Chapter 5

Aeschylus in the Balance: Weighing Corpses and the Problem of Translation

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5.1 Introduction

In the famous *agôn* between Aeschylus and Euripides in Aristophanes’ *Frogs*, Aeschylus proposes that Dionysus weigh out his verses against those of Euripides (*Ra*. 1365–1367). Comparing the contest to weighing cheese (1369), the god agrees, and a large balance [*stathmos* 1365, 1381] appears onstage. On the first go, Euripides speaks the opening “winged words” from his *Medea* – “Would that the Argo had never winged over the sea.” However, Aeschylus’ pan sinks lower with a line from his (lost) *Philoctetes* about the river Sperchios, prompting Dionysus to liken the poet to a merchant who soaks his wool to make it heavier and thus able to weigh down the scales. On the second attempt, Euripides’ line – “Persuasion has no other shrines but language” – proves no match for Aeschylus’ “Alone of the gods death loves no gifts” from his (lost) *Niobe*. As Dionysus explains, Aeschylus’ pan dips lower [*repei*, 1393] because death is much heavier than the ethereal language of persuasion. In the final trial, Euripides makes a mighty effort to “talk tough” with his verse of tragic poetry – “he seized an iron-clamped mace in his right hand” – but Aeschylus’ massive “chariot on chariot, corpse on corpse” (from his lost *Glaukos of Potniae*) easily wins (*Ra*. 1365–1410).¹

Aristophanes’ comic invention draws on the everyday practice of weighing cheese and wool, but the scales that his Aeschylus asks for also suggest the weighing of human fates found in Homeric epic.² Fulfilling his promise to Thetis to make the Greeks suffer in battle, Zeus weighs out the fates of the Trojans and Greeks, and the death-day of the latter proves heavier (*Iliad* 8.69-74). In an almost exact reversal near the end of the poem, Zeus weighs out the fates of Achilles and Hector, and the Trojan’s pan dips lower (*Iliad* 22.209-213).

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¹ Aristophanes sets up the contest earlier in the play, when the household slave of Pluto (frequently referred to as Aiakos, but see K.J. Dover, (ed.), *Aristophanes, Frogs* (Oxford, 1973: 50–53)) tells Xanthias, “Amazing things will come into play here. / Yes indeed – the art of poetry will be weighed out in scales!” (*kai gar talantôi mousikê stathmêsetai*, *Ar. Ra*. 796–797).

These epic passages set the pattern for later occurrences in Greek literature, where “the sinking down of the heavier pan in the scale means death.” In Aristophanes’ *Frogs*, however, the heavier pan indicates the opposite, not defeat and death but victory for Aeschylus and his ultimate release from Hades back to the world of the living. In their chapter, Hanink and Uhlig have more to say about the Aeschylus’ “afterlife” in old comedy.

Aristophanes also may be referring to Aeschylus’ lost *Psychostasia* (*Weighing of the Souls*) mentioned by Plutarch (*Moralia* 16f-17a). In Homeric fashion, Aeschylus’ title refers to Zeus’ weighing the fates of Achilles and Memnon (like Achilles, a short-lived son of a goddess), who meet in battle at Troy. Although no identifiable fragments of the play survive, several Attic vases depict scenes of the weighing out of these combatants’ souls, perhaps reflecting Aeschylus’ original staging of *Psychostasia*.4 We have better evidence for a relevant weighing scene in Aeschylus’ lost *Phrygians*, or *The Ransom of Hector*. There, Achilles weighed Hector’s corpse in the scales, balanced by the gold ransom brought by Priam. This scene takes up the Homeric passage (*Il. 22.346-54*) in which Achilles vows he will not return the body for burial even if Priam were to offer Hector’s literal weight in gold.5 Whatever its inspiration, Aristophanes’ use of on-stage scales – to weigh out spoken verses and to decide the fate of humans already in the underworld – provides a multi-layered comic version of an (epic-influenced) Aeschylean tragic theme.

The scene in *Frogs* encourages us to consider references to the balance in Aeschylus’ extant plays, especially where the scales are linked to death and corpses. In the process, I will confront some intractable issues facing a translator or adapter. How does one convey the idea of a *balance* in a digital world,

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