popular Gothic novel and not Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. What is more it did so 11 years after Charles Robinson's "democratic" edition of *The Frankenstein Notebooks*, which clearly lays out the evidence against Lauritsen's radical thesis.¹ Lauritsen is the hapless Dan Brown figure of Romanticism; his enthusiastic "scholarship" might fire the imagination and fool a good number of people, but it is also - and this is import - ill-informed, highly selective, half-baked and with toxic levels of deceptive and unsupported claims. An example (and there are many to choose from): "The manuscripts of Shelley's Aeschylus translations were not lost or destroyed, but retained by Medwin, who used them for the translations he published in *Fraser's*, over a decade after Shelley's death" (2011.8-9). Lauritsen's foreword and cover blurb are jam-packed with such statements, as unsupported as they are authoritative. This is a dangerous combination.

The blurb boldly states: "Lauritsen demonstrates, through biographical and textual evidence, that Shelley was at least a full collaborator in the translation." His phrase "at least a full collaborator" is tellingly cagey, perhaps indicative of a passing pang of conscience. The suggestion that Shelley made some kind of contribution towards the creation of Medwin's Aeschylan translations would be the basis of a fascinating study. It is generally accepted, for example, that in their youth Medwin and Shelley collaborated on the verse melodrama *The Wandering Jew* (completed 1810, published 1887). We also know that they lived together in Italy for some sustained periods from 1820-21.² There is therefore evidence at least of opportunity and propensity for some kind of united exploration of the original at an early and formative stage of Medwin's engagement with Aeschylus.

Lauritsen reproduces Medwin's own account of Shelley's oral translation of *Prometheus Bound*, in which he explains that

¹ Lauritsen, J. (2007). *The Man Who Wrote Frankenstein*. Dorchester, MA, Pagan Press; and Shelley, M. W., & Robinson, C. E. (1996). *The Frankenstein notebooks*. New York, Garland Pub.

² For biography see Richard Holmes (1974). *Shelley; The Pursuit*. London.

Shelley read out loud to him Aeschylus' Greek "as fluently as if written in French or Italian; and if there be any merit in my own version... it is much due to the recollection of his words, which flowed on line after line in blank verse..."³ Lauritsen is right to question the validity of this statement, which is after all a recollection in 1847 of an event that took place in 1821, which is meant to have significantly informed a text published in 1832. Medwin's biography is generally thought to be largely untrustworthy, especially when it comes to dates and specific details. Lauritsen is less correct to doubt the account's validity on the grounds that he does, i.e. a disbelief in the idea that Shelley could have made an oral translation for Medwin: "No doubt Shelley did read his translation of *Prometheus* to Medwin, but he would have done so from a written version – a manuscript which Mary had transcribed, either from dictation or from his own handwriting." This is a good example of the semi-reasonable scholarship of Lauritsen. He uses the critically considered details of the transcription of the imaginary text to smudge over what is an important leap of faith, which effectively denies the possibility of oral translation and conjures out of thin air a fair-copy manuscript of Shelley's translation of *Prometheus Bound*.

Shelley's performance of oral translation is attested elsewhere by Hogg, Trelawny, and Leigh Hunt's son, Thorton Hunt. Shelley was more familiar with *Prometheus Bound* perhaps than any other Greek text. He engaged with it creatively for months from 1818 to 1819, which immersion resulted in the production of his acclaimed sequel to Aeschylus' text, *Prometheus Unbound* (1820). There is absolutely no reason why he should not have been able to perform a lucid improvised translation on the spot in 1821. It is possible that Medwin, *allá* Lauritsen, was simply using Shelley's fame to shine a favourable light on his translations. But what if Medwin really was able to recall Shelley's performance? What if he took notes? How are we to characterize such an influence? Can we, as Lauritsen argues, really detect Shelley's influence in the text? Such questions are important, and they need to be answered cogently and openly before including Shelley in the by-line.

³ Lauritsen (2011) 16, quoting Medwin & Buxton Forman Ed. (1913). *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley* 242-3. London.

Interestingly there are in Medwin's translation certain suggestive elements of what we know to be Shelley's political interpretation of the Prometheus myth, but the antiestablishment, freedom-fighter style Prometheus was not Shelley's alone. He and Medwin were affiliated with a sub-cultural and highly literary group, often labelled the Cockney School, whose members tended to share similar social, literary and political ideas. These shared ideas of course influenced their engagement with political literature, such as *Prometheus Bound*. I imagine that what Lauritsen identifies as being unmistakably Shelleyan tends to conform to the shared aesthetic, social and political characteristics of Shelley's group, manifestations of which of course are on show in his own work.

The publicity for this book states that the translation was "done by Percy Bysshe Shelley and Thomas Medwin," in that order. This suggests that Shelley is a co-author, and indeed the primary author, which is simply untrue.

After a short extract from Shelley's Preface to *Hellas* (1822), apparently used decoratively or perhaps to artificially raise the Shelley-factor, Lauritsen launches into his argument that "Shelley himself was the primary craftsman in composition." The biographical evidence promised on the back cover amounts to no more than their living together (as outlined above), and the slightly bizarre interpretation of Medwin's account of Shelley's oral translation as evidence for the existence of a concealed manuscript. If you are not entirely satisfied with the biographical evidence alone, then perhaps the textual evidence might smooth over the cracks.

I'm afraid not. The textual evidence consists of:

1. The translation's variety and intricacy of verse form, which was apparently beyond the capabilities of Medwin, but not Shelley.
2. The presence of 'the unusual word "tottering"' in Medwin's *Oresteia* (used twice), Medwin's *Prometheus Bound* (four times) and Shelley's work (six times).
3. A line that has 'such a Shelleyan ring... that it amounts to his signature: "We, / Enslaving no one, would ourselves be free."'

Medwin's original and translated poetry, e.g. *Sketches in Hindoostan* (1821), *Ahasuerus The Wanderer* (1823), Aeschylus's *Seven Before Thebes* (1833) show an increasing skill, interest in and variety of verse form; indeed the latter seems to be from the same batch, formally and stylistically speaking, as *The Medwin-Shelley Oresteia* (as we now have it). Are we to assume that this is by Shelley too? I wonder how many hours a day he would have had to write in his final years to keep up with this workload?

The verb "totter" and its derivatives are particularly common in English classicizing poetry of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the frequency therefore in Shelley and Medwin's translation indicate nothing out of the ordinary. The scholar John Harwood, whose *Agamemnon* was printed by John Murray in 1831, used the word "tottering" to capture Aeschylus's expression of the infantile unsteadiness of old age (around lines 75-80). Medwin's use of the same word in the same place demonstrates its common currency. The word may seem unusual now because it has been out of favour for some time, but it will be familiar to those who have had occasion to read older English translations of classical texts.

The "Shelleyan ring" of Medwin's line of course does not *actually* amount to his signature. Medwin spent a good deal of time with Shelley and knew much of his poetry by heart, it is therefore likely that we should be able to identify traces of Shelley's work, ideology, and even allusion (both conscious and unconscious) to his writing in Medwin's. On its own the identification of a "Shelleyan ring" amounts only to evidence of a possible and low-level Shelleyan influence on Medwin's writing, but no more.

By not acknowledging Medwin's scholarly notes to *Agamemnon* (1832), which show a deep engagement with ideas about translation and a close scrutiny over specific areas of the original, Lauritsen does not admit some very strong evidence for Medwin being the sole translator of the *Agamemnon*, which is studiously as well as poetically made from Blomfield's 1814 edition of Aeschylus. Medwin has a strong written voice, which is telling mute in Lauritsen's edition.

Lauritsen has decided to change Medwin's Roman nomenclature for a number of the gods, including Jove, Minerva and Vulcan, for their Greek equivalents. This is very

heavy-handed editing and completely unnecessary. In order to preserve the rhyme and meter of the more stylized verse sections, he reverts to the use of Medwin's Roman gods, which means that instead of having a consistent pantheon we have one that changes between the dialogue and choral sections. He makes this senseless change in order to satisfy "Classical scholars," who apparently "frown on this practice." This may have been true a century ago. I think now we'd rather have access to unadulterated texts and reserve our fearsome frowns for things that really matter like deceiving the public.

On first glances this book may be of interest to students of Translation History and Classical Reception, but as long as it has the foreword in its current state and bears the title *The Medwin-Shelley Translation* this book should be recommended for nothing but kindling. This might seem somewhat harsh, but Medwin's translations of Aeschylus form important links in the chain of literary history, and it would be unforgivable for any academic to knowingly condone, even partially, its falsification. However much Lauritsen might want the translations to be by Shelley, and for them to be staged all over the known world using his text, they are in fact written by Thomas Medwin and there are much better modern performance scripts for the *Oresteia*, notably including those by Tony Harrison (1973) and Ted Hughes (1999).

Lauritsen's other book is a Promethean medley, bound and printed identically to the *Oresteia* volume, containing Medwin's translation of *Prometheus Bound*, Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, and in the appendix a few paragraphs on *Prometheus Unbound* written in 1887 by John Addington Symonds and a translation of Goethe's *Prometheus* by the editor himself. The foreword is substantially a reprint of the foreword to the *Oresteia*. It is equally offensive but differs in its inclusion of a couple of paragraphs from Medwin's *Life of Shelley*, which offer some insight into what Medwin made of Shelley's attitude towards translation. Lauritsen also briefly and unsatisfactorily makes the case that Shelley wrote Medwin's translation of *Prometheus Bound*. His arguments are equally feeble to those discussed above. Medwin's *Prometheus Bound* was first published in Sienna in 1827.⁴ It was then reprinted in London in 1832, and in 1837 it appeared in *Fraser's Magazine*. It is this latest version that we find in

⁴ This copy may be read in the British Library.

Lauritsen's book. It is a valuable and relatively unknown example of late Romantic classicism, and actually a very good companion piece to *Prometheus Unbound*. It is a shame that to read them together in the same volume and in a well-presented modern edition we should have to suffer such slippery work as this:

“Although I have argued that Shelley was the primary craftsman in composing this translation, I would not claim it as his work alone... [2011.13] Comparing the versification in *Prometheus Unbound* with that in the Aeschylus translation can lead to only one conclusion: all were composed by the same poet [2011.16].”

In sum, do read Thomas Medwin's translations of Aeschylus, but do not buy this book.