

“Hopeful that Aeschylus will not turn in his grave!”

Carmel Serracino

The run-up to the B. I. Players’ production of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, in March 1950 at the British Institute in Valletta, Malta, was characterized by some vigorous advertisement on the *Times of Malta*.¹ On 9 March, the paper published a promotional article by Michael Kissaun, revealing *inter alia* that correspondence relative to the representation had taken place between the co-producer² and director of the production, Major Alec Cathcart Bruce, and the translator of the version that was being staged, Professor Gilbert Murray.

The revered stature of Gilbert Murray as the preeminent British Hellenist of the first half of the 20th century, and the possible discovery of letters related to the representation of a Greek tragedy in Malta, made a time-constrained search among the vast collection of the Papers of Gilbert Murray at the Bodleian Library of Oxford University a daunting but uniquely exciting task.³ Happily, the quest through papers belonging to the last months of 1949 and the first six months of 1950 yielded two letters, reproduced hereunder, which Cathcart Bruce had written to Murray during the production. The first letter proves that there had formerly been at least one other exchange of letters, and the second attests to Murray having responded to questions posed by Cathcart Bruce in relation to the play. Unfortunately, Murray was not accustomed to keep copies of the letters he wrote, unless they were particularly important ones. For this reason, Murray’s letters of reply to Cathcart Bruce, or copies

¹ C. Serracino (2016), 296–298.

² Alec Cathcart Bruce was assisted by Helen Laybourne.

³ My gratitude goes to the staff of the Weston Library (Bodleian) for their excellent assistance.

thereof, appear to be missing from Oxford's collection. They are currently neither to be found in the archives at the British Council in Malta.⁴

Bearing a friendly though respectful tone, the two letters bristle with the great enthusiasm which their author invested into his dramatic initiatives. Alec Cathcart Bruce, a retired British Major, was the director of the British Institute in Malta between 1944 and 1950.⁵ His love for the theatre spurred him to form the B. I. Players, for which he directed, and acted in, a number of plays.⁶ In 1946 Cathcart Bruce also instituted a drama study circle where classes and lectures in dramatic instruction were organized, thus becoming a pioneer in the field of formal dramatic training on the island.⁷ In 1949 he directed Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* for the Malta Branch of the Virgil Society, a production which proved to be a resounding success.⁸ This triumph is naturally mentioned in his letter to Murray as a testimonial to his (Cathcart Bruce's) capability in taking on the possibly more challenging *Agamemnon*, but, true to the affable personality of the man, so is his youthful role as 'a heavy-armed soldier' in a production of the same Aeschylus' tragedy at Bradfield College in 1911, where Cathcart Bruce studied as a young man in England. There was, of course, good reason to make reference to Bradfield College, one which Murray would have fully appreciated. Since 1890, a Greek play had been produced in the original language every three years at Bradfield, in the College's open-air Greek theatre modelled on the theatre of Epidauros. This activity had raised the prestige of the College significantly: 'together with the Greek plays at Oxford and at Cambridge from 1882, the Greek play at Bradfield College in Berkshire was to become another notable date in the social calendar'.⁹

⁴ I would like to thank Mr Simon A. Quinn, of the British High Commission in Malta, for his interest and help.

⁵ *Times of Malta*, 29.3.1950, 3.

⁶ J. Schranz *et al.* (1994), 586; J. C. Mompalao de Piro (1985), 46.

⁷ J. Schranz *et al.* (1994), 591.

⁸ C. Serracino (2016), 293–24, and, for the Virgil Society in Malta, 285–288.

⁹ E. Hall and F. Macintosh (2005), 457.

Gilbert Murray, the Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford between 1908 and 1936, had turned 84 years old on 2 January 1950, only a few weeks before the composition of the first Cathcart Bruce's letter transcribed hereunder. One imagines that the octogenarian Murray would have been bemused by the casual gusto of Cathcart Bruce's style of writing, devoid as it is of the formality that regularly typified letters from school or college principals requesting the Professor's permission to stage one of his several translations of Greek plays¹⁰ (many examples of such letters survive in the Bodleian's Murray Papers). Characteristically, the indefatigable Murray always considered it his hallowed duty to reply promptly to the letters and requests he received: '[...] only his secretaries know how incompatible with professional learning was his self-imposed obligation of response – instant, apt, and sensible – to the most preposterous calls upon his



A scene from *Agamemnon* featuring the altar of Dionysus inscribed with the name of the god in Greek.

¹⁰ For an assessment of the impact of Murray's translations on the propagation of Ancient Greek Literature among readers and theatre-goers in the English-speaking world, see J. Morwood (2007).

time.¹¹ Thus, in answering Cathcart Bruce he would have probably advanced some ideas to enlighten the director's dilemma regarding Cassandra's 'prophetic habiliments' or whether it should be herself or Clytemnestra to carry 'an embroidered net' (see below). Regrettably, though understandably of course, George Mifsud Montanaro is nowadays unable to recall how the director had solved these specific problems for his production.¹² As a young man in his early twenties entrusted with the role of the Chorus Leader of the *Agamemnon*, Mgr Mifsud Montanaro was one of the actors who, in the words of Cathcart Bruce, experienced the 'delight' of learning the Aeschylean lines as translated by Murray.

The first communication, on a letterhead of 'The British Institute, Valletta, Malta, G.C.', is dated 14 January 1950, paragraph-numbered and addressed to Murray's residence at Boars Hill, Oxford:¹³

Dear Professor Murray,

1. Your very kind letter reached me last night, and I am most grateful that you have seen fit to charge only a nominal fee for our March production of the "The Agamemnon" in the British Institute here. I may add a cheque in payment is being forwarded at once to the Secretary, the United Nations Association.¹⁴
2. It is with much trepidation that I have taken on such a production as that of "The Agamemnon", but I am fortified firstly because I am an old Bradfield boy, and was a heavy-armed soldier in 1911 in "The Agamemnon" of that year. I have seen subsequent productions – more than one – as well as "The Alkestis", "Antigone", "The Rhesus". I have also played Pentheus in "The Bacchae" in an

¹¹ M. I. H. (1957), unpagued.

¹² Personal communication with the author on 27 December 2016. On the brothers George and Frank Mifsud Montanaro's role in the formation and the theatrical activities of the Virgil Society's branch in Malta, see C. Serracino (2016).

¹³ The letter's official reference is VAL/0340/2/36.

¹⁴ Murray was joint President, 1945–1947 and 1949–1957, and sole President, 1947–1949, of the United Nations Association of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; see J. Smith (1960), 111, note 3.

amateur open-air production in Holland years ago,¹⁵ and of recent years produced with some success “The Iphigenia in Aulis” (Melian Stawell’s delightful translation)¹⁶ and adored doing it. So, sir, I trust you will feel that we shall all do our best to be worthy of so great a play. Later on I will send you a programme and tell you how things have gone. Most of our cast are Maltese members of the Institute and I myself am playing the Watchman.¹⁷

3. We shall play not only on our stage, but also on and around a set of semi-circular steps leading from stage to audience, and I have in mind to bring the Herald running down the hall from the back of the audience.¹⁸ You will realise that we shall not play to a specialised audience, and that as far as may be, I am adjusting the production to modern taste to some extent and making cuts in the choral odes. We are using no music, but speaking the choral parts either in unison or individually to get as much variety of voice as possible. The traditional altar to Dionysos¹⁹ will not be omitted and surely March is the proper time of year to do the play!
4. I have asked the British Council Recorded Sound Department to approach you officially and ask if you will record a talk for us about the play on simple lines, with a special note as to the function of

¹⁵ This 1928 production of Murray’s translation of the *Bacchae* is recorded on the University of Oxford’s online database A.P.G.R.D. (<http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/productions/production/8860> accessed on 02.01.2017).

¹⁶ Euripides’ *Iphigenia in Aulis* was not among Murray’s published translations.

¹⁷ Besides Cathcart Bruce as the Watchman and George Mifsud Montanaro as the Chorus Leader, the cast featured a mixture of Maltese and British actors: Victor Mercieca (Agamemnon), Angela O’Shea (Clytemnestra), Faith Flynn (Cassandra), Lewis Portelli (the Herald), Raphael Simpson (Aegisthus), Francis Bencini, Michael Calascione, Francis Bernard, Adrian Mercieca, Francis Laferla, and Charles Arrigo (Chorus of Argive Elders).

¹⁸ This *coup de theatre* gained the admiration of *The Times of Malta* theatre-critic, T. Cyril Parker, who reviewed the play on 22.3.1950.

¹⁹ The altar would also bear the name of the god written in Greek: see photograph, reproduced from Ch. Arrigo (1998–99), 51.

the Chorus.²⁰ If this should eventuate it would be of very great benefit to prepare the audience beforehand, as I should have it broadcast over our local Rediffusion network.

5. I would ask you to help me in one matter, in re the prophetic habiliments of Cassandra? They are, I believe – fillet, net and wand. I would like your guidance and suggestion in this, since I am no classic scholar. One other point. Does Cassandra carry an embroidered net or does Clytemnestra? I am not very clear. Alas, I was not able to see the Bradfield production last summer by Bellamy,²¹ whom I know well, but I see from the photos that Cassandra has an embroidered net over her arm.
6. Please excuse rather a long letter, but I felt you will be interested in our venture. I cannot tell you what an honour it is to use your translation and the lines delight those who have to study them.

Sincerely yours,
Major A. Cathcart Bruce
Representative

The second, shorter, communication, on a double letterhead of the 'The British Council, Malta G.C.' and 'The British Institute, Valletta', is dated 15 March 1950.²² This was only five days before the debut of the *Agamemnon*, which had a run of six shows between 20 and 25 March.

Dear Professor,

²⁰ Regarding Murray's long involvement in radio broadcast, see M. Morris (2007), who states that 'Murray was quite literally, to millions of radio listeners, the voice of classical learning' (294).

²¹ Cecil Bellamy produced and directed a number of Greek plays in the original at Bradfield College between 1925 and 1952. He directed the *Agamemnon* in June 1949 (<http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/productions/people/830> accessed 16.1.2017). According to Dr Paul Xuereb (personal communication by email dated 26.5.2017), Bellamy was one of the professional directors engaged by the British Council in Malta to direct productions for the B. I. Players in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Xuereb himself had a 'reasonably good but secondary part' in the 1959 production of T. S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* directed by Bellamy.

²² Reference Number VAL/0340/2/71.

We are now in the midst of the final dress rehearsals for “The Agamemnon”, and all things considered, I am hopeful that Aeschylus will not turn in his grave!

I have much pleasure in attaching a copy of our programme which I feel sure will interest you, and later on, after Easter I hope to send a photo or two, if you would care to have them.²³

I am sorry it was not found possible for the British Council to contact you with regard to making a record for us about the play, but the Director of our Sound Recording Department in London has been ill, and all work therefore in arrears. However, I managed to make one locally myself, which was well received.

I know you will wish us luck, and personally I am most grateful for all your kindly interest and advice.

With kindest regards,
Sincerely yours,
Major A. Cathcart Bruce
Representative

Judging by the evaluation of the *Times of Malta* theatre-critic, T. Cyril Parker, who was also the Headmaster at the Lyceum, *Agamemnon* was an excellent presentation for which the director ‘reaped a rich harvest from the toil and thought’ he had put into the production.²⁴ Cyril Parker had watched the play accompanied by some of the Lyceum students, among whom was a very young Paul Xuereb who to this day recalls the shudder he experienced on seeing the bloodied body of Agamemnon carried out onto the stage towards the end of the play.²⁵ This was indeed Cathcart

²³ Apparently, the promise was kept: according to the A.P.G.R.D (<http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/productions/sources/10107> accessed 2.01.2017), a B&W photograph of the production exists among the Gilbert Murray Papers at the Bodleian, although this did not come to the attention of the author. No record of the programme seems to exist.

²⁴ *Times of Malta* 22.3.1950, 9.

²⁵ Personal communication with the author 31.1.2017. Besides later distinguishing himself as an actor, Dr Paul Xuereb (b. 1936) would for many years be the chief theatre-

Bruce's last theatrical work in Malta. Together with his co-producer Helen Laybourne, Cathcart Bruce left the island for good in summer 1950, assured by an unidentified correspondent of the *Times of Malta* that 'their swan song has been truly magnificent. It has been so truly great that they will be remembered so long as there are lovers of the drama in Malta'.²⁶ Professor Gilbert Murray would have been happy to learn that his translation had not been ill-used in Malta to make the great Aeschylus 'turn in his grave'!

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critic of the *Times of Malta* and *The Sunday Times*. In another email dated 26.5.2017, Xuereb recalled Parker as the 'genial Headmaster who introduced me to Shakespeare on the stage by casting me in Lyceum productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Twelfth Night*, and made me love that dramatist ever since.'

²⁶ *Times of Malta* 29.3.1959, 3.

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