

## 8. The Plagiarizer

During times of a budget crisis which, in respect to a public university is constant, the easiest way to save money is to fire teaching faculty who, by and large, are very expensive to maintain. Besides, even though they have cushy jobs in comparison to pretty much any nine-to-five job, professors are well known whiners, rarely happy in their jobs, almost always blaming the faceless ill-defined “administration” for all their woes. Academics, please forgive me for making this outlandishly exaggerated characterization. I know that many would retort, saying that it is true that their jobs are generally not nine to five, but in fact their working hours, most often self-inflicted, are much longer than 9 to 5. They work as much at home as they do in their offices, sometimes even more. And while there is constant bickering over “teaching load” at elite colleges and schools some teach maybe just two classes a week, compared to public universities and community colleges that are commonly eight or more. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* occasionally encourages this debate.

This bleak, admittedly incomplete and rough picture of the culture of academia sits brooding at the back of every university budget crisis. Indeed, it may even be the cause of budget crises. In any case, the immediate effect of a budget crisis is for an administration to survey its campus academic programs and look for any school or department that is not bringing in its fair share of money (that is, does not attract enough fee-paying students) to justify its continued existence. And, as in any union controlled university faculty, there is the usual caveat that one cannot fire a tenured professor, unless one abolishes an entire school or department. The logic of this policy or union rule is not altogether clear, except that it does have a significant effect on morale, incites fear in large numbers of faculty and even their administrators if they think that they are to be targeted. The outcome is that these conditions set professors against each other, school against school, administrator against administrator. One common indication of this internecine horror is to level a charge

at a professor in a small department that has few students, of having violated the sacred prohibitions of academic research: having fudged one's data or plagiarized another's work.

Such was the case that spawned some of the most nasty, backbiting and infighting that I have ever seen. It was also probably the most irrational administrative decision: to eradicate the Classics Department. Irrational because it was the smallest department on campus with so few faculty that not a lot of savings would be made by getting rid of them. Although, "some was better than none," answered the bean counter in the budget office when I confronted him, and he also pointed out that if you added up the several years over which the department had taught maybe only a half dozen students, at the cost of five faculty, salary and benefits etc. per year, it worked out at a ridiculous amount spent on each student. I won't bore you with the arithmetic, but take it from me, it comes to a considerable sum. There were, however, other departments that were just as small, though admittedly they had maybe a few more students than the classics department. I pointed this out to Colmes who had called me in to discuss the issue. The President had asked him to fix the problem because various faculty and union operatives were threatening a law suit. The President had even received an anonymous death threat.

\*

When I sat across from Colmes to discuss this case, he sat back in his chair, tapped his fingers together and I detected a twinkle in his eye. This usually meant that he already had solved the case, or at least was ready with a plan of action that he knew would solve it. Expectantly, I leaned forward from my wicker chair.

"Ah yes! Hobson I know what's going on. And indeed, some in this university have come to me complaining that if the Department of Classics is closed it will be the end of Western civilization—and I agree with them—the classics are the foundation of all Western thought, the profound basis of every university in the West. Eradicate the classics, they say, and you plant the seeds of destruction of our great university system."

Colmes sat back awaiting my response. I could tell he was very pleased with his little discourse.

"It's true, our universities were built on the ideas of classical

times, but..." I mumbled.

But Colmes interrupted.

"Yes, Hobson, I know. It's a bit of a stretch, a sign of panic maybe. Though, if one ignores history, events have a way of biting back, don't you think, Hobson?"

"Indeed. Indeed," I mused, imitating Colmes.

"Hobson, would you be surprised if I told you that there is another simpler reason for targeting the Classics Department?" asked Colmes, teasing me a little, that slight smile twitching at the edge of his mouth.

"You surprise me every time we meet," I quipped. "What is it then?"

"There is a feud going on between our Vice president for Community Outreach, John Porridge, who as you know is something of a linguist, and the Chair of the Classics Department, whose name I have for the moment forgotten."

"Cicero?" I asked, jokingly.

"Ha Ha, Hobson. We'll call him that for now. This is indeed a laughing matter!" retorted Colmes with satisfaction.

"There are only four faculty in the Department of Classics, if I am not mistaken, and that includes the chair," I opined.

"Correct," answered Colmes, "and they are all tenured, so can't be fired."

"And what does the Vice President for Community Outreach, whatever that is, have to do with the classics department?" I asked.

"Nothing, at least not now," answered Colmes with a friendly frown, "except that he appears to be a sworn enemy of the Classics Department and once in fact threatened the chair that he would one day destroy the whole department."

"But what's his beef?"

"His beef, as you so rudely call it, is that some years ago he was an assistant professor in the Classics Department, taught Latin and Greek, and because he had only four students over three years, and was untenured, Cicero told him that he should look for another job," answered Colmes.

And I continued the discourse. "Being untenured, of course, he was fair game to the administration."

"Yes," said Colmes, "And Provost Dolittle informed the chair of her decision to move the faculty line elsewhere."

[For non-academics, a “line” is a position that is ‘tenure track’ in contrast to a temporary or limited period contract position.]

“And don’t tell me. The Vice President for Community Outreach is John Porridge!”

“Indeed. Indeed. Excellent deduction, Hobson!” bellowed Colmes with enthusiasm.

“OK. But that can’t be his actual beef. I mean, how is he working to get the Classics Department abolished?”

“He has launched a formal complaint against Cicero that he plagiarized a translation of Cicero’s *De Divinatione*, claiming it was his, when in fact it is clear, so says the VP, that it was copied word for word from another translation.”

“That’s a very serious allegation. Enough to place the whole department in a very precarious position. Plagiarism can never be forgiven!” I exclaimed.

“Indeed. Indeed, Hobson. Though, as I will point out to the Provost, it is in fact a very complex issue in all fields of academia, a kind of occupational hazard, one might call it.” Colmes closed his eyes for a moment, and took a deep breath.

“Really?” I asked, “I would have thought it was pretty straight forward. Either you wrote it yourself, or you didn’t. It’s as simple as that, isn’t it Colmes?”

“Not at all, my dear Hobson. Not at all,” answered Colmes opening his eyes and fixing his gaze directly on me. He retrieved a page of notes from a pile of papers on his desk. “Take a look at this,” he said.

I took the paper and saw that Colmes (or more likely someone else, a secretary, given his dyslexia) had typed a page that had several sentences each separated by blank lines. They appeared to be repetitions of the same statement, except for the first, which was written in Latin. I stared blankly at the paper, then handed it back to Colmes.

“You appear puzzled,” said Colmes. “You did not take Latin when you were at school?”

I blushed a little and was quite annoyed with myself for doing so. These days, nobody took Latin unless they were made to, or went to some fancy private or religious college. It was no longer required for entry into a university, though maybe it was never required in American universities. I struggled with it so as

to get accepted into Melbourne University in Australia, never mind the date.

Colmes drew himself up in his chair and sat up very straight. “These are quotations from Cicero’s famous *De Divinatione*, roughly translated as *The Art of Telling the Future* —my translation of course,” said Colmes showing off as was his want.

“OK. I can see that. I do remember that book, but why all the translations? They all look much the same with just a few details here and there a little different,” I observed sagely.

Dear Reader, for your interest and fascination here is the original Latin followed by the several translations as typed on the page that Colmes gave me:

*Sed nescio quo modo nihil tam absurde dici potest quod non dicatur ab aliquo philosophorum*

- *There is nothing so absurd but some philosopher has said it.*
- *Nothing so absurd can be said that some philosopher had not said it.*
- *But somehow there is nothing that can be said so absurdly that it would not be said by some philosopher.*
- *One cannot conceive anything so strange and so implausible that it has not already been said by one philosopher or another.*

“Very good, Hobson. You have a keen eye. But tell me, which one, if any, is plagiarized from another?” asked Colmes raising his right eyebrow a little for emphasis.

“Well, I don’t know. They are all different, yet they are all very similar, except for the last one which is rather embellished,” I observed, frowning, then continued, “oh, but I see what you are getting at. If you had a translation at hand, you would not even have to be able to translate Latin. Just copy the translation and change a couple of words here and there.”

“Precisely,” said Colmes with considerable satisfaction.

I now warmed to the subject and felt quite an enthusiasm building up. “And maybe whoever did the last translation, embellished it to make it look as though it was an original translation, when it most likely is not.”

“Indeed. Indeed, Hobson,” exclaimed Colmes, “very good! Very good indeed!” then immediately frowned at me and added, “but when is a translation not a translation? You can see that whoever made these translations, some were eager to stick very close to what we call a “literal” translation, whereas others, especially the last translation you have pointed out, want to adapt the translation and make it look more like every day English, or one might call it popular vernacular.”

“So you’re saying that all the translations on the page are legitimate translations in themselves, and are not plagiarized,” I said, a little defensively.

Colmes leaned back in his chair and tapped his fingers. “I think that to accuse someone of plagiarism you would need a lot of evidence, especially if it came to a translation. But even so, have you not had students write a term paper by copying various sections out of textbooks, and stringing them together?” challenged Colmes.

“Oh yes. A lot do that. But my rule of thumb is so long as the student gives the proper citation, then it’s probably OK, though of course not as good as writing the paper in your own words,” I said, expecting Colmes to tell me I was wrong. And he did.

“But they haven’t actually written the paper if it is ninety percent quotations from a text book or books, even if they do cite their sources,” is that not so Hobson?

“Yes, but..”

Colmes smiled wryly. “Perhaps we should stop there. For if we took the argument to its logical conclusion we would have to eventually conclude that just about all academic writing is a reproduction of what has been written before.”

Again, my face flushed. “You’re talking about my dissertation writing aren’t you?” I asked, again, defensively.

“Not in particular, but the fact that you see it as relevant to our case, then it demonstrates that we in academia are all guilty of habitually committing plagiarism every time we write something supposedly new.” Colmes leaned forward expecting my immediate response.

We were getting rather close to home. “Now I see it. This is the reason I have so much trouble first coming up with a dissertation topic, and second once I settle on the topic, to write

something about it that is original or new.”

“Indeed. Indeed. The demand that every dissertation produce something new and adds to the aggregated pile of knowledge is preposterous,” said Colmes with much vigor.

“If I were to follow your logic to its end I would have to conclude that most of academia is a fraud. It pretends to do the impossible,” I said, quite troubled.

“I think you are having trouble with the truth,” quipped Colmes, with, for him, a broad smile.

Fortunately, there was a knock at the door, so our thoroughly depressing conversation was thankfully halted. Though it would hover in the background of our coming attempts to sweep whatever plagiarisms there were away—or more precisely, under the rug.

\*

After Porridge, the Vice President for Community Outreach, agreed to meet with Professor Colmes concerning the plagiarism charge that he had leveled against Cicero, he decided, being a cautious person, to pay a short visit to the Director of Human Resources, Dr. Tochiarty, who, he had heard on the academic rumor mill, was out to get Colmes and had threatened to expose him as a fraud and imposter. His first inclination had been to decline the request for a meeting in Colmes’s office, since Colmes was surely well below him on the administrator pecking order. However, after a brief phone call with Tochiarty, he realized that it would be a good idea to take her along. That way, he could leave it to her to throw whatever dirt was necessary to make Colmes desist from defending Cicero and the department of classics. He would appear at the meeting as the mediator, rather than the progenitor.

However, there was an unforeseen problem meeting with Colmes in his office, which was that there was not enough room for four adults to meet, nor were there enough chairs.

“Come!” called Colmes when he heard a key in his office door. He knew it had to be Tochiarty using her key, because of course, at this time of day the door was always unlocked when Colmes was present.

Tochiarty entered, almost running, followed by a cautious Porridge. She rapidly reached Colmes’s desk, then glared down at me seated on my wicker chair as usual. I glared back. Colmes

made a very slight nod and looked across to the overstuffed chair in the corner. I rose, pushing against her as she stood so close towering above me, until I was able to stand tall.

“Oh take my seat, Dr. Tochiarty,” I said with exaggerated politeness, “or maybe you would prefer the more comfortable one over there?” I pointed at the overstuffed chair.

“Thank you, but I’ll stand. This will not take long,” she said smiling way too much, almost snarling.

I turned to Porridge. “Dr. Porridge?” I said, gesturing to my chair.

“Good day to you, Dr. Porridge, welcome to my humble office,” said Colmes, trying not to smile.

Porridge nodded, I thought also grunted, and sat on the wicker chair, my usual seat. That left me with the overstuffed chair which I did not mind at all.

“Let’s get on with it,” demanded Tochiarty, “I am told that you are actually defending a renowned and well proven plagiarizer.”

Colmes, I could tell, was in his rational emotive suppression mode.

“Not quite,” he said, frowning.

“Not quite what?” pressed Tochiarty. Either the fellow is a plagiarizer or he isn’t.”

Colmes looked across to me. “Hobson, be a good fellow and show our defenders of the truth the page of translations I shared with you.

I had carried the copies with me to the old chair, so had to pull myself up out of it in order to hand out the translations. Tochiarty hardly looked at them. Porridge, of course, since it was in his field of expertise, looked at them very closely.

“What is your professional opinion?” asked Tochiarty turning to Porridge.

“They are all remarkably similar,” he mused, hesitating, clearly not wanting to commit himself at this stage.

“Indeed. Indeed,” added Colmes. “You do of course, recognize one of the translations to be your own?”

Porridge looked down, straining his eyes as though the words were difficult to read. “Well I’m not sure. It was quite some time ago when I did my translation of Cicero,” he stammered.



Tochiarty stepped forward, pressing against Colmes's chair, trying to tower over him, hands on her hips. "Enough of this!" she almost shouted. "Porridge is not on trial here! The Classics Department and its proven plagiarizer chair are."

Colmes frowned and looked at his watch. And as if on cue, there was a light knock at his door, and in walked the Provost, looking as tiny as usual, even more so, her shoulders crunched up, head almost disappearing into them.

"My apologies if I am late," she said.

"Not at all, Dr. Dolittle. You are just in time," smiled Colmes who rose from his chair and beckoned to her to take it, which she did. Tochiarty's face reddened. She was now absolutely outranked, administratively that is. She nodded slightly and forced a polite smile, then backed away and stood over me in my overstuffed chair. Colmes walked to the door and closed it quietly. The Provost looked around the room. I had moved across to the other side of the office and pretended to examine some of the books on the shelves next to me. I wondered where this was all going.

Colmes looked over at Tochiarty. "Before you leave," Colmes said to her, "could you share with us how much money will be saved and where it will likely be spent if the Classics Department is dissolved?"

"I understand that there are four lines, all tenured, all full professors, so a lot of money will be saved," she said, "though I would have to work out the details, and of course, there are the salary benefits that have to be factored in." Tochiarty looked nervously at the Provost.

Colmes turned to the Provost. "And to what department will these lines be moved?" he asked.

"That has not yet been decided. In fact there is a good chance that the money will be put back into general revenue," said the Provost regretting her sharing of information.

Colmes looked at me, then around the room, making eye contact with each person in turn. "Then I think we all know that the true answer is that no money, that is no lines, will be saved at all. They will be lost forever into the dregs of general revenue," he announced with considerable confidence.

"Pardon, but I do not think that your expertise lies with budgeting," said the Provost, delivering to Colmes a small

informational slap on the wrist.

“Indeed not,” answered Colmes. “But it does reveal the charge of plagiarism against the classics department *vis a vis* its Chair, to be irrelevant.”

“Crap! Utter crap!” cried Tochiarty.

Colmes ignored her. “You will need to find another excuse for abolishing the Classics Department, Dr. Dolittle,” he urged.

“I do not need an excuse,” as you so rudely call it. “My responsibility is to make sure our academic excellence is not sullied in any way. In fact the money saved by closing the classics department will be spent on upgrading the gymnasium and sports fields that are in very serious disrepair.”

There, she had said it. I looked at Colmes who I could see was most gratified with this admission, which is what it was, and confirmed the usual suspicions that faculty generally in this university and truly universities everywhere. Academics came third. Administration was number one, sports number two.

Tochiarty harrumphed and scrunched up her shoulders. “This is unbelievable,” she announced, and walked to the door.

“Don’t go just yet,” called Colmes, there is more, lots more.”

Tochiarty turned, unable to leave without hearing more of what she hoped would be gossip or dirt, foolishly forgetting that Colmes was unrelenting and had vast hidden tentacles of information sources and resources, how and why a mystery to herself and other administrators.

Colmes continued. “Could I please ask you to look again at the list of translations. The last translation was made by Porridge. It is highly embellished and is a far cry from the first literal translation. I put it to you, Dr. Porridge, that you consulted all other translations and used them to inform your own translation. Am I right?”

“I do not really need to answer to you, Mr. Colmes,” said Porridge sarcastically, “but for what it is worth, of course I consulted them. And in so doing I was able to show that my translation was much more relevant to the modern audience of today.”

“Indeed. Indeed. I totally agree,” responded Colmes. “What you did was not plagiarism. Nor was the translation of Cesare Beccaria’s work *On Crimes and Punishments* done by your former department chair. He did the same as you, is that not so?”

PorrIDGE remained silent. To disagree would be to extend the debate and there was no way around it that did not also imply that he too was a plagiarizer.

Colmes persisted. "I can produce a list of translations of Beccaria that will demonstrate the same as I have shown you of the Cicero translations."

"I think we will stop right there," announced Dr. Dolittle. "This has gone far enough."

There came another light knock at the door. "May I come in?" called a light sweet voice.

"Enter!" called Colmes.

And in came Cecilia, her bright black radiance lighting up the entire office. She glided past Dr. Dolittle who smiled, though appeared a little irritated.

"Ah, thank you my dear. Just in time," said Colmes.

Cecilia handed Colmes a handful of papers. "I hope this is what you wanted. It was delivered at the convocation of 2003 University of Michigan," smiled Cecilia.

"Excellent Cecilia my dear. And my very best regards to your Mom, assuming she is in good spirits?" gleamed Colmes.

"She is fine thank you and sends you her love," said Cecilia whose entire presence emanated love. She brushed past the Provost, gave a quick glance to Tochiarty who remained impatiently at the door, as though Cecilia was taking too long to leave.

"Allow me to share with you all Exhibit A," said Colmes as he began in his characteristic style to walk back and forth across his office. "Perhaps it might be better for all present if Tochiarty and PorrIDGE left us at this point. This is strictly an issue between Dr. Dolittle and myself. And certainly not Tochiarty."

Colmes passed the document to the Provost who took one quick look at it and said, "Tochiarty, leave us please." Tochiarty left grumbling to herself and slammed the door behind her. The Provost continued. "However, I think that PorrIDGE should stay, given that he is directly involved in this plagiarism mess."

"As a matter of fact," said Colmes, "I do have a small document, actually just one page of translations for Dr. PorrIDGE to examine." He handed the document to PorrIDGE whose hand shook as he received it.

"Oh. So I see that you found my new translation of the

famous criminologist Cesare Beccaria's treatise *On Crimes and Punishments*," he said proudly.

"I did. Or at least my excellent colleague Hobson here did," answered Colmes.

"Then I am sure you have seen that my translation is easily the best," bragged Porridge.

"I am not especially qualified to make such a determination," said Colmes, "but my colleague Hobson who almost has a PhD. in Criminal Justice, surely does."

At this point I should perhaps make a small apology to you, the reader. I admit to a little resentment on my part. Colmes had in fact asked Cecilia to find these translations, but it seems that she had suggested that I do it. I am not sure of the reason, but I admit that I would have been a little annoyed had she done it since the topic obviously fell within my realm, that of criminal justice. In fact, I could easily have looked up the Cicero translations. In any case, after this case was completed, I resolved to speak with Colmes about this matter. I suspected that Colmes, as usual, was keeping information from me, that something was going on between him and Cecilia, perhaps? But no, Cecilia was not his type. His type was Rose the elder.

Now back to this fascinating case. Just by the way, though. I wondered why someone who was formerly in the classics department was translating Italian. Admittedly Italian probably owes much of its syntax and vocabulary to Latin, but so after all do many western languages, including English. So I could not resist asking Porridge, "how come you chose Beccaria of all authors to translate?" He had a ready answer.

"I believe that administrators should keep up their scholarship. Forced out of the classics department, I felt free to pursue other languages besides the classics. Italian, which I had studied as an undergraduate, was a logical choice."

Dear Reader, here is the list of three different translations of Beccaria's famous last sentence.

*"In order that every punishment not be an act of violence, committed by one man or by many against a single individual, it ought to be above all things public, speedy, necessary, the least*

*possible in the given circumstances, proportioned to the crime, dictated by the laws.” (1880)*

*“So that any punishment be not an act of violence of one or of many against another, it is essential that it be public, prompt, necessary, minimal in severity as possible under given circumstances, proportional to the crime, and prescribed by the laws.” (1950s)*

*“So that every punishment should not be an act of violence of one or many against a private citizen, it must be essentially public, prompt, necessary, the minimum possible in the given circumstances, proportionate to the crimes, and dictated by the laws. (2012)*

Porridge looked up. “Mine is the last, of course,” he said. “I am impressed that you did not include the translations from the French editions of the Treatise that were bastardized by the translator who rearranged the text from its original and even added some of his own text,” observed Porridge with an air of scholarly superiority.

“I studied Beccaria in my criminal justice courses,” I responded quietly, though I thought that I perhaps need not have answered him.

“Excellent,” said Colmes.

The Provost, who had remained uncharacteristically quiet during these small interactions of scholarship, intervened. “I do not see what any of this has to do with closing the Classics Department,” she asserted

Colmes responded. “Let me summarize it all for you, my dear Provost. It has been a demonstration of how very difficult it is, especially when it comes to translations of famous texts, to discern what is plagiarized and what is not. It would be entirely possible for a scholar to translate any text from whatever language into English, using an already done translation. Porridge’s translation here, is very similar to those before it. And so it should be. After all, the actual content of the Treatise is the same, if you follow me.”

The Provost did not respond. Colmes continued.

“My dear Provost, I have one more item to share with you, which then may help you change our mind. I thank my young assistant Cecilia for digging this up for me. I knew it existed

somewhere, just a matter of sniffing it out, if I may say so.”

Colmes passed another sheet of paper on which was written the following:

*Provost Paul N. Courant's Remarks at the 80th Annual Honors Convocation "Responsible Citizenship" March 16, 2003*

*“One often hears of the community of scholars—a community of which all who we honor today are citizens. It is a community that cherishes disagreement and that supports the risk of failure that is inherent in the possibility of success. At its best, the University is a place where people can learn from each other easily, and teach each other easily, even though learning and teaching are invariably hard work. The more different are our initial points of view, the more different our backgrounds and expertise, the harder is the work, and the more there is to learn from each other. As citizens of this community, we create the environment—individually and collectively—that allows us to succeed. This is exactly the lesson that we take the broader world.”*

Colmes started to read it aloud to all present. But the Provost, her face red with anger and embarrassment screwed up the paper and threw it back at Colmes who impressively caught it and almost grinned with satisfaction. “You do recognize that speech, do you not, Madam Provost?”

Not only was it the speech of Provost Courant, but it was also part of Dr. Dolittle’s recent speech to our own graduating class of 2012.

Colmes continued. “Indeed, there is great similarity between the text of your recent speech and that of Courant on 2003. It would be acceptable if it were taken from a translation, but, word for word...”

“Enough!” cried the Provost. “Colmes! I tell you. This prying into my entire life is atrocious behavior. I will one day see to it that you receive your due for this outrageous invasion of my privacy.”

“Madam Provost. This is not prying, The information, in this wonderful age of the Internet is there for anyone to use, if they know where to find it,” lectured Colmes.

Porridge could see where things were going. “I don’t think

my presence is needed here anymore, so I will say good-bye,” he said and made for the door. Colmes gave me a quick look and I knew immediately to get to the door in time to collect all the papers we had distributed.

“What we have disseminated in this room stays here,” ordered Colmes solemnly. He got up from his chair and approached the Provost. “Dr. Dolittle?” he said, “perhaps you can find savings elsewhere on campus. Let us keep the Department of Classics. It is all a modern university has to shield itself from the crass superficialities that daily bombard universities everywhere, and that will, I fear, one day destroy our great Western Civilization.”

The Provost left without a word, and the question of the eradication of the Classics Department quietly slipped away.

