

CONFRONTING
THE CLASSICS

Traditions, Adventures and Innovations

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PROFILE BOOKS

This paperback edition published in 2014

First published in Great Britain in 2013 by
PROFILE BOOKS LTD
3A Exmouth House
Pine Street
London EC1R 0JH
www.profilebooks.com

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78125 049 5
eISBN 978 1 84765 888 3



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P R E F A C E

This book is a guided tour of the classical world, from the prehistoric palace at Knossos in Crete to that fictional village in Gaul, where Astérix and his friends are still holding out against the Romans. In between we encounter some of the most famous, or infamous, characters in ancient history: Sappho, Alexander the Great, Hannibal, Julius Caesar, Cleopatra, Caligula, Nero, Boudicca and Tacitus (and that's just a selection). But we also get a glimpse of the lives of the vast majority of ordinary people in Greece and Rome – the slaves, the squaddies in the army, the millions of people across the Roman empire living under military occupation (not to mention my own particular favourite, from Chapter 19, Eurysaces the Roman baker). What made these people laugh? Did they clean their teeth? Where did they go if they needed help or advice – if their marriage was in trouble, or if they were broke? I hope that *Confronting the Classics* will introduce, or re-introduce, readers to some of the most compelling chapters of ancient history, and some of its most memorable characters from many walks of life; and I hope it will answer some of those intriguing questions.

But my aim is more ambitious than that. *Confronting the Classics* means what it says. This book is also about how we can *engage* with or *challenge* the classical tradition, and why even in the twenty-first century there is so much in Classics still to *argue* about; in short, it's about why the subject is still 'work in progress' not 'done and dusted' (or, in the words of my sub-title, why it's an 'adventure' and an 'innovation' as well as a 'tradition'). I hope that this comes across loud and clear in the sections that follow. There should be some surprises in store, as well as a taste of fierce controversies old and new. Classicists

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are still struggling to work out what exactly the horribly difficult Greek of Thucydides means (we're doing better, but we're not there yet), and we are still disagreeing about how important Cleopatra really was in the history of Rome, or whether the Emperor Caligula can be written off as simply bonkers. At the same time, modern eyes always find ways to open up new questions and sometimes to find new answers. My hope is that *Confronting the Classics* will bring to life, for a much wider audience, some of our current debates – from what the Persian sources might add to our understanding of Alexander the Great to how on earth the Romans managed to acquire enough slaves to satisfy their demand.

Debate is the key word. As I shall stress again in the Introduction, studying Classics is to enter a conversation – not only with the literature and material remains of antiquity itself, but also with those over the centuries before us who have tried to make sense of the Greeks and Romans, who have quoted them or recreated them. It is partly for this reason – because they're in the conversation too – that the scholars and archaeologists of earlier generations, the travellers, artists and antiquarians, get a fair share of attention in this book. And that's why the indomitable Astérix gets a look in as well, because – let's be honest – very many of us first learned how to think about the conflicts of Roman imperialism through his band of plucky Gauls.

It is fitting that all the chapters of this book are adapted and updated from reviews and essays that have appeared over the last couple of decades in the *London Review of Books*, the *New York Review of Books* or the *Times Literary Supplement*. I shall have more to say about the craft of reviewing in the Afterword. For now let me simply insist that reviews have long been one of the most important places where classical debates take place. I hope that those that follow give a flavour of why Classics is a subject still worth talking about with all the seriousness – not to mention the *fun* and good humour – that we can muster.

But *Confronting the Classics* kicks off with a version of the Robert B. Silvers lecture I was more than a little honoured to give at the New York Public Library in November 2011. The title 'Do Classics have a Future?' hits the nail on the head. It is, if you like, my manifesto.

Introduction

DO CLASSICS HAVE A FUTURE?

The year 2011 was an unusually good one for the late Terence Rattigan: Frank Langella starred on Broadway in his play *Man and Boy* (a topical tale of the collapse of a financier), its first production in New York since the 1960s; and a movie of *The Deep Blue Sea*, featuring Rachel Weisz as the wife of a judge who goes off with a pilot, premiered at the end of November in the UK and opened in the US in December. It was the centenary of Rattigan's birth (he died in 1977), and it brought the kind of re-evaluation that centenaries often do. For years – in the eyes of critics, although not of London West End audiences – his elegant stories of the repressed anguish of the privileged classes were no match for the working-class realism of John Osborne and the other angry young dramatists. But we have been learning to look again.

I have been looking again at another Rattigan play, *The Browning Version*, first performed in 1948. It is the story of Andrew Crocker-Harris, a forty-something schoolteacher at an English public school – an old-fashioned disciplinarian who is being forced into early retirement because of a serious heart condition. The Crock's other misfortune (and 'the Crock' is what the children call him) is that he is married to a truly venomous woman called Millie, who divides her time between an on-off affair with the science teacher and devising various bits of domestic sadism to destroy her husband.

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But the title of the play takes us back to the classical world. The Crock, as you will already have guessed, teaches Classics (what else could he teach with a name like Crocker-Harris?), and the 'Browning Version' of the title refers to the famous 1877 translation by Robert Browning of Aeschylus' play *Agamemnon*. Written in the 450s BC, the Greek original told of the tragic return from the Trojan War of King Agamemnon, who was murdered on his arrival home by his wife Clytemnestra and by the lover she had taken while Agamemnon had been away.

This classic is, in a sense, the real star of Rattigan's play. It is given to the Crock as a retirement present by John Taplow, a pupil who has been taking extra Greek lessons, and who has gradually come to feel some affection for the crabby old schoolmaster. The giving of the gift is the key moment, almost the moment of redemption, in the plot. It is the first time that Crocker-Harris's mask slips: when he opens the 'Browning Version', he cries. Why does he cry? First, because it forces him to face how he himself is being destroyed, as Agamemnon was, within an adulterous marriage (this is not exactly a feminist play). But he cries also because of what young Taplow has written on the title page. It's a line from the play, carefully inscribed in Greek, which the Crock translates as 'God from afar looks graciously upon a gentle master.' He interprets this as a comment on his own career: he has made sure not to be a *gentle* schoolmaster, and God has *not* looked graciously upon him.

Rattigan is doing more here than exploring the tortured psyches of the British upper-middle class (and it's not just another 'school story', that quirky fixation of some British writers). Well-trained in the Classics himself, he is also raising central questions about Classics, the classical tradition, and our modern engagement with it. How far can the ancient world help us to understand our own? What limits should we place on our re-interpretation and re-appropriation of it? When Aeschylus wrote 'God from afar looks graciously upon a gentle master', he certainly did not have a schoolmaster in mind, but a military conqueror; in fact, the phrase – and this too, I guess, was part of Rattigan's point – was one of the last spoken by Agamemnon to Clytemnestra before she took him inside to kill him.

To put it another way, how do we make the ancient world make sense to us? How do we translate it? Young Taplow does not actually rate Browning's translation very highly, and indeed – to our tastes – it

is written in awful nineteenth-century poetry-speak ('Who conquers mildly, God, from afar, benignantly regardeth,' as Browning puts the key line, is hardly going to send most of us rushing to the rest of the play). But when, in his lessons, Taplow himself gets excited by Aeschylus' Greek and comes out with a wonderfully spirited but slightly inaccurate version of one of the murderous bits, the Crock reprimands him – 'you are supposed to be *construing Greek*' – that is, translating the language literally, word for word – 'not *collaborating with Aeschylus*.'

Most of us now, I suspect, are on the side of the collaborators, with their conviction that the classical tradition is something to be engaged with, and sparred against, not merely replicated and mouthed. In this context, I can't resist reminding you of the flagrantly modern versions of Homer's *Iliad* by the English poet Christopher Logue, who died in December 2011 – *Kings*, *War Music*, and others – 'the best *translation* of Homer since [Alexander] Pope's,' as Garry Wills once called them. This was, I think, both a heartfelt and a slightly ironic comment. For the joke is that Logue, our leading collaborator with Homer, knew not a word of Greek.

Many of the questions raised by Rattigan underlie the points I have to make here. I am not trying to convince anyone that classical literature, culture, or art is worth taking seriously; I suspect that would, in most cases, be preaching to the converted. I want instead to suggest that the cultural language of Classics and classical literature continues to be an essential and ineradicable dialect of 'Western culture', embedded in the drama of Rattigan, as much as in the poetry of Ted Hughes or the novels of Margaret Atwood or Donna Tartt – *The Secret History* could not, after all, have been written about a department of Geography. But I also want to examine a bit more closely our fixation on the decline of classical learning. And here too Rattigan's *The Browning Version*, or its sequels, offers an intriguing perspective.

The play has always been popular with impoverished theatre and TV companies, partly for the simple reason that Rattigan set the whole thing in Crocker-Harris's sitting room, which makes it extremely cheap to stage. But there have also been two movie versions of *The Browning Version*, which did venture outside Crocker-Harris's apartment to exploit the cinematic potential of the English public school, from its quaint wood-panelled classrooms to its rolling green cricket pitches. Rattigan himself wrote the screenplay for the first one, starring

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Michael Redgrave, in 1951. He used the longer format of the film to expand on the philosophy of education, pitting the teaching of science (as represented by Millie's lover) against the teaching of Classics (as represented by the Crock). And he gave the Crock's successor as the Classics teacher, Mr Gilbert, a bigger part – making it clear that he was going to move away from the hard-line Latin and Greek grammar grind, to what we would now call a more 'pupil-centred' approach.

In 1994 another movie version was made, this time starring Albert Finney. It had been modernised: Millie was renamed Laura, and her science-master lover was now a decidedly preppy American. There was still some sense of the old story: Finney held his class spellbound when he read them some lines of Aeschylus and he cried at the gift of the 'Browning Version' even more movingly than Redgrave had. But in a striking twist, a new narrative of decline was introduced. In this version, the Crock's successor is in fact going to stop teaching Classics entirely. 'My remit,' he says in the film, 'is to organise a new languages department: modern languages, German, French, Spanish. It is after all a multicultural society.' The Crock is now to be seen as the very last of his species.

But if this movie predicts the death of classical learning, it inadvertently appears to confirm it too. In one scene, the Crock is apparently going through with his class a passage of Aeschylus in Greek, which the pupils are finding very hard to read. Any sharp-eyed classicist will easily spot why they might have been having trouble: for each boy has on his desk only a copy of the Penguin translation of Aeschylus (with its instantly recognisable front cover); they haven't got a Greek text at all. Presumably some bloke in the props department had been sent off to find twenty copies of the *Agamemnon* and knew no better than to bring it in English.

That spectre of the end of classical learning is one that is probably familiar to most readers. With some trepidation, I want to try to get a new angle on the question, to go beyond the usual gloomy clichés, and (with the help in part of Terence Rattigan) to take a fresh look at what we think we mean by 'Classics'. But let us first remember what recent discussion of the current state of Classics, never mind their future, tends to stress.

The basic message is a gloomy one. Literally hundreds of books, articles, reviews, and op-ed pieces have appeared over the last ten years or so, with titles like 'The Classics in Crisis', 'Can the Classics