C. M. Bowra on W. S. Barrett: An Unpublished Testimonium

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Introduction

W. S. Barrett, *Euripides Hippolytus, Edited with Introduction and Commentary* (Oxford 1964), remains one of the most lasting English contributions to the study of Greek tragedy. Barrett (1914–2001), outside of Keble College, Oxford, is little more than a name on a titlepage. He rarely travelled. I know of no lectures he delivered in foreign countries. Further, after his book he published only some three articles, two largely forgotten in *Festschriften*. No complete bibliography of his writings is known to me. There is a brief life by his student and successor at Keble, A. S. Hollis. Among much else the names of his parents and the profession of his father are omitted. We are told that students enjoyed his lectures. I wonder. Dr John Taylor informs me (*per litt.* 18 January 2005): “In my experience Barrett was an extremely boring lecturer. He once looked up from his prepared script to offer what promised to be a Housmanish admission of feeling but it turned out to be simply the observation that he had reached the same point in his notes (on Pindar) by the end of fourth week every year since 1958 (vel sim.).” And we are told little of the man.

I reviewed *Hippolytus* at *CP* 60 (1965) 277–282. The review is critical but in a precise manner. I note numerous errors and omissions. Revealingly Hollis cites only the panegyric by Hugh Lloyd-Jones, *JHS* 85 (1965) 164–171. I do think that when

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writing lives of the dead for posterity both sides should be presented and the reader allowed to decide. I sent an offprint of my review to Sir Maurice Bowra (1898–1971), Warden of Wadham, to whom W. G. Forrest had introduced me several years before. I edit his kind reply to a colleague 34 years his junior here. The typed letter is in my possession.

The text

From the Warden  
Wadham College  
Telephone No. 44045  
Oxford  
17th September 1966

Dear Mr Calder,

Thank you very much for three most interesting and enjoyable offprints. The German pieces is [sic] very fine, and full of good stuff. I met H. Weir Smyth in his old age and found him charming. He took down his Aeschylus and said: “That was written by a man who still had blood in his veins.” He was not too gentlemanly. Not elaborate, or southern colonel, or anything like that. Joshua Whatmough left me flabbergasted. I thought him mad

2 See my article in DBC I 100–102.
5 This would have been during Bowra’s guest professorship at Harvard September 1936–February 1937: see C. M. Bowra, Memories 1898–1939 (London 1966) 309–330. He mentions neither Smyth nor Whatmough there. Smyth would have been in his eightieth year.
6 For the authoritative life of Joshua Whatmough (1897–1964) see William F. Wyatt, Jr., in Biographical Dictionary 688–691. Wyatt tactfully catches his eccentricity to which as a former student I may also testify: see my recollections of the man at Men in their Books (Studiaomata 67 [Hildesheim
and offensive, but [t]he may have had other and better qualities.

You treat Barrett with exemplary fairness. He is Fraenkel’s best (and only) pupil and has all the marks of the beast. A total Philistine to the point of illiteracy outside his immediate subject. Extremely conceited and proud of having done so well. Maddening at all meetings and committees. But in the end childlike and rather touching. The rudeness comes from thinking that other people don’t exist.

yours [sic] sincerely

C. M. Bowra

What have we learned?

The letter, because from so well informed a source, is further and important evidence for the Oxbridge struggle between Wissenschaft and Dilettantismus. A binding decision is impossible but surely Bowra and Fraenkel for many epitomize the division. The Oxbridge tradition was gentlemen teaching the sons of gentlemen to become gentlemen by translating selected texts precisely, with little attention to content, and by composing essays or better still poems in Greek or Latin. There was small
interest in von Ranke’s ideal of recreating a lost world “as it actually was.”

The struggle between old and new reached a boiling point with the appointment of Eduard Fraenkel, a refugee from Nazi antisemitism, fired from his Ordinariat at Freiburg, to the Corpus Professorship of Latin at Oxford in 1935. He was successor to A. C. Clark over the objections of the Establishment and in part because of a public letter supporting the appointment by A. E. Housman. Because Housman was little loved and his legacy often despised, this only aggravated matters. So fine a scholar as K. J. Dover has dismissed Housman’s work as “a disastrous influence on the classical scholarship of our time.” That Fraenkel was a Jew did not ease matters. And he was not the most amiable of men. His student Lloyd-Jones attests that he “at first and for long after alienated many well-wishers by his tactlessness and insensitivity.” His brutal review of the Harvard Servius permanently ended any American invitations. “From whatever point of view we look at the new Servius, we see serious deficiencies.

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The dullness of this edition, though unnecessary, is, perhaps, forgivable; its inaccuracy and haphazardness are not.”

Bowra’s detestation of Fraenkel is attested elsewhere. In a published letter to Noel Annan he reveals that Fraenkel, along with Denys Page, refused to congratulate him on the occasion of his knighthood in 1951. K. J. Dover in 1953 seeking to reform the Classics syllabus at Oxford won the support of Fraenkel and Barrett. The reform failed. Dover writes: “Fraenkel’s support was the kiss of death, because so many of the older members of the Subfaculty (notably Maurice Bowra) resented any criticisms that came from him …” The dislike was mutual. I have argued that Fraenkel’s damnation of Gilbert Highet (1906–1978) written on 24 December 1951 was motivated in part by Highet’s friendship with Bowra. Just as Fraenkel disliked Highet because he was a student of Bowra, so Bowra did Barrett because he was a student of Fraenkel. Odium philologicum omnia vinct!

January, 2005

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16 Fraenkel, Kleine Beiträge 389. The origin of this famous review has never been elucidated. Sir Ronald Syme informed me on 24 January 1975 that he had learned “from Arthur Darby Nock in his cups” that Nock had urged Hugh Last to assign and publish the review, although JRS normally avoided such purely philological matters. Did Nock for some reason wish a damnatio memoriae for E. K. Rand? The review successfully delayed publication of further volumes for decades.


20 I am grateful to four learned friends who have much improved an earlier version: James Morwood (Wadham College, Oxford), Paul Naiditch (UCLA), W. J. Slater (McMaster University), and John Taylor (Tonbridge School).