

Isidora FÜRST*

INTERVIEW: PROF. DR VICTOR CASTELLANI**

Professor Victor Castellani is a renowned professor in the field of classical languages, ancient literature and humanities.

He was born in Brooklyn, NYC, on February 14, 1947. He graduated from the Brooklyn Preparatory School („Greek Honors”) in 1964, graduated from Fordham University in 1968 and received his doctorate from Princeton University in 1971 with a dissertation on „House and Home in Euripides”.

Professor Castellani is a full professor at the University of Denver and had been the chair of the Department of Languages and Literatures for several terms.

He has written a very large number of articles and reviews, and has given hundreds of lectures around the world. His specialties are ancient tragedy, comedy, epics and Roman law.

The interview was led by Isidora Fürst, on December 7, 2021.

Isidora Fürst: *Dear Professor Castellani, on behalf of the editorial board of the Herald of Legal History I would like to thank you for accepting the invitation and agreeing to this interview. It is a great honour for me to talk to you today and thank you for giving out readers the opportunity to learn more about your academic work and teaching.*

You are a prominent scholar, specialized in the field of classics, ancient culture and art. In your academic work, you focused on Antiquity –

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** A video recording of the interview is available at the YouTube channel of the Herald of Legal History: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCTorTliVwloaGPAYzFm-BSw>

ancient Greek and Latin prose, poetry, mythology, philosophy and law, as well as Ancient Greek and Latin languages. Could you please tell us how your journey began and why you decided to study classical languages and the beginnings of the humanities? What piqued your interest in the earliest phase of your education, and did you focus on the topics that would be the base of your scholarly work early on, or did you gradually discover new areas and develop an interest in them through your work?

Prof. Dr Victor Castellani: It's my honor to be here. The story of my classics immersion began when I was 13 years old. First year in a Jesuit high school in Brooklyn, where I was born and grew up. And I had a teacher, he was a Jesuit scholastic, not a priest, but on his way to priesthood, who taught English and Latin to one of the honors classes at Brooklyn Prep. He was such an enthusiastic teacher of English and got me interested in literature more than I had been before by any of the nuns who taught me at Resurrection School, but also was a brilliant teacher of Latin. I had no experience with a second language, Latin was my first, and because he did such a good job with Latin, and I learned it so well – I may have the facility for learning it – he persuaded me and almost all of his class who had the option of taking either the Greek honors or the science honors path for our second, third and fourth years in high school, to take the Greek one. So, I started Greek when I was fourteen, in my second year of high school, and I never stopped Latin or Greek in the meantime. I have taught both, although there's much more call for Latin these days. Because we were going in the Latin to reach the *Aeneid* of Vergil in the fourth year, and in Greek we were going to read in third year some of the *Odyssey*; I became interested in the epics of both languages and studied them further when I went to Fordham University in the Bronx, another part of New York City.

I was a double major in Greek and Latin. Now, as it turned out, my honors theses for Fordham was on Plato – „Plato's Use of Humor in the *Gorgias* and *Protagoras*”. I had wonderful teachers in high school through all four years of Latin and three of Greek, and wonderful teachers at Fordham. There are some... There is Herbert Musurillo, the Jesuit priest, one of the greatest people and greatest teachers I have ever met and have ever enjoyed working with. He and several others at Fordham, like Mr. McFadden and several at Brooklyn Prep, inspired me to continue through classics as far as I could go. And another Jesuit, by the name of William Grimaldi, who was probably the first Jesuit and the first priest to get a doctorate at Princeton University. And with an Italian name. So, an Italian, a Jesuit and a priest – probably not all that welcome when he studied at Princeton – so impressed them, that his recommendation was as good as gold in getting

me into Princeton, where I got a dissertation on Euripides and was very well, broadly trained in classics.

My special topics, and special topics were required for concentration toward the qualifying examinations before one could do a dissertation, my special topics were in comedy, the plays of Terence the Roman, tragedy, Euripides – my dissertation man, and Roman law. And so, I began the study of Roman law as a graduate student in classics, under the instruction of one of the most brilliant lecturers I've ever encountered. A man named Frank Bourne, who gave big lecture classes to all of those Princeton undergraduates who thought they were going to become lawyers. Well, I had great fun with him. I also had great fun in a small preceptorial group that was led by one of the classics faculty, a Roman historian by the name of James Luce. And so, I had full coverage of literature. Epic, lyric, dramatic, but also a lot of history, and even some law in my graduate preparation. This was a very good basis for me.

In the post that I acquired, my first full time job ever, and one that I've held since I began in 1971, at the University of Denver, because for almost all of the time that I've been there since 1971, all except the first four years, I've been the only classicist there. So, I have to, I have to know everything, I have to be able to teach everything. Only at undergraduate level. We don't have a graduate program. We don't even have an undergraduate major these last decades. But when a question arises from a colleague or an opportunity arises for me to teach something that interests me, I can do it, I'm pretty much my own boss, the head of a department of one. I became very interested in both epic and tragedy, comedy as well. But those two, epic and tragedy, are my strongest suits. Early on, as an undergraduate, through graduate school, and through my teaching, I pretty much had to invent a curriculum of classics in translation in the 1970s, my first years at the University of Denver, and I explored. I learned a great deal more than I had known about the Homeric epics and got deeper and deeper into Euripides. Tragedy and epic, epic and tragedy, have been my bread and butter as a scholar, but I have diversified and it was necessary for me to diversify. Not all students want or want only what I was prepared to teach. Mythology is a very popular subject in the United States. And pretty early on I learned to teach a mythology course, that would appeal to large numbers of students. Of all the other courses in the department to which I belong, the mythology one enrolls by far the most students, even though it's offered every year in the spring, and also in our summer session. And I've enjoyed mythology. What we call mythology is actually stories of Ancient Greek religion. The Greeks actually believed in those gods, it's hard for us to do so, it's impossible for us to do so, it's difficult for us to put ourselves in their place. But unless you understand

those gods, you can't understand the epics, you can't understand the tragedy, you can't even understand the Greek comedy, at least, although the Roman comedy is pretty secular. So, by having to teach mythology – it wasn't that I was compelled, but I could see the need for it, and came to enjoy it – I appreciated the plays and the epic poems better than I had done before. Because there's a kind of crosscurrent between tragedy a lot of what we understand about the gods we have from the tragic plays, but about the tragic plays, unless you know something more about the gods than what the plays themselves include, you can't understand what's going on with Apollo and Athena and all of those people.

I've been involved in classical associations, and have regularly contributed papers. I have – between extramural lectures and conference papers – I have a long list that I think you've seen, it goes well into the hundreds. I enjoy making my work public and taking my show on the road. Since with only undergraduate students and no advanced students, even at undergraduate level, [you can't] do anything important, I have to go to a conference among other scholars, or to offer to lecture elsewhere. And I'd lectured, now, in 25, countries abroad, Spain was my 25th. Just last week, I finally lectured in Spain, although I'd been to conferences there. And here I am, I am near retirement, but I am reluctant to retire. But I'm in fact going to retire over the next couple of years, because I enjoy doing what I do too much. I will probably continue to be a scholar and as an emeritus will continue to participate in scholarly conferences and writing. But it's time I guess, to slow down after 51 years at the University of Denver; this is my 51st year and my 53rd will be my last.

I.F.: *Thank you so much for telling us all this. So, if we can move on...? In your, as you've said, decades-long career, you have published a large number of papers and books, while teaching at the same time, and you also managed the faculty as a dean. How did you reconcile these two functions? Could you please give us a brief account of the different stages in your career, in this sense? Doing so many things at the same time...*

V.C.: For 22 years, not consecutively, but in three different spans, I was chair of the department of otherwise modern languages and literatures. And I was rightly situated as the one and only classicist to be a kind of referee among the different modern language faculties, to keep the French and the Germans, the Italians and the Spanish happy, by being impartial. The department has had and, sometimes, I should say, has suffered leadership by someone belonging to one or another of those language programs. And it was never a secret that when there was someone from French, French benefited at the expense of other programs, when it was someone from German, German had unfair advantage. When someone

from the small Russian program was chair, that program expanded, they got extra faculty. Well, I was not going to get extra faculty in Classics. In fact, I made a deal once with a dean, now probably close to 30 years ago, that I would not push to develop a major program in my own field, which would require at least one more faculty member in Classics, so I'd have a colleague, someone to talk to – I would not do that. But instead, I would manage the modern languages as judiciously as I could. Although [laugh], what turned out is that I pushed for all of them. Instead of having, say, a chair from German, pressing for an extra position in German; I was pushing for extra positions in just about every one of the sub-departments. But that was, in fact, appropriate, and I maintained, I think, balance. I'm talking about balance, now, in my administrative function.

I never taught fewer than three classes of the six that are normally the load of a tenured faculty member in my department. So, I always taught at least a half load of teaching. I would not let go of teaching; I enjoy it. Too much. I'm not one of the best, I'm aware of that. Although the best students respond to me better than some of those who need a little bit more „holding by the hand” to move through material.

But I was able to find the time to keep giving papers; once I started giving papers, first in the late 70s, picking up speed in the 80s and then through the 90s, I was a regular paper giver at two or three different conferences, every year. I managed somehow, maybe at some sacrifice of personal time with family, although I work as much as I can at home. So, I'm there, although I'm busy. Almost all that time I am actually teaching.

But yeah, administration leadership, I was maybe not the most valuable leader, developing new curriculum and that sort of thing. But I trusted faculty, I trusted faculty more than some chairs of the department and I haven't been chair all the time. Then some of the chairs did, I would not micromanage any program, as other chairs have done. And in some ways, I'm not all that effective a paper pusher. I sometimes have to be pushed myself to do some of the things that others who are maybe more destined by their character to be leaders [do]. Chair of a department, that's what we call the head of an academic department, a chair, chairperson – some are really gifted. They have a vocation.

The current chair in my department of what's now called Languages, literatures and cultures, she is a born leader and chairperson. I knew that as soon as I met her when she was appointed in the year 2007. She was destined to be chair of the department someday and now this is her second full year as chair; she has fulfilled her destiny and she's terrific – much, much better in some respects, not in all, but in some respects than I ever was. But her scholarship is suffering. And I have urged her and she has taken this as confirmation of what she already determined to do.

She has decided that one three-year term as chair was enough. She wanted to get back to her scholarship. She's an Associate Professor. She wants promotion to full professorship and she did not want to wait as long as I did. I was Associate Professor in 1981, and I was Full Professor in 2017. I may be in the Guinness Book of Records for longest term as an Associate Professor remaining alive and not retired and getting the full promotion. But I did not devote so much of my time to administration, even when the department was much larger; it split recently. Even when the department was much larger, I did not spend as much time as Rachel Walsh, my current boss does. Her scholarship has essentially stopped, I would never let mine stop completely.

Although when the department grew to over 30 people, it was not possible for me to produce at the rate I had done as a scholar, but I kept teaching. And it was always a good thing to have tutorial students, that much of the Greek and Latin that I teach after the elementary; Latin is tutorial, it was nice to have a tutorial student or a couple of tutorial students in my office with the door open – so, faculty with a problem would come to me seeking a solution to a problem or refereeing in a dispute with a colleague. They would come by, they would look for me and they were angry, and they wanted a solution, they wanted an intervention right away. And they could see how he's with a student or a couple of students doing Latin or Greek. So, they would look and then go away. And at least half of the time, maybe much more often than not, the problem would simmer down or would be solved on my colleagues' own initiative. That's not the best kind of management probably. But it worked, it worked for me and my colleagues that elected me and reelected me and reelected me as chair until finally a dean intervened and said „You've got to stop being chair” [laugh]. And there was going to be a big transition in the structure of the department that the higher administration had planned. But I'd still be chair. I'm glad that I wasn't, because there was a health issue three years ago that would have made it impossible for me to do everything. I had to take a quarter off.

I. F.: *Thank you. So, the dominant topic of your scholarly work is ancient literature, but you have also studied and written about comparative and contemporary world literature, as well as about culture in general. What is it you start from when you analyze a literary work and cultural-historical phenomenon? How do you decide on a topic to study and write about?*

V. C.: Well, there's a kind of circularity in... What do I choose to read that I haven't read before? And those last words are important. I spend a lot of time rereading. At every opportunity, I used to go through Dante's *Divine Comedy*, all the way through, in Italian with a struggle, in translation

with the Italian text nearby. I try to go through that every few years, try to go through the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, each of them every few years. Read, reread the most important plays of Ancient Greek tragedy, Greek and Roman comedy. So, a lot of my reading is rereading, or is reading of commentary or secondary literature. It is not all that often that I approach a brand-new work for analysis. It is likelier to be a play than anything else. It can be a play originally in English, it can be a play in one of the languages that I read a bit. I can work in something like 10 different languages, but I can work confidently in only about three or four of them, and two of them are the classical ones. So, when I approach a new play, ideally – and theater is my interest in performing arts – when I see a new play before I can read it, I am eager to see the script. And do probably three different things at once.

One of them is the comparative literature approach. How is this related to anything else? Almost, how is this related to *everything* else in the history of drama? So, there's the comparative literature angle, how does this fit in? I am interested in how successful the production I saw was. When I read the play, do I recognize what I saw? Or as I read the play, do I think that the director or the principal actors were, I wouldn't say wrong, but missed opportunities or took the play in a different direction than I would have done? And now here's my arrogant third element of approach – as I think the author would have done, what did the author intend. It's a big issue in literary criticism, whether we can ever know the intention of an author. Even if the author writes essays about her or his play, that doesn't mean that when the play was written, the intention was there.

In the *Apology* of Plato, that Socrates' defense speech before he was condemned to death by the Athenians, Socrates says that he went around to all the wise people, or the people who are called wise – *sophos* – at Athens, and ask them sometimes specific questions about their art, or their vocation. He would talk about politics and justice with politicians, he would talk about beauty with artists of different kinds, he would talk about practical applications when he was dealing with a craftsman. Well, he said that among the people he interrogated were poets. And the most important poets in Athens were the tragedians. So, Socrates probably did have some conversations with Sophocles or Euripides. If those guys weren't too smart to run away from Socrates. As soon as Socrates came, anyone who was really smart, would move as quickly as possible in the other direction, because this happened in public space. And Socrates would track down all of the reputed wise people. And among those were poets and among those were surely the leading tragedians. Sophocles was regarded as the greatest, Euripides maybe as the smartest of tragedians. And without naming names, without naming Sophocles or Euripides or

anyone else, Socrates, according to Plato, said that when he did corner one of the poets, and Socrates was well known for this kind of thing, he's got somebody pretty much backed into a corner, almost, although there are no corners in the marketplace. But he's got this person confronted and this person now can't run away. And he's asking him some questions, a crowd would gather. A crowd would gather to see Socrates humiliate some supposedly wise person by showing that he really wasn't all that wise. And Socrates says in the apology, that he would ask the poets about their work, and they would try to explain their work. And Socrates said that he was never satisfied with their explanations. Worse is that anybody in the crowd of bystanders listening to this could have given a better explanation of the poem, the play or whatever the matter was.

So, intention is not something that you can know for certain, and yet there are indications, indications in novels, indications and other kinds of writing of what the poet intended to convey. Some kinds of writing may be entirely for the authors' own pleasure, his intention is to please, to satisfy himself, or herself. But certainly, the old plays that I study, enjoy and teach, they all have intention. I don't think there can be any question about that. And when I approach a new play, I start from the assumption that the author intended something beyond telling a story. Now, there is a very important director who gave a wonderful little seminar for me and a few students that we brought, whom we brought downtown to meet this fellow. And he said that, when he approaches a play, he approaches it as a storyteller, the play has a story to tell. And that's fundamental, unless it's a postmodern play, and then it's hard to figure out what's happening from line to line. But if it's a conventional drama that has a beginning, middle, and maybe not a very satisfying end, according to Aristotle's description of what a play is supposed to do, beginning middle and an end that is conclusive, but it tells a story. But it also has, it has a lesson or we can learn something from it, maybe that's a better way of putting it, we can learn something from it, maybe not what the author intended. Maybe the author himself or herself discovers, coming back to a writing of years ago, something that the author was not aware of when composing it. And sometimes playwrights I know will do this, they'll come back to a play, they'll modify it, because they found something in it that they wanted to make clear, that wasn't clear in the first edition of the thing, wasn't clear when it was performed on the stage, if it was a play, wasn't clear in its published form. And so, you'll get a revised edition, editions – there are a number of playwrights, Ancient, Renaissance, Humanist and modern, who are famous for changing their plays. So, I'm looking to learn something, whether it's something that I believe, but to learn what the message was, maybe something that will convince me, something that will

change me. I don't know that I've ever read a play that has changed me, but many a play I have read has enriched my experience. And it's more philosophical than history. That's what Aristotle says of tragedy, it's more philosophical than history. Because it can teach things that are distilled from human experience, rather than a civil record of human experience, that the history of journalism conveys.

I. F.: *Thank you. But which play would you distinguish as the one that impressed you the most – not changed you, but impressed you?*

V. C.: Okay, well, I don't know that there is a play that has changed me the most. But the one that I guess I am the fondest of, and, in fact, I'm preparing a lecture that's going to deal partly with this play, it's the first one I read in Greek. It's Euripides' *Medea*, one of his most famous plays. Maybe his most famous over a long time. And I can't say that it has changed me. But it made me aware, when I first encountered it, and this would have been in, let's see, something like 1964 or 1965, it was long time ago, aware of the difference between the Jasons and the Medeas of the world. And this is, could you even talk about a real feminist movement in the 60s of the last century, it was just beginning. There was no feminist teaching at Fordham University, at least in anything that I was aware of, maybe in the English department or somewhere. But there's the beginnings of a kind of feminist attitude on the part of Euripides. Euripides is controversial. Euripides is sometimes regarded as a misogynist. Sometimes he's regarded as a feminist with qualification. Properly, he is a very conflicted person who is partly misanthropic, who doesn't think very much of the human race. And on the other hand, he is as philanthropic as can be, he loves the human race, despite its failings and appreciates the goodness, that's possible in people. Well, the *Medea* shows very little goodness, except on the part of good people who suffer terribly for their goodness. It's a sorry lesson. And that, I chose Euripides as my special author, my special Greek author for Princeton's general examination, and then I chose Euripides for my dissertation. All follows from that experience with Father Herbert Musurillo, whom I mentioned earlier, and Euripides and the *Medea*. So, if there was one play that changed my life, it was that. I'll be talking about Euripides tomorrow, I'll be talking about Euripides on Thursday or Friday, I'll be talking about Euripides next Monday in Madrid, assuming I can get past the health authorities and get across Switzerland to Spain. I'll be talking about Euripides next Wednesday. And so, he's with me.

And I'm a kind of evangelist of Euripides, who defies classification. His plays defy generic description. I'm doing a big bibliographic project on one of those plays, *Alcestis*, and I'll be talking about that next week. His *Alcestis* defies generic definition. It's not a tragedy, it's not a comedy,

it's not a satire play. It's *sui generis*. It's a thing of its own. Many of his plays are like that. And I have to fight a battle on several directions against those who want to peg Euripides as this or that. Euripides is as elusive in his tragic project as Plato was in his philosophy. Plato is the greatest philosopher because he never stood still. And Euripides is maybe the greatest of dramatists, because he never stood still, either. He is constantly second-guessing himself. He even wrote, sometimes, a second, very different, version of plays that he would come back to after 10 years, the classic instances, the politics that we have now, but I don't want to get into that kind of detail here. Suffice it to say that, that one experience under a brilliant teacher, who is one of the two or three of the many, many teachers I've had, after whom I tried to model myself and when I do a good job in a class, I think that one or another, or even all of them, would be proud of me for that class. And at my best, I'm good. And I may be at my best when I'm teaching the *Odyssey*. I have a big project, book project that has been going on for longer than Odysseus was away from home, and Odysseus was away from home for 20 years. And my project is about twice as long as that on the *Odyssey*. So, I'm at my best when I'm teaching or giving a paper on the *Odyssey* and I did a very good one last Friday in Barcelona. And when I'm dealing with Euripides, almost any topic on Euripides. And I look forward to dealing with some Euripides tomorrow, before the Ethnographic Institute of the university here. There are some issues in a couple of Euripides' plays that embody the kinds of value-social structure that classicists touch upon, but anthropologists, ethnographers have as their chief concern.

I. F.: *Thank you. Since we're talking about plays, the fate of an individual in those works often depends on society's reaction to certain events and changes. Do you think that these issues are universal, regardless of the period of time and the changes in social systems?*

V. C.: Yeah, the issues of synchronic relationship among siblings, between spouses, between anyone and her or his contemporaries, which social, economic, political, even epidemiological conditions affect, those are timeless. They are, of course, concretely embedded at times in places under conditions, that are probably, if you analyze very deeply, unique. And you don't have to be Heraclitus, or those who think that there is no constancy in anything, that you can't step into the same river because it's constantly changing. The whole world is changing, yet some things, human nature, are constant. And so, the synchronic relationships, that's to say with siblings, if any, I had a sister, with other more extended family of the same generation, with coworkers, with fellow students, depending on one's state of life... Those relationships, although conditioned by particular

circumstances, that are unique and unique almost at any moment, certainly unique even in the same person's experience of tomorrow or next week or in retrospect over last year, those are constant. But also, some of the diachronic relationships with people, the generational matter, whether narrowly the relationship between children and parents, or looking at it the other way of parents and children; parents and older generation, parents and next generation, and then spreading out, all people of the older generation. All people of the new generation, Generation X or whatever it is that follows Generation X.

There again, are very different circumstances as a generation moves to generation, technological changes have been fast and furious to separate someone of my generation from actually two generations younger than I, who are now having adult lives, and yet matters between them are pretty constant. And there are some natural drives, some natural hopes and fears that I think belong to everyone. I find that, despite my love for dissonant music, harsh music, that my wife can't stand, and my love for tragedy, including the most pathetic, the most tearful tragedy of Euripides, I am on the philanthropic side of my friend Euripides and believe with my favorite ancient philosopher, Chinese Mencius. Discovered him in teaching a comparative civilizations class in the 90s, and into the first years of this century. Mencius thinks that human beings are born good. In the West, maybe we think that human beings are born free. Well, he wasn't interested in freedom, he was interested in goodness, in human heartedness and benevolence. And I'm with him. And the default of a human being seems to be a goodness, but a goodness that can be crushed and turned into something very different by social circumstances. And those circumstances begin with right relationship of generations, the near relationships and family, whether lateral siblings and cousins, or upper and lower generations. The factors that distort basic human goodness vary, but they have been here as long ago as Mencius, and Mencius lived around 300 BCE, and as new as the year 2022 on the horizon. Those problems are going to be with us forever, establishing the perfect harmonious relationship with a father and son, mother and daughter, or cross sex, father and daughter, mother and son, never mind psychology and Freudian analysis of relationship. To establish those has been and probably ever will be a challenge. But if all of those factors that distort the natural parental and filial affection are prevented by economics or by some other intervention... I think that the issues are eternal between generations and between siblings.

Greek mythology has examples of loving brothers and brothers who kill one another, literally kill one another, the two sons of Oedipus do that. And something can be learned from the models, cautions and encouragement. It's possible to have brothers who love one another. And unfortu-

nately, there are brothers who hate one another, who kill one another or, in one mythological case, a brother kills his brother's little children and feeds them to him. So much does he love his brother and his nephews, right? That's a little off the track there, but still these are eternal problems, and sometimes, external factors prevent the flourishing of human beings and human beings can only be human in a relationship. It's impossible to be a human being in isolation. Even Robinson Crusoe had to have his Friday. And I love the word for my Chinese friend Mencius' chief virtue – 'run', spelled 'jen' or 'ren' in Roman, although I never learned to pronounce it exactly right – it's something like 'run'. The Chinese character for that shows the basic figure for a human being, and the number two – the human being by itself is not even a person probably, especially with the value of the word person indicating a presentation of an individual to others in some kind of relationship, however tenuous or deep.

I. F.: *You've also written about ancient lawyers and ancient trials, and about legal history. How did you come up with the idea to write about the connection between comedy and law in Ancient Rome and Ancient Greece?*

V. C.: Okay. Now, I mentioned when I was talking about my selection of topics for the general examination or qualifying examination at Princeton before you would be allowed to proceed with a dissertation. And I mentioned my ancient Greek author was Euripides, the most elusive of tragic playwrights, and Terence may be the more humane of the great Roman comedians. Plautus being a wild farcical guy, Terence writing beautiful Latin and wonderful plays that may not have the comic vigor that some people miss, but I love Terence. But I had to choose among several different areas. One of them was Greek and Roman religion. One of them was the topography of Athens and Rome, archeological sites, but also the historical development of the two cities from their humble origin. One of them was ancient science, we had someone on the faculty who was interested in ancient science, so ancient science and math; Plato would have liked that. But one of them was Roman law.

Now, why did I choose Roman law? I chose Roman law because I had done a Roman comedy class with Arthur Hansen, very good teacher, brilliant man who died entirely too young. Art Hansen in his comedy class pointed out the importance of law in understanding some of the things that were going on in Plautus. Now, we didn't read the plays of Plautus that I talked about in connection with Roman law. But in every play of Plautus, if you do not understand Roman law, you cannot understand what's going on. Sometimes it's embedded in the language, it's just metaphors from Roman litigation, or the value system embodied in certain words. But some of the greatest comedy, the funny business, in some of Plautus' greatest

plays... The *Pseudolus*, the *Menaechmi*, the *Miles Gloriosus*, the *Mostellaria*, the *Aulularia*, to name a few, and all of them influential ones that have modern imitation, development, imitation adaptation; and Terence's *Phormio*, which has maybe the first lawyer joke in all of Western literature. To understand those plays, as comedy – to get laughs, you really needed more Roman law than Art Hansen who taught the Plautus class was finding, and he himself was aware that there's probably a whole lot more there than he was aware of. And, well, I found that and was happy to have found it, and some of the earliest papers, lectures and conference papers that I gave, had to do with Roman law and comedy. Back in the 70s I was already starting, 70s and 80s I was already starting, I taught a Roman law class a couple of times at the University of Denver, because we have a fair number of undergraduates who aspire to go to law school; the University has its own law school.

And I should probably explain quickly for anyone who doesn't know, though I'm sure your readers all know, that the study of law in the United States is post-baccalaureate. So, I teach entirely undergraduates, baccalaureate students, for business degrees and for the arts degrees. And there are a lot of them who intended and still intend to go to law school after they graduate. And so, I got a pretty good enrollment when I could teach that course, however, it was pretty good enrollment. And there are other courses like the mythology classes, or comedy and translation that draw many more students. And we're a private institution. It's not a state university. And so, enrollments are important. And so, where the customers were, I brought the product; and Roman law just wasn't a product that appealed to students enough, I could get a class, the class was not too small to go, but I could get many more if I were teaching comedy or tragedy or mythology – that's the big seller.

So, in order to understand Roman comedy, I chose Roman law as my special subject. And then I use that when I teach, even comedy in translation, and I did that last academic year. Or when, with a tutorial student, I go through a play of Plautus or Terence, I can point out a dimension of language that when you just read the script, you miss, but there were laugh lines that depend upon knowledge of Roman law. And although a student who is struggling with Latin doesn't laugh so loud, when the laugh line is explained to him or her, still, it's an enriching experience. There are similar things embedded in other kinds of drama. You'd have to know a lot about Victorian Norwegian society, including law, to appreciate what's going on in Henrik Ibsen's plays, as one of the authors that I have dealt with at some length, although I haven't had a chance to do much with him lately. To understand more law than is explained in the script of something like *Doll's House*, gives you a better understanding of the

issues there. And I confess, I don't know enough about Swedish or Norse Swedish Union law in the 1880s to appreciate some of the fine nuance of the situation in that play and in some of the others of Ibsen where there's obviously some legal issue. So, to understand law is, for some ancient literature – and this goes for Virgil's *Aeneid* for sure, the great national epic of the Romans – that you need to understand law, and there are people who have admired, and I'll use Virgil's *Aeneid*, as an example, have admired the tragedy of Dido and Aeneas without understanding principles of Roman law that would have given a very different perspective on the relationship to a Roman than they do to somebody with our laws of marriage and divorce.

I. F.: *So, this is about something else... It is well known that you have been present in Serbian academic circles for years. And let's start with Matica Srpska, our oldest cultural institution. For years, you were a foreign member of Matica Srpska and member of the editorial board of its Journal of Classical Studies. You have written a large number of articles for this journal. Can you tell us how that collaboration started?*

V. C.: It started when I met at the 2000, this is the year AD 2000, International Conference of the International Society for the Study of European Ideas, ISSEI. It met in Utrecht, in the Netherlands. And I had proposed what we call a workshop; which is – it's not a seminar, it's a special kind of meeting where people interested in the same basic thing, share information in papers, presentations. Ksenija Maricki Gađanski, I can never remember which to put first, but great Ksenija Gađanski. That's, I guess, her married name. She was there. And the topic was the future of classics in the third millennium. Well, in the 21st century, and in the third millennium. And she came with a report on circumstances in Serbia. She was already then, and this is over 20 years ago, she was already a leading light, a distinguished figure in Classical Studies in this country. And she gave a presentation, and I was very impressed with her presentation, and I was impressed with her. And we agreed that we would keep in touch. And we did. She invited me to contribute to *Zbornik*. And I did. In fact, I think I have contributed to *Zbornik* every year without interruption. Maybe it was volumes seven or eight or something like that, and now we're looking at 20 to 23. I think I've contributed every year; I don't think I missed one. And there's one year I actually had two, and I guess that's a combined issue, but so I've published a lot there. But it started with a personal meeting. A virtual meeting is nothing, a personal meeting is everything. A personal meeting with Ksenija, national professor of classics, I guess, Greek classics.

And so, I began contributing and I am a strange kind of subscriber. I contribute each year rather than get the volume. And some of my very best work has appeared there. I'm proud of everything, I think, that I publish there. But there are two or three things there that I've published, I could have published elsewhere. And they would have had a wider distribution. When I was up for promotion to full professor a few years ago now, I chose several of the articles that I published there for the other reviewers. And they were good enough to have impressed some prestigious scholars of their value. But I heard from one of them who was a friend of mine, that, really, I should have been publishing in other places. But I was happy to continue to support this journal. And I'm always happy to read articles that aren't in Serbian, that appear year after year. I should have by now, I've learned to read a little bit, at least in the Roman script. But unfortunately, I've not had time to do that.

I. F.: *Thank you. And apart from Matica Srpska, you have been cooperating with the Serbian Society for Ancient Studies and the University of Belgrade Faculty of Philosophy for a long time. Can you tell us something about that as well?*

V. C.: Well, that's a more tenuous relationship. I did contribute to a special conference some years ago, and I contributed something actually on Petronius, a Roman author. I lectured on a contemporary American playwright, August Wilson, at the Matica Srpska, one of my first times in Serbia. So, this is now 10 years ago, that that happened. I lectured on August Wilson, the black American playwright who, if he had lived long enough – unfortunately, he died in his mid-60s, he should still be alive, but he got cancer and it killed him – now, he probably was going to win a Nobel Prize, he's that good. And I say he is that good because his plays live even if he doesn't live. And so, the connection is slight. I have not done much for Classics. I think this will only be the second lecture that I have given for classics. That will be later this week. I did lecture, I think, for the Theological and for the History institutes. One year, Ksenija Gađanski arranged for me to be very busy during my week here. And so, I lectured for other units of the University. That has been sporadic and not nearly as continuous or, to be perfectly honest, as important in my life as the annual article for the Zbornik.

I. F.: *But you are a welcome guest and lecturer at the Forvm Romanvm, a friend of the University of Belgrade Faculty of Law and a friend of our professor emeritus Sima Avramović. All of your lectures and simulations of the trials of Hercules, Orestes and Anaxagoras are well remembered. In December 2020, we had the opportunity to listen to your lecture „A Murderous ‘Supreme’ Court of Public Passion: Tainted Prosecutions at*

Athens, of Alcibiades and of the Arginsuae Six". We look forward to hearing from you again this week and we are glad that this is the fourth time that all those who are interested will be able to see and imagine a trial in Ancient Athens. What inspired you to present the world of Ancient Greece, to students through trial simulations, not just Ancient Greece but also Ancient Rome? What do students learn the most during such presentations?

V. C.: The principle of what I call impersonation exercise, has been a principal of my pedagogy, my method of teaching, almost forever. I was brought to the University of Denver in 1971. to participate in what we call the block course on classical Athens. The block course meant that for one academic quarter, we were on a trimester or quarter calendar, but for one quarter of the year, a student would do nothing but interdisciplinary study of, well, of classical Athens, there was one on Elizabethan England, there was one on Song China, there was another one on Gupta, India, I think.

Classical Athens involved two of us, because in those early years, before I was the only classicist, there were two. So, two classicists, a historian, an art historian, a philosopher, a religious studies person, and someone from theater. So, this team would lecture to the whole group, and we could have 60 or 70 students, to lecture to the whole group, and then we would break out into small classes topically. So, my own topic was tragedy. But for the general sessions, we planned a variety of events, not just lectures. I lecture, I could lecture and I'd become much better as a lecturer in the meantime; I wasn't very good when I started. But I also had the idea right away. And it's nothing that I had experienced in my undergraduate or graduate education. That a good way of getting students to think their way into the heads of the ancient Athenians we were studying, was to make them ancient Athenians, in a real-life situation. And so, in the, I think, it was in the very first year, if it wasn't in the first year, it was in the second year, third year, fourth year, the thing was offered four different times before they ran out of money to support it and some of the faculty were released. If it wasn't, but I think was already in the first time, we had the trial of Anaxagoras. And we did one of those for *Forvm Romanvm*. I think that was the one immediately before the plague. So, we did Anaxagoras, and then we had the plague. There was going to be a trial of Alcibiades a year ago, but instead, the political trials zoomed lecture took its place a year ago.

Anaxagoras, the atheistic philosopher, scientist, was someone we were trying to understand, we're trying to understand; in the lecture series, we're trying to understand his place in Athenian intellectual history, but also in Athenian political history. The Athenians were proud of *parrhesia*, of free speech, but some kinds of speech were not protected;

and speech – and this was also understood to include writing – speech and writing that was unholy, was subject to prosecution and pretty serious capital prosecution. So, all of this was understood, there was free thinking, but then there were limits on free thinking by people who are basically very pious, superstitious, fearful, that if one person in the community seriously offends the gods, the whole community can suffer for it. So, students are learning about ancient science and about pre-Socratic philosophy, and so we had from someone in Philosophy a lecture that was partly about Anaxagoras. And I knew that was going to happen. So, when we planned the course, I said: I think it'd be a great idea – because I had studied pre-Socratics with David Furley at Princeton and knew something about it – that we should have a trial of one of the most outrageous of pre-Socratics. And so, we did. I think, in this case, the faculty were the prosecutor and the defense. I forget whether I was the prosecutor, I think Don Hughes was the prosecutor, and I think I was the leader of the defense. So, we didn't get undergraduate students. These are first year students. These are 17, 18-year-old kids. We didn't get the students to do the prosecution or the defense. But we did have other faculty, because the faculty so far as possible, all of them attend everybody else's lectures. And so, we had arguments for killing this guy: „He is outraging the gods and we're all in danger”; or „Where is your respect for free speech”; and „In fact, he is not attacking the gods, he says nothing about the gods”; and back and forth. And then we had the students vote. And we had them vote in two stages, just like the trial of Socrates that Plato reports in the *Apology*. There was a first stage to find Anaxagoras guilty or not guilty. He committed injustice – *ēdikei ē ouk ēdikei* (ἠδίκηει ἢ οὐκ ἠδίκηει). And the first vote was narrowly to condemn him. So, second stage is 'what shall we give as a penalty'. And this makes me think that I was probably a prosecutor, or I put this in the mind of one of my colleagues, who would say that Anaxagoras is really a subject of the king of Persia because the city Klazomenai was really Persian when he was born – „He was really born a Persian, let's impale him, it's just good Persian punishment”. And then the other side said, well: „Let's exile him”. And the vote was not to commit that atrocious punishment, but just to exile him. But all this happened in 1972. And we did this in future years.

And we did something like that when we did a Roman course, a parallel Roman course, we alternated the Athens and Rome, this whole name – Rome. But it was Ancient Rome, time of the last civil wars, and the very beginning of the empire. And we did something like that in the Roman course, as well. And I've been using impersonation exercises, in classes that are appropriate, on and off for all the time that I've been at the University of Denver.

I do, of course, Athens and Beijing, „Two Worlds or One?“, and we had the students there to be disciples of Confucius – „Confucius has died“. But Confucius disciples were very much contentious among themselves, and they took very different interpretations of what Confucius meant. Every bit as much as Christians disagree about what Jesus meant. And so, I had different schools. So, they were all ancient Chinese, and they all knew Confucius, but they were going to take different approaches to what Confucius meant to them, and they would probably go into established different schools.

Then I had, I won't give you all of them, there were several of them. But one of them was different French people on the day that Louis XVI was guillotined. And so, people are gathered, people who hated the monarchy, people who loved the monarchy, people who are religious and think that the monarch is protected by God, and people who are atheist. People who have a financial interest in the success of the revolution, people who have suffered financially because of the revolution. Each of the 18 students in the class had a particular identity, and was asked to speak from that person's perspective, not whether they believe Louis XVI should have been killed, or should have been just thrown out of the country. But this is going to happen. He is going to lose his head. Any minute now. We're watching, we see the king is going to come up on the platform, so everybody can see, a big crowd has gathered. And so, we have the crowd talking about what's about to happen. Is this a good thing? Is this a bad thing? Are you afraid of the consequence without knowing exactly what it is? But if you can take the head off a king, nobody should be too sure to keep his or her head, because they started executing women. Soon after, in fact. I forget when the first woman was guillotined, it may not have been until a little bit later in the year 1793. So, impersonation, I love impersonation. Some of the students love them, some of the students hate them and ask why we do this. And it's exactly the students who asked why we do this, who must try this kind of thing.

I. F.: *[The students] who [eventually] learn the most.*

And one question, besides your academic work. What would you point out as your interest and passion, your hobby? You have written about wineries and visited many of them. As Plato said: nothing more excellent or valuable than wine was ever granted by the gods to man. Can you tell us something about this?

V. C.: Sure. I became a wine drinker before I was able legally to buy or to drink wine in New York. And as soon as I was legal at age 18 then, and so this would have been 1965; you can figure out how old I am by

doing the arithmetic. I began buying wine in, maybe, the best place in the world. London and New York were the best places in the world to buy wine at that time. And the US dollar was very strong. So, I could get it at a very reasonable price – I didn't have a lot of spare money – but at a very reasonable price, I could get the best wines in the world. I became especially interested in German wines. Although I drank the best of France. The best of Spain, the best of Italy, were harder to find. But the best of France and the best of Germany were available in New York, and you could get great wines, wines that now cost many hundreds, even thousands of dollars, for prices now that seem impossible to believe. There's one wine in particular, burgundy, that now costs, probably \$12,000 a bottle. Even before it's bottled, you have to put your money down and they'll bottle it and you'll get one bottle. That wine was available for \$22.50. There's a very great white burgundy that now costs at least \$800, you get for \$13.68. That's a funny amount. But I remember that New York State had a controlled price on alcoholic beverages, including wine. And so, \$13.68 would buy the Montrachet de Laguishe bottled by Joseph Drouhin. Again, now before it's even shipped from France [it] will cost \$700 or \$800 at least.

So, I could learn all the best wines, and since I had studied German and was studying German as my required second modern language at Fordham, I wrote to German winemakers and invited myself to visit them and I was first over there in 1974. A very good time to be there, but [laugh] why it was such a very good time to be there is a long story that you don't need to tell. In short, the 1971 vintage was one of the greatest of all time and the wines were available for tasting when I was there in '74. But also, there were some good people around whose acquaintance I've made and whose sons or daughters I am in touch with now. But wherever I go, wine tourism is important. And the first time I was here, Ksenija Gađanski arranged for me to visit Fruška Gora up in your country. And we visited a winery there. That was a long time ago – 2010, 2011. Serbia's making some great wine now. Every night I have some.

I. F.: *Great. And finally, if you could say something to our fellow students? What would you say to them?*

Well, I have been immensely impressed by all of the students who have participated in these trials. I've been impressed further by other students whom I have met sometimes after the trials when there was a little celebration. I think even in this very space here, in the *Forvm Romanvm* series. So, I've been impressed not just by English, although the excellent English of the student performers or participants has been impressive, but by the imagination, the vigor and well, imagination and vigor in very ex-

pressive English with many fewer mistakes than I would make if I were trying to use my second language, which is German.

I've never tried to lecture in German, I never tried to do anything except make a false beginning of a paper. There was an Ibsen conference in Gossensaß, in northern Italy. It was because the University of Innsbruck was sponsoring things, papers were possible in German, and in English, not even in Norse, it was an Ibsen conference, but German or English. And most of the people there didn't know German very well, and struggled through papers that were being given in German. And I gave a lot of people a scare, by speaking a sentence or two of German at the beginning of my paper and [they] said: „Oh, God, no, another paper in German”. I couldn't give a paper in German. I couldn't do anything nearly as good as I've been hearing from the students in the *Forvm Romanvm* ancient trials. So, I've been immensely impressed. And I expect that impression is going to continue in what's going to happen this Friday evening.

I. F.: And thank you for this excellent interview. I hope that we will have the opportunity to hear your lectures and read more of your work in the near future.

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