

Two Recent Films

Appaloosa, Brideshead Revisited

Is it ever permissible to take the law into one's own hands? Most people think so, in desperate situations such as, to take an extreme case, the plot to kill Hitler. I ran across a remote parallel in one of Alexander Kent's Bolitho books: *Signal—Close Action*. In it, the captain of a warship who is holding back from the action is shot by his own lieutenant, who then sails to the rescue of the battered squadron. More difficult is the situation where a known criminal has outfoxed the legal system and gone free. In such cases, Agatha Christie—surely an expert witness—condones the execution of the criminal by a private citizen. In *Curtain* the last person anyone would suspect of murder, *viz.*, Hercule Poirot himself, is the who who dunnit. The same device appears in *The Mousetrap*, but with a twist, since "Sergeant" Trotter is not really a detective. Again, thanks to the movie many people are aware that in *Murder on the Orient Express*, a whole household combines to avenge the murder of a child and its tragic consequences for the parents. And what about *Ten Little Indians*, in which on an isolated island Mr. Justice Wargrave arranges for the deaths of ten men and women—including himself—who had escaped the courts?

At the end of *Appaloosa*, a western in the classic style, the (relatively) mild-mannered deputy, Everett Hitch (Viggo Mortensen) turns in his star and, now a private citizen, challenges the villain Randall Bragg (Jeremy Irons) to a gunfight as a form of execution. Bragg had been convicted of cold-blooded murder, only to have the sentence reversed in a higher court. By his action, Hitch achieves something, but exactly what is not altogether clear. The sheriff, Virgil Cole (Ed Harris), had earlier commented on Hitch's being a little slow on the draw, not because his reflexes were deficient, but because he had a trace of sentiment for his opponent. His winning the gunfight, then, was not a foregone conclusion; that he did so could indicate that he had lost his humane notions. At the end of the movie Hitch rides out of Appaloosa, now on his own, for the town has changed, too. With good order established, gunfighters are becoming obsolete. Sheriff Cole has settled down with Allison French (Renée Zellweger), the town floozy. She may not be all she should be, but she's all there is, and, with both Hitch and Bragg out of the way, her fluctuating affection can now settle on Cole. As Jane Austen noted, "Where other powers of entertainment are wanting, the true philosopher will derive benefit from such as are given." This hardening of the citizen-executioner represents a change from the situations described by Christie and Kent or by Jose Saramago in *Blindness*, when the doctor's noble wife "executes" a thug who is terrorizing the victims of the epidemic. Each of these is a hero whose guiltlessness, essential to the *raison d'être* of his action, accounts for his escaping punishment. (As it turns out, even Justice Wargrave in *Ten Little Indians* is guiltless, not having in fact condemned an innocent man to death as he thought he had.)

Murder is one vice that does not figure in the new film version of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, but Lady Marchmain (Emma Thompson) is so horrible that someone should have killed her. Watching Thompson's over-the-top performance I began to understand why people burned witches. She's a sort of fanatical Circe who turns men, not into pigs, but into something equally inhuman, replicas of her own life-denying, sin-obsessed Catholic self. At one point she lugubriously states that Catholics care nothing about the present world, only about the world to come, a statement that Waugh

had put into the mouth of the odious Canadian Rex Mottram: “. . . her crackbrain religion, not to take care of the body.” Is this the religion that captivated the heart of Saint Augustine, challenged the intellect of Saint Thomas Aquinas, and assuaged the desperation of John Henry Newman? Certainly not, nor is it Waugh’s.

Everyone who comes into contact with Lady Marchmain is sooner or later destroyed; even the irreligious Charles Ryder (Matthew Goode), who struggles manfully against her spells, is compromised. In the final scene, when he visits the Catholic chapel at Brideshead, he moves to put out a candle burning before the statue of Our Lady, but then he lets it be. By a twist of symbolism, the still burning candle represents the extinction of his hopes for anything like a normal life. Lady Marchmain has her final triumph from beyond the grave.

The character of Lady Marchmain is not the only casualty, for cramming the novel’s nuanced sequence of events into a couple hours for an evening at the cinema has produced a confusing mishmash of characters and action. In the book, for example, Charles’s fascination with the Marchmain children, Sebastian (Ben Wishaw) and Julia (Hayley Atwell), is carefully orchestrated. Charles begins his love affair with Brideshead as a student at Oxford when he meets Sebastian. Only in the second half does he as an adult discover his passion for Julia. The movie destroys this symmetry by introducing Julia too early. She accompanies Sebastian and Charles to Venice where Charles’s attraction to her makes Sebastian petulant. I may note here that they are badly cast. Sebastian’s features are coarse, and Julia is too robust. Waugh’s ideal of feminine beauty is the sophisticated and svelte: Brenda Last, Angela Lyne, Virginia Troy.

The treatment of Lord Marchmain’s illness illustrates what is wrong with the movie. He has returned home to die, apparently entrenched in his abandonment of the Catholicism that he had adopted at the time of his marriage. As his condition worsens Julia wants him to receive the last sacraments, while Charles dismisses what he considers to be superstition as well as an imposition. In the book the anointing is a moment of grace, and not only for Lord Marchmain. Julia gains the strength to end her adulterous relationship with Charles, and even he finds himself praying for a sign “for the sake of the woman I love.” He prays again at the end of the novel, in the chapel in “an ancient, newly-learned form of words” and then, having lost everything, he is greeted by the second-in-command with “You’re looking unusually cheerful today.” But the movie implies that Lady Marchmain has so polluted the very atmosphere of Brideshead that everyone there, even after her death, has been infected by her “crackbrain” ideas. A passage from the novel provides the best correction to this distortion. In a conversation with Charles she examines the difficulty of being wealthy in a religion that requires its members to sell all they have and give to the poor: “. . . it is possible for the rich to sin by coveting the privileges of the poor. The poor have always been the favourites of God and his saints, but I believe that it is one of the special achievements of Grace to sanctify the whole of life, riches included.” What Lady Marchmain learns, and this is the lesson she passes on to her family, is that for rich, as for the poor, this total sanctification comes from suffering. Hence, at the end of the novel, emotional and, in Sebastian’s case, physical distress leads the soul to God. Cordelia—the truth speaker—is a central figure, although her role in the movie is vestigial. Her assessments, simultaneously serious and comic, are always sound, as in her description of Sebastian’s final state, which encapsulates Waugh’s purpose in writing the book. Charles has just said, “I suppose he doesn’t suffer.” She replies, “Oh, yes, I think he does. One can have no idea what the suffering may be, to be maimed as he is—no dignity, no power of will. No one is ever

holy without suffering.” But here, as throughout the film, Waugh’s wonderful dialogue has been omitted or twisted, as it had to be: there’s no place for exposition or nuance in caricature, and, unfortunately, holiness doesn’t have box-office appeal.