Commentary

Thomas G. Palaima  REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

The words matter even when they are in Greek

In Eugene O’Neill’s 1937 play “The Iceman Cometh,” a “misbegotten lot” of broken men and female “tarts” drink cheap whiskey in Harry Hope’s New York bar in 1912. They console themselves with pipe dreams while awaiting the arrival of Hickey, a traveling salesman who normally helps them sustain the illusions that make their pitiful lives tolerable. On the two days in O’Neill’s play, however, Hickey comes in with a convert’s zeal for truth-telling that he eventually applies tragically to himself. He admits that the ice man in the proverbial joke did not make love to his wife. Hickey killed her in her sleep because he could not stand her pity for him. Fortunately, there are other ice men to sustain our pipe dreams.

My own pipe dream concerns the past and the future. It is a simple one. At some time in the past, life was simpler and better and kinder, and it perhaps can be so again. Some of you may feel the same way. What are we thinking about? The little Greek used here is made into gibberish because no editor at the New Directions Press, which published Wilfred Owen, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and Austin’s own Lars Gustafsson, took the time to have a Greek student check the text for 10 minutes.

Was there a golden age when this kind of thing mattered? Or as one of my Verbophile friends remarked, are these kinds of rarefied spelling mistakes irrelevant nowadays to the small number of educated readers who read such works as these, most of whom cannot read Greek any way?

After all, words in early texts of Shakespeare were spelled any which way. Admittedly, this all can be seen as trivial pedantry on my part. As you know from reading my columns, I am preoccupied much of the time with war and politics and poverty and the state of our nation and the world, so even I perhaps should think of it as pedantic. But I don’t. Why?

It also can be seen as symbolic of the carelessness that has now crept into our lives, the deterioration of standards in which the marginalized group is taken to be inferior or less than us, and the statement of the credo that we are no better than our ancient Greek forebears.

But think about the big issue. The ice man will come next column.

Palaima is Dickson centennial professor of Classics at the University of Texas at Austin.

The phrase is the Greek in Aeschylus’ “God from afar looks graciously upon a gentle master.” When Crocker-Harris looks at the dedication, he is choked up by this act of kindness. Taplow, however, is worried that his stern master has detected a mistake in his writing of the Greek. He asks whether a particular word is accented correctly. Crocker Harris assures him it is right. Ironically, it is the one word in the entire official French’s Acting Edition text that the author mis-accented.

The first kind gesture that Taplow has ever seen of Hickey is the one of his students, most of whom either fear or ridicule him. It is Robert Browning’s translation of Aeschylus’ “Agamemnon.” The student named Taplow has inscribed it with a heart-warming phrase that indicates that he alone among his peers has sensed the humanity beneath his teacher’s stern surface.