

NOCTES ATTICAE

34 Articles on Graeco-Roman Antiquity
and its Nachleben

Studies Presented to Jørgen Mejer
on his Sixtieth Birthday March 18, 2002

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THE BROWNING VERSION'S AND CLASSICAL GREEK

"TAPLOW. It's for you, Sir."*

Thomas G. Palaima

On November 29, 1946 British playwright Terence Rattigan, age thirty-five, finished writing a one-act play of eighty manuscript pages. He had completed the play in a mere 'seven writing days'.¹ It represented a radical departure for Rattigan, and indeed for contemporary British theater. Rattigan's new play for the London stage, *The Browning Version*, adhered to classical strictures about unity of time, place, and action and employed what one critic calls a "classically severe sequence of scenes".² Like a Greek tragedy, Rattigan's play concentrates on the fate of its protagonist, Andrew Crocker-Harris. It reveals his personal tragedy by bringing a classically small number of other characters, six to be exact, on and off a single stage set, the sitting room of the Crocker-Harris's flat at a Public School in the South of England, between approximately 6:30 and 7:45 PM on a single evening in late July. *The Browning Version* is a masterful rendering of personal, professional and emotional failure, "a study of a man in the final days of his life at a public school. His past is revealed to the audience by a series of well-timed entrances and exits of the student [named Taplow], the [wife's] lover [science master Frank Hunter], the headmaster, the Clytemnaestra-like wife [Millie], and the new master [Mr. Gilbert and his wife]".³ We should say that the present of Andrew Crocker-Harris is revealed in the same way, and his full future as a human being—he is only forty years old and for reasons of ill health is retiring, without pension, to a far less prestigious position at a "crammer's"—is, in the original playscript, intentionally left uncertain.

The play is classical in other ways, and deeply personal. The title refers to Robert Browning's verse translation of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*. Passages from the *Agamemnon* appear at critical junctures in the meticu-

lously constructed plot of the play and provide ironic resonance. Elements of characterization and theme in *The Browning Version* are derived from the Aeschylean masterpiece, as indicated by the adjective "Clytemnaestra-like" used above aptly to describe Millie Crocker-Harris, Andrew's younger wife, "the only true villain Terence Rattigan ever allowed himself to create. He called her 'an unmitigated bitch'".⁴

The personal element is also classically informed. Andrew Crocker-Harris is a classics master teaching students in the lower fifth form. Andrew, his unnamed public school, and several incidents in the play are based on Rattigan's own experiences at Harrow, which he attended on scholarship from 1925 to 1930. He later said that reading the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus in translation at Harrow fixed his resolve to become a playwright.⁵ Rattigan modelled Crocker-Harris upon one of the classics masters at Harrow, J.W. Coke Norris. Like the protagonist in *The Browning Version*, Coke Norris had completed an Oxford first with prize distinction. He taught the lower fifth in a humorless and emotionless manner that drained even the *Agamemnon* of its dramatic power. As Organization Master between 1924 and 1926, he was responsible for the school's timetables. He evinced little personal feeling even when presented with a thoughtful schoolboy gift. And he took an early retirement shortly after Rattigan graduated.⁶ Rattigan himself was never taught by Coke Norris, nor did he ever give him a present. "Instead he used his experience with another master at the school, on whom he had developed a homosexual crush, as the inspiration for Taplow's gift to the Crock".⁷

The Browning Version also reflects developments in Rattigan's private life and his career as a playwright. As he moved toward his professional ἀκμή, he was keen to write a 'serious' play; and a one-act piece with classical unities suited his strong points. "[H]e believed that there was a particular quality in the one-act piece that was hard to achieve with plays as conventionally presented in the theatre [with their interruptions for intermissions]. With the one-act play, this broken attention did not happen. One of [his] supreme abilities was the creation of long developing scenes of the type that playwrights of our own day seemed to find so hard to write".⁸ Rattigan was also a stern self-critic, "measuring himself against the highest standards and not merely technical facility".⁹ He had periodic bouts of sincere doubt as to whether he was fulfilling his intellectual potential by writing plays.

Rattigan was preoccupied with the idea of unfulfilled promise. His preoccupation extended back beyond his observation of Coke Norris at Harrow to his family's experience of the consequences of his own father

Frank Rattigan's forced retirement from the Foreign Office on a small pension. The 'retirement' in 1922 was prompted by his indiscreet womanizing, eventually culminating in an affair with Princess Elisabeth of Romania. When Elisabeth became Queen of Greece, "the British Foreign Office decided that enough was enough. Frank Rattigan was politely, but firmly, asked to resign... If he agreed he would be given a small pension. Reluctantly, he agreed".¹⁰ This brought about a radical change of lifestyle from the glamour, comfort and borrowed privilege of Acting High Commissioner in Constantinople to the necessary economies and social insignificance of an early retiree's top-floor flat up four flights of stairs in London.¹¹ This father's son was always aware of his potential for not fulfilling his promise as a playwright, and the bitter consequences such a failure would have. Rattigan was affected also by the disillusionment of his friend, supporter and sometimes lover Henry 'Chips' Channon, an American-born MP who at age fifty had "accepted gracefully the frustration of his political and creative ambitions" and reached an amicable divorce with the wife whose wealth had purchased the social connections to which he now devoted his energies.¹²

The Browning Version is then a classical and modern play written from Terence Rattigan's heart and memory. It was so important to him that, according to its producer Stephen Mitchell, "there was not a line altered in the play from beginning to end. It was the only play I've ever known in which there was no alteration of any kind whatsoever".¹³ Small wonder. Its perfections are clear. Its pacing, tone, characterization and plot movement, and its single major and minor climaxes are all virtually beyond improvement. "Beautifully but unobtrusively shaped, it deals with emotional repression, falsity, failure and love, in a densely packed yet completely satisfying hour and a quarter".¹⁴ "The play is a masterpiece of dramatic magic".¹⁵ For once, positive critical assessments are not exaggerated.

For example, the climax is a psychological and spiritual murder worthy of the *Agamemnon*. Millie kills the vital signs in Andrew's momentarily revived soul¹⁶ with hatefully timed words that horrify and alienate her adulterous lover, science master Frank Hunter, and even drive Frank to take the first steps toward a real friendship with Andrew. Imagine Aegisthus turned off by the magnitude of Clytemnaestra's manly crime, and buddying up to the ghost of Agamemnon. Millie's words match the brutal power of Clytemnaestra's exultant narration in *Ag.* 1372-1398 of how she ensnared and struck Agamemnon with knife blow, knife blow and knife blow.

The Browning Version closes with a minor climax, as Andrew asserts to the headmaster, who has called him on the telephone, his right to

speak after his junior colleague, the popular cricket-playing marvel Fletcher, at the year-end prize-giving ceremony. He then resumes the normal repressed patterns of his domestic life, inviting Millie to the dinner table: "Come along, my dear. We mustn't let our dinner get cold".¹⁷ This leaves their relationship as suspended for the audience as is the situation after Clytemnaestra's parallel gesture to Aegisthus at the end of the *Agamemnon*:

μη προτιμήσης ματαίων τῶνδ' ὑλαγμάτων <ἐγώ>
καὶ οὐ θήσομεν κρατοῦντε τῶνδε δωμάτων <καλῶς>
Ag. 1673-1674

The audiences know where things are heading in both plays. Orestes has to return and exact vengeance for his father's murder. Crocker-Harris is departing for "second-class life at a crammer's and Millie is resolved to leave him". But the audiences do not know exactly how these characters will all get where they are going.

The controlled perfections of the playscript for *The Browning Version*, first produced at the Phoenix theater in London on September 8, 1948, become clearer when we contrast its use of classical elements, and particularly of classical Greek, with two later versions of the play: (1) Anthony Asquith's 90-minute 1951 film version, for which Rattigan won the Cannes Film Festival award for best screenplay and Michael Redgrave the Cannes award for best actor; and (2) Mike Figgis's 1994 97-minute film adaptation starring Albert Finney as Crocker-Harris with a screenplay written by Ronald Harwood.

As George Orwell and Edward Gibbon both knew, less is usually more in creative writing. The two later *Browning Version*'s prove that the converse is also true: more is often much, much less. Expanded in 1951 from 75 to 90 minutes and then in 1994 to 97 minutes, *The Browning Version* is weighed down in both film treatments with *Goodbye Mr. Chips*-ism and in the 1994 film with all sorts of modern cultural baggage, as it addresses such issues as the neglect of children by wealthy parents and the tension between multi-culturalism and the sound old values of the classical tradition. The 1994 film eviscerates the very element that created dramatic tension and the one gasp of outright horror in the 1948 play. In Figgis's film, "the unmitigated bitch", who, as played by Jean Kent in Rattigan's 1951 screenplay, still held her own as a vindictive and malevolent figure, has transmogrified into Greta Scacchi, now renamed Laura. She delivers her venomous climactic lines with suitable clipped and repressed hatred. But

she is covered by modern no-fault human-relationship insurance. Finney as Crocker-Harris tells Matthew Modine as Hunter, "Never, never presume to know the secrets of a marriage". And "Don't take sides. It's so very unbecoming". Andrew and Laura even have an intimate scene together dressing for dinner with the headmaster. In this bedroom scene, in a surprisingly non-politically-correct survival of chauvinism, younger wife must wait for older and wiser husband to provide marital relationship exegesis from the moral highground. Andrew decides, "We inhabit different worlds. I'm saying, 'No'. I'm saying, 'Enough'". Imagine Clytemnaestra, Agamemnon, Aegisthus and Cassandra at group couples counseling, reading the latest self-help books on open and healthy relationships, and helping each other realize their true selves. 1994 Andrew and 1994 Laura, *née* Millie, may have better chances at human happiness, but they give us poorer tragedy.

The script for the 1994 film derives from the 1951 screenplay. In both films, the story is opened out and varied. The perfect unity of time and place of the 1948 play is destroyed, and therewith Crocker-Harris's "mental agoraphobia".¹⁸ The 1951 film opens and closes with outdoor shots of the exclusive public school. As it begins, students race across the manicured green while the bells announce morning chapel. After the obligatory *Mr. Chips* chapel scene, the headmaster guides Crocker-Harris's replacement Mr. Gilbert toward the Crock's class. In the 1994 film a car brings Gilbert sweeping in along the country roads to the impressive school buildings. Both have corresponding closing scenes. At the end of the 1951 film, the boys mill freely outside after the prize ceremony, and Taplow speaks for the last time with Crocker-Harris, who shows his renewed humanity by revealing to Taplow by clever indirection that he has indeed gotten his remove. At the end of the 1994 film, Laura is driven away. Both films take us inside Crocker-Harris's classroom for more *Mr. Chips* feel. Both films also have cricket-match scenes to which the dialogue between the headmaster and Crocker-Harris about the delicate matter of his pension is transferred. In both films we get to see Fletcher's prowess at cricket. The 1994 version even has Laura make her soul-killing comment to Andrew at lunch inside the tents at the cricket match. It is witnessed by all the primary characters and many extras. There are some good moments in both films, particularly involving classical Greek, but neither has the distilled, economical and claustrophobic tragic power of the 1948 play.

The 1948 play opens¹⁹ with Taplow in the Crocker-Harris flat waiting for a last tutorial hour with his master and amusing himself with imaginary golf swings. He is observed and then interrupted by Frank Hunter, the science master and Mrs. Crocker-Harris's adulterous lover. Hunter comments

on Taplow's golfing technique. Taplow is keen to get his remove from the classics lower fifth and begin his studies of science with Hunter. Hunter is too casual and familiar with the boy and even admits to caring not in the least about the science that he has to teach. Taplow explains that science is better than the muck he has to study with Crocker-Harris. But upon questioning, he admits that the *Agamemnon* is not muck. "It's rather a good plot, really; a wife murdering her husband and having a lover and all that. I only meant the way it's taught to us—just a lot of Greek words strung together and fifty lines if you get them wrong".²⁰ Hunter admits that he admires the Crock's ability to impose classroom discipline. Taplow defends his master against implicit charges of sadism, explaining that the Crock is rather "all shrivelled up inside like a nut and he seems to hate people to like him". The scene ends when Millie enters, overhearing Taplow mimicking the Crock's classroom reprimand of Taplow for being the only one to laugh at a dry Latin joke he did not really understand. Taplow explains he acted out of "ordinary common politeness, and feeling a bit sorry for him having made a dud joke".²¹ Frank and Millie send Taplow off on an errand, and their scene alone together reveals their adulterous relationship and Millie's deep contempt for her husband for having never fulfilled his original promise and ambitions. She cuts this short because "it's too depressing".²² The dialogue makes clear that Millie is more desperate for Frank's affections than he is for hers.

Andrew Crocker-Harris arrives and talks politely with Hunter about the school timetable which he has drafted for the last fifteen years (starting about the time when he first gave up trying to communicate his passion for his subject or to advance his career or his intellectual interests). When Taplow returns, they begin their lesson with *Agamemnon* lines 1399-1400. Taplow labors at the translation and the Crock makes small interventions that Rattigan describes in his staging notes: "His interruptions are automatic. His thoughts are evidently far distant".²³ They would be, given what the Aeschylean lines would suggest to him.

Taplow provokes the Crock's attention by translating the end of the chorus's distich: "Utter such a boastful speech—over— (*in a sudden rush of inspiration*) the bloody corpse of the husband you have slain".

ANDREW (*after a pause*). Taplow—I presume you are using a different text from mine.

TAPLOW. No, sir.

ANDREW. That is strange, for the line as I have it reads: "ἦτις τοιούδ' ἐπ'

ἀνδρὶ κομπάζεις λόγον." However diligently I search I can discover no "bloody"—no "corpse"—no "you have slain." Simply "husband."

TAPLOW. Yes, sir. That's right.

ANDREW. Then why do you invent words that simply are not there?

TAPLOW. I thought they sounded better, sir. More exciting. After all she did kill her husband, sir. (*With relish.*) She's just been revealed with his dead body and Cassandra's weltering in gore.

ANDREW. I am delighted at this evidence, Taplow, of your interest in the rather more lurid aspects of dramaturgy, but I feel I must remind you that you are supposed to be construing Greek, not collaborating with Aeschylus. (*He leans back.*)

TAPLOW (*greatly daring*). Yes, but still, sir, translator's license, sir—I didn't see anything wrong—and after all it is a play and not just a bit of Greek construe.

ANDREW (*momentarily at a loss*). I seem to detect a note of end of term in your remarks. I am not denying *The Agamemnon* is a play. It is perhaps the greatest play ever written. (*He leans forward.*)

TAPLOW (*quickly*). I wonder how many people in the form think that? (*He pauses; instantly frightened of what he has said.*) Sorry, sir. Shall I go on?

(*There is another pause. ANDREW raises his head slowly from his book.*)

ANDREW (*murmuring gently, not looking at TAPLOW*). When I was a very young man, only two years older than you are now, Taplow, I wrote for my own pleasure, a translation of *The Agamemnon*—a very free translation—I remember—in rhyming couplets.

TAPLOW. The whole *Agamemnon*—in verse? That must have been hard work, sir.

ANDREW. It was hard work; but I derived great joy from it. The play had so excited and moved me that I wished to communicate, however imperfectly, some of the emotion to others. When I had finished it, I remember, I thought it very beautiful—almost more beautiful than the original. (*He leans back.*)

TAPLOW. Was it ever published, sir?

ANDREW. No. Yesterday I looked for the manuscript while I was packing my papers. I was unable to find it. I fear it is lost—like so many other things. Lost for good.

TAPLOW. Hard luck, sir.²⁴

Crocker-Harris and Taplow then briefly resume the normal course of translation, before being interrupted by the arrival of Frobisher, the headmaster. Taplow is dismissed, reluctantly by Crocker-Harris, who apologizes for not having given him his full instructional due. This gives the headmaster occasion to remark on the arrival of the new classics master, and about Crocker-Harris that: "It's sometimes rather hard to remember that you are the most brilliant classical scholar we have ever had at the school". Rattigan has the headmaster "urbanelly" correct this gaffe as follows:

FROBISHER. Hard to remember, I mean—because of your other activities—your brilliant work on the school time-table, for instance, and also your heroic battle for so long and against such odds with the soul-destroying lower fifth.

ANDREW. I have not found that my soul has been destroyed by the lower fifth, Headmaster.

FROBISHER. I was joking, of course.

Frobisher then inquires about Millie's whereabouts. When he finds out that she is not in, he gladly takes the occasion to speak to Andrew, without his more forceful wife being present, about the governing board's decision not to grant him a pension. He then asks that Andrew cede his place to Fletcher at tomorrow's prize-giving ceremony. Andrew agrees. Millie returns. The headmaster departs. Millie cross-examines her husband about what the headmaster had to say about the pension. Discovering it has been denied, she speaks out angrily against the board and headmaster, and contemptuously of her husband for saying nothing, not even a Latin joke.

ANDREW. There wasn't much I could say, in Latin or any other language.

MILLIE. Oh, wasn't there? I'd have said it all right. I wouldn't have sat there twiddling my thumbs and taking it all from that old phoney of a headmaster. But, then, of course, I'm not a man.

(ANDREW is turning pages of "The Agamemnon", not looking at her.)

What do you expect to do? Live on my money, I suppose.

The *Agamemnon* and the two key choral lines from it serve to define and reveal the ironic undercurrents of the 1948 play. Millie Crocker-Harris is a modern Clytemnaestra, alienated from the husband she once admired

and briefly loved, and carrying on an affair with one of her husband's colleagues whom she tries to subvert to do her will. Like Clytemnaestra, she has the forcefulness a man should have and she is feared by the headmaster, just as the chorus in the *Agamemnon* fears Clytemnaestra (and as another weak power figure in Greek tragedy, Creon, fears Medea). As Millie speaks with Clytemnaestra-like masculine authority, Andrew turns the pages of the *Agamemnon*. The play symbolizes their relationship and also acts as a talisman of all he once was and has now lost.

Lines 1399-1400 are translated with graphic violence by the young Taplow. The irony here is that he cannot grasp that Mrs. Crocker-Harris has effectively murdered her husband, albeit with his complicity. By having Taplow's translation force his master to remember his early passion for the *Agamemnon*, Rattigan also makes clear the strength of the Crock's original talents. Who would dare before the age of twenty to translate Aeschylus's masterwork and think the resulting translation superior to the original? It also underscores the tragedy in the headmaster's remark that the Crock's genius and soul have not been in evidence for a long, long time.

The *Agamemnon* returns later in the play in the form of the actual Browning version, and it is critical to the tragic climax of the play. Taplow, guided by his now increased sympathy for his master, buys him a second-hand copy of Robert Browning's verse rendition of Aeschylus's tragedy. He presents it to the Crock as a gift with an inscription, an appropriate Greek line from the play that he remembered from class. The audience does not know at first what inscription Taplow has written. Andrew is deeply moved by Taplow's kindness and the appreciation it implies. In fact it puts him on the verge of an emotional breakdown.

(ANDREW continues to stare at TAPLOW's inscription on the fly-leaf.)

TAPLOW. (*Suspiciously.*) What's the matter, sir? Have I got the accent wrong on εὐμενῶς [*sic*]?

ANDREW. No. The perispomenon is perfectly correct. (*His hands are shaking. He lowers the book and turns away above the chair R. of the desk.*)

In a bizarre twist, the official actors' edition of the play has an accentual printing error on the very word that Crocker-Harris assures Taplow he has accented correctly. An acute accent is printed instead of a smooth breathing.²⁵ Taplow is still viewing the Crock somewhat as "the Himmler of the lower fifth", a totalitarian master of construe, and fears that his

kind gesture will be found wanting purely on grammatical grounds. But it is the French's Acting Edition that does not measure up to the Crock's Himmelerian standards.

Rattigan holds the dramatic tension. Only the greatest Aeschylean scholars in the audience might know at this point from the single Greek word εὐμενῶς what Taplow has inscribed. It is Ag. 951-952: τὸν κρατοῦντα μαλθακῶς/θεὸς πρόσωθεν εὐμενῶς προσδέρεται or, as Andrew later translates the passage for Frank Hunter, "God from afar looks graciously upon a gentle master". In Aeschylus, Agamemnon speaks these words right before he yields to Clytemnaestra's persistent and treacherous persuasions and enters the palace by stepping on royal purple draperies, the act of *hybris* that seals his doom. In *The Browning Version*, these lines will also seal doom. Millie will use them to murder her husband's spirit.

As Andrew is showing the present to Frank and explaining the nature of the inscription, Millie enters and sees how much the gift has meant to her husband, how it has brought his soul to life for the first time in a long time. She acidly comments that Taplow is an "artful little beast" and that he bought the gift as a bribe for fear that Millie would tell Andrew about Taplow's earlier mimicking of Andrew's mannerisms, and that Andrew would then "ditch his remove or something". The book in Millie's spiteful and somewhat jealous words is merely "a few bobs' worth of appeasement". On opening night, according to one critic, during Millie's lines "the gasp of horror was audible".²⁶

Andrew thinks he has been the victim of a schoolboy deceit and—worse yet for this emotionally agoraphobic man—that his emotionalism over the gift will be part of the story with which Taplow regales his schoolmates. Frank tries to explain the complex truth to Andrew, but fails. This revelation of Millie's cruelty is something Frank insists he will not forget "if [he] live[s] to be a hundred", and he breaks off with Millie. He then tries to persuade Andrew to leave Millie, claiming, "She's out to kill you". Andrew in turn analyzes the tragedy of their marriage. "I know that in both of us, the love that we should have borne each other has turned to bitter hatred. That's all the problem is. Not an unusual one, I venture to think—nor nearly as tragic as you seem to imagine. Merely the problem of an unsatisfied wife and a henpecked husband. You'll find it all over the world. It is usually, I believe, a subject for farce". Rattigan has transformed it into a subject for flawless, unsentimental minor-key tragedy.

Both films destroy the tragic impact of the ending by having Andrew deliver an emotional *Mr. Chips* speech at the year-end prize-giving ceremony where he publicly admits to having "failed to give you what you

had the right to demand of me as your teacher: sympathy, encouragement and humanity". In the 1951 film, he says, "I have deserved the nickname of Himmeler.²⁷ I have degraded the noblest calling a man can follow, the care and moulding of the young". His melodramatic confession brings loud and unexpected huzzahs from the students, but still no indication of a pension from the board. In the 1994 version, the now sympathetic Laura even waits at the chapel entrance listening to the Crock deliver his confessional speech before she drives off.

In the 1951 film, even Rattigan cannot refrain from cinematic overkill. The Crock's completed youthful translation of the *Agamemnon* is not poignantly "lost for good", like his genius, passion and soul, but it is now unfinished and found by the Crock in cleaning out his classroom. This is done so that Taplow can find it later in the Crocker-Harris flat, sneak off with it, read it, and then at the movie's close advise the Crock on its merits: "I think it's rather good. Better than old Browning. It's like a play, a real play, a modern play. It is really worth finishing". Thus Rattigan transforms his tragedy into melodrama. The 'uplifting tone' he introduces will be raised to deafening decibel levels in the 1994 film which promotes itself as "the memorable story of a student who inspires his brilliant yet beleaguered and unappreciated teacher...[T]he proud academic is adrift until one student's profound act of kindness gives him inspiration and courage to build his life anew".

In most critical opinions, including my own, the later film treatments ruin a masterpiece, by introducing sentimentality, hope, and, in 1994, talk-show tolerance for the ways in which human beings make each other profoundly unhappy. If the films are not viewed in comparison with the original play, they are entertaining, moderately uplifting, mildly thought-provoking, and allow us to go away having experienced lesser feelings of pity and almost no fear at all. This reflects a kind of progress in the western human condition, if it is progress to replace tragic pathos with the simply pathetic and to promote the lie that human beings can always make themselves less miserable.

The film versions do three other things with classical Greek that deserve attention. In the 1951 version, the blackboard behind the Crock as he lectures to the class has written upon it in Greek Ag. 414-419:

πόθῳ δ' ὑπερποντίας
φάσμα δόξει δόμων ἀνάσσειν
εὐμόρφων δὲ κολοσσῶν
ἔχεται χάρις ἀνδρὶ

ὀμμάτων δ' ἐν ἀχηνίαις
ἔρρει πᾶσ' Ἀφροδίτα

These lines appear visibly in the background from a few camera angles. The lighting puts the ends of all but the last line into shadows. The effect is brilliant for those who know Greek and notice this Greek. Late in the 1951 film, Andrew is sitting at his desk in front of the blackboard speaking privately with Gilbert about why he has failed in teaching the boys: "Perhaps it was my illness. No, I don't think it was that. Something deeper than that. Not a sickness of the body, but a sickness of the soul". As Michael Redgrave speaks these words, the film-viewer who knows classical Greek sees behind Redgrave the cause of Crocker-Harris's sickness. Just as Menelaus in the Aeschylean choral passage longs for his missing wife, hates false representations, and confronts the fact that "all charm of love is gone", so Andrew Crocker-Harris's soul has been sickened by the failure of his marriage and the unrequited *pathos* and smoldering hatred it has inspired in his wife. It is particularly gripping to see in the background the Greek words φᾶσμα, ἔχθεται, and ἔρρει πᾶσ' Ἀφροδίτα, the equivalent of psychiatric notes, as Redgrave brings to life the deep pathos in Andrew's self-diagnosis. Such touches reveal Rattigan's genius for subtle "dramatic magic" and the care he took for small effects in translating his play to film. The thoughtful pains taken to produce this effect would be appreciated, consciously, by very few even of the classically educated audience in 1951. Nonetheless Rattigan and Asquith took them, and one definition of genius is the capacity for taking infinite pains with things most human beings would consider not worth the trouble.

We may contrast this with the 1994 film, which fills the upper half of the blackboard in the Crock's classroom with the opening Greek lines of the *Odyssey*, and the lower half with diagrammatic assignment instructions: "Translate first passage", "Construe", "Classroom Exercise", "Trachiniae", "Sophocles", "Peloponnesian". One could make a case for an ironic relevance of the *Odyssey* passage, but I think it is there mainly as prop filler. Certainly there is no use of the blackboard in any camera angles comparable to those in the 1951 film.

The 1994 film, however, had some serious input from a classical scholar. The opening post-chapel scene in which Gilbert visits Crocker-Harris's classroom has been rewritten to reveal the intensity of Crocker-Harris's repressed emotions and the hidden sickness in his marriage. It also reveals his long-forgotten gifts for communicating the beauty of Greek texts to fifth-form schoolboys, and the dismissive and cynical sarcasm that he now

uses on the boys. By revealing these inner aspects of Crocker-Harris's soul early on, the 1994 film has drastically altered the plot and purpose of the original. But it gives Albert Finney a scene for a *tour de force* of acting.

Finney announces to the boys that since this is their last class, they will have an:

end of term treat. We will read a passage from the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus. *Agamemnon* is perhaps the greatest play ever written. The scene I have selected starts with Clytemnaestra standing over the bodies of Agamemnon, her husband, and the prophetess Cassandra, both of whom she's murdered.

Very well, Lawton, begin. [One of the boys, named Lawton, starts to read at Ag. 1377, haltingly and with no dramatic feeling. Finney interrupts him at line 1379 to correct the pronunciation of ἔσθηκα and then says, addressing the boy,] Forgive me for interrupting, but I have the impression that you understand nothing of what you are reading. Clytemnaestra has just committed murder. She is describing her foul deed. She is unrepentant. Hmmm? Do you not think she would show some emotion? I realize, Lawton, that you may not have met a wife who has destroyed her husband, nor perhaps had Aeschylus. Nevertheless he knew, alas, that such wives do exist. He used his imagination, Lawton. Imagination, a word I think not in your vocabulary.

For example, ἔσθηκα δ' ἐνθ' ἔπαισ' ἐπ' ἐξειργασμένοις: I stand upon mine act, yea, where I struck. Do you not think insane those words? She might reveal a flash of cruelty and of pride. Hmmm? Defiant creature. And then hear. οὕτω δ' ἔπραξα, καὶ τὰδ' οὐκ ἀρνήσομαι/ὥς μήτε φεύγειν μήτ' ἀμύνεσθαι μόνον. And I confess it. I did use such craft he could not fly nor fend him against it. ἀπειρον ἀμφίβληστρον, ὥσπερ ἰχθύων,/περιστιχίζω. I caught him in a net as men catch fish. πλοῦτον εἵματος κακόν: no room, no rat hole in his loopless robe.

παίω δέ νιν δίς, παίω δέ νιν δίς. I struck him twice. And once and twice he groaned. He doubled up his limbs. καὶ πεπτωκότι/τρίτην ἐπενδίδωμι/Διὸς νεκρῶν σωτήρος εὐκταίαν χάριν. And with that stroke committed him to Zeus that keeps the dead.

[Then with supreme emotional intensity and exhilaration at the power of the Greek, Finney as Crocker-Harris speaks lines Ag. 1388-1390 in char-

acter as an actor would, transported by their force and relevance to his own marital circumstances, and quite forgetting he is teaching a class of schoolboys. The camera captures the stunned and amazed faces of the schoolboys, including Taplow, at this transformation in the Crock.]

οὐτω τὸν αὐτοῦ θυμὸν ὀρμαίνει πεσῶν
 κάκφυσιῶν ὄξειαν αἵματος σφαγῆν
 βάλλει μ' ἔρεμνῆ ψακάδι φοινίας δρόσου

[With the Greek reaching Clytemnaestra's stunning simile of her joy at Agamemnon's blood spurting upon her like drops of murderous dew, the bell rings marking the end of class. Its sound wakes Finney's Crocker-Harris from his dramatic reverie. He realizes where he is and what he has just revealed, composes himself, and in his usual *persona*, he says to the boys,]

"Very well, you may leave".

Classicists would do well to show this scene on videocassette or DVD to first-year Greek students to help them understand why they are learning Greek. It conveys the riveting realism of much of ancient Greek literature and how seriously and honestly the Greek authors dealt with the experience of being human. This one scene argues for the value of the classics better than any modern discussions I have read by classicists, pundits and educators, including myself. And it shows the value of studying even second-rate works based on original masterpieces. The fourth and so far last Browning version justifies its existence, and transcends its own pop-entertainment melodrama, with a distinguished actor's reading and translation of twelve lines of Aeschylus.

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NOTES

* For Jørgen Mejer, classicist, humanist, translator, and dear friend. Thank you for playing such an elegant and meaningful role in our lives. Greek references are to the Denys Page OCT edition of Aeschylus. Reference abbreviations are as given in the bibliography.

1. GW, 166.
2. SR, 68.
3. SR, 68.
4. GW, 175.
5. MDGH, 156.
6. GW, 171-172; BAY, 74-75; MDGH, 156; SR, 62.
7. GW, 172.
8. BAY, 71-72.
9. MDGH, 152
10. GW, 23.
11. On Rattigan's father's human failings and truncated career, see GW, 9-23.
12. MDGH, 152-153.
13. GW, 175.
14. MDGH, 155.
15. BAY, 75.
16. Andrew's own self-analysis (BV, 51) of his initial response to Taplow's gift shows how murderous Millie's words were: "My hysteria over that book just now was no more than a sort of reflex action of the spirit. The muscular twitchings of a corpse. It can never happen again".

17. BV, 54.
18. BAY, 81.
19. For a brief critical analysis of the chief elements of the plot of the 1948 play, see SR, 62-66.
20. BV, 5.
21. BV, 6-7.
22. BV, 12.
23. BV, 19.
24. BV, 19-20.
25. BV, 39: *i.e.*, εὐμενῶς instead of εὐμενῶς
26. GW, 178.
27. In the 1994 film, the Crock is known as "the Hitler of the lower fifth". The screenwriter here makes concessions to the historical ignorance of the modern viewing audience, but this wildly alters the reference. The Crock is not a powerful and charismatic public figure who inspires his own particular *Volk* to put abominable doctrinal evil into action, but he can be compared to a less public Nazi figure like Himmler who obsesses over timetables and other planning aspects of the Final Solution and strikes terror into those 'in his care'.