

Gwyneth Lewis interviewed by Elena Theodorakopoulos and Polly Stoker at University of Birmingham, (12/11/2012)

ET: We thought we'd start off by talking a bit about Classics and your education; and how you came to be so interested in the Classics.

GL: I did the wretched Nuffield Latin [Cambridge Latin Course] in school. The method was to use, I suppose, the innate grammatical knowledge you have in your brain, syntactical knowledge, à la Chomsky and you just read a lot. They never taught you grammar systematically; you didn't decline nouns, or conjugate verbs, you just read. And in fact, it did give you quite a good instinct for text but no foundations to retain at all.

But then I did Latin O-Level and I absolutely loved it because we read *Aeneid 2*, the Laocoön episode, which I adored and this to me was a huge revelation about how to create poetic effects. So I remember doing really good crit. on Virgil, it was one of the highlights of school for me. I also liked Catullus and we read some Pliny. And then we started Greek lessons in the break but it never got going. So I know Latin not Greek.

ET: That's such a common story, especially for women.

GL: Is that right? It's a class thing as well though, isn't it? It's class as well as sex. So then at Cambridge I did English. And as part of the Cambridge Tripos in the final year you did the Tragedy paper. So we read a lot of tragedy and a lot of theory of tragedy and read right through the canon to Modern, which was a tremendous education actually (I hated the paper at the time). But it finally came in handy when I was writing *Clytemnestra* because I had my bearings, I knew the plot and I knew what the issues were.

ET: So the next question really is how did this *Clytemnestra* come about?

GL: When I was at University, I studied creative writing in the States and the teachers made us read the Classics. And I remember reading Ovid then, in translation, particularly the *Tristia* because my teacher, Joseph Brodsky, was an exile himself and he had turned to the poems; and I was away from home so it meant a lot to me. And then Robert Hass the American poet made us do versions of Lucretius. So it was being shown to us that that was part of the job of a poet; to look at the whole of a tradition, not just the one that happened to be in your own language. And then obviously as they came out I would read Seamus Heaney's translations, or versions I should say, of the Greek plays and Ted Hughes's. But I always got very frustrated that these people were not scholars and they were offering new translations. Well it seemed to me that this was doing only half the job, that they had no authority, that you should go the whole hog and be braver and do a new version.

Of course it is a rite of passage for poets to do one of the classical plays and like most poets I prefer Aeschylus, perhaps, to the other playwrights. Anyway, the chance came up to do a

play. Somebody asked me would I do a new version of the *Oresteia* and I said: "Well, there's not much point doing that because Ted Hughes has done it for this generation and it's going to be a while until there'll be a need for another one". And I didn't see the point in my doing an *Oresteia* anyway because I'm not a Greek scholar. But Fiona Shaw, the actress, said to me: "By the way, did you know that of the House of Atreus Clytemnestra is the only one who's not avenged?" I thought this was a very interesting idea. So that developed into a two-play commission and then because of various theatrical politics we ended up doing the one play which was staged in April 2012. So I was very familiar with the plays behind the play but also very concerned with doing something contemporary and not even contemporary really: futuristic. Because we're dealing with myth, it seemed to me there's no reason to place the myth in the past it can be any time.

ET: Yes, there are quite a few women I think writing science-fiction, futurist versions.

GL: It seems logical to me and you know, there are plenty of disaster scenarios. We're not that far away from the type of catastrophe the Greeks were facing with war and scarcity and so on and so forth; I think we're going to see more of those things, not fewer.

PS: Were there any translations in particular that you used to put together your *Clytemnestra*?

GL: I looked at my old college ones, Grene and Lattimore. The language is pretty stodgy. I also read what was available of Anne Carson's translations which made it much more vivid and contemporary.

PS: Did you stick with 'The *Oresteia*' or like Anne Carson's *An Oresteia*, did you bring in Euripides, Sophocles...?

GL: I must have done by absorption because I read a lot. I read around the House of Atreus story: we've got Euripides' *Helen*, we've got *Iphigenia in Aulis*, *Iphigenia in Tauris*; all those plays, I read them again. But I was lucky enough to see a production of Ann Carson's *Oresteia* in New York. It was a marathon on a Saturday afternoon in a public theatre and my husband, who's not a literary person, said: "Oh, what are you doing to me?", and I promised him he could leave if it was too awful. In fact he was so excited after seeing this production that he couldn't sleep at night. It was marvellous; it was the most compelling theatre, I think, and totally unexpectedly alive. So I think her versions are stunning and they really work. I could understand why so many thousands of people, Greek citizens, went to see those plays; they were very, very entertaining and mind-stretching in terms of looking at them as debates for wider society: this is why the plays are so interesting intellectually and socially.

PS: Speaking of audience, I read that you said that you wanted your *Clytemnestra* to be stripped down in such a way that your grandchildren could understand the plot.

GL: I wanted it to be a debate, really, about: when is it allowable to make your personal grievance more important than social wellbeing? This was a very difficult thing to do but part of the difficulty was honing down what I wanted it to be about. There are so many issues that you could take from the play. One would be, for example, the sexism of blaming Clytemnestra when she had a perfectly legitimate complaint. But I take it that tragedy works only when you present two insoluble points of view and they're both right and they're both wrong. So part of the process of the commission was to think about the political world, that these people were inhabiting. So I translated the Trojan War into a food war to try and get a sense of what would matter to people. People are worried about food security these days. And then the second stage of the commission was getting the characters' internal worlds sorted out. Then of course there's the issue of Iphigenia; what role she would take in the play. I decided not to show the sacrifice of Iphigenia and not really to come out for or against Agamemnon, but to leave the question up in the air.

PS: I find that quite surprising because what I got from the play, I thought that you presented the sacrifice of Iphigenia as even more horrifying than the description in *Iphigenia in Aulis*. When you say, "they fucked her to death", that is horrible! And I think there has been a wave in the reception of Clytemnestra that has really pulled on the Iphigenia story and used that to, not so much rehabilitate her but, make sure that you see the story through the lens of Iphigenia. And usually receptions like that would be classed as feminist. Do you see your Clytemnestra as feminist because of the angle that you put on Iphigenia?

GL: Well I read the feminist criticism of it; I read Irigaray, I read everything I could get my hands on, basically, and there is a strong temptation to just let Clytemnestra off the hook, but I didn't want to. In fact, my first intention was to do a feminist retelling and to rehabilitate Clytemnestra but then as I read on and on I realised that I couldn't, because I didn't actually think she was right to do what she did. I parted company with crusading feminism at that point, where I could see where her faults were. I wanted to make her a person who had given into something that Agamemnon had been accused of, which was to act in a self-serving way too quickly. I read Martha Nussbaum's book on tragedy and the thing that was most helpful to me, that gave me a handle on it, was that Agamemnon may not have been wrong to do what he did, given the dilemma he had about the welfare of his army so on so forth. But the speed with which he made the decision, there was something suspect about it and that it had been self-serving. And that nuance gave me a way into Clytemnestra. So that's how I worked it out. But it was very difficult, these are very rich psychological seams to work.

PS: And how did Cassandra fit into this? Because I know that Cassandra becomes Iphigenia, becomes Cassandra again. I'm really interested in her character because I know that you said that you didn't want her in the play.

GL: I didn't want her in it at all. I didn't want Electra in it. I was frightened of both Electra and Cassandra. But in fact Cassandra was my gift from God because she solved everything,

once I saw that you couldn't have the play without her. She's the one who speaks to the audience because she sees through time; and every character I had a problem with, in terms of plot, she solved. I was very careful to make all the action... to follow Aristotle's definition of tragedy not being character but the action of character: it's the action that matters and that is why drama is so hard. You can always put somebody spouting on the stage but you have to make something happen and she turned out to be the action.

PS: So perhaps like the convention of the *deus ex machina*, which often works to untangle all the knots, because you didn't have that, do you think that Cassandra worked in that way?

GL: No, I don't think she did. Because I did try at one point, in one of the plays (I must have written about three different plays to get this one and then ten drafts of that one) to have a *deus ex machina*, which is another interesting thought. But no, she's not, because she gets caught up in the action really and I think that's essential about her: that she can see but she can't save herself. I mean she's really the common man, in a sense: she can see that she's going to die but she can't do anything about it, like us all.

ET: Your Electra I found very interesting. Is she the one who's right, in a way?

GL: I wanted to show Electra, very much not Sophocles' *Electra* because you know how she is in Sophocles: she just goes on and on and on; she's infuriating, but she is right. And I wanted to show how Electra moved from being a very inexperienced person, not assertive, to having to step up and look after Clytemnestra before then turning against her mother. I wanted to chart a part of the story that hadn't been told and this gave me the logic for which bit of the House of Atreus story to focus on. Because where do you start – with the stew, the House of Thyestes? So I just wanted to show that patch where Electra was not Electra yet, Aegisthus was not Aegisthus and Clytemnestra was not Clytemnestra yet; so it's their pre-lives really, before-Aeschylus.

PS: And obviously we want to talk about the Furies...

ET: We wondered whether they were prefigured in *Hospital Odyssey* in the greyhound? We both independently thought they were.

GL: But he's benign?

ET: He's benign but...

GL: His breath? His breath, of course. Well, I hadn't even thought of that. I think that must be right. I think because I'm bilingual I'm hyper-aware of the role of language in pushing you around and forces that push you further than you want to go. So my Furies were really that linguistic force or that part of the brain, that reptile brain that is only interested in the primitive or only connects up with the primitive parts of the self. The temptation was to let the Furies go and then for a while I couldn't see why the Furies

couldn't win. Because in the same way as Clytemnestra is disposed of in the Classical canon, the Furies are bought off in the *Eumenides* and I found that unsatisfactory because they're such energetic, compelling characters. But of course you can't. When you think about what it would be like to live in a society ruled by the Furies: it's horrendous, a kind of vendetta morality: it's tribal, it's earlier, it's not a democratic model for society. But also, in a way, the Furies are not defeated in this play because they move on. They just lose interest in Clytemnestra once she's done the deed.

PS: Do you think there's a sense of hope that Aegisthus, unlike in Aeschylus, he resists?

GL: I think there is. There has to be an element of choice in this. If I was going to argue that Clytemnestra had chosen the kind of self-dramatisation that isn't good morally then I had to show that there was a choice. That you *could* leave it and that they wouldn't tear you to pieces. So it's a Christianised version, if you like, it's an issue of free will.

ET: We should move on to maybe talk about *Hospital Odyssey* or, because you've mentioned bilingualism, we were just wondering if you wanted to say anything more about your sense of identity. To what extent is your identity as a poet bound up with being bilingual?

GL: It's central because in a way, I think, the brain works by translating to itself, all the time. I think this is true of everybody: whether you're monoglot, bilingual, trilingual, whatever. But I think I'm more aware of it, perhaps. I mean how did it feed into the play? On a literal level I did think at some point that I might have the Furies speaking Welsh but then I thought through the implications of what that would say and it didn't sit right. So their rhythms had to come from something else which was pre-linguistic. In fact, I see the Furies as pre-linguistic - they're just falling into language all the time, that's why there's a lot of singing and moving which is before they speak. And then they have very strange language, quite eccentric and rhythmical. I really enjoyed writing the Furies. I enjoyed the Chorus as well, but for different reasons. I think the Furies are probably the result of knowing that one language is not the end of the story, it's the beginning. I want to cancel that thought, to say that actually by the time you've uttered one word, a lot has happened before that, no matter which language you speak. So the cascades into different languages don't bother me at all. That seems to me also essential to the way that poetry works itself.

ET: There are people who say, or maintain, that somehow there's something feminine about translation in that it's often seen as being a helpful, handmaiden sort of job. Women are often the ones who do the literal translations...

PS: But then at the same time deceptive, unfaithful...

GL: I think it depends how you play it, it really does. It's not the way I see translation at all. In fact I think there's a masculine way of translation which is what I'm objecting to, perhaps; in the way that to do a translation from a language you don't know, of an existing

text, seems to me somehow incomplete. I'm wanting to improve it. My version is of a part of the story that doesn't have a text so, I mean, that's as good a definition of poetry as you can get, actually.

ET: Shall we move on and have a little bit of time on *Hospital Odyssey* which is a major achievement: a big narrative poem, in a proper epic tradition. You take, very self-consciously, the voice of the epic poet, you appeal to the likes of Virgil and Milton and Dante and there is something Dantean about the journey.

GL: I mentioned that I was very keen on Virgil in school. You know, it's a great thing: when you're a young writer you struggle with these texts, you really struggle with them and then you reach a certain age and you think: "I know what this is about" and that happened to me with Virgil. And I reread the *Aeneid* in Robert Fitzgerald's translation. It's the most delightfully entertaining, camp work, certainly not as I'd remembered it from school. And it seemed to me to have such a *joie de vivre*. And I got taken by the form: I've always like the epic form because you can think in it, you can have a real old argument with yourself. As in *Hospital Odyssey*, what is health, is it quite what we think? It was a great adventure.

ET: And the fact that the traveller in the poem is a woman but at the same time she's travelling to get back to her husband who, at the end, I think very tellingly says he was lost at sea and she was coming to find him. But it's nothing like as neat as an inversion of the *Odyssey*?

GL: No, it's like an active Penelope. Penelope has always infuriated me. Originally (because my husband and I were sailing on this boat before he got ill), if we'd continued by sea, I was going to do a modern version of the *Odyssey* with container ships in it. But that wasn't possible, so I transmuted the idea into the hospital as a place that had an underworlds. It was just such a playful experience; what happens is that you find that you have to get the narrative right, it has a certain speed, which frees you up in terms of imagination to do rather wild things. In fact I was going to fast at one point that I had rhymes (it's all rhymed, albeit half rhymes as well) coming faster than I could think logically. So I'd get rhymes for the next stanza before I'd finished the previous one and I would know I'd be able to fill the line logically and that was a really marvellous experience.

ET: So your Penelope figure, I think one can sense your frustration with her with the way you've half turned her into Arachne.

GL: Well yes, she's also a Penelope, she's a miserable Penelope, a malign Penelope and Maris is the active Penelope. Yes, I think I've been the casualty of trying a couple of Penelope poems in the past but I've always preferred Circe: doesn't everybody?

ET: And then Helen turns up...

GL: Helen yes, she interests me very much. I mean, she's in the *Odyssey* and I tried to get her into the other play but I wasn't able to pursue that. Of course she's Clytemnestra's half-sister or twin-sister? And I think Helen gets such a bad press, such a limited definition of what she was. She gets portrayed as a babe, but she's something much greater than that. That's why I was trying to convey her as a sense of health, of wellbeing, really overbrimming. You know moments when you suddenly realise that actually being alive isn't a drag, it's the most fantastic thing ever and those moments are rare. I think they're 'Helen of Troy moments'. And that's why people will do anything for her, anything.

ET: So she's a really life-affirming presence then at the end when Maris is reunited with her husband and she has Helen's ring.

GL: It's a huge blessing so if anything I'm rehabilitating Helen from the siren, the unprincipled goddess, I think she can be seen as something much more interesting.

PS: Now that's interesting, because that brings you in line, I suppose, in company with people like Anne Carson who in *Autobiography of Red* looks at Stesichoros' *Apologia* to Helen and then Carol Ann Duffy with 'Beautiful' who also aligns Helen with Marilyn Monroe...

GL: I'd want to go further than that. I thought I'd do a Marilyn Monroe thing and I thought no, it's got to be for everybody. The Greeks were talking about real impulses in our psychic lives, and not about just archetypal figures; so for me the job is to try to understand which part of the psyche the figure of Helen is describing. It's a perfectly good analogy, the Marilyn Monroe one, but it's not one that satisfies me.

ET: But you go much further I think, because your Maris is a Penelope and your Penelope ends up wearing Helen's ring and invoking Helen as a benign presence. What I find fascinating about that is in a sense, Homer's Penelope almost does that, right at the end of the *Odyssey* when she says to Odysseus: I might have done the same as Helen did had I been caught up by that impulse. And that's something that readers of Homer often ignore, the fact that Penelope and Helen are not a million miles away from one another.

GL: And I did notice that in my reading, I remember that point. Mine was an attempt to actually put that in some kind of larger context.

ET: We have five minutes – can we just have a very quick word about the Sappho poem in the *Sparrow Tree*? I think it's quite fantastic starting with half a line of Sappho which goes something along the lines of: 'as long as you want' ...how did that come to be?

GL: I was reading *If Not Winter*, Anne Carson's translation of Sappho, and got struck by that particular phrase and it allowed me to start thinking about my muse, the 'M' word, which is always dangerous to talk about. But I started thinking about the impulse that drives the poet. The most basic is to reach towards the reader. I was trying to describe that

impulse in three different ways and I think I'm still struggling with that one. I had a much longer series that I cut right down. I tried to convey how absolute that impulse is, you know, how implacable it is, fortunately for me.

ET: *Hospital Odyssey* feels very Ovidian in places, the focus on the bodily and transformation and mutation in a way that reminded us of Jo Shapcott's *Of Mutability*, so we just wondered whether that was something conscious?

GL: Well it has been said that a lot of women writers use the body as a field for transformation; that may be true. But I think it actually goes back further to metaphor because it's a question of your stock frame: you've got two frames, you've got the two parts of the metaphor, the two comparatives which are going to come together as one. You have to get from one to the other and that's the transformation bit. So that can be done on an image level, it can be done in a kind of parable (I have explored that in earlier poems about parables) or you can do it in a surrealist way, that's partly what Ovid did, he's a surrealist poet. So I think it's more fundamental than just being a gender-based strategy, it's so well used in both. I mean certainly the body was on my mind, it took five years of reading before writing that book and I read a lot about the body. But it's also not being afraid to see things mixing into each other, bleeding into each other, I find that fascinating.

ET: I find it very strong in *Hospital Odyssey* because you have the journey impulse, which is so Virgilian or Dantean, but then it's almost like the transformative impulse is threatening to derail it sometimes.

GL: Yes, because if you spend too long transforming you stop. You pit one against the other, the journey against the transformation. But then a journey is always a transformation in and of itself, in a linear way. But you're right, it journeys along, through episodes: you can't afford to stay too long.

ET: And in a sense, Ovid as a reader of Virgil is always trying to linger on the episode and not get on. The Sibyl says to Aeneas in the Underworld: "all this looking at people and talking to people is all good and well but you've got to get on". And there are moments in your *Hospital Odyssey* where Maris is torn between finding out about the people she's meeting and getting on with it.

GL: Yes, those two impulses, the quarrel in the self. I agree with that.