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## Mr. Chipping and Mr. Hundert: Manliness, Media, and the Classical Education

Emily A. McDermott

James Hilton's genial portrayal of a Latin master in a turn-of-the-century British public school, *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*, was published as a magazine story in England in 1933, and in book form in America a year later. It has inspired two film versions, one in 1939 and one in 1969, as well as a full-length Masterpiece Theatre production for television in 2002.<sup>1</sup> In 1994, Ethan Canin published a short story entitled "The Palace Thief," about the tribulations of an ancient history teacher at an elite Virginia prep school; it was made into the 2002 film *The Emperor's Club*.<sup>2</sup> Both stories are predicated on teachers' attempts to mold boys' minds and character in the tradition of the Victorian British classical education; their plotlines span decades in the lives of their protagonists, tracking the ups and downs of their careers and their eventual retirements, and feature their idealistic pedagogical goals and their devotion to their profession and to the institutions they serve. Within these broadly similar outlines, the two literary originals differ radically in tone and theme—to such an extent, in fact, that one is tempted to read Canin's story as a conscious inversion and subversion of Hilton's iconic portrayal of a beloved schoolmaster. Further complexities arise when the cinematic versions of both stories are added into the critical mix, for each resulting text idiosyncratically invests its plot with meaning that varies according to its medium, its audience, and its

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<sup>1</sup> References to *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* are to the pagination of Hilton 1934. The 1939 film version was MGM's *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*, directed by Sam Wood and starring Robert Donat (who won the Oscar for Best Actor, beating out Clark Gable as Rhett Butler) and Greer Garson. The same studio produced the 1969 musical version of *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*, directed by Herbert Ross (from a screenplay by Terence Rattigan) and starring Peter O'Toole and Petula Clark. The 2002 Masterpiece Theatre production of *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* was directed by Stuart Orme and stars Martin Clunes and Victoria Hamilton.

<sup>2</sup> References to "The Palace Thief" and "Batorsag and Szeralem" are to the pagination of Canin 1994. Its 2002 film counterpart is Universal's *The Emperor's Club*, directed by Michael Hoffman and starring Kevin Kline and Emile Hirsch.

makers' cultural assumptions concerning both the Victorian educational ideal itself and the notions of "manliness" that underpin that ideal.

The immediate background for Hilton's novella was the Victorian public school ideal. The curriculum of the time was classical, on the double assumption that the brain could best be trained through the gymnastic of Latin philology and that moral character could best be formed through exposure to literary and historical *exempla* that modeled virtuous behavior and notions of honor. Beginning in 1870, and in the context of a national cult of manliness epitomized by Charles Kingsley's push toward "muscular Christianity," British public schools' academic reliance on a traditional classical education was fused with an increasing obsession with team sports. The resulting curriculum aimed less at developing scholars than at molding well-rounded men to become society's future governors: "the Public Schools aim at something higher than mere culture. They build up character and turn out the manly, clean-living men that are the rock of empire" (Lunn 1926: 67).<sup>3</sup>

Hilton's Mr. Chipping ("Chips") is Latin master at the Brookfield School, a fictional English public school "of the second rank" (12)—a suitable venue for Chips, who "in any social or academic sense, was just as respectable, but no more brilliant, than Brookfield itself" (13). Over time, he mellows into "a Brookfield institution" (79–80), known for his "old and tattered gown" (102), his self-deprecating jokes, and his penchant for chaffing important alumni for having "absolutely no idea whatever about the difference between a Gerund and a Gerundive" (84). An attempt by a modernizing (and short-lived) young headmaster to push Chips into early retirement is defeated by an affectionate onrush of support from the entire school community, and Chips ends up guiding the school as temporary head through the troubled years of World War I.

The uplifting effect of Hilton's novella issues partly from the sense of nostalgia it evokes. Chips is old-fashioned and lovably "out of it" in a more modern world. Indeed, he plays up this image of himself, as teachers

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<sup>3</sup> Lunn's declaration is quoted (but mislocated by a page) in Mangan 1998: 44. In context, the lines are parodic, part of a quotation read out sardonically by games-averse boys from a clichéd magazine article on the virtues of the public schools. (Scandalized response to the rather mild iconoclasm of Lunn's book forced the author to resign from all five of his London clubs [Gathorne-Hardy 1977: 309].) See also Mangan 1981: 16–67 on the process by which sports were added to the public school curriculum and became part of an ethic of political/imperial fervor. This ethic contrasted, for example, with the more purely scholastic mold of Scottish education. For a concise account of Kingsley's "muscular Christianity," see Newsome 1961: 207–211.

everywhere play to their *personae* in dealing with their students.<sup>4</sup> Surely no one over fifty can read his response to a technology-struck boy who has been marveling at the cinema Wurlitzer (“Dear me.... I’ve seen the name on the hoardings, but I always—umph—imagined—it must be some kind of—umph—sausage” [112]) without recognizing tongue-in-cheek disingenuousness. But it takes more than Chips’ endearing quirks and readers’ nostalgia for their own schooldays to explain the outpouring of adulation *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* has inspired, out of all proportion to its modest literary merit. Rather, the novella’s impact is intensified by the symbolic value with which it prominently invests the protagonist’s character.

During Chips’ association with Brookfield, which spans the years 1870–1932, the school (like British society) undergoes radical change, reflecting an increasing industrialization; an increasing democratization, which, in Hilton’s eyes, was laudable; an increasing emphasis on materialism and a culture of wealth, which Hilton deplored; and, not least, the trauma of world war. In tandem with society at large, the curriculum changes too, moving away from almost exclusive concentration on classical philology and history to include options focused on science and other modern subjects.<sup>5</sup> Yet Brookfield itself stays essentially the same, “rooted

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<sup>4</sup> This tendency is neatly summarized by a Greek teacher in Terence Rattigan’s “The Browning Version”:

In early years, too, I discovered an easy substitute for popularity. I had, of course, acquired—we all do—many little mannerisms and tricks of speech, and I found that the boys were beginning to laugh at me. I was very happy at that, and encouraged the boys’ laughter by playing up to it. It made our relationship so very much easier. They didn’t like me as a man, but they found me funny as a character, and you can teach more things by laughter than by earnestness—for I never did have much sense of humour. So, for a time, you see, I was quite a success as a school-master. (Rattigan 1953: 31)

<sup>5</sup> The Rugby curriculum of the 1830s, under the headmastership of Thomas Arnold, for example, time-tabled the boys for 17.75 hours per week of classics and an additional 3.5 of history and geography (primarily ancient), while devoting only 2.75 each to mathematics and French, and a final 2 to Scripture (Bamford 1970: 22; for an itemization of the Rugby curriculum of 1834, see Williamson 1964: 223–227). At Harrow, Eton, and elsewhere in this same period, mathematics and French were completely optional (Bamford 1967: 62). Honors schools in science were added to Oxford and Cambridge in 1850 and 1851, respectively, and science was introduced to the secondary school curriculum by recommendation of the Public Schools Commission in 1861 and by act of Parliament in 1868 (Bamford 1967: 108–109). By the 1880’s, “Modern” or “Army” sides had been established in almost all schools to teach modern subjects, but they were generally “despised, regarded as refuges for the second rate” (Gathorne-Hardy 1977: 142). Gathorne-Hardy’s summation of the development of the Victorian curriculum (Gathorne-Hardy 1977: 136–143) is concise and informative.

in things that had stood the test of time and change and war” (107). It is thus especially appropriate that the teacher who “stands for” the school is a classics master, one who will assert, as Chips does even as bombs explode outside his classroom, “And these things—umph—that have mattered—for thousands of years—are not going to be—snuffed out—because some stink merchant—in his laboratory—invents a new kind of mischief” (99). Like countless defenders of the classics throughout the centuries, Chips defines the ultimate goal of education as the achievement of “a sense of proportion” through humanistic study of history and literary masterpieces (74; cf. 95).<sup>6</sup> It is precisely because he is a Latin master that Chips can be taken handily by the author as representing “those ideas of dignity and generosity that were becoming increasingly rare in a frantic world” (96). It is also precisely because he is a classicist that both the fictional school and the author establish him as a comforting icon for stability in turbulent times.

But another hallmark of Hilton’s characterization is that, though old-fashioned, Chips is not *ossified*. While the classical education of the Victorian era was more characteristically than not affiliated with elitism and Toryism, Chips (though explicitly labeled “a Conservative in politics” [37]) unabashedly breaks loose of those bonds: he presses Brookfield to play a soccer match against a poor grammar school from East London (37–40); he converses with strikers (61–62); in commemorating members of the Brookfield community fallen in the Great War, he reads out the name of a German master who died fighting *against* England; and he skeptically holds jingoism at bay: “Not that he was a pro-Boer—he was far too traditional for that, and he disliked the kind of people who *were* pro-Boers; but still, it did cross his mind at times that the Boers were engaged in a struggle that had a curious similarity to those of certain English history-book heroes—Hereward the Wake, for instance, or Caractacus” [58]).<sup>7</sup> He is, in short, open-minded: he looks at issues from both sides and resists being pulled, unthinking, by strong political or social currents. Moreover, he fairly embodies humanistic methodology: he draws on the *exempla* of the past, as he does here in citing Hereward and Caractacus, tests them against deeply

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Kipling’s somewhat earlier school story, “Regulus,” in which the Latin master, Mr. King, carries on a running debate with the science master about the ancient versus modern sides of the curriculum. His summary of the case for the classics—“Character—proportion—background,” snarled King. “That is the essence of the Humanities.”—anticipates Mr. Chippings’ (Kipling 1917: 271).

<sup>7</sup> Both are *exempla* for leaders of resistance to imperialist incursion— Hereward the Wake an eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon resister of the Norman Conquest, Caractacus a British chieftain who opposed Claudius’ invasion of Britain in 43 CE.

ingrained humane values, and from this process draws his own, sometimes heterodox, lessons. As a result, he is the ideal spokesman for the classical education, not only because he is a beloved Latin teacher, and not only because he espouses humanistic ideals, but also because he portrays this form of learning as more than just a relic. Properly used, the author implies, the classical education ever adapts itself to a changed world, and will continue to instill in its subjects such habits of mind as dispassionate reasoning, historical analogizing, fair-mindedness, and empathy.

Within this general symbolic framework, Mr. Chipping's individual characterization is particularly apt for one tasked with turning out well-rounded public school graduates, for he himself fits the public schools' holistic educational ideal. His most heartfelt pedagogical goal is general character development. He is not a philological task-master concentrated on instilling mastery of the refractory Latin language into his young charges: the book enacts no grueling line-by-line explications, no public excoriations of fumbling fifth-formers. In fact, the headmaster who tries to engineer Chips' retirement explicitly impugns his students' undistinguished pass rate on their "Certs" (73), and Chips himself is portrayed as a dilatory practitioner of his craft: "Sometimes he took down Vergil or Xenophon and read for a few moments, but he was soon back again with Doctor Thorndyke or Inspector French" (20).

He *is*, on the other hand, a strong athlete. He meets his wife at the age of forty-eight while hiking the precipitous terrain of Great Gable, a 2949-foot mountain in Cumbria. At fifty, "he could still knock up a half century on the cricket field" (54), and during some "energetic fives" he "played as well as many a fellow half his age" (54). After retirement, he takes care to watch "all the important matches on the Brookfield ground" (85) and remains "fit" enough (92) to come back and take on the role of Acting Head during the war years. These comments on his physical skills are not casual asides; rather, they identify him as one who embodies the ideal of the Victorian master—what today we might call a "scholar-athlete" but then was an "all-rounder." Such teachers regularly augmented their classroom duties by joining their charges daily at their games; they thus lived as well as professed the holistic ideal.<sup>8</sup>

Nor is it coincidence that Chipping's fitness and athleticism are set into contrast with the seedier condition of the "pale, lean, and medically unfit" (100) science master, Mr. Buffles, for the constitutions of the two men are emblematic of the distinction between the ancient and modern curricular "sides," with Chips representing the holistic *mens sana in corpore sano*, while Buffles, "nicknamed the Stink Merchant" (100) and affiliated

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<sup>8</sup> See further Mangan 1981: 113–121.

by that moniker to the forces of war, is suggestive of that “frantic” new world steadily undermining Chips’ ideal of dignified and generous behavior.

A sub-theme of *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* is that, athlete or no, Chipping is not really complete as either a man or a master until he has fallen in love and married. Before the advent of Kathie, his “astonishing girl-wife” (35), he “worked well; he was conscientious; he was a fixture that gave service, satisfaction, confidence, everything except inspiration” (34). After Kathie, however, his personal happiness overflowed into his professional life, and “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” (35–36). The image of Chips’ growth—better, his *completion*—draws again from Kingsley’s code of muscular Christianity, which exalted not only the athletic capacity of man’s God-given body, but also its fulfillment of God’s purposes through appropriately sanctified heterosexual union.<sup>9</sup> Through a lovely woman’s intercession, then, a master whose joining of athletic and academic achievements has already made him an all-rounder takes the final step to perfect roundedness. From a slightly distant bachelor schoolmaster, Chips is made into a father to his students. The transformation is underlined by his dying words many years later: overhearing one of the colleagues at his bedside commenting that it was a pity he had not had children, he rouses himself to say, “with quavering merriment”: “Yes—umph—I have.... Thousands of ’em...thousands of ’em...and all boys” (125).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See Newsome 1961: 209–210.

<sup>10</sup> “Teaching staffs in the Victorian public school were almost without exception monosexual” (Honey 1977: 222). Bachelor masters abounded, and in some schools housemasterships were reserved for unmarried men (Honey 1977: 174). This practice reflected the public school’s essential function as an all-male institution designed to initiate boys into the world of men in a form of *rite de passage*: as in primitive education rites, boys were taken from the company of their mothers and sisters and subjected to a set of ordeals (athletic, academic, personal) to render them fit for manhood. On the connection of western secondary education in general to rites of passage, see Ong 1959: esp. 104–107, with earlier bibliography at 105, n. 1. The view of British public school education in particular as trial by ordeal is all but universal; see, *inter alia*, Honey 1977: 219–224, and Chandos 1984: 20 on the “tribal mystic” of these schools; cf. 246. In this context, dilution of an environment viewed as properly masculine and grueling was problematic. The young heroes of Kipling’s *Stalky & Co.* themselves take umbrage (in “The Moral Reformers”) at the intrusion of the feminine into school life when they complain, “I’ve met chaps in the holidays who’ve got married house-masters. It’s perfectly awful! They have babies and teething and measles and all that sort of thing, right bung in the school; and the masters’ wives give tea-parties—tea-parties, Padre!—and ask the chaps to breakfast” (Kipling 1925: 122). This is precisely the influence Kathie has at Brookfield in *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*, but Hilton presents it in an unremittingly positive light.

Although the humanization of Chips by Kathie will be the primary theme of all the film versions of *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*, Hilton's all-rounder protagonist does not survive life after Hilton's novella intact. In the 1939 film, his reserve as a young master ("Till his marriage he had been a dry and rather neutral sort of person" [34]) is deteriorated into active unpopularity with the students. A key incident with no precedent in the book has him keep his "insolent" form in for punitive extra work, so that they are prevented from participating in the most important cricket match of the year. In a second incident original to the film, Chips is passed over, eighteen years after his arrival at the school, for a position of housemaster that by seniority should be his. (In the book, he *is* a housemaster by that time.) In explaining the slight, the cinematic Head suggests that Chips would more appropriately concentrate on the academic side of school life, given his "unusual gifts of getting work out of the boys" and his penchant for turning out "minor Latin poets." Thus, the film both makes him a Latin taskmaster (where the book had not) and emphatically places him on the academic side of a scholar-versus-athlete antinomy that was essentially foreign to the Victorian schools' holistic educational ideal. While Chips does note once in the film that what teachers should impart to their students is a sense of proportion and a sense of humor, this reference is more passing than thematically insistent. Rather, the film effectively drops Hilton's topical focus on the value of a classical education, in favor of stressing the *personal*: specifically, Chips' conversion by Greer Garson's Kathie from a stiff disciplinarian, out of touch with his students' non-academic needs, to a beloved paternal icon.

An even more radical turn in this direction is made by the 1969 musical remake of the film, in which a terminally stiff, repressed, and anachronistic Chipping (Peter O'Toole) is loosened up by a socially "unsuitable" musical comedy star (Petula Clark). The screenwriter Terence Rattigan hyperbolizes the earlier film's cricket incident, attributing it not to Chipping's reluctant need to rein in student cheekiness, but to extreme academic over-zealousness: because his class has performed below standard on their most recent examinations, he has them stay in for extra drill on the last day of term, thus preventing the star tennis player from participating in his scheduled tournament match.

Even more than in the 1939 version, the later film's meaning resides in the humanization of the title character by a good woman (with, as an added fillip, some aspersion cast on upper-class social intolerance). Hilton's thematic stress on the interplay of the Victorian classical education, turn-of-the-century developments in British society, and World War I is not

only absent but indeed precluded by a decision to update the plot to start in the 1920s, ending after the second World War.<sup>11</sup>

Over the years, then, and in the switch from literary text to Hollywood, the intertwining of classics and athletics into a holistic educational ideal is entirely lost. More than that, it is converted into an antithesis: the narrowly academic classical misfit as antitype of the athlete. In this process, Chips' *persona* is deliberately changed into that of the taskmaster, where Hilton himself had allowed no traces of this element. It is clear, then, that Hilton's original portrayal of an athletic Latinist—so true to the life of the Victorian public schools—made less sense to the later filmmakers than did an unbridgeable opposition between strict academicism and athleticism, where a teacher of dry-as-dust, antiquarian Latin is seen as a natural antagonist to the boys' desires for healthy physical release.

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The holistic British public school ideal crossed the Atlantic and helped form the curricula of America's elite independent preparatory schools. Although imperialist rhetoric faded in this transfer, these schools too were champions of the Victorian ideal of a mind shaped academically by classical study, with compulsory team sports not only keeping the body fit but also inculcating positive character traits like fortitude and *esprit de corps*.<sup>12</sup> They too were designed as bastions of elitism, where the sons of society's powerbrokers would be segregated from the masses and prepared to follow in their fathers' footsteps.<sup>13</sup> This is the world in which the drama

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<sup>11</sup> The 2002 Masterpiece Theatre script returns the story to the Victorian era, but with the addition of a muckraking agenda. It maintains the core theme of Chipping's personal redemption by Kathie but augments it with a disapproving focus on some of the harsher realities of nineteenth-century public school education. The protagonist becomes both a militant supporter of an academic meritocracy over one based on physical prowess and a one-man campaigner against rampant ragging, fagging, and flogging. Hilton might scarcely have recognized this hero: *his* Brookfield was blissfully free of bullying and brutal discipline (though Chips himself casually recalls administering a few well-merited "thrashings" [18, 81]); again, *his* Chips would have been baffled by the idea that academicism and athleticism should be dichotomized.

<sup>12</sup> See Cookson and Persell 1985: 78–80, Henry 1993: 93–95, and Powell 1996: 21, 25–26, on American boarding schools' importation of the British public schools' goal of educating the whole person through a combination of academic training and character development, with team sports an integral part of the school experience. See Cookson and Persell 1985: 47, 73–74 and Henry 1993: 94 on the derivation of the early prep school curriculum from the classical curriculum of the English public schools.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Cookson and Persell 1985: 13–19.

of Ethan Canin's short story "The Palace Thief" plays out, to immensely different effect from *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*.

Mr. Hundert is an ancient history teacher at the fictional St. Benedict's Preparatory School in Virginia, an elite all-boys school an hour from the nation's capital. His hallmark as a teacher is his committed humanistic outlook and his appeal to the examples of history to instruct his students and mold their character, preparing them for the positions of corporate and political leadership that will be theirs as if by birthright: "My classroom was in fact a tribute to the lofty ideas of man, which I hoped would inspire my boys, and at the same time to the fleeting nature of human accomplishment, which I hoped would temper their ambition with humility" (156–157). In *The Emperor's Club*, he adds the further corollary, "Great ambition *without contribution* is insignificant," and challenges his class: "What will be *your* contribution?"

At issue in both story and film versions is the pedagogical relationship between Hundert and a "problem" boy, the sullen son of a prominent U.S. senator. Through a set of quirky plot turns, yoked to the author's abiding theme that "man's character is his fate" (193),<sup>14</sup> Hundert becomes effectively haunted by Sedgewick Bell. More particularly, he is consumed by the moral failures in himself highlighted by his dealings with this "roustabout" (157), whom he twice catches cheating, once as an adolescent in the school's "Mr. Julius Caesar" contest, once (incredibly—or predictably, depending on how one looks at it) in a reprise contest arranged by the adult Sedgewick "to reclaim his intellectual honor" (183). Over and over in his relations with this student (later the chairman of EastAmerica Steel and an aspiring senator himself), the teacher is sucked willy-nilly into compromising his principles, to the point that a story that begins by offering itself as a cautionary tale concerning the character "of a well-known man" (155) ends as an indictment of its teacher-narrator for equal corruption. In other words, the character and fate at the core of the story are Hundert's, more than his devious student's.

The teacher makes his "first mistake" (165) when he deliberately raises one of Sedgewick's quiz grades in order to "leapfrog" him (165) over the studious Martin Blythe into one of three finalist spots in the school's "Mr. Julius Caesar" contest. It matters little whether his "special interest that term in Sedgewick Bell" is strictly pedagogical, based (as he himself

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<sup>14</sup> The sentiment appears first in Canin's "Batorsag and Szerelem," an earlier story in the collection (Canin 1994: 96); both loci attribute the thought to Heraclitus. The actual fragment is 119DK (121B): 'Ηράκλειτος ἔφη ὡς ἦθος ἀνθρώπων δαίμων. The precise force of the word δαίμων has been debated, but the phrase's meaning is clearly along the lines of "Heraclitus said that it is a man's character that guides the events of his life"; for discussion, see, e.g., Marcovich 1967: 501–503.

asserts) on “the honeyed morsels of a teacher’s existence, those students who come, under one’s own direction, from darkness into the light” (164), or whether it is tainted by a more ignoble urge to curry favor with the boy’s Senator-father (who has already presented him with an antique pistol from the Civil War era, in token of his power of *gratia*)—or, even more sinisterly, whether his fascination with the boy’s looks and charismatic personality (see, e.g., 158, 159, 174) suggests that he indeed, as Sedgewick himself suggests (see below), has a prurient interest in boys. Whatever Hundert’s motives, his corruption begins when he consciously marks an A grade on a B quiz.

His guilt is compounded when he is cowed by the headmaster into not calling Sedgewick out for cheating onstage during the contest (though he *does* steer victory away from him). The ethics are murkier here. The teacher—even the headmaster—may perhaps be excused for declining to make a public scene at a festive event, but Hundert’s moral strength is without doubt impeached by two related derelictions. First, despite “[fighting] this battle constantly” in his mind (172), he is unable over the subsequent week to muster the resolve even to report the cheater to the school’s discipline committee, a more private solution that would nonetheless hold the boy accountable for his dishonesty. Second, though his trickery in swinging victory away from Sedgewick and to the straightforward Deepak Mehta is ingenious and serves an honorable end, the means to this end are compromised, specifically because they are not invisible to Deepak. Having won on a question that both he and his teacher know only he will be able to answer, Deepak realizes immediately that Hundert has willfully handed him the victory: “He briefly widened his eyes at me—in recognition? in gratitude? in disapproval?” (170). Thus, the author makes clear that Hundert’s vigilante justice is tainted by its implication of an innocent in loss of honor.

Once, then, Hundert has been maneuvered by the headmaster’s intervention into pandering to the Senator’s influence and has resorted to a less than ethical stratagem to counter Sedgewick’s deceit, he can find no way to combat the boy’s cynical conclusion that principles will fall in the face of power every time. He accordingly loses any opportunity he might have had to mold the boy’s character for the better: “I did not know at the time what an act of corruption I had committed, although what is especially chilling to me is that I believe that Sedgewick Bell, even at the age of thirteen, did” (172).

A network of thematically significant ironies develops here. As a proponent of the holistic educational model, as well as an engaged teacher, Mr. Hundert believes firmly that his role in his students’ lives includes *character building*. Full of this conviction, he tells Senator Bell, “It’s my job, sir, to mold your son’s character” (163). The senator replies with a

challenge to the pedagogue's philosophical premise: "I'm sorry, young man...but you will not mold him. I will mold him. You will merely teach him" (163-164). The first irony is that the senator's words come literally true, but to the boy's detriment: it is this demagogue's ruthless, materialistic value system and carelessness of ethics, rather than Mr. Hundert's ideals, that will permanently warp his son's character. But that first irony is also a function of the second, which is that Mr. Hundert's ideals are no match for the senator's expediency. They may seem safe when ensconced within the walls of St. Benedict's, but as soon as the corruption emblemized by the world of national politics and wealth infiltrates his ivory tower, Hundert proves unequal to the task of living by his principles: "no sooner had I resolved to confront the senator than it became perfectly clear to me that I lacked the character to do so" (173).

The third and most vicious irony is that in the end even St. Benedict's cannot offer Mr. Hundert safe haven. At the end of his career, unwittingly embroiled in a battle with a former friend to succeed the headmaster, he is charged by his opponent with keeping a working pistol in his home. In fact, he does; it is the antique supposedly once owned by Robert E. Lee's coachman and given to Hundert years before during his visit to Senator Bell. Unaccountably (since the indiscretion, if there is one, is certainly venial), he denies the accusation and later that evening takes the gun to a distant marsh and throws it in. The cover-up is yet another moral failure proving the deficiency of his principles, as well as his inadequate mastery of history's *exempla*: "I became obsessed with the idea that I had missed this most basic lesson of the past, that conviction is the alpha and the omega of authority. Now I see that I was doomed the moment I threw that pistol in the water, for that is when I lost my conviction" (182). Hundert's betrayal by Charles Ellerby, whom he had thought a friend and soul-mate, is, then, only a secondary factor in his loss of the headmastership and subsequent forced retirement; the primary cause is the weakness of character that he carries with him as his fate. The indictment is all the more emphatic for issuing from his own lips, as he perseverates throughout the story over the rightness or wrongness of his past actions and turns to compulsive self-questioning and self-condemnation.

Hundert's narratorial voice combines this vacillation and obsessive introspection with an affected, indefinably prissy style. The story's opening lines prefigure the theme of moral failure while at the same time setting the tone of the coming narration: "I tell this story not for my own honor, for there is little of that here, and not as a warning, for a man of my calling learns quickly that all warnings are in vain. ...I tell it only to record certain foretellable incidents in the life of a well-known man, in the event that the brief candle of his days may sometime come under the scrutiny of another

student of history” (155). Right from our first scan of these artful words, we can sense that the story will treat of failure; our preliminary assessment of the narrator is colored not only by this sense but by his affected style, characterized by one critic as marked by “an extreme formality of voice that is inherently comic” (Kramer 1994). This voice joins with the unfolding events of the story to present us with a narrator/protagonist both “rigid” and “self-deceiving.”<sup>15</sup>

Complementing the narrator’s weakness of character is, significantly, the notion that he is anything but an athletic Victorian “all-rounder” like Mr. Chipping. Indeed, though Canin’s narrator does boast once of his post-retirement ability still to walk “three miles before dinner” (186), there is no hint that he shares Chips’ interest or prowess in athletics, nor that his influence over the boys may have extended beyond the classroom. The opposite is suggested, in fact, by a scene at their reunion, when Fred Masoudi hilariously instructs his old teacher in how to hit a tennis ball, and “they roared...and cheered and stomped their feet whenever I sent one back across the net” (190).

There is also the suggestion in the story that Hundert may be homosexual, even with a pedophiliac interest in his students. Sedgewick himself first levels the charge. Called in to discuss his dismal performance in class, the boy goes on the offensive. He first notes, “You’re not married are you, sir?” then continues, “That’s why you like puttin’ us in togas, right?” (160). Hundert’s response is to reflect: “Frankly, I had never encountered a boy like him before, who at the age of thirteen would affront his schoolmaster without other boys in audience” (160).

Sedgewick’s insinuation lingers, brought back to the reader’s mind by two exchanges whose indirection concerning the “vice that dares not speak its name” is worthy of a true Victorian. First, a menacing Senator Bell, angry that his son has been tripped up in the Mr. Julius Caesar finals by a question that was not on the required outline, warns Hundert, “My son has told me a great deal about you, Mr. Hundert. If I were you, I’d remember that” (173). The reader is surely invited by the threatening undertone to infer that what Sedgewick has shared with his father is the same imputation of homosexuality he has voiced insolently to his teacher. Later in the story, it is equally subtly implied that the identical rumor may play a role in blocking Hundert’s bid for the headmastership, when his rival Ellerby echoes Sedgewick by asking, “You’ve never been married, am I correct, Hundert?” (180). As the two have been both friends and colleagues for many years, it is obvious that the character is not really seeking an answer.

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<sup>15</sup> Kramer 1994. A more forgiving critic, Wendy Brandmark, speaks rather of Hundert’s “sweet falterings,” his “mildly vain misconceptions, his shy missed connections” (Brandmark 1994).

Rather, his query, like Sedgewick's, is crafted by the author as an oblique challenge to Hundert's sexuality.

Homosexuality has already been a theme in an earlier story in Canin's collection, "Batorsag and Szerelem." In that story, the climactic revelation of the teenage narrator's brother's homosexuality is a surprise. Although the reader may later realize that certain earlier expressions of concern by the boys' parents about their older son are intended as subtle hints about the ultimate revelation, these hints are so insubstantial that even in retrospect one cannot be sure that that is how they were meant. Is the mother's quizzing of her younger son about his brother's social skills with girls at school (62), for example, occasioned by a desire to fend off an instinctive unease about his sexuality? Is it because of that unease that she blinks when the boy secretly stashes a professed girlfriend for weeks in a hiding-place in their basement (103)? Is it a similar instinct that causes the father, when asked his opinion of the other teenager who will eventually be found in bed with his son, to respond, "Elliot's a fine kid, why? Is there something I should know about?" (70) In both stories, then, Canin seems at once to approach and to back away from the question of homosexuality through unconfirmable hints.

The impulse to this authorial indirection, however, does not lie in Victorian squeamishness. Rather, it serves as an iconic representation of societal attitudes toward homosexuality in the respective eras depicted in the stories. The action of "Batorsag and Szerelem" takes place in 1973, in times of extreme social ferment.<sup>16</sup> Though the parents of the story "were trying to change with the times" (74), that did not stop them from sitting somewhat uneasily in their bell-bottoms and sideburns. They were tongue-tied, like their society, about any anxieties they might have harbored concerning their son's sexuality; they were certainly not ready for the crashing into their personal lives of the then still-nascent gay liberation movement. This inability of theirs to "keep up" as times changed is what led to, in the narrator's words, "the great unturning of my brother's life" (106).

The understatement of the more elusive homosexuality motif in "The Palace Thief" comments similarly on attitudes of the period in which it is set. The story spans forty years in the career of Mr. Hundert, from about 1950–1990; the original incident with Sedgewick Bell takes place at the beginning of that period, at a time when homosexuality was a topic of communal denial, and even a whisper could cost a teacher his job. It is that societal condition that Canin deftly sketches through Sedgewick's initial toga jab and its so-oblique follow-up in the mouths of Senator Bell and

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<sup>16</sup> The year is set precisely by the statement, "It was the year the Vietnam War ended, Spiro Agnew resigned, and the Indians took over Wounded Knee" (65).

Charles Ellerby. If Canin's intimations are too indirect to clue us whether, in his mind, the character Hundert *is* homosexual, either actively or wishfully (let alone with his students), he is at least the kind of person—self-involved, finicky, solitary, and unfulfilled—whose character traits do not align themselves well with normative societal assumptions about “manliness.” As a result, he is the kind of person who might at that time find himself the subject of rumors of homosexuality, and whose career might suffer from the imputation. Hundert is a committed teacher, and seemingly an effective one, but he is lacking that last *je ne sais quoi* of comfort within his own skin that would make him a happy man and a completely successful schoolmaster.

It is, indeed, as if Canin has consciously (and metatextually) set his own character up against the literary prototype for the beloved schoolmaster, Mr. Chips, and found him wanting. Hilton's functional but uninspired pedagogue was able to grow into a model educator only through marriage: Kathie made Chips a new man—“though most of the newness was really a warming to life of things that were old, imprisoned, and unguessed” (35). Those things are destined to remain cold in Hundert. And, because his lack of ease and self-confidence will prevent him from becoming, like Chips, a quasi-father to his students, it is perhaps natural that the same qualities will establish him, at least to some minds, as a quasi-pedophile.

This hint of intertextual dialogue between Canin's story and Hilton's classic novella is extended through the presentation of Hundert's retirement. When Chipping is scored by a reform-minded headmaster for “slack and old-fashioned” teaching methods (69), he indignantly rejects the suggestion that he might retire, and an outpouring of affection from the school community forces the headmaster to retreat. This situation is echoed in “The Palace Thief,” but with a less salubrious outcome: Hundert, in competing with Ellerby for the headmastership, is denounced by the latter for outdated pedagogy; though this charge is initially met by a chorus of boos from their older colleagues, his support soon dissipates, and Hundert is forced to retire when Ellerby, as the new head, asks him to.

In the fullness of time, of course, the long-widowed Mr. Chips does retire. He takes rooms “across the road, with the excellent Mrs. Wickett, who had once been linen-room maid”; from this base, “he could visit the School whenever he wanted, and could still, in a sense, remain part of it” (80), keeping close tabs on the life of Brookfield, always with a walnut cake with pink icing ready for boys who stop in to tea. Although he “almost wished he had not retired,” still “he found plenty to do” (84–85). He has an “income...more than he needed to spend” (109–110) and a nest-egg in “gilt-edged stocks”; he gives money away liberally to the needy and writes a will leaving “all he had to found an open scholarship to the School” (110).

He is, in short, physically, financially, and morally comfortable. Hundert's situation is again tantalizingly similar, but always just a bit off-key. He too takes a pleasant room in town, with a pleasant landlady (185–186); he too watches over the school he has left, but there is a neurotic edge, an unhealthy neediness, to his melancholy: "To witness the turning of the leaves and to smell the apples in their barrels without hearing the sound of a hundred boys in the fields, after all, was almost more than I could bear. My walks had grown longer, and several times I had crossed the river and ventured to the far end of the marsh, from where in the distance I could make out the blurred figures of St. Benedict's. I knew this was not good for me" (199–200).

He too receives occasional visits from "his boys," but they are strangely inarticulate and unfulfilling, like his final encounter with Deepak Mehta, where he serves brandy instead of cake with pink frosting and keeps "refilling his glass" in a vain attempt to stimulate meaningful communication (205). He dreads his free time and days that "[crawl] by": "passing my reflection in the hallway mirror on my way down to dinner, I would think to myself, *Is that you?*, and on the way back up to my room, *What now?*" (186). He is "keenly aware" of needing money now that his "time in the school's houses and dining halls was coming to an end" (183)—no gilt-edged stocks here—and is motivated to agree to Sedgewick's proposed reenactment of the Mr. Julius Caesar contest partially by his offer of a fat personal pay-off ("Of course, he also offered a good sum of money to me personally" [183]). In his penury, he conceives of Sedgewick's promised contribution to the school's Annual Fund as his own personal legacy, his diluted version of Chips's "open scholarship to the school."

True, none of these topics is unexpected in the context of retirement, but the number of coinciding motifs is too high to result from simple coincidence. No, Hundert moves into a rooming house *because* Chipping did. He is short on money because Chipping was *not*. He lives in the shadow of his beloved school because, like Chips, he has nowhere else to go; but this lack, a source of contentment for Chips, brings Hundert a haunted and self-doubting loneliness. He mulls over his potential "bequest" to his school's annual fund *because* Chips makes Brookfield his legatee. "The Palace Thief" ends with a boy's visit with his old teacher *because* Hilton's novella did. In all these ways, the author of the later work shows that we should see his story in intertextual connection to Hilton's classic portrayal of a committed humanistic educator, with Hundert presented as a flawed and sadly subverted Mr. Chips.

Intriguingly, the adaptation of Ethan Canin's story to the medium of film sees a movement that is practically the inverse of that between the literary and cinematic versions of *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*: whereas the earlier films drop the novella's focus on the holistic ideals of the Victorian classical education, *The Emperor's Club* takes a Hundert who in the short story is an imperfect exemplar of the humane education he espouses and turns him into an icon for the Victorian ideal, a golden, athletic assistant headmaster in the tradition of the "all-rounder." Specifically, while Canin's original story enmeshes its hero in a tangle of moral weaknesses and failures, then interrogates his manliness through hints of homosexuality and pedophilia, the film version effectively minimizes the former and scrubs away the latter.

The implication of homosexuality is carefully expurgated from the cinematic version of Canin's short story. As the film begins, in a motif completely without precedent in the literary original, Hundert is in love (though decorously inexpressive of his emotions) with the wife of a colleague. Almost as soon as we meet her, she leaves the scene, following her husband to a job in England. She will return twenty-five years later, divorced, to rekindle their love and marry. This insertion of a romantic angle into the film is plainly not gratuitous.<sup>17</sup> Because viewers are privy to Hundert's romantic secret from the start of the film, Sedgewick's toga remark (which the screenwriters preserve) and its insinuation that Hundert has an eye for boys registers merely as an insolent wisecrack, with no further significance. Further, whereas in the story both Senator Bell and Charles Ellerby pick up on Sedgewick's jab, as if to confirm it, in the film the question is never raised again. In other words, it serves to characterize only its speaker, not the one he speaks about. In one sweep, then, the film has both slander-proofed Hundert and introduced a Kathie to complete and paternalize him.

Concomitantly with the film's normalization of Hundert's sexuality comes a general boost to his manliness. The cinematic Hundert is handsome, square-shouldered, and athletic (he *is*, after all, Kevin Kline). He starts every day by sculling vigorously and, indeed, announces in a voice-over that rowing on a lake is one of only two certainties in his life (the other is that character is fate). When challenged by the young Sedgewick to take a turn at bat in a pick-up baseball game and "show us how it's done, old-school," he sends the ball sailing so far it smashes the headmaster's car window. This display, like Chips's half-century at cricket, sets the classicist up, to his benefit, as an "all-rounder" who is academic by choice, not by

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<sup>17</sup> An interview with Canin reveals that this alteration to his story was one he did not like, though he does not give the reasons why: see Rebecca Murray, "Ethan Canin Talks about 'The Emperor's Club,'" available at <<http://movies.about.com/library/weekly/a112102d.htm>>.

default. It also establishes him (again like Chips) as a model product and proponent of the holistic educational ideal brought into American prep schools from their British counterparts: because his character has been formed by this ideal, he is fitted to the task of so molding his students' character.

At the same time as the cinematic Hundert is made more athletic, the weaknesses of character so prominent in his literary counterpart are minimized. The critical incident of the antique pistol is omitted, as is the story's odd coda, where Hundert is drawn obsessively to a campaign rally for Sedgewick and again manipulated when the populist candidate lyingly introduces him to a blue-collar crowd as his teacher from Richmond Central High (202). His expediency in swinging victory in the Mr. Julius Caesar contest to Deepak Mehta is allowed to stand unchallenged on ethical grounds because the camera fails to pan to Deepak's own reaction to the trickery and the option of referring the miscreant to the school disciplinary committee *after* the contest is not recognized. The illegitimate raise in Sedgewick's quiz grade remains (though tellingly reduced in scale to the difference between an A- and an A+), as does its implicit wronging of Martin Blythe (the true third finalist). Hundert is specifically absolved from this lapse of judgment, however, at the end of the film, first when he makes an *amende honorable* to the adult Martin by admitting his error, and later, in the film's epilogue, when Martin symbolically absolves him by entrusting his own son to Hundert's pedagogical care. In another subtle white-washing, the Hundert of film mounts no campaign to succeed the headmaster; rather, as heir-apparent, he is sandbagged by Ellerby and resigns in indignation, to the dismay of the board of trustees. Thus, he is spared the indignity of the forced retirement visited on him by the short story, and he is enabled to return triumphantly to the classroom in the end. Finally, the film certainly does not allow the possibility that part of the teacher's incentive in agreeing to Sedgewick's reprise contest has been personal gain, as in the story.

The net effect of these omissions and modifications by the film is to minimize the recurrently dubious morality of the original Hundert's decision-making, affirming his integrity and efficacy as a molders of youth. While Canin's original text pessimistically draws the reader, along with Hundert and Sedgewick, into a sinkhole of failed principles, weakness of will, and moral corruption, the cinematic Mr. Hundert is a glowing latter-day Mr. Chips.

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Hilton's novella is not overly profound, but it advances a significant theme. In it, the Latin master is not only a colorful and endearing

character; he also represents the educational ideal that pervaded the English public schools in the Victorian era, an ideal that aimed at building character rather than simply training the intellect. As both classicist and all-rounder, he personally partakes of this ideal's holistic conjunction of academics and athletics; he is thereby an appropriate intermediary to put its goals into practice. So he sets about building his boys' character, placing before them classical *exempla* of fortitude, probity, and mental and moral courage, at the same time as team sports provide them with micro-proving grounds for these same virtues.

When the novella was transferred to film, Hilton's thematic thrust was lost. Whereas the novella was about an educational ideal and a beloved teacher who represented it, the films are about a beloved teacher. An inevitable result of this shift is loss of the nuances of Chips' original characterization. A failure to appreciate that, under the public school ideal, classics and team sports were coequal partners in the educational enterprise of molding boys' character results in a cinematic Chips who is a narrow academic, hostile to sports.

The classical educational ideal is at the thematic core of both "The Palace Thief" and *The Emperor's Club*. The Hundert of the original short story passionately espouses the promise of the humane literary education (though without reference to the athletic term of the traditional holistic equation), but he fails to live up to it. This point, implicit in all the teacher's lapses of will, is hammered home by his explicit judgment that by losing his conviction he has "missed [the] most basic lesson of the past" (182). If his rival for the headship of St. Benedict's had been a scientist, or any sort of modernist, we would be invited to take Hundert's failure symbolically, as a new chapter in the battle between the ancient and modern curricular sides, and as emblematic of the classics' loss of prestige in the long twentieth century. But Ellerby is himself a Latin teacher and has been Hundert's prime ally in maintaining a "commitment to classical education" and championing "adherence to tradition" during the social upheavals of the sixties (178). As a result, no antinomy is set up between the two men; instead, we are invited by the author to view Hundert's failures not symbolically, as a function of the type of education he advocates, but personally, as indications of his inability to keep his guiding educational ideal from crumbling in the face of more successful "real-world" players like Senator Bell.

The dark message of Canin's story was not translated to film. The filmmakers have deliberately eliminated the protagonist's vacillations and self-absorption, emphasizing in their place his general probity and the respect and love he has inspired in his students. While the literary Hundert falls prey to the worry that the attention he has received at the reunion has been occasioned by the contestants' attempts "to gain advantage" before

the exam (101), in the film his students' affection is not in doubt. Purposeful integration of athleticism and a heterosexual romantic union into the filmic Hundert's characterization make him a complete proponent for a classically-based humanistic education.

Just as *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* paints Brookfield and the English public school experience in warm tones, so *The Emperor's Club*, having sloughed off the implications of defeatism in Canin's original story, puts St. Benedict's forward as a glowing image of American elite boarding schools. The case for both types of school is implicit in St. Benedict's motto, *Finis origine pendet* ("The end depends upon the beginning," borrowed by the filmmakers from Phillips Andover and Exeter Academies), which stresses the schools' role as maker of men. This idea is nicely capsulized in a moment at the beginning of the film.<sup>18</sup> It is fall, and the boys have just arrived on campus to start the academic year. Mr. Hundert, upright, blond, and radiating pedagogical integrity, calls over a boy who has just cut across the grass and asks him to provide a definition of the word "path." After the boy quickly takes his point, the teacher goes on: "Follow the path, Mr. Masoudi. Walk where the great men of the past have walked." Wrapped in this apothegm is a plea for the kind of classical education endemic to late Victorian British public schools and to Hilton's *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*, and exported from them to American boarding schools, an education that aspired to mold the character of society's future governors through a combination of team sports, classical learning, and classical moral *exempla*.

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<sup>18</sup> Neither the motto nor this incident appear in "The Palace Thief."

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