The Browning Version

Rattigan's Play

Terrence Rattigan wrote *The Browning Version* in 1946 when he was 35 years old and had already achieved phenomenal success as a playwright. The son of a diplomat, Rattigan was educated at Harrow and Oxford and had a play produced in the West End while he was still a student at Oxford. At 25 he wrote *French Without Tears*, which had a run of 1000 performances. He had a new play produced almost every year, and in 1944 he became the first playwright since Somerset Maughm to have three plays running simultaneously in the West End.

Rattigan's first plays were comedies and despite his success (or perhaps as he was sometimes inclined to believe because of it) drama critics did not treat him as a "serious" playwright. His celebrity image as the dapper man-about-town did not help in this regard, but critical opinion began to change with the production of *The Winslow Boy* in 1946. Based on an historical court case about a school boy accused of petty theft, Rattigan chose not to present it as a courtroom drama but rather as a domestic drama focusing on the tensions and conflicts within the family of the accused.

For his next play Rattigan chose an even more uncharacteristic and ambitious project, a one-act play modeled on a Greek tragedy but set in the living room of a teacher at a school resembling Harrow. The result was the play by which Rattigan reportedly wished to be judged and remembered, even though he went on to write a dozen more including *Separate Tables* and *The Deep Blue Sea*.

Rattigan is traditionally viewed as one of the last masters of the "well made play." The term, which ironically came to have pejorative connotations, derives from the theories of the French playwright Eugene Scribe. Between 1815 and 1861 Scribe with the help of a staff cranked out over 450 plays. In the process he analyzed the way in which events on stage held the interest of an audience and developed what he considered to be the laws governing the theatrical experience. From this he deduced his principles for the construction of a satisfying play. Needless to say his analysis was reflective of the society in which he lived and of the way in which theater was evolving as a popular form of entertainment.

Given the financial success Scribe enjoyed, it is clear that his principles worked for the audiences of his time. Scribe was the first playwright with enough clout to demand royalties from the performance of his plays, and he founded the Society of Authors, which led to the current generally accepted relationship between playwrights and the commercial exploitation of their work. His principles evolved along with the theater and were the subject of heated debate for over a century, but they are still very much in evidence in the teaching and practice of screenwriting. The term denouement comes from Scribe as does the concept of "the obligatory scene."

Why a set of principles for the construction of a play should be controversial can be sensed from the way in which Scribe summarized his own per-

spective. In an address delivered when he was admitted to the Académie Française, Scribe said:

> You go to the theatre not for instruction or correction, but for relaxation and amusement. Now, what amuses you most is not truth but fiction. To represent what is before your very eyes every day is not the way to please you; but what does not come to you in your usual life, the extraordinary, the romantic, that is what charms you. That is what one is eager to offer you…[1]

Scribe's concerns with principles of formal construction are often associated with what some regard as manipulative entertainment, theatrical presentations whose only goal is excitement of some sort and which "pander" to an audience's sentimental sensibilities. Opposed to this type of "theatricality" is an "art of drama," which has as its goal something "higher" or "deeper" than titillation.

This competition between art and entertainment seems to be a perennial one, fueled in part by limitations in the resources available for the production of one or the other. The debate associated with it became particularly heated in Victorian England, however, when the call for dramatic art was based on a philosophical analysis of what was wrong with the prevailing culture and of how the popular theater was a means for reinforcing the status quo. By this time the idea of the "well made play" had evolved in England to connote a type of naturalistic, character-driven drama revolving mostly around romantic relationships. Social critics saw that the mechanics of the plot construction for popular theater relied on the restrictive, middle class mores that they sought to overthrow. They called for a theater that challenged social conventions rather than exploiting them for emotional effect.

Ibsen's plays, which were being translated in to English, were heralded as an example of dramatic art committed to social change rather than theatrical effect. George Bernard Shaw, first as a critic and then as a playwright, became the principal champion in England of the theater as forum for ideas and instrument for social change. Few critics bothered initially to analyze the formal aspects of Ibsen's plays, which are of course tightly constructed examples of character-based drama whose themes carry pronounced overtones of social criticism. The battle lines between art and entertainment were drawn with a concept of the importance of Ideas in drama. Rattigan saw his own work in the context of this debate.

> I believe that the best plays are about people and not about things. I am in fact a heretic from the now widely held faith that a play which concerns itself with, say, the artificial insemination of human beings or the National Health Service is of necessity worthier of critical esteem than a play about, say, a mother's

1 Turney.

> relations with her son or about a husband's jealousy of his wife.
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> I further believe that the intellectual avant-garde of the English theatre – or rather, let's be both brave and accurate, and say of the English-speaking theatre, since in my view, the Americans are the worst offenders – are, in their insistence on the superiority of the play of ideas over the play of character and situation, not only misguided but old-fashioned.

This is the opening of a long letter from Rattigan published by *The New Statesman And Nation* on March 4, 1950. It was followed by ten letters published over the next two months from playwrights and critics including James Birdie, Peter Ustinov, Sean O'Casey and Christopher Fry. The fracas culminated with a missive from none other than George Bernard Shaw and finally Rattigan was allowed a last word in the May 13 issue. It was of course largely a tempest in a teapot allowing each contestant to joust with whatever straw man best suited his temperament. Embedded within it are genuine differences at least in style if not in artistic intent, and Rattigan's final summary is worth quoting for what it reveals about his public persona as well as his motivation as a writer:

> Sir, – I have no doubt that your readers are as relieved as I am at your decision to close this controversy – if by that term we can dignify the weekly belabouring of a cheeky fourth former by some of the biggest and brainiest boys in the school.
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> Nevertheless, despite the severity of his punishment, the cheeky fourth former must confess himself quite unrepentant and still cheeky enough to ask why, if what he said was, as so many of the illustrious contributors to this series have either stated or implied, so nonsensical as hardly to merit a reply, it should in fact have merited not merely one, but six. Isn't there something just a little suspect in this formidable unanimity of august indignation? Nonsense – even flagrantly irreverent nonsense – is surely better ignored, or curtly and contemptuously dismissed. So thunderous a response as I seem to have provoked inevitably leads me, and perhaps your readers, to believe that my heresy must have made some sense, and perhaps even dangerous sense. And that is a flattering thought.
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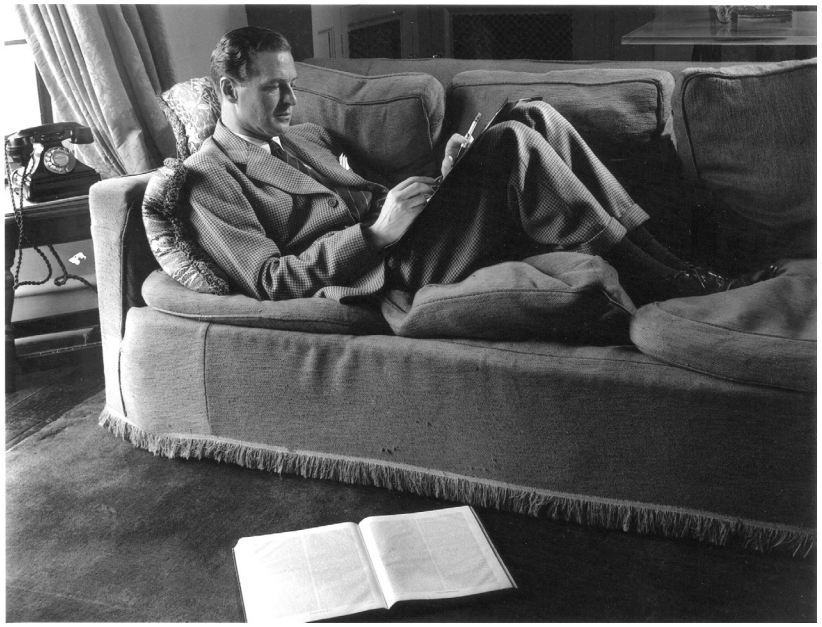
> Still, the battle, unequal though it was, is over. All I would do now, in valediction, is to remind your readers of the remark that originally caused all the fuss. "I believe," I said, "that the best plays are about people and not about things." By that admittedly prodigious over-simplification I did not mean that no good plays contained ideas, nor that all plays of character are necessarily good plays, nor any of the other idiocies which some of my antagonists have ascribed to me. What is more, I was perfectly aware of the impossibility of entirely disjoining people and things – a point so obvious that I confess I was surprised to find it

so often made – and of the danger of attaching labels to creative work.

Nor was I willfully ignoring the vital question of the writer's powers of expression – (or lack of them) – or the strength of his literary imagination (or lack of it). All I meant by my statement was that, in my view, the successful creation of living characters upon the stage (by whatever medium of dramatic expression, realistic, poetic, expressionistic, impressionistic, surrealist, apron-stage, circular stage, revolving stage, revolving audience or just flatly box stage and reactionarily naturalistic) has always been, is now, and will remain a higher achievement for the dramatist than the successful assertion of an idea or series of ideas (however much those ideas might contribute towards a solution of the human predicament, however they might befit a series of articles in *The New Statesman And Nation*, or a preface to the published plays.) I was, in fact, naively stating my personal preference for such a play as *Macbeth* over such a play as *The Master Builder*; or – to demonstrate the unprejudiced nature of my loyalties – for *Hedda Gabler* over *Measure for Measure*, or, even, and this I state solely in order to refute Bridie's assertion that I haven't read any of Shaw's plays and Shaw's presumption that I don't like those I have read, for *Candida* over *The Millionairess*.

But I verge again on the cheeky, and I mustn't risk another caning. Someone, I suppose, is almost bound not to burst into your columns with the confident assertion that Rattigan believes there are no ideas in *Macbeth*, and no characters in *The Master Builder*. Let me save him his time and trouble by saying I don't believe anything of the kind. It is all surely a question of emphasis, or rather, for the process of creation is far less conscious than most critics seem to suppose, of the focus of the dramatist's original inspiration. Which came first – the chicken or the egg – the people or the idea? I think it's hypocrisy to say that one can't possibly judge. Arrogantly, let me state my firm belief that I can judge and, didactically, let me reiterate my continued preference for plays in which the ideas have sprung from the characters over plays in which the characters have been created as mouthpieces for the ideas.

Well, sir, I cannot, in conclusion say with perfect truth, that I have altogether enjoyed my weekly whackings, but I can at least assure you that my behind – if Sean O'Casey will forgive the middleclass euphemism for his uncompromisingly proletarian monosyllable – my behind, if red, is so no more from the harsh treatment it has received than from blushful pride at the high distinction of the canes that have belaboured it. While not only my behind but the whole of my anatomy is still positively quivering with the shock and delight of having been considered worthy of the high honour of a birching from the head boy himself, who with characteristic and Olympian generosity, dealt far more leniently with the cheeky fourth



Rattigan "at work." He may have been working with a photographer on his public image here, but he apparently did outline and write his plays in this way.

former than with the school prefects who had been bullying him.

And so, encouraged thus in my cheek, I shall wish my opponents well of their theatre that is – to quote one of them – "one third arena, one third temple, on third music hall." Personally, I shall just stick to the theatre.

Rattigan's eagerness to promote his views about drama seems to have stemmed not only from his love for a certain type of theater but also possibly from the hurt of being dismissed by critics as a "commercial" or lightweight playwright. He always chafed at the notion commercial success was incompatible with seriousness or that comedy was less significant than tragedy. He addressed this issue with his own urbane style in a preface to the first volume of his collected plays published in 1953:

> It will save a good deal of falsely modest circumlocution if I state at once that the five plays in this volume have all had very long runs. Two of them, *French Without Tears* and *While the Sun Shines*, both played for over a thousand performances, and I have it on the authority of the late Mr. John Parker, the omniscient editor of *Who's Who in the Theatre*, that, on those grounds, I can lay claim to a sort of world's record, in that I am apparently the only playwright, until now, who has written two plays so blessed with longevity. *Flare Path* ran for eighteen months, *The Winslow Boy* for fifteen, and *Love in Idleness*, after a season in London limited first to three months and then extended to six, survived nearly two years on Broadway.
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> I have a highly superstitious nature and in reciting these, to me, agreeable figures, it is not, let me assure the reader, hubris that has led me so to invite the all-too-possible Nemesis of five quick successive future flops. In fact, I have composed that complacent-seeming opening paragraph with my fingers firmly crossed. But facts are facts and it would be highly dishonest of me, just because I am now enjoying the honour at last of a collected edition, and indeed of writing a real preface to it just like a real dramatist, to attempt either to deny or to conceal the most relevant fact of all — that I am — or rather have been until now — avaunt Nemesis — a popular playwright.

This fact has not, I admit, caused me anything but the most acute, if slightly mystified, pleasure until now, when, in attempting to repay my publishers' compliment by taking myself seriously as a dramatic author, I find myself at some disadvantage. I envy now those dramatists, and there are not a few, who, in their prefaces, are able confidently to commend their plays to the discriminating reader on the bare grounds that undiscriminating audiences have firmly rejected them. Students of my friend Stephen Potter's Lifemanship manuals will know what I mean when I say that in the matter of writing prefaces to plays a dramatist is instantly 'one up' from the moment he is able to state that 'his play pleased not the million', a quotation which must of necessity bear two strong inferences to the reader; if, on the one hand, he is able to admire the play he can plainly count himself as one in a million; but if on the other, he is not, he stamps himself at once as a boor, who, like the rest of the scorned 'general', cannot tell caviar from suet pudding.

These five plays, however, as I have already had the honesty to confess, did please the million, and I find myself thus inevitably 'one down'. I am not able, as is my 'one-up' rival, to attack the state of the modern theatre, to deplore the commercialism of Shaftesbury Avenue (all these plays were performed either in Shaftesbury Avenue or within a hundred yards of it), to revile the short-sightedness of West End managers (all my managers have had offices in the West End, and none of them, with regard to my own plays, has seemed noticeably myopic), to pay tribute to the courage and enterprise of small repertory theatres outside London. (I would willingly do so, were I not deterred by the memory of one earnest young repertory manager who once said to me, in all good faith: 'What's so nice about doing your plays in my theatre is that their profits pay for the good ones.')

In commenting on his decision to turn to more serious drama with *The Winslow Boy* he says

> I have claimed above that I have never allowed myself to be guided in my subsequent work by anything the critics may have had to say in disparagement or praise about my previous endeavours, and in examining my motives for turning, at this stage in my career, from light to serious comedy, I can acquit myself of any attempt to try and 'give them what they want' (I mean, of course, the critics. Audiences, apparently, had already got it.) True, I totally disapproved — and still do disapprove - of the widely held notions that writing seriously for the theatre inevitably means writing serious plays, that serious plays are more difficult to write than comedies — in my case the reverse has been true — and that it is necessarily worthier to make an audience weep than to make it laugh.

The letter to *The New Statesman And Nation* was written six years before the premiere of John

Osborne's *Look Back In Anger*, which Rattigan was sure would be a complete flop and which, of course, radically altered English theater. Rattigan, who had always been viewed as something of a throwback to outmoded conventions, fell even further out of favor. He continued, however, to write for movies and television as well as the stage right up until his death in 1977. He wrote at least as many screenplays as he did plays for the stage. He received two Oscar nominations and at one point was reportedly the highest paid screenwriter in the world. He was a contract writer at the Warner Brothers studio in Teddington when *French Without Tears* was produced, and he had a long, very productive relationship as a writer for director Anthony Asquith. Nonetheless he regarded himself primarily as a playwright.

Rattigan knew before he was a teenager that he wanted to be a playwright. He fell in love with the theater at a very early age thanks partially to the influence of an aunt who took him to matinees. He began trying to write plays at 11 and spent most of his time at Oxford writing plays or dramatic criticism even though he was ostensibly studying history.

When attempting to explain his success as a playwright Rattigan cited his "sense of theater." He associates this with the excitement he felt as a boy when he was mesmerized by the performance of a play and caught up in the audience's reaction to certain moments. It is in the interaction between a performance and its audience that "theater" exists, and it is the indefinable moment of catharsis or epiphany or heightened shared awareness that is the essence of the theatrical experience. Rattigan knew better than to try to articulate or define this phenomenon in any abstract or analytical way. It was in a very real sense the love of his life, and what it meant was that a playwright must inevitably be conscious of his potential audience as he writes. It is not just the "material" that concerns him; it is the experience of an audience at a performance as well.

Rattigan was bold enough to attempt to explain this with two metaphors. One was to say that a playwright must be a bit of a schizophrenic.

> In the other preface I said that in my view a sense of theatre 'implied in its possessor a kind of deformity of the creative mind, a controlled schizophrenia which will allow a dramatist to act as an audience to his own play while in the very process of writing it'. When, in early days, my heroines rushed into their second-act paroxysms of hysterics and fell to the floor in dead, but graceful, faints; when my handsome heroes crushed some fatal document violently between the palms of their hands and stared with horror and amazement into space; when my villains turned quickly on their heels with curt, sardonic laughs and quietly left the room; and above all, when the curtains slowly fell—I never wrote of them as falling fast, for the reason, I suppose, that if they had the plays would have ended a second or so sooner,

an unbearable thought—it was at such ecstatic moments that I was most conscious of being a member of my own audience, and of participating myself in the emotions that I, as author, had aroused in them.

It might be argued that this sense of audience—participation implies no more in its possessor than a fairly lively imagination; that there is nothing mystical nor even instinctive about it, and that all it amounts to is the cold and conscious exercise that all creative artists must of necessity train themselves to perform. The novelist must be reader to his own novel, the painter viewer of his own painting, and the composer listener to his own music. They cannot write, paint, or compose in a complete vacuum. Yet in those branches of the arts there is no talk of some mysterious sixth sense or split mind that the artist must possess before he practises. Talent is all.

Nevertheless in the field of playwriting — and it will, I trust, be remarked that I do not use the word art — I believe that talent, in the usually accepted sense of the term, is not all. A novel can be great with only one reader to account it so; a painting may be a masterpiece, even though it is hidden away in a cupboard in the painter's studio; and a score of music can be a work of genius even in manuscript. But a play can neither be great, nor a masterpiece, nor a work of genius, nor talented, nor untalented, nor indeed anything at all, unless it has an audience to see it. For without an audience it simply does not exist. No audience means no performance, and no performance means no play. This fact, sadly lamented though it may have been over the centuries, by aspiring, talented but unperformed dramatists is hard, I admit, but utterly inescapable.[2]

The second metaphor introduced in this same preface to the second volume of his plays was the infamous Aunt Edna, the representative of that imaginary audience who some critics felt summarized exactly what was wrong with Rattigan's plays.

> …[P]lays, though they may give incidental pleasure in the library, are first intended for the stage. If they are not, they are not plays, but novels, poems, or philosophies in dialogue form, and their author, writer of genius though he may well be, has no right to the title of dramatist.
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> From this there follows a simple truth, and for the purpose of its illustration let us invent a character, a nice, respectable, middle-class, middle-aged, maiden lady, with time on her hands and the money to help her pass it. She enjoys pictures, books, music, and the theatre and though to none of these arts (or rather, for consistency's sake, to none of these three arts and the one craft) does she bring much knowledge or discernment, at least, as she is apt to tell her cronies, she 'does know what she likes'.

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2 Second Preface x - xi]

Let us call her Aunt Edna. She is bound to be someone's aunt, and probably quite a favourite one. She plays bridge rather well, goes to church on Sundays, and — but I must stop, or I shall be straight into a new play and the disconcerted reader may find the curtain rising to disclose the lounge of a small hotel in West Kensington.

Now Aunt Edna does not appreciate Kafka — 'so obscure, my dear, and why always look on the dark side of things?' — she is upset by Picasso — 'those dreadful reds, my dear, and why three noses?' — and she is against Walton — 'such appalling discords, my dear, and no melody at all'. She is, in short, a hopeless lowbrow, and the great novelist, the master painter, and the composer of genius are, and can afford to be, as disregarding of her tastes as she is unappreciative of their works.

Not so, unhappily, the playwright, for should he displease Aunt Edna, he is utterly lost. Though by no means a vindictive lady, nothing, I fear, will prevent her from avenging her unsatisfactory afternoon by broadcasting that evening in the lounge of her hotel in West Kensington: 'Oh, it was so dull, my dears, don't think of going to it. So much talk, so little action, so difficult to see the actor's faces, and even the tea was cold.'

She will be listened to. Aunt Edna always is. The playwright who has been unfortunate or unwise enough to incur her displeasure, will soon pay a dreadful price. His play, the child of his brain, will wither and die before his eyes. At this crisis in his life — for it is a crisis — he may possibly comfort himself with the hope of another performance of his play elsewhere before a more discerning audience; but the hope is likely to be vain, for, as I have maintained in the first preface, audiences do not, in matters of intelligence and discernment, differ much between one country and another. Aunt Edna is universal, and to those who may feel that all the problems of the modern theatre might be solved by her liquidation, let me add that I have no doubt at all that she is also immortal. She, or her ghost, is, I believe, as strong a force in Moscow as in London; perhaps, from the evidence, even stronger, for her English equivalent does not nearly so peremptorily demand that every picture tell a story, or that every play say something that is proper for her to hear.

Perhaps the best thing that can be said about Aunt Edna is a remark that Rattigan made about Noel Coward in a preface to a collection of reviews celebrating Coward's career: "Authors usually write shockingly badly about their own work…"[3]. It is generally agreed that Rattigan did himself a grave disservice in creating this character and escorting her into the world of drama criticism. In an interview with John Simon in 1962 Rattigan tried to clear up some of the misunderstanding with what seems on the surface to be some rather fierce back peddling.

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3 Coward p. xx

> Aunt Edna is badly expressed but what I tried to say about Aunt Edna – my imaginary typical theatergoer – is that an audience is a constant – has not varied much from Sophocles to Tennessee Williams. I feel very strongly that we don't have to aim at our audience directly, as at a target, but we must never lose sight of them because if they don't come we're lost – we have no play – nothing.
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> …[T]he dear old girl sees the new Osborne and loves it.. You can't shock the old girl. And my view about her remains constant – her taste is bloody good – her taste is better than the critics'…
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> Even with Brecht, who is now a cult, Aunt Edna will go to the ones she likes – she will go to *Mother Courage* but she won't go to the *Bad Woman of Setzuan* or whatever it's called. She makes up her mind and she says "Right. *Mother Courage* rather good play – very interesting. Press in."[4]

Perhaps 50 years later it is easier to see beyond the seeming condescension with which he regarded his audience and to grasp the respect he felt for the ability of even the most "hopeless lowbrow" to respond to characters with empathy and to sense the moral and emotional significance of private moments and events made visible through the contrivance of theater.

Analyzing drama in terms of impact on the audience is nothing new. Aristotle's *Poetics* can be read in this way. The question is perhaps how the excitement aroused in audiences by 19th century melodrama is related to the catharsis or wonder resulting from the pity and terror aroused in Greek audiences by *Oedipus Rex*.

In describing this boyhood experience as a theatergoer, Rattigan made an interesting comment on the nature of his response:

> If my neighbours gasped with fear for the heroine when she was confronted with a fate worse than death, I gasped with them, although I suppose I could have had but the haziest idea of the exact nature of the lady's peril; when my neighbours laughed at the witty and immoral paradoxes of the hero's bachelor friend, I laughed at them too, although I could have appreciated neither their wit nor their immorality; and when my neighbours cheered the return of some favourite actor I cheered with them, even though at the time of his last appearance in London I had, quite possibly, not been born.
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> All of which, no doubt, sounds very foolish — seemingly no more than an expression, in a rather absurd form, of the ordinary child's urge to ape the grown-ups. Yet I don't think it was only that. Up in my galleries (or, as my pocket money increased proportionately with my snobbishness, down in my pits), I was experiencing emotions which, though no doubt

4 Simon p.24

> insincere of origin in that they were induced and coloured by the adult emotions around me, were none the less most deeply felt.[5]

Aside from the indication that there is something infectious about audience reaction in a theatre there is an implication that his deeply felt emotions were more meaningful than his more limited conscious or verbal understanding. The emotional state is real and valuable despite its questionable origins. It is in fact so valuable that it becomes the basis of the ambition which shaped his life.

> When I came, therefore, to try to reproduce, as a precocious playwright, the emotions that had been aroused in myself as a precocious member of an audience, the results, though no doubt ludicrous, were at least instinctively theatrical.[6]

Needless to say Rattigan does not provide a psychological explanation of how deeply felt emotions can be "insincere of origin." In saying that the emotions he felt as a boy were "induced" by the responses of the adults around him rather than being his own immediate response to the action of the play he does seem to be saying that what he grasped was not the meaning of the play but the form of the theatrical experience. His juvenile efforts as a playwright resulted in excessively melodramatic or clichéd efforts to orchestrate his audience's emotions. They were presumably "ludicrous" because they could not come anywhere near their goal of engaging the audience sufficiently take them on an emotional rollercoaster ride.

Even after he decided to pursue a career as a professional playwright, Rattigan had five plays rejected before he hit the jackpot with *French Without Tears*. He was obviously not only refining his craft but also learning how to tap into his own more mature emotions. And he was realizing that the playwright's relationship with the audience was a bit more complex than he had first imagined.

> There is a wide difference between 'theatre' and theatricalism, as wide in fact as the difference between Maugham and Sardou. Long before I even got my first rejection slip from a manager, my heroines had ceased to [faint] at moments of crisis… My heroes and my villains had stopped glaring at each other, boldly on the one side and malevolently on the other. They had merged gradually into one and had become much the same person. Impossibly happy endings and convenient last-act suicides had been, or at least were in process of being, eliminated. Now self-discipline began to tighten even more, and those grandly built-up entrances for the star, together with those comic or dramatic exit lines to take them off to applause, both much beloved of Aunt Edna's connections in the gallery, by Aunt Edna

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herself and, to be honest, by me, were sadly but ruthlessly included in the list.

I was learning, in fact, that although Aunt Edna must never be made mock of, or bored, or befuddled, she must equally not be wooed, or pandered to, or cosseted. I even made a rather startling discovery; that the old dear rather enjoys a little teasing and even, at times, some bullying.

It is as well that she has this slight masochistic strain in her, or if she had not there would be no such thing as good drama, but only good theatre.[7]

The hierarchy of "theatricalism," "theater," and "drama" defines the second dimension of Rattigan's ambition. He had no doubt of his success as a creator of theater; he at least pretended to be less confident in his claim to be a dramatist, though not as hesitant to accept the label as many of his critics were to apply it. *The Winslow Boy* and *The Browning Version* were the beginnings of his attempt to stake his claim as a dramatist. He eventually claimed to be embarrassed by some of his earlier successes, but he never disowned his "light" comedies nor denigrated in any way the craft of theater.

He was adamant, though, that good theater was not just a matter of technique or craft. He was equally adamant that it was not a matter of "eloquence, the poetic gift, or the powers of rhetoric,"[8] even though he could admire verse drama and the attempts by dramatists such as T.S. Eliot, Christopher Fry and others to reinvigorate the language of contemporary theater. He, himself, was committed to a form of naturalism in which characters spoke completely in the vernacular.

His most telling comment about the sense of theater, however, concerns the necessity of indirection:

> Sense of theatre does not lie in the explicit. An analysis of those moments in the great plays at which we have all caught our breaths would surely lead to the conclusion that they are nearly always those moments when the least is being said, and the most suggested. 'As kill a King?… Ay Lady 'twas my word.' 'She'll come no more. Never, never, never, never, never.' 'Finish, good lady, the bright day is done and we are for the dark.' 'Cover her face: Mine eyes dazzle: she died young.' 'Mother, give me the sun.' One can multiply instances, but surely the point is here.
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> Has not sense of theatre then something to do with the ability to thrill an audience by the mere power of suggestion, to move it by words unspoken, rather than spoken, to gain tears by a simple adverb repeated five times or in terms of comedy to arouse laughter by a glance or a nod? Surely, in comedy as in tragedy, it is the implicit rather than the explicit that gives life

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to a scene and, by demanding the collaboration of an audience, holds it, contented, flattered, alert and responsive.

The power of implication in drama admits no argument. About comedy my view can plainly be challenged by the supporters of the Congreve-Wilde 'gilded phrase' school. It is too large a question to enter into now. Let me merely state that I have always firmly believed that the weapons of understatement and suggestion are even more effective in comedy than in tragedy, and I have with diligence, discipline, and self-restraint always practised that belief…

I am sure that this instinct for the use of dramatic implication is in fact a part of the mystique of playwriting, and, in my view, by far the most important part; for it is the very quality that can transform a mere sense of theatre into a sense of drama.[9]

Despite his attempt to reduce the importance of implication or suggestion to that of just another technique for engaging the audience, Rattigan seems to want to say that there is more at stake by summoning up the "mystique of playwriting" and by invoking a transformation of a "mere sense of theatre into a sense of drama." It is as though his instincts tell him that the experience of "those moments in the great plays at which we have all caught our breaths" involve a heightened state of awareness which puts us in touch with something vitally important that cannot be verbalized. In any event he is much less interested in the analyzing such moments than he is in created them.

I am inclined to latch onto this moment in Rattigan's perspective on his own work because so much of what he says about his sense of theatre seems to imply the kind of rollercoaster aesthetic whose ultimate embodiment is the visual effects extravaganza. One could claim that the difference between Sardou and Maugham is simply one of sophistication in technique. As audiences catch on to the tricks by which they are held on the edge of their seat, playwrights need to devise ever more subtle tricks. One way this is done is to create more believable characters and situations to elicit empathy. Once you have hooked the audience into identifying with someone, you can jerk them around emotionally. Admittedly the thrill of watching a beleaguered hero finally get the best of his nemesis may take place in a different part of the brain that the thrill of seeing an entire city engulfed in apocalyptic explosions, but the reason for buying the ticket may be essentially the same. Real life is a dull, unsatisfying affair so we need cheap thrills, especially if one doesn't have a taste for suicidally extreme sports.

Even visual effects professionals know how to talk about the importance of "story." All the mayhem and gravity-defying stunts are in the service of "storytelling," which is the creative heart of movie making. My question may be whether anyone understands why storytelling is an important

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or popular pastime. When John Simon asked Rattigan if he could summarize his own vision, Rattigan gave a refreshingly candid answer:

> No. Because it varies from person to person, from play to play. It's a vision of a human being or of a situation between two human beings which is personal to you and which you are seeing with your God's eye view and you are saying, "I can communicate this to an audience." And I don't know why one does it. One does it because – just because it makes one some money, I don't know.

Obviously for Rattigan the difference between "theatricalism" (rollercoasterism) and "theater" is character. And every screenwriter in Hollywood knows he is supposed to write "character-driven" scripts. Even the term "sitcom" comes from the idea that good comedy is rooted in situations involving characters rather than just funny lines. The saving grace note in Rattigan's commercialism is the "which is personal to you." This means that the starting point for Rattigan was some instance of the human predicament which resonated with him and for which he felt he had some intuitive understanding that permitted a "God's eye view" of it. Needless to say it does not mean the content of his plays was autobiographical. It means that what shaped his plays was not simply what he imagined would get a rise out of an audience but something he knew about life and felt he could communicate.

The image of Rattigan as a boy in a theater spellbound by the action unfolding before him makes me want to look at the difference between his experience and the experience of a boy in his own home witnessing a conflict between his parents. Theater is obviously "make believe" where the action on stage has no implications for the life of the spectator other than what he can learn from it. The experience of theater is not the witnessing of a conflict per se. Suppose the actors on the stage had a monumental ego conflict and something provoked them to forget about the performance and launch into a real life blowout. Some of the audience might relish this "reality show;" some might be embarrassed for the actors; none would enjoy a "theatrical experience" in which conflict is one aspect of a structured "action" viewed from an Olympian perspective. Even when information is deliberately withheld from the audience as a means of engaging their interest, ultimately the audience attains the same "God's eye view" from which the playwright worked. What is apprehended from that distance is not just the events or the behavior of the characters, but some "meaning" embodied in the play as a whole.

Rattigan's objection to plays of ideas was couched in terms of the creative process: which "came first," the ideas or the characters. This can be interpreted as a matter of priorities as well as a description of the development of a particular play. He was reacting to a movement which saw theater as a means of social reform and which he thought was selling it short as propaganda or political

rhetoric. He did not necessarily object to any of the theatrical techniques employed by avant-garde theater. He was able along with Aunt Edna to embrace some of Brecht's plays which he thought relied on character. He does not seem to have recognized Brecht's claim that traditional theater further hypnotized an already sleepwalking audience rather than waking them up.

There is no doubt that part of what attracted Rattigan to the theater was the "glamour" of its world, and his public persona was someone who would seem completely at home in a Noel Coward play, but he also had a private life which enabled him to understand the dynamics of love relationships or the complexities of the emotions raging beneath the surface of seemingly ordinary people. Perhaps even as a boy he felt, as would Andrew Crocker-Harris, the need for "something that would make life supportable," and the excitement he experienced in the theater pointed the way.

The Characters

Andrew Crocker-Harris is obviously the central character in *The Browning Version*. Rattigan said there was a classics master at Harrow named J.W. Coke-Norris, who retired while he was there and who rebuffed a student's attempt to give him a book as a going-away present. To some extent the genesis of the play is probably in Rattigan's efforts to imagine how Coke-Norris became the kind of man he was.

We do not really learn much about Andrew's past. We know that he was a brilliant scholar at Oxford who took every possible honor and that he began teaching at the school immediately upon graduation from Oxford. We know that he met Millie 20 years ago when he was doing a walking tour in the Lake District and knocked on the door of the house where she was staying. We know that he has been at the school 18 years. This would presumably mean that he is in his early forties, perhaps just 40. (Rattigan, in fact, considered inserting a line in the play that would make it clear that Andrew was 40 when he felt the actor playing the part was playing him as though he were much older.) We can probably assume that he did not marry Millie until he knew he had the teaching job, which would mean they knew each other about two years before marrying. They have no children.

We know little else about Andrew's youth except that he is not from a wealthy family. This would probably mean that he had a scholarship to Oxford, as did Rattigan. When he was about 18 Andrew wrote a verse translation of The Agamemnon. We know that he had high hopes for his career and, according to Millie, he felt he had a vocation for teaching and hoped to become a headmaster.

He teaches the lower fifth. English public schools like Harrow are divided into upper and lower divisions, roughly comparable to the division between junior and senior high school in the Unit-

ed States. Grades are called "forms" and the division between upper and lower school corresponds to a division between the upper and lower fifth form. The organization of the curriculum and the path that a student takes as he progresses towards graduation appear to vary from school to school, and there was actually a discussion in Punch magazine shortly after the opening of *The Browning Version* regarding the significance of the fact that Andrew is teaching the lower fifth. In researching his book on Rattigan, B.A. Young confirmed with someone at Harrow that the job of teaching classics in the lower fifth would have indeed been a plum assignment for someone fresh out of Oxford. It can also be assumed that someone teaching classics to the lower fifth would also be teaching more advanced students as well. It seems reasonable to assume that had Andrew been a more popular or successful master, he might have been given other duties and relieved of his teaching responsibilities in the "soul-destroying lower fifth."

What is perhaps more relevant is the fact that the classics were still regarded as the core of any curriculum. Schools like Harrow were very slow to adopt a "modern" curriculum which gave equal weight to sciences and humanities. In order to specialize in the sciences, a student had first to satisfy the basic requirements in classics. This is the point of Taplow's anxiety about whether he will get his "remove" and be permitted to switch to a science curriculum in the upper school.

Andrew also organizes the schedule of classes for each term. In Rattigan's time Coke-Norris was the "Organization Master" responsible for the timetable of classes. While this seems to be a significant contribution to the administration of the school, other masters (e.g. Frank Hunter) are not necessarily aware of Andrew's role since the published timetable always bears only the Headmaster's name and not the name of the person who actually prepared it.

Andrew is having to retire due to a problem with his heart. He has taken a position at a "crammer's" in Dorset, a smaller school for "backward" boys run by an Oxford colleague. The new job will be much less demanding, but also will pay much less than his current one. He is hoping that the school will provide him with a pension, even though technically he is retiring too soon to be entitled to one.

The rest of what we know about Andrew comes either from his description of himself or the descriptions of him given by other characters. Whether or not we should take Andrew's description of himself at face value is a matter of interpretation. Before we begin exploring possible interpretations of Andrew, it may be helpful to review some of the basic information about the characters.

Andrew's wife Millie is described as "a thin woman in the late thirties, rather more smartly dressed than the general run of schoolmasters' wives." She is the daughter of the owner of a men's

clothing shop in an arcade in Bradford, and she has a very modest income of her own from a dowry. Her uncle, Sir William Bartop, is apparently much wealthier and more prominent than her father. She is having an affair with Frank Hunter, one of the other masters at the school; and there is reason to believe that this is not the first extramarital affair she has had. She is clearly much more of a social animal than Andrew. She is painfully aware of social status, and she knows how to charm. The interpretation of her character may be the most critical element in the interpretation of the play as a whole. The distinction between fact and interpretation in her case is not an easy line to draw so I shall postpone most of the discussion of her character.

Frank Hunter is a younger science teacher at the school. He is a popular master and is described as "rugged" and "self-confident." He is apparently somewhat athletic, although the only sport he demonstrates knowledge of is golf. He canvassed for Labour in the last election, a fact which, combined with his relative youth, helps make him seem "different" from the other masters to Taplow. He professes to be bored by the science he teaches, and the ambivalence with which he views his involvement with Millie points to a more basic conflict within him about his own nature.

John Taplow is described as "a plain, moon-faced boy of about sixteen, with glasses." He is taking "extra work" from Crocker-Harris, an arrangement for which his father pays Crocker-Harris directly; and he is anxious to complete his classics requirement so that he can study science in the upper school. He would rather be playing golf than being tutored in Greek on the next to last day of term, but he is sufficiently intimidated by Andrew not to think of cutting. When his lesson is cut short, he says there is no need to refund any money to his father, which may be an indication of his family's financial circumstances. Millie's father met Taplow's mother at a "fete" where she and Millie's uncle both gave speeches.

Taplow may be taking extra work, but he is clearly a bright and perceptive student. The interpretation of his motive in giving his teacher a present is the fulcrum around which action of the play pivots. I would be inclined to say that the description of him as "plain" and "moon-faced" are an indication that what matters most is what is projected onto him by the other characters.

Dr. Frobisher, the headmaster of the school, is described as looking "more like a distinguished diplomat than a doctor of literature and classical scholar." Rattigan also tell us, he is "in the middle fifties and goes to a very good tailor." There is no information about his background nor is any needed. We see everything we need to know in the way he deals with Andrew and Millie.

The only other characters in the play are Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert. Peter Gilbert is Andrew's replacement. He is a brilliant student fresh out of Oxford who met his wife on a holiday in the Lake

District. There is a suggestion that his wife has more money than he, and she expresses surprise that Millie does her own cooking. The couple obviously functions as a kind of shadow of Andrew and Millie. There is an exchange between them in which Gilbert tells his wife not to "swank" by implying she has more social status than she actually does. Millie's tendency to present as though she comes from a prominent family is a recurring motif in the play and may have even influenced the decision not to grant Andrew a pension.

The Action of the Play

The Browning Version is a one act play which takes place in one room virtually in real time. The only dramatic license in terms of the passage of time may be the amount of time allowed for Taplow to go to the village and return twice. The first time he is sent by Millie to fill Andrew's prescription so that she can be alone with Frank. She gives him money to buy himself a treat as well. He returns to begin his lesson eight pages later (just under 8 minutes in the BBC broadcast version of the play). He then leaves again (page 22) and returns with the gift (page 37 – a lapse of 6:12 in the BBC version). The only issue with this is the question of whether he bought the book he gives Andrew only after he left the second time. It seems as though this is the intended implication since the gift is to some extent a response to Andrew's revelation that he himself had written a verse translation of the *Agamemnon*. But he also mentions that he has been reading the Browning translation so the implication is that he discovered the book, decided to buy it and then read part of it before coming back to give it to Andrew. Dramatic license certainly allows for time compression of this sort, and it would not be an issue at all if it were not for the question of whether Taplow's gift is in fact at least partially the bribe that Millie says it is. Her interpretation has more credibility if Taplow bought the book on one of his trips to town after she overheard him mocking Andrew. Except for this consideration the play leaves it to the audience to decide exactly what mixture of components there are in Taplow's decision to buy the book for Andrew. It is, I believe, typical of the way the play works that his motivation is deliberately unclear. It is both an artful bribe and a sincere expression of sympathy and appreciation.

The action of the play progresses on four levels:

1) A sequence of seemingly everyday events,
2) The revelation of information mainly for the benefit of the audience,
3) The revelation of information between the characters themselves, and
4) The emotional or psychological impact that the characters have on one another.

Pages	Event
1	Taplow arrives for lesson with Andrew.
2 - 7	Frank arrives to see Millie, chats with Taplow
7 - 9	Millie arrives, sends Taplow to village

9 - 14	Millie and Frank discuss plans for summer
14 - 17	Andrew arrives, shows Frank time-table
17-18	Taplow returns, Millie & Frank leave
18 - 21	Taplow and Andrew discuss Agamem-non
21-22	Frobisher arrives, Taplow dismissed
22 - 27	Frobisher discusses pension & prize-giving
27 - 28	Millie speaks to Frobisher as he leaves
28 -30	Andrew gives Millie news of pension & ceremony
30 - 32	Gilberts arrives to see flat
32 - 35	Andrew & Gilbert talk as Millie shows Mrs. Gilbert around
35 - 37	Gilberts depart
37	Mille & Andrew talk about Gilberts; Mille exits.
38 - 40	Taplow brings gift
40 - 41	Frank returns for dinner. Andrew shows him Taplow's gift, Taplow leaves
41 - 43	Millie "explains" Taplow's gift. An-drew exits.
43 - 46	Frank reprimands Millie, breaks with her
46 - 53	Andrew returns; Millie exits; Frank offers advice.
53	Millie re-enters to set dinner table as Frank leaves.
53 - 54	Millie and Andrew discuss plans for summer.
54	Frobisher phones; Andrew tells him of his decision.
54	Millie and Andrew sit down to dinner.

Given the fact that this is the next-to-last day of the last term for Andrew at the school, the occurrence of all these events within the time frame of the play is perfectly believable. Things are coming to a head and need to be resolved before everyone leaves. That Andrew would insist on tutoring Taplow that afternoon is unusual as Frobisher notes, but it is indicative of his character. His commitment to doing things in the manner he believes right and proper is central to a definition of who he is. Others (including the audience) may view this trait as rigid or stuffy. ("I have given you exactly what you deserve. No less; and certainly no more.") It is, however, one of the sources of the power he wields over his students and also an important element in his relationship with his wife.

A glance at the time line for the play makes it clear that Andrew is the spine of the structure. Once he enters, he only exits briefly at the moment when he seems to have been completely broken. His exit allows Frank and Millie to have time to resolve their relationship, but it also sets up his return as a rising from his own ashes.

Many of the events in the play are used for conveying information about who the characters are so that the story can have its full impact. The real action of the play consists of nine moments which have a significant impact on Andrew or in which Andrew reacts.

Page	Event
20	Taplow's "enthusiasm" stirs Andrew's memories of his youth.
24, 26	Frobisher denies pension and requests he relinquish his ceremonial place.
29	Millie attacks Andrew for acquiescing.
32	Gilbert tells Andrew he is Himmler of Lower Fifth.
38	Taplow gives Andrew the book.
42	Millie debunks Taplow's gift.
51	Hunter makes a gesture of friendship.
53	Andrew decides not to go to Bradford.
54	Andrew reclaims his proper ceremonial place.

Literary Context

There are two literary references looming behind *The Browning Version*: *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* and the *Agamemnon*. Both figure explicitly in the dialog and are clearly intended as pointers to a context within which the meaning of the play can be better appreciated. It is as though the play exists as a relief against the background established by the other works. (There is another literary echo which may be worth noting as well: George and Martha in Albee's *Whose Afraid of Virginia Wolfe* may be the next generation in this lineage.)

Goodbye, Mr. Chips is a novella written by James Hilton in 1933, which enjoyed great popularity and was made into a movie starring Robert Donat and Greer Garson in 1939. (A musical version of it was filmed in 1968 with a screenplay by none other than Terrence Rattigan.) Millie's reference to Mr. Chips is an indication of the extent to which the character of Mr. Chipping had become a cultural stereotype. *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* is a sentimental novel and an even more sentimental movie.

It is tempting to view *The Browning Version* as an ironic rebuttal of *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*. Mr. Chips is a classics teacher at an old English boarding school. He has settled into a rut in his life when he falls in love and marries a woman who revitalizes him and enables him to become a much beloved personification of the traditions of the school. Mr. Chips was known for his sense of humor and was not a scholar of any depth. He regarded mastering the classical languages as a kind of initiation ritual for an English gentleman, and he took pride in his ability to play cricket well even at the age of 50. The entire story is told from the point of view of Chips as an old man enjoying his comfortable retirement in lodgings near from the school. He is summoned back out of retirement to become acting headmaster during the war. It is surely no coincidence that both Chips and the Crock met their wives while on a walking tour in the Lake District. (The film version of *Goodbye,*

Mr. Chips exports this scene to the Alps in order to combine it with the development of a relationship with a German colleague at the school.)

One suspects that when Rattigan hit upon the idea of using a character based on Coke-Norris as the subject for a serious one-act play modeled on a Greek classic, he may well have seized the opportunity to show the world what a "crock" of sentimentality *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* is. It may also be that the way in which Rattigan turns everything in *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* on it head is simply a sly literary in-joke. Or the play may be an example of what Anthony Powell described as one of Rattigan's favorite formulas: "Take a hackneyed situation and reverse it."[10]

Except for the need to understand Millie's allusion to Mr. Chips, the audience need have no familiarity with *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* in order to experience the full impact of *The Browning Version.* Neither Rattigan himself nor any of the critics ever seem to have commented on a relationship between his play and *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*, but it may have just seemed too obvious to merit discussion.

Goodbye, Mr. Chips has pleasures of its own to offer the reader, and the 1939 film is widely regarded as a classic. Donat won an Academy Award for his performance, and the film was nominated for six others in a year that is legendary for the number of classics it produced (*Gone With The Wind*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Stagecoach*, *The Wizard of Oz*, etc.) The main relevance of Mr. Chips to this analysis may be the help he can offer in pinning down the nature of sentimentality when we consider the way in which Rattigan's play evolved into the two films versions.

The *Agamemnon*, on the other hand, is a conscious model for the construction of the play, and there are numerous ways in which *The Browning Version* resonates with references to the it. One of the more indirect references is, I believe, the image of the siege of Troy as a metaphor for what happens to Andrew in the course of the afternoon. At the outset Andrew is clearly a character who has fortified himself by adopting a rigid persona. He even describes part of this process in his confession to Peter Gilbert when he explains how he became a "character" in his relationships with his students.

The first event which weakens Andrew's defenses is the way in which Taplow's reaction to the *Agamemnon* reminds him of his own youthful passion. Taplow has entered not only Andrew's home, but his repressed inner self. Like the Trojan horse in which invaders were allowed to enter the citadel of Troy, Andrew's own meticulous devotion to his teaching responsibilities exposes him to an intrusion which makes him vulnerable. The recollection of his own enthusiasm and of his efforts to convey his excitement to others via his own verse translation of the *Agamemnon* is an opening in the

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armor of his psyche which makes him all the more vulnerable to the attacks which ensue.

Dr. Frobisher delivers the first wave of the attack when he informs Andrew of the school's decision not to award him a pension. And he twists the sword with his request that Andrew relinquish his proper position in the ceremonies in favor of another more popular master who is also leaving.

At this point the relevance of the *Agamemnon* becomes much more direct as Millie is presented first as an accomplice in the attack and ultimately as Clytemnestra, the vengeful wife who murders her husband and speaks boastfully about it.

There is also a parallel with the setting for the *Agamemnon* in terms of the contrast between the public space presented on stage and the private space off stage. The screen separating the sitting room from the rest of the house functions like the door to the palace where the murder takes place in the *Agamemnon*. Rattigan plays with this public/private demarcation, reversing it at times so that the sitting room is the private area in contrast to the public space of the school and town beyond the door. He also uses it to reflect the public and private personas of the characters.

Millie's attack on Andrew is presented in two phases. First she attacks Andrew for acquiescing in the school's decision about the pension. She also reveals that she knew Frobisher was going to ask Andrew to relinquish his position in the ceremonies and had encouraged Frobisher to do so. Then after Andrew is made even more vulnerable by the discovery that he is regarded as "The Himmler of the Lower Fifth" and by Taplow's gift, Millie delivers the final blow by debunking Taplow's motives. Even though this might seem to be a minor event in comparison to the school's decision to deny Andrew's request for a pension, it is in fact a devastating blow and perhaps a supreme example of Rattigan's ability to orchestrate a "theatrical" moment. He has set it up with a one-two punch in which Andrew is opened up, hit, torn open more and then hit again. Perhaps the prime function of Frank Hunter's character in the play is to provide a reaction to Millie's attack on Andrew. The fact that he witnesses it and the impact that it has on his feelings about her provide a kind of echo chamber which amplifies the viciousness of her act.

Frank's gesture of honesty and friendship towards Andrew after Millie's attack is a reprise of Taplow's honesty and openness which began the whole cycle. Andrew's seeming equanimity implies that he has regrouped in some way. He appears to have simply re-established his defenses and on the surface he rejects the gesture with a bitter reference to his own gullibility about Taplow's "bribe."

Andrew has resumed his public persona; but, when he is alone with Millie, he reveals that something has changed within him. He tells her that he does not intend to join her in Bradford for the month of August; and, indeed, that he does not expect her to join him when he assumes his new

position in Dorset. Finally he informs the headmaster that he has changed his mind and is not willing to relinquish his proper position in the ceremonies the next day.

Andrew may have described himself to Hunter as a corpse that could not be revived except by a miracle, but he has in fact survived Millie's latest blow and reclaimed at least some portion of his integrity. Taplow, the invader, has also been the bearer of healing medicine for Andrew's heart. The magnitude of this event points straight into the depths of Rattigan's understanding of human nature.

The final event in the play may seem simply to be an ironic curtain line: He and Millie sit down together as he says, "Come along, my dear. We mustn't let our dinner get cold." However, given the shift that has occurred not only in Andrew but also in our perception of Millie as a result of Andrew's explanation of her to Hunter, this final action becomes symbolic of the entire play. Dining together is a step in the dance of love and hatred which binds them together.

Information Management

In order for the play to tell Andrew's story, the audience needs information about him and the circumstances surrounding the events it is able to witness directly. Every character in the play tells us something about Andrew. Even Mrs. Gilbert, who has only just met him, tells us how Andrew and Millie met. Taplow, Frank and Millie all talk about him before his entrance. Frobisher tells us that Andrew has been at the school 18 years and is perhaps the most brilliant classics scholar ever to teach at the school. Peter Gilbert tells Andrew and us that he is known as the Himmler of the Lower Fifth. Andrew spells out his financial circumstances for Frobisher and describes himself and his past experiences to both Frank and Gilbert.

Controlling the flow of such information is one of the ways in which Rattigan keeps the audience engaged. The most obvious and extreme example of this is the timing of the revelation that Andrew is fully aware of Millie's affair with Frank. Knowing this too soon would deflate the tension created by the sense that the affair is their secret and the anticipation of what may happen when and if Andrew discovers it. Discovering instead that Andrew already knows about it has almost as much impact on the audience as it does on Frank. This is again a prime example of what I believe Rattigan meant by his "sense of theatre."

Another example of his sure-handed technique is the handling of news about the pension. It might be tempting to inform the audience earlier that Andrew is hoping to get a pension so that there could be some "suspense" or anticipation associated with Frobisher's visit. What Rattigan does is the opposite. We have no idea what Frobisher wants to discuss with Andrew. Frobisher sidles up to it without saying directly what is

on his mind, and Andrew deduces and responds to the decision before we have any idea what is at stake. The net effect of this, however, is to heighten the impact of Millie's attack on Andrew after Frobisher leaves.

We are given a clue that the pension is an issue between Andrew and Millie when Andrew corrects himself as he says to Frobisher, "But I thought – my wife thought, that an exception was made some five years ago –" As a result we are probably suspicious of Andrew's obliviousness when Millie says, "Well? Do we get it?" The ensuing explosion makes perfectly clear what is at stake with the pension, and its impact on the audience is heightened by the fact that there has been no reason to expect it. Withholding the information engages the audience by having them discover the circumstances as they witness the interactions between the characters.

There are two principal threads in the background information we need about Andrew: that having to do with his career and that having to do with his relationship with Millie. The information is provided by various characters as the play progresses. In some instances we are given information in advance to set up our understanding of an event that we shall witness. In other instances we are given information which alters our perspective on an event that has already taken place. There is very little, if any, dialog in *The Browning Version* that seems "expository." It all seems to be part of an exchange which is both natural and relevant to some immediate emotional or psychological situation. It all also has overtones which enrich the main themes or motifs of the play.

Two examples may serve to support this claim. Perhaps the two bits that seem to come closest to being expository are Frank's comment, "He ought never to have become a schoolmaster, really. Why did he?" and Frobisher's remark, "Now you have been with us, in all, eighteen years, haven't you?"

Frank's question comes out of his reflections on the difficulty of achieving any kind of natural relationship with the students. The relationship between masters and students is a predominant theme in the opening scene and a major thread running throughout the play. We witness Frank's interaction with Taplow which includes a virtual embrace when he coaches him in his golf swing as well as Frank's complicity in his mimicry of Andrew. Millie chides him teasingly for encouraging disrespect, and Frank responds by expressing an ambivalence about his role which is characteristic.

Andrew is not only a general presence looming in the background of the scene, but also seems to be the principal thing separating Frank and Millie. It is natural therefore that he should be a topic of thought and conversation. It is plausible that Frank would never before have wondered why Andrew became a schoolmaster and that the conjunction of his interaction with Taplow and his liaison with Millie would raise the question.

Frobisher's remark is part of the way in which he sidles up to communicating what he doesn't want to say directly. It is obvious in retrospect that both Frobisher and Andrew know perfectly well how long Andrew has taught at the school. Making this remark is a kind of formality that pretends to be a clarification when in fact it is simply a way of approaching a subject obliquely. Frobisher does not have the nerve to come right out and tell Andrew that the board has refused his pension. He wants to delegate that task to Andrew. Rattigan can also get away with this degree of exposition because the audience knows nothing about what is coming and will not necessarily latch onto the fact that both of them know all too well how long Andrew has been at the school. Frobisher is revealing himself as the kind of circumspect politician that a headmaster must be. He is also providing a satirical variation on the public/private persona theme that runs through the play. I think it is safe to assume that an audience will see through Frobisher's "diplomacy" to the fear or cowardliness beneath.

Before we see Andrew, we know from Taplow and Frank that students are intimidated by him and consider him without feelings and barely human. Students call him "The Crock," a nickname which may not have had the same associations it is likely to have with a contemporary American audience; but which surely indicates that the students view him more as a phenomenon than as a human being and perhaps exploits a connotation of crocodile and crocodile tears. Crock also has a secondary meaning of a broken piece of earthenware rather than just a pot or jar.

Taplow offers an interpretation of Andrew's repression and expresses sympathy for him despite the fact that he feels Andrew does not want others to like him.

We also learn before we see Andrew that his wife is unfaithful. Even she refers to him as The Crock in her explanation to Frank of why Andrew became a teacher. She tells Frank (and us) that his career began auspiciously and that he had ambitions. Although she will later reveal the depth of her contempt for Andrew, she describes him with a degree of sympathy and sadness rather than complete bitterness. She is, of course, primarily interested in Frank and considers talk of Andrew to be a depressing distraction.

Frank seems initially to share the students' view of Andrew. He is also apprehensive about Andrew's arrival for fear that he will be caught in his affair with Millie. Andrew may seem barely human, but he is also set up as a judge of others behavior. Taplow has described his experience in the classroom in a way that conjures being summoned before a magistrate for a breach of the law.

Taplow tells us that Andrew is leaving the school. Millie reveals that Andrew's prescription is for his heart. Eventually Frobisher confirms what we have probably surmised: Andrew is having to retire early because of a medical problem. Andrew professes to be looking forward to the

change in his career when he rejects Frank's expression of sympathy, but we already know enough to be suspicious of his acquiescence in his fate. Only when Andrew opens up, first the Taplow and then to Gilbert, do we get a clearer picture of the frustrations of his career. By this time we have probably adapted a view of him similar to that of Frank and the students, so the revelations of his own feelings can alter our perspective on him and move us in a way they would not have been able to do had he expressed them earlier.

The same is true for his own view of his relationship with Millie. He is introduced as a cuckold. Even a student sees him as shriveled up emotionally, and his wife describes him as unfeeling to the point of being dead. When he finally reveals that he has known all about Millie's affairs, he tells Frank that she is as much to be pitied as he, because neither got what they needed from the marriage. Although he attempts to present his situation as farcical, his revelations underscore its tragic dimensions. We go from seeing him as a victim to seeing him as someone struggling with his own responsibility and guilt.

Obviously it is impossible or pointless to discuss the way in which information about Andrew is revealed in the course of the play without discussing the way in which that information is intertwined with the action of the play and its emotional impact or meaning. The point here is simply to indicate the extent to which the structure of the play is partially a matter of controlling the flow of information about the central characters. What we know about them affects our interpretation of their actions and our emotional involvement with them. It is not as though there is a certain amount of background information which has to be gotten out of the way in order for the dramatic events to make sense. The events themselves are largely an unfolding of information about the characters and their background as well as a movement towards something new. We move back in time as we move forward; events flush out depths in the characters and relationships. Information that is revealed causes us to reassess our interpretation of what we have seen and "moves" us into a different relationship with the characters. It seems cynical to label this effect as "manipulation" of the audience. "Orchestrating emotional responses" may be a less pejorative expression for the way in which the craftsmanship of the playwright produces an experience which an audience values.

Meaning and Interpretation

On the surface *The Browning Version* seems to exist in the space created by a stark contrast between the *Agamemnon* and *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*. The *Agamemnon* is, at least in Taplow's eyes, about "a wife murdering her husband and having a lover and all that."[11] *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* is about the revivifying power of love and marriage:

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11 Rattigan p.4

He had been at Brookfield for over a quarter of a century, long enough to have established himself as a decent fellow and a hard worker; but just too long for anyone to believe him capable of ever being much more. He had, in fact, already begun to sink into that creeping dry rot of pedagogy which is the worst and ultimate pitfall of the profession; giving the same lessons year after year had formed a groove into which the other affairs of his life adjusted themselves with insidious ease. He worked well; he was conscientious; he was a fixture that gave service, satisfaction, confidence, everything except inspiration.

And then came this astonishing girl-wife whom nobody had expected — least of all Chips himself. She made him, to all appearances, a new man; though most of the newness was really a warming to life things that were old, imprisoned, and unguessed. His eyes gained sparkle; his mind, which was adequately if not brilliantly equipped, began to move more adventurously. The one thing he had always had, a sense of humor, blossomed into a sudden richness to which his years lent maturity. He began to feel a greater sureness; his discipline improved to a point at which it could become, in a sense, less rigid; he become more popular. When he had first come to Brookfield he had aimed to be loved, honored, and obeyed – but obeyed, at any rate. Obedience he had secured, and honor had been granted him; but only now came love, the sudden love of boys for a man who was kind without being soft, who understood them well enough, but not too much, and whose private happiness linked them with their own. He began to make little jokes, the sort that schoolboys like – mnemonics and puns that raised laughs and at the same time imprinted something in the mind.[12]

In contrast to Mr. Chips Andrew is a brilliant scholar who sees himself as a failure, whose contemptuous and unfaithful wife has long ago succeeded in killing him, and who commands obedience with "soulless tyranny." His esoteric jokes elicit only pity, and the comic persona which he adopted in his relationship with the students has ceased to work.

ANDREW: I knew, of course, that I was not only not liked, but now positively disliked. I had realized, too, that the boys – for many long years now – had ceased to laugh at me. I don't know why they no longer found me a joke. 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. At all events it didn't take much discernment on my part to realize I had become an utter failure as a schoolmaster. Still, stupidly enough, I hadn't realized that I was also feared. The Himmler of the

12 Hilton p. 31f

> lower fifth! I suppose that will become my epitaph.[13]

If this were a complete description of Andrew, he would probably seem to most members of the audience merely a pathetic victim. Even Brooks Atkinson, reviewing the New York production of *The Browning Version*, seems to have viewed Andrew in this way:

> [T]o me Mr. Rattigan's schoolmaster is pure sentimentality and I cannot grieve over his misfortune.[14]

One key to seeing beyond this is the image of Millie as Clytemnestra. When Clytemnestra murders Agamemnon, she is taking revenge for the fact that he killed their daughter, Iphigenia. Clytemnestra feels justified in taking Aegisthus as a lover while her husband is fighting at Troy, because Agamemnon sacrificed Iphigenia in order to be able to sail off to war. Her justification is reinforced by the fact that Agamemnon has brought Cassandra home with him, presumably as a mistress. The murder at the center of the Agamemnon is only one link in a chain of inexorable events going back at least a generation.

Implying that Millie is Clytemnestra suggests that she has in some way been wronged. Andrew himself provides the explanation of Millie bitterness, although he attempts to dismiss their problem as inconsequential:

> ANDREW: You see, my dear Hunter, she is really quite as much to be pitied as I. We are both of us interesting subjects for your microscope. Both of us needing from the other something that would make life supportable for us, and neither of us able to give it. Two kinds of love. Hers and mine. Worlds apart, as I know now, though when I married her I didn't think they were incompatible. In those days I hadn't thought that her kind of love – the love she requires and which I was unable to give her – was so important that its absence would drive out the other kind of love – the kind of love that I require and which I thought, in my folly, was by far the greater part of love. I may have been, you see, Hunter, a brilliant classical scholar, but I was woefully ignorant of the facts of life. I know better now, of course. 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 a very 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 hus-

13 Rattigan p. 34

14 NY Times Oct 23,1949,section 2 p.1

> band. You'll find it all over the world. It is usually, I believe, the subject for farce.[15]

His attempt at detachment is not very convincing, however, after the way Rattigan has set up Andrew's confession of the "great wrong" he has done Millie by marrying her. Clearly Rattigan was not writing a farce.

Andrew's description of the discrepancy between the two kinds of love that he and Mille needed is as explicit as the play gets and is a fairly bald statement of a principal theme of the play once allowance is made for the fact that it is filtered through Andrew's own perspective. While it would be a mistake to interpret this simplistically in sexual terms, there is clearly a significant sexual component in "the problem." Andrew's reference to his own ignorance of "the facts of life" obviously implies sexual naiveté and inadequacy, but an overly literal (or physical) interpretation risks reducing the problem to a subject for farce. Given the fact that Andrew teaches Greek, it is probably safe to assume that he has in the back of his mind the two types of love described by Plato in *The Symposium*.

Agamemnon sacrificed his child in order to go off to war. His father had butchered the children of his brother and served them to him at a banquet as an act of revenge. Andrew and Millie have a childless marriage. The barrenness of their marriage is not just a literal result of their incompatibility but a metaphor for it. Andrew has gone off to war and betrayed his wife by the simple fact of who he is, what the focus of his life is. On the simplest level, he is cerebral and perhaps ascetic, while she is physical and worldly. There marriage seems to be a classic case of the attraction of opposites. It is not hard to imagine how the student on a solitary walking tour in the Lake District was smitten by the beautiful girl at the mansion where he sought refreshment.

> FROBISHER. …Has anyone ever told you, Crocker-Harris, that you have a very attractive wife?
>
> ANDREW. Many people, sir. But then I hardly need to be told.

Similarly it is not hard to imagine how the shopkeeper's daughter admired the brilliant and ambitious scholar: "[H]e wasn't always the Crock, you know. He had a bit more gumption once."

Mr. Chips and his wife also had no children, because Mrs. Chippings died in childbirth along with the baby; but Mr. Chips felt he had thousands of children in his students through the years. The relationship between schoolmaster and student is a theme running through *The Browning Version*, but it is hardly a sentimental image of parent and child.

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15 Rattigan p. 50f

FRANK. …Why can't anyone ever be natural with the little blighters?

MILLIE. They probably wouldn't like it if you were.

FRANK. I don't see why not. No one seems to have tried it yet, anyway. I suppose the trouble is – we're all too scared of them. Either one gets forced into an attitude of false and hearty and jocular bonhomie like myself, or into the sort of petty, soulless tyranny which your husband uses to protect himself against the lower fifth.

Frobisher refers to the "soul destroying lower fifth" and Gilbert is "petrified" at the prospect of having to maintain discipline with his students. Millie bribes Taplow in order to have a few minutes alone with Frank and then interprets Taplow's gift to Andrew as a bribe. Andrew, despite his reputation, seems to be the one with the most sympathy for the students: "They aren't bad boys. Sometimes – a little wild and unfeeling, perhaps – but not bad." It is this sympathy which enables him to be so touched by Taplow's gift.

The frustrations he has experienced as a teacher reveal the connection between his early literary ambitions and his sense of vocation. There is buried deep within him an idealistic commitment and a desire to share his passion for literature which represent a kind of love, a desire to nurture which is often associated with parenting.

ANDREW; For two or three years I tried very hard to communicate to the boys some of my own joy in the great literature of the past. Of course, I failed, as you will fail, nine hundred and ninety nine times out of thousand. But a single success can atone and more than atone for all the failures in the world. And sometimes – very rarely, it is true – but sometimes I had that success. That was in the early years.

It seems as though such an ambition is as doomed to failure as his marriage. Given the nature of an institution like the English public school, the odds are just too great. A teacher who is motivated by something less idealistic and passionate stands a much better chance of "success," just as a marriage based more on compatibility and less on the passionate attraction of opposites is much more likely to be a comfortable arrangement. So the passionate scholar becomes The Himmler of the Lower Fifth and young love gives way to bitter hatred. His heart seems to be exhausted.

On his last day at the school, however, he gets a glimpse of the possibility that one student may have sensed something of the passion and beauty obscured by exercises in construing Greek. Taplow has revealed an "interest in the rather more lurid aspects of dramaturgy" and even expressed appreciation of him as a teacher. This victory is hardly unmitigated, but it does reveal that a flame

still flickers in Andrew's soul; and it may be giving him the strength to salvage something of his life. He is able at the very least to reclaim his ceremonial position at the school for his last hour, and he is able to assert himself with his wife enough to be a commanding presence at the dinner table.

ANDREW: Come along, my dear. We mustn't let our dinner get cold.

He is inviting her to join him in a meal before it is too late for them to enjoy it properly. The implication may be that some degree of balance has been restored to their relationship as a result of his revival. She may also be more available because of the end of her relationship with Frank, but there is, of course, no guarantee that she will join him in Dorset.

If Millie is Clytemnestra, then Andrew is Agamemnon, the weary warrior:

ANDREW: I can bear anything.

The armor of his rigid persona is not just a fortification he can hide behind; it is also an expression of an inner strength and integrity. To view Andrew as heroic rather than simply as a henpecked pedant or prig requires an instinctive sympathy with the part of him that required something that would "make life supportable." The play makes no attempt to elaborate on why life is such a burden, but it is something more basic than the frustration of teaching classical literature to boys who are more interested in golf or of suffering the barbs of a wife who has lost all respect for him. It has to do, I believe, with passion, with the incompatibility of inner fire and everyday life. Andrew and Millie both suffer from this in different ways. Frank and Frobisher both seem to be immune – at least so far as we can see within the context of the play.

Frobisher is the only other character in the play whose diction approaches the formality of Andrew's. They both relate to the world with a very self-conscious sense of style, but there is, I believe, a world of difference. Frobisher is maneuvering. His public persona is a polished shell enabling him to slide through the world with as little friction as possible. Andrew's self-conscious diction is part of his effort to hold himself together, a means of preserving some scrap of what he knows makes life worthwhile. Others mistake him for dead, but Taplow can't help but like him.

Much has been written about the relationship between Rattigan's sexual preferences and the content of his plays. Part of the revival of interest in Rattigan's plays has been associated with the emergence of gay studies as a legitimate academic discipline. If one is primarily interested in Rattigan himself, there can be no doubt that his plays shed light on the way he dealt with his own sexual and emotional needs. If, however, one is concerned more with how a play "works" than where it came from; consideration of Rattigan's own love relationships may not be particularly helpful in articulating the impact and meaning of

the play. I do not mean to discount the relevance of his life to a fuller understanding of his work. I certainly recognize that the "meaning" of his work cannot be apprehended without some sense of the context in which it was created, but I also believe that the emotional and psychological issues which permeate at least this play are universally human and not restricted to a particular personality type or sexual orientation. In fact I would argue that it is a sign of Rattigan's talent that he was able to write about elements of his own relationships in a way that revealed their universal dimensions without making them empty abstractions.

Certainly the kind of pain embodied in Andrew and Millie can be related to the pain experienced by a gay man living in England in the mid-twentieth century when homosexuality was a crime and someone like John Gielgud could be arrested. Rattigan has been faulted by some for rewriting roles in plays to change a character from homosexual to heterosexual in order to make the play more acceptable, but the discrepancy between private passion and public persona is not limited to a gay sensibility. The need for love takes many forms, but it knows no gender boundaries. In commenting on the lewd behavior of Major Pollock in *Separate Tables* Rattigan said, "If I had written the man as a homosexual the play may have been construed as a thesis drama begging for tolerance specifically of the homosexual. Instead it is a play for the understanding of everyone."[16]

16 NY Times from Young p136

There are two other footnotes concerning the structure of the play in the form of ideas Rattigan considered and rejected. The first is the possibility of having Andrew die of a heart attack at the end of the play.

> [T]he endings to *The Browning Version* and *The Deep Blue Sea* […] are, I know from experience, unsatisfactory to an audience in their inconclusiveness. The unregenerate, younger me would not have hesitated, in either instance, to have given both plays a satisfactorily 'tragic' end – death from heart trouble in the one, a second and successful suicide in the other. I would, I venture to think, have run little risk with the critics in so doing, for they, bless their hearts, have almost as much of Aunt Edna in them as myself, indignantly as they may deny the imputation; while audiences would certainly much have preferred, with both plays, to have left the theatre knowing that Andrew Crocker-Harris and Hester Collyer were both safely out of this unkind world and in a better place. Indeed, and rather ironically, I have, by a few critics, been even blamed for bringing down the curtain on these plays on quasi-happy endings. If only they knew how strongly the temptation had worked in me to contrive for them just the very endings that they felt I had run away from. But Paula Tanqueray's suicide has always seemed to me just a little suspect in its neatness and a little troubling in its convenience (I blush for the impudence). While *La Dame aux Camelias'* pro-

longed and romantic death pangs were surely not for Crocker-Harris.[17]

Surely this is an example of an alteration that would have radically changed the "meaning" of the play. Even if Andrew had been allowed his moment of assertiveness with the head master before he died, the implication would be that Millie had killed him with one last fatal stab when she cynically interpreted Taplow's gift. Any apparent revival after that moment would be only a last gasp or twitching in the throes of death. Why an audience, much less a critic, would prefer to have the play end this way is an interesting question. I suspect Rattigan is right to sense that it has to do with "neatness." In other words it provides a purely formal satisfaction. It provides a more complete "resolution." It might be more in keeping with the *Agamemnon* or the inversion of *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*, but it would, I believe, cheapen the play and satisfy only the viewer who was seeking excitement rather than insight.

When he saw a revival of the play in 1976 Rattigan expressed some desire to revise it and proposed among other things splitting it into two acts. The first act was to end with Andrew learning that Millie has burned his translation of the *Agamemnon*. It is difficult to see how this would strengthen the play. If one starts from the notion that a break in the middle of the play is necessary for some reason, the extra bit of spite from Millie might be an effective closing line for the first act. It would presumably come after Andrew has given Millie the news from Frobisher about his pension and the plans for his farewell remarks. The break might imply a passage of time which would give Taplow more time to buy the book for Andrew. That Andrew would inquire about the manuscript of his translation might indicate the extent to which his session with Taplow has revived his old aspirations, and Millie's revelation that she burned the manuscript would serve to prefigure her debunking of Taplow's gift. The main argument against this alteration seems to be the tightness of the original construction of the play and the intensity a single sustained act adds to the final impact.

Performance

This is, of course, one "reading" of *The Browning Version*. A play, like a musical composition, must be performed to be fully realized, and there is always considerable room for interpretation. In the course of rehearsals for any play actors may try a dizzying array of readings of lines or whole scenes as everyone works their way towards what will hopefully be a coherent interpretation. Sometimes an actor will form an interpretation of a play by trying different renditions in order to elicit responses from the director or the other actors. The interpretation may never be fully articulated or even verbalized at all, but it is what guides or inspires the performance. One of the benefits of being able to see (or even just hear) different ac-

17 Praface 2 xvii

tors performing the same role is the way in which it can reveal how much is up for grabs when dialog is performed.

Rattigan obviously appreciated the contributions of actors to his plays, as much as he may have also enjoyed satirizing their egos in *Harlenquinade*, the one act comedy packaged with *The Browning Version*. In his 1962 interview with John Simon he attempted to distinguish the kind of instinct required of an actor from the analytical intelligence required to understand a play:

> Well, I don't know any intelligent actor or actress who's good. I know plenty of intelligent men and women who also act. I suppose the ability to submerge one's own personality into the personality of another must call for a kind of perception. Is it a question of someone looking at himself and saying, "Oh, no I can't possibly do that?" Or is it a question of Larry Olivier, for instance, identifying himself with Oedipus without having the faintest idea of what he's playing – not the faintest – but of so identifying himself that he was able to work that animal cry from instinct. I asked him afterwards – it profoundly moved me – "How did you come to this?" He said, " Well, I did visualize myself as a wild animal trapped and the net was closing in on me – and suddenly I saw that the net was complete and there was no escape and I was a wild animal and I gave this cry."[18]

Each of the characters in *The Browning Version* can be played in a variety of ways which will have a different effect on the overall impact of the play. Suggesting some of the possibilities may shed some light on the construction of the play and the effect it can have.

Frobisher has the least substantial role. He is on stage for only about 11% of the duration of the play and his principal function is to deliver the decision about the pension and to ask Andrew to relinquish his rightful place in the ceremony. He also provides a foil for Millie. His interactions with her reveal a completely different side of her character than we see either with Frank or Andrew. Rattigan commented on the necessity of keeping secondary characters somewhat sketchy so that they did not distract one's attention to much from the principal characters.[19] It might seem that it does not matter too much how Frobisher is played.

The most critical consideration in the interpretation of Frobisher is, I believe, the extent to which he is viewed as satirical. This is a fairly intangible thing, but I would be inclined to describe it in terms of a temptation faced in interpreting Frobisher. The temptation is to make him more

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18 Theatre Arts April 1962 p.76

19 Young p. 73

"interesting" to the audience by emphasizing a comic dimension of his role. The most obvious example of this is when Frobisher commits what the stage directions describe as a gaffe by saying, "It's sometimes rather hard to remember that you are perhaps the most brilliant classical scholar we have ever had at the school…" In his attempt to extricate his foot from his mouth he succeeds only in inserting it even further by alluding to Andrew's "heroic battle…with the soul destroying lower fifth." There is a lack of sensitivity which can easily be seen as comic. The question is how comic.

One conventional way of discussing this is to put it in terms of how "broad" the interpretation or performance should be. Broader tends to be funnier at the risk of being shallower. Depending on the audience "subtler" may be more satisfying than "broader." While this distinction seems to point to something familiar or recognizable, it is not immediately obvious exactly what it connotes. Another approach is to describe it in terms of the attitude of the actor towards the character. It is the difference between a performance where there is a certain distance or judgment separating the actor from the character and one resulting from a complete empathy between the actor and the character. Even when the overall intent is satirical, actors are often advised to find a way to play the character that involves genuine empathy and to let the satire come from the interaction of the character and the situation. If the actor shares Millie's evaluation of Frobisher as an "old phoney," it will probably be apparent in the way he delivers these lines. Some actors can enjoy playing an old phoney. They may have a gift for capturing details of behavior which are immediate give-aways for hypocrisy and insensitivity and which make the performance an amusing caricature. Like a caricature certain traits are emphasized with broad strokes which appear to define the essence of the individual.

There is no question that a performance which is a kind of caricature can be entertaining or engaging. That is why it is a temptation when the character is as sketchy as Frobisher is in *The Browning Version*. The question is whether it is appropriate or necessary in the overall context of the play. Does it heighten the impact of Andrew's situation or does it distract from a real appreciation of it? A balance must be maintained between immediate impact for its own sake and the overall cumulative effect of the whole play.

No matter how Frobisher is played there will be an ironic underscoring of Andrew's plight. Frobisher forges on after his initial blunders and describes Buller in a way that only serves to reflect poorly on Andrew and to set up the contrast between Andrew and Fletcher. One could also play Frobisher as simply insensitive. He might realize his remarks would be considered tactless without really feeling any sympathy for Andrew. He might just want to avoid the unpleasant task of relaying the board's decision without feeling it is anything more than just a nuisance or mildly un-

pleasant duty. If the actor emphasizes Frobisher's anxiety and the dread with which he approaches a gruesome duty on this last day of term, his blunders may come across as painfully pathetic fumbling in the face overwhelming emotional obstacles as he digs himself deeper and deeper into a hole. He could still maintain his urbane gloss simply because he wears it everyday just like his well-tailored suits, but the audience would not get a dose of comic relief. We might sense Frobisher's limitations without being so inclined to smile about them. The irony in the scene would be more grim. The focus would probably remain more concentrated on Andrew. Whether this would be desirable is a typical decision faced by actors and directors in the performance of the play.

Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert present a similar choice. In the BBC Radio adaptation and the Caedmon recording of the play as well Mrs. Gilbert is given a somewhat comic interpretation. She sounds a little ditzy or silly. Peter Gilbert is allowed to sound irritated with her and the tension between the couple seems to be on the brink of erupting into something unpleasant. Neither of these choices is inevitable, and I suspect they were both made in the interest of heightening the energy of their scene.

It would be entirely possible to play Mrs. Gilbert as young and even a little naïve without having her seem silly. The stage instruction "Breathlessly" for Mrs. Gilbert when she says, "Oh. Do you cook?" does seem to encourage a satirical interpretation of her, but it is entirely possible that a girl from a wealthy family might be surprised that Millie would do her own cooking. Playing her "straight" might flatten the scene, but it would not remove the irony of the contrast she and her husband provide to Millie and Andrew. The same is true for the tension between them. All of their exchanges leading up to his suggestion that he married her for her money could be delivered as a kind of teasing repartee which has a much playfulness in it as it does explicit tension. The suggestion of an underlying problem would still be there, but the scene would not be pumped up for its own sake. Peter could be embarrassed and uncomfortable without taking it out directly on his wife. I obviously suspect that a subtler interpretation of the scene would be more effective. I am even inclined to put it in terms of respect for the audience's ability to be interested enough to see what it going on without having it belabored. I also believe that maintaining the focus on Andrew would be beneficial and in keeping with the tight, even claustrophobic structure of the play.

The role of Frank Hunter does not present the same broad choices as these minor roles. Its biggest challenge is how to realize the description of him as "a rugged young man – not perhaps quite as rugged as his deliberately-cultivated manner of ruthless honest makes him appear, but wrapped in all the self-confidence of the popular master." There is not much evidence of his "ruthless honesty" in his initial scene with Millie, especially if we believe his later confession that he intended to

end their affair when he came to visit her during the summer. His name seems to embody his inner conflicts: He struggles to be frank, and he is something of a predator. He is at odds with himself in virtually every aspect of his life. He is not interested in the science he teaches and says the science curriculum attracts "all the slackers." He is popular with the students, but uncomfortable with the way in which he achieves that popularity and afraid of them despite his seeming self-confidence. He enjoys his affair with Millie enough to sustain it, but feels it is dishonest and improper – even despicable.

In the course of the play his innate decency gradually seems to win out. His decision to end the affair with Millie sooner rather than later is precipitated mainly by witnessing the cruelty with which she punctures Andrew's enjoyment of Taplow's gift. The impact of this along with the shock of discovering that Andrew knew about their affair all along apparently brings him to his senses. He is able to take responsibility for his behavior and to be open about it with Andrew. His attempt to restore Andrew's appreciation of Taplow's gift is a sincere gesture. His suggestion that he come visit Andrew in Dorset may be absurd and ineffectual, but it is nonetheless a sincere gesture of friendship as well. Even Andrew recognizes it as such in rejecting it initially.

When Frank and Andrew shake hands as they say good-bye, it is the first time they have connected as peers. One of the small things they share during this moment is a sympathy for Taplow. Andrew agrees to let Frank take word to Taplow that he has obtained his remove, although it is "highly irregular." For a very brief moment the two men are free from the restrictions of the social convention and able to express their better nature.

Whether this kind of interpretation of Hunter's role in the play can have any bearing on the way an actor actually performs the part is something only an actor could know. The way in which Hunter attempts to reassure Andrew in the end will presumably be different if he is doing so out of genuine regard for Andrew than if he were doing so out of an inability to accept what he has just witnessed and a desperate attempt to make it go away. How this difference can be manifest in the speech and behavior of an actor is part of the enigmatic gift that possesses talented actors. No amount of conversation with James Lipton can explain it or even describe it adequately.

As I indicated earlier I believe Taplow's character is deliberately undefined. This insight is of course even less helpful to an actor preparing for the role than the kind of interpretation offered for Hunter. Is it possible for an actor to play Taplow without deciding whether he bought the book as a bribe? Even if his primary goal is to keep the audience from knowing, does he have to believe one way or the other himself? Or can he believe that Taplow himself does not "really" know why he bought the book? Does the actor even have to decide whether Taplow bought the book after Millie

witnessed his mimicry of Andrew? It is perhaps the only logical conclusion; since if he had bought it before his last lesson with Andrew, he surely would have brought it to the lesson to give to him.

Surely it is reasonable to assume that Taplow bought the book both as a bribe and as a sincere expression of gratitude and sympathy. It might not have occurred to him to buy the book if he were not worried about Millie's having seen his disrespectful behavior. Given an impulse to buy a gift, it might not have occurred to him to buy a verse translation of the *Agamemnon* if he did not have some admiration for Andrew's appreciation of classical culture. Perhaps the key for an actor is exactly how much sensitivity Taplow should reveal when Andrew opens up to him.

We know already from his conversation with Frank that Taplow is a perceptive and perhaps more capable of sympathy than most of his classmates. I think Andrew would have to sense a fair degree of interest and empathy in order to be able to talk about his desire to translate the *Agamemnon*. The moment between them should I think be an extraordinary one emotionally, but it should also seem natural and almost inconsequential. I suspect Taplow's most difficult line may be "Shall I go on, sir?" Andrew has apparently withdrawn into his private reflections and the stage directions say Taplow "steals a timid glance at him." That glance might convey everything about how Taplow really feels towards The Crock and how aware he is of the intimacy of the moment.

An actress's interpretation of Millie is a pivotal point which determines the balance of the entire play. One of the things that seems to have happened in the course of the play's history is a shift in the interpretation of Millie. Rebellato describes this evolution:

> The critics of the first production generally agreed with *The Sketch's* verdict that 'there has not been this year a more hateful woman on our stage', and one described Mary Ellis's performance as "a virulent piece of over-sexed nastiness.' The first professional London revival in 1976 at the King's Head, Islington, directed by Stewart Potter, seemed to provoke similar feelings. Nigel Stock's Crocker-Harris was greatly praised, B.A. Young admiring the 'little explosions of passion that trouble his existence.' However Barbara Jefford was felt to be hampered by a role which was 'just a bit too insensitive for real credibility'…
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> In 1980, *The Browning Version* and *Harlequinade* were the first Rattigan plays to be performed at the National Theatre, featuring Alec McCowen as Crocker-Harris, Geraldine McEwan as Millie and Nicky Henson as Frank Hunter. But now critical perceptions had changed. According to B.A. Young, McEwan's Millie was 'never outwardly unpleasant, simply uttering her barbs of cruelty as if they were everyday conversation and so emphasizing the sadness of having to live with them so long'. For Michael Gillington, McEwan 'rescues the wife from vulgar bitchery and

shows her as someone equally trapped'. And of Millie's cruelest moment Robert Cushman notes that "Miss McEwan lets you see exactly why she does it'. Only Sheridan Morley demurred, wishing McEwan had been the 'snobbish and vindictive wife' he felt Millie to be. Eight years later, at the Royal Theatre in London's West End, Dorothy Tutin's Millie 'strides around the stage with physically hungry savagery' her thwarted desires only able to be released in the form of spite.[20]

One of the most striking features of John Frankenheimer's direction of the *Dupont Show Of The Month* version of the play for CBS in 1959 is the way in which he introduces Millie. We first see her in a large close up with a cigarette dangling from her lips in a way I associate more with women playing slot machines in Las Vegas than with a well-bred or even just socially ambitious English woman of the 1950's. This seems to be an early indication of Frankenheimer's tendency to go for heightened impact even in a drawing room drama. It is as though he feels he must set up her behavior by presenting her initially in an unappealing way or by making her seem hardened.

Millie is largely defined by her relationship with three men: Andrew, Frank and Forbisher. We see her first in a relationship characterized by an imbalance. Frank's inability to return the kind of passion she feels for him seems at first to be a function of the immediate circumstances. He is nervous and hesitant for fear of being discovered, but we soon realize that the imbalance is inherent in the relationship. He simply does not love her in the way she loves him. She professes to understand and not care so long as she can feel he finds her attractive. The key issue here is how desperate to play her and whether her passion can be played in a way that makes her sympathetic or at least appealing. Can she be sexy in an attractive way?

We are, of course, witnessing the dissolution of her relationship with Frank rather than its inception, which surely must have involved a flirtation invested with sensuality if not sexuality. We get a glimpse of her flirtatiousness with Frobisher, and there is a fair amount of latitude in how this can be played and perceived. If we have already formed a judgment about Millie, we may be inclined to view her exchanges with Frobisher as unappealing manipulation. Her own contemptuous description of him as an "old fool" or "old phoney of a headmaster" certainly seem to confirm this interpretation of her flirtatiousness. It might be possible, though, for an actress to play the scene with Frobisher in a way that would reveal playful sexuality as a completely instinctive response in Millie – something that points to an attractive facet of her personality and is at odds the contempt she expresses for him.

Do we really believe that Millie would kill herself if Frank does not come to Bradford? Does

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she really believe she might? The obvious answer is that neither we nor she really believes it. She "means it" in exactly the same way she wants to believe Frank "means it" when he tells her later that they are through. It seems at the moment to be the appropriate expression of what she feels. She is clinging to Frank, driven by needs which cause her to humiliate herself and to act in ways that she has promised herself to avoid. She cannot refrain from expressing anger about the fact that Frank "forgot" to sit with her at Lords. She is reduced to pleading with him rather than charming him and seducing him.

How we respond to Millie's dilemma with Frank will obviously color our interpretation of her relationship with Andrew. If we view her initially as a passionate woman who cannot find someone who reciprocates her passion in a way that nourishes her, we shall be quick to understand Andrew's explanation of how their marriage degenerated into the current stand-off. If, on the other hand, we see her as a self-destructive woman using her charms to seduce inappropriate men who are certain to frustrate her, we may understand the fury which she directs at Andrew; but it is hardly likely we shall find it sympathetic. At best it would be the fury of a natural force, a harpy whose behavior is ordered by things beyond human control. Andrew would be view largely as a victim, responsible only for the fact that he allowed himself to be seduced. There is perhaps some justification for this view in the parallel nature of Andrew's failure as a schoolmaster. He was seduced by naïve ideals in a world which is hostile to naïve idealism. He was doomed by the realities of the English educational system, even though he himself was a product of that system.

Presenting Millie as a destructive force of nature may be the easiest way to give coherence to the events of the play, but it is surely not what an advocate of a "theatre of character" intended. The most constructive approach for the actress playing Millie is probably to begin with the assumption that she is a sympathetic character, find the aspects of her which can be appealing to others and work from there to discover the roots of the clearly unsympathetic behavior which makes up so much of her role in the play. The problem, of course, is to find moments in the play when Millie can reveal her sympathetic aspects. She seems angry and contemptuous so much of the time. Even her generosity with Taplow clearly stems form a selfish desire to be alone with Frank and her attempt to connect with him via her uncle seems like "swanking."

The issue here is whether principal characters in a drama must be "sympathetic."

ANDREW: We are both of us interesting subjects for your microscope.

Is a detached fascination or clinical interest sufficient to engage the audience so that they can be open to whatever effect a play seeks to create? It is a common assumption in writing plays or screenplays that the audience must identify with

one or more of the characters and that this identification is only possible if the character is basically "sympathetic." This is often understood in simplistic terms so that clichéd or formulaic information is used to insure audience sympathy, but such a misunderstanding does not invalidate the idea.

Villains may be exempt from this need for sympathy, and it has been suggested that Millie is perhaps Rattigan's only dyed-in-the-wool villain. According to Wansell

> She is the only true villain Terence Rattigan ever allowed himself to create. He called her 'an unmitigated bitch'.[21]

It may seem presumptuous to claim that Andrew Crocker-Harris understands his wife better than her creator, but I do believe interpreting Millie in this manner reduces the complexity of the play and the value of what it has to offer. I also must question whether Rattigan himself really viewed her so simplistically, given the absence of the context of his remark.

One way to distinguish "drama" from "melodrama" is in terms of the complexity of the audience's sympathy for the adversaries in the conflict which is being presented. Clear cut conflicts between the good guy and the bad guy have a different kind of entertainment value than a conflict between two sympathetic and complex characters. Millie may be cruel, but she is also passionate and alive. We can sympathize with her needs, and we can find her attractive.

Another common dictum for playwrights is that passivity is not sympathetic and that the principal character in a drama must be "active." It is often considered virtually axiomatic that drama is essentially the presentation of action as embodied in a central character. A corollary of this is that victims are unsympathetic and the central character in a drama cannot just be a victim.

It is easy to see Andrew as a victim – both of his wife and of the school's board of governors. He can even be viewed as a victim of nature, because his weak heart is forcing him to retire. Certainly Andrew's passivity is a central issue in the play.

MILLIE. …And what did you say? Just sat there and made a joke in Latin, I suppose?

ANDREW. There wasn't very 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 from that old phoney of a headmaster. But then, of course, I'm not a man.

The theme of gender appropriate behavior is one which the play shares with the *Agamemnon*, and there is certainly no doubt that within the boundaries of that play Agamemnon is a victim. Andrew's acquiescence is viewed as evidence that

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he is "dead." Both Taplow and Millie have their reasons for thinking that Andrew is unfeeling to the point of being dead. An audience's cumulative frustration with Andrew's passivity while he is being attacked from all sides is one of the reasons a critic could respond to the original production by saying

> …[W]hen at the end Mr. Portman utters into the telephone these apparently quite unexciting words, 'I am of the opinion that occasionally an anticlimax can be surprisingly effective,' [the audience's] heart responds as to the sound of a trumpet.[22]

Our perception of Andrew evolves during the course of the play. We develop an image of him based on reports from other characters before we see him. We then adjust that image as we observe his behavior and learn more about him. At some point, though, Andrew himself begins to change.

It is another common prescription for drama that the principal character must change and that this change should be integrally related to the events of the play. Andrew's change is certainly triggered by the events, but it is more a recovery of his lost self than a change in his basic nature.

MILLIE: …he wasn't always the Crock, you know.

Andrew reconnects with the passions of his youth through a realization of how completely he has failed. It is as though he must hit rock bottom before he can stand again. He knew he was "dead," but it takes Taplow's enthusiasm for the Agamemnon and Gilbert's revelation of his epithet to push him into the realization that he can still be alive. He tastes for a moment the joy of a shared passion for literature when Taplow gives him the book, and is perhaps able to see Millie's jealous cruelty for what it is once he recovers his equilibrium. He experiences in a few minutes a metaphor for his life and marriage, and it enables him to see things "in a different light." The most that he can do is to tell Millie he is not going to join her in Bradford and to announce to the headmaster that he will speak last at the ceremony as is his privilege. These are small gestures but in the context they are tantamount to rising from the grave.

It is probably true that to experience Andrew's resurrection in this way an audience must be sympathizing or identifying with him for much of the play. What is the basis for this sympathy, and how can a performance insure that the audience is drawn into the character? Andrew is set up by a considerable amount of information before he makes his entrance. We have heard that he is "barely human" and protects himself against his students by means of a "petty, soulless tyranny." His entrance is also a threatening intrusion just as Millie's entrance was.

The door is pushed open. FRANK has made a move towards MILLIE but stops at

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the sound. MILLIE has recovered herself as ANDREW CROCKER-HARRIS appears by the screen. Despite the summer sun he wears a serge suit and a stiff collar. He carries a portfolio and looks, as ever, neat, complacent, unruffled. He speaks in a very gentle voice which he rarely raises.

All of the details of his appearance and manner can be interpreted as unappealing traits. Even his entrance throws cold water on passion. It is easy to see him as the epitome of English repression and academic pedantry. How one responds to the English stiff upper lip is entirely a function of what sense one has of its roots. Part of what *The Browning Version* is about, I believe, is the meaning of this aspect of Englishness. Some analyses of Rattigan's plays emphasize the way in which they attack the emotional and sexual repression so common in the English personality, but the portrayal of Andrew Crocker-Harris is not simply an attack on or an examination of the devastating effects of repression. It is an exploration of how the repression functions as a means of survival and how it can be possible to break out of it. A defense mechanism is, after all, constructed in order to defend something precious. It can become an obstacle to life, but its primary purpose is survival.

Why does Andrew wear a serge suit and stiff collar on a hot summer day? A contemporary American may assume that this is an indication of a vain attempt to maintain "appearances" and a stubborn refusal to let go of inappropriate traditions. The stiff collar signifies an unnatural stiffness in his personality which is unappealing. It is also possible, however, to see his attire like his speech as an indication of his integrity. Even in the summer sun he is true to his sense of what is right and proper.

The key to the interpretation of Andrew in a performance may be in casting someone with charisma. There is potentially a discrepancy between what we have been led to expect and what we actually see when Andrew enters, and the only thing that is going to make this apparent is the natural charisma of the actor. Charisma is probably impossible to define, but one source of it is a sense of self and an integrity which generates a magnetic energy. I think it is highly likely that a young man who won every conceivable honor at Oxford and seduced a glamorous, ambitions girl could have had this kind of charisma. I also think it is plausible that it has survived despite the battering that his ego has taken over the years.

We hear a lot during the course of the play about Andrew's ability to maintain discipline, but we actually see no direct evidence of it. Based on what we hear before Andrew enters, we might expect a ferocious tyrant, although we have been briefed not to expect that by Taplow's commentary on sadism.

The only concrete example of his "tyranny" is the story of his humiliation of Taplow when he

laughs out of politeness. Even this, however, can be construed as a matter of standards or expectations rather than tyranny. Andrew does not want his students pretending to know or feel something they do not actually know or feel. Taplow is being reprimanded for compromising his integrity for the sake of social intercourse. There are obviously many other factors in play during the exchange, and the actual outcome of the moment is never revealed because the story is cut short by Millie's entrance. Taplow seems to view the incident mainly as an indication of how Andrew withdraws from any normal human contact. His point is that Andrew "seems to hate people to like him" not that Andrew has cruelly humiliated him in front of his classmates.

Andrew may be viewed as a joke, but he commands by example. That seems to be the only explanation for the difference between what we hear about him and what we see of him. Andrew is not cruel. He clearly feels sympathy for the students regardless of his inability to show it. He just expects them to adhere to the same ideals as he does – ideals represented by the traditions of classical education. The unruffled exterior and the "very gentle voice which he rarely raises" are both part of the fortification inside of which he is trapped and part of the "rod of iron" by which he "rules."

The implication is that Frobisher's epithet reveals more about Frobisher's lack of understanding than it does about Andrew. Frobisher sees the effect on the students, and his limited imagination supplies the only explanation it can. Similarly Frank misinterprets Taplow's fear of cutting his extra work. Taplow's image of Andrew following him home is an instinctive metaphor for his own conscience and an indication of the extent to which he has internalized Andrew's expectations.

Many commentaries on the play describe Andrew as pedantic. There is obviously justification for this in Andrew's strict adherence to the rule regarding announcement of form results and his insistence that Taplow take extra work on the next to last day of term. There is no reason to conclude, however, that Andrew is focused solely on petty and trivial aspects of his work. He may seem to some of his colleagues to be a corpse going through the motions of teaching, but we get to see beneath the surface during his lesson with Taplow. If anything Andrew's problem is that he cared so much about the larger issues involved in education that he had to retreat from a world that seemed impervious or even hostile to them. He is indeed "all shriveled up inside" but an actor can convey sense of what remains and what it once was.

In the BBC radio version of the play Nigel Stock has Andrew express frustration and irritation when Millie tells him she has sent Taplow to the chemist. He raises his voice, speaks rapidly and seems cross with Millie. It adds a certain energy to Andrew's entrance, and it is certainly a plausible reading of the dialog, but it seems to me to get Andrew off on the wrong foot. Lee Richardson in the Caedmon Audio recording of the play

delivers the same lines with complete equanimity. This is obviously more in keeping with the stage direction concerning how Andrew speaks, and the seeming discrepancy between the content and the manner in which it is delivered points to something unique about the character. The result is, I believe, even more impact for his entrance.

One intriguing point of attack in considering how to interpret Andrew is the way in which he addresses Millie as "my dear." Is it conceivable that there is still some shred of affection in his use of this formality? Clearly it is an expression that was adopted early in their marriage. What is the significance of the fact that he still employs it? Mille also calls Andrew "dear." She even begins her cruelest attack on him with "My dear." Sheila Allen as Millie in the Caedmon recording emphasizes the irony in her use of the term, and Millie seems much more likely to address Andrew in this manner when others are present than she does in private. It is almost as though for her the term has become a weapon, a way of reiterating for Andrew how contemptuous of him she really is.

Andrew's use of the term seems more natural. It can be seen as part of the façade of civility he maintains at all times. He also addresses Frank as "my dear Hunter" at a time when he is clearly trying to rebuff him or push him away. The formality can be interpreted as signifying condescension. It has enough connotations of glib social interactions that it may be viewed as a sign of superficiality. Once again, though, I believe the more effective interpretation would be to allow some element of affection to cling to the phrase as though the performance of social ritual engenders the spirit behind it no matter what the circumstances.

When Andrew says goodbye to Gilbert and wishes him well, he addresses him as "my dear fellow." I see no reason not to interpret this as a sincere expression of good will and sympathy. He has opened up to Gilbert in an uncharacteristic manner. As disturbed and embarrassed as Andrew may be, he clearly has responded positively towards Gilbert and is able to offer him encouragement. The civility which is second nature to him opens the door to genuine generosity.

Part of what I sense in this aspect of Andrew's manner is an abstract commitment to civility which is rooted in a passionate, albeit repressed, need for emotional connection and loving support. He knows he needs it, and he believes that others are equally entitled to it. It is part of what makes life "supportable."

There is another striking moment of how this civility functions in his marriage. As he is showing Frank the time table for the next term, he makes the polite gesture of including Millie in the exchange:

ANDREW. …that's a new idea of mine – Millie,
this might interest you –

MILLE. (Suddenly harsh.) You know it bores me to death –

ANDREW. Millie has no head for this sort of work.

Andrew surely knows that Millie not only has no head for this sort of work but finds it petty and probably thinks it is pathetic of him to do it without getting credit for it. It might be possible to play Andrew as an oblivious pedant who can still think his wife might be interested in his work, but it is the gesture that counts. He need not believe she has any interest, but he can believe that he owes her enough respect to include her in the conversation. Rather than just being a hen-pecked and cuckolded fool, he is a man who can bear anything with dignity. This is a character that requires a very powerful presence on the stage.

The Browning Version was written for John Gielgud. He had originally been very enthusiastic about it, but by the time the production was ready to get under way he had lost interest. Part of the problem was that *The Browning Version* was part of a package of two one-act plays, the second of which was a farce about a theatrical touring company. After Gielgud officially withdrew, the plays were offered to Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh. They liked the farce, but did not think The Browning Version was right for them. Ironically the Lunts read and liked *The Browning Version* but Rattigan did not dare show them the farce since the two central characters being spoofed in it were modeled on the Lunts. Alec Guinness was offered the play. He was interested but unavailable for the time when the play was scheduled to be produced. Frederic March was offered the role and Cedric Hardwicke as well. Finally Eric Portman was cast and won an award as best actor of the year for his performance.