Tony Harrison's *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* as post-colonial criticism*

Myrto Malouta
Ionian University
malouta@ionio.gr

Abstract

Tony Harrison's play *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* has been considered in the secondary literature from the point of view of dramatic impact, classicism and social criticism. In this paper, I propose that a major, but overlooked, theme of the play is that of colonial exploitation in the practices that shaped the study of the classical past, and suggest that it can be used as a valuable guide to decolonizing papyrology.

Keywords

Classical reception, colonial ideology, history of papyrology

The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus is one of the best known of Tony Harrison's works and has been named as one of the most important plays of the 20th century (Harrison 2017, 14). It is the most obviously classically inspired of Harrison's mature work, in which the author creatively uses and adapts the recovered fragments of Sophocles' satyr play *Ichenutae*, which tells the story of Hermes as a baby stealing Apollo's cattle. Harrison envelops the story within a recent historical scene, depicting the endeavours of British papyrologists Grenfell and Hunt in Oxyrhynchus/El Bahnasa. The chorus is initially made up of the fellaheen who were employed to do the digging, but then changes to a chorus of satyrs.

The play has been discussed and analyzed in several scholarly articles. The classicists on the one hand are mostly interested in the way it works as a prime example of classical reception, with classical themes and literary devices being repurposed for conveying modern messages. The English philologists on the other hand set it within the whole of Harrison's oeuvre and examine the network of influence he has had not just from the classical tradition but from other literary traditions, mostly other contemporary poets. The themes they identify in this play are evident in different ways in most of Harrison's work and must be understood in the light of his biography.

Tony Harrison is one of the most highly acclaimed contemporary British poets. He was born in Leeds in 1937 and his classical training, themes of which are evident in most of his writing, is largely

* This paper was presented within Panel "Public-Facing Scholarship and the Reception of Papyrology".

owed to the British Education Act of 1944,[1] which offered the chance to working-class children to obtain an education which would not otherwise have been available to them. This, in Harrison's case, who came from a working-class family, also led to a university education, and in an emblematically elite subject, Classics, no less. The education itself, so much removed from his family's pursuits, as well as the upward social mobility it entailed, caused him a lifetime of trying to reconcile his roots with his current situation. And where others with a similar story chose to treat their personal success as the end of the battle, Harrison devoted his life's work to highlighting the injustice and absurdity in the divides between social classes, "high" and "low" art, access to education etc.

Indeed, *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* highlight several topics regarding social injustice and class divisions, privileging the matter of the artificial divide between "high" and "low" art. Even the very choice of literary device, the satyr play, flags this: within the surviving classical corpus the satyr play genre is all but lost, since philologists both in antiquity and until our day, kept seeing it as inferior and thus less worth preserving than drama (Griffith 2015, 3). This as well as many other points on matters of social injustice have been adequately picked up in the many analyses of this play. One thread, however, that has been almost entirely overlooked, certainly by "western" scholars, is the sharply critical way in which Harrison deals with the colonial practices that drove the papyrologists. Colonialism is a topic that is more obviously addressed in some other works of Harrison, mostly the ones he wrote while living and working in Nigeria, at a time when the country had just been released from British rule, and in those plays and poems it has been picked up and discussed by scholars.[2] The fact that it has not been acknowledged in the case of the *Trackers*, in my view, is rather indicative of how various facets of colonialism and orientalism have been normalized and are still inherent in papyrological practices.

A major theme in the play is who does art/culture belong to? And while this is a question that Harrison usually asks within the confines of social stratification, here it touches upon wider issues of claims on antiquity. There is a palimpsest here to contend with, the production of culture, the reception of culture through history and the study of culture today. The inference is that someone has a right and a claim to those steps and, as a result, someone has a lesser claim.

Harrison addresses those questions obliquely but deftly. The tone is already set in the first lines of the play, where Grenfell announces the plan concerning the finds of his excavation:

> Here are treasures crated, waiting to be shipped
> from Egypt back to Oxford.
>
> D 5, NT 20[3]

[1] About the Act see Blackburn and Marsh 1991.
[2] See e.g. Rylance 1991, 124 on *The White Queen* (Harrison 2016, 23-40); Ploix 2018 and Harrison 2017, 132-139 on *Phaedra Britannica* (Harrison 2002).
[3] Harrison writes his plays for specific performances and with specific audiences in mind. *The Trackers* were first staged at the Theatre of Delphi and then at the National Theatre in London. The edition of the play by Faber and Faber publishes

Back to Oxford. So the first step, that of the production of culture is removed from the setting where the papyri are found. The idea of "return" to Oxford signifies that the "west" will now repatriate the products of its own heritage without much thought of the circumstances that made them be found in the sands of Egypt. This notion is repeated and compounded later with the complementary statement that the "return" is an act of salvage as well, as the locals are incapable of understanding their value and the way they should be treated:

> We ship back papyri to decipher them at Queen's
> but they'd use them, if we let them, as compost for their greens.
>
> D 18, NT 62

This point is made several times throughout the play, and for emphasis usually classical works or authors are named in juxtaposition to the produce they would be used to fertilize. Grenfell even spells this out towards the end of his opening monologue:

> I swore, while still a teenager at Queen's
> to rescue Greek papyri from enriching Egypt's greens.
>
> D 40-41

The highlighting of this attitude is absolutely in line with Harrison's messages regarding British society, and the fact that the poorest and most uneducated are precluded from understanding the importance of art is one of the main themes in his work. The nuance here lies in that the fellaheen are portrayed in accordance to the evidence of the time not as disenfranchised, but as incapable of grasping the importance of papyri, i.e. art. The fact that the figures who are taking on the role of authority on the subject are not Egyptian but British, removes this inequality from the confines of Egyptian society and sets it within the frame of colonial power dynamics. Thus, the fellaheen, who in the absence of authoritative Egyptian figures stand in for Egyptians in general, are in the receiving end of essentialist, orientalist appraisals about their relationship with and rights to the classical past.

If the above were the only comments on this subject in the *Trackers*, I still think they would have served as a pointed, if somewhat subtle, indictment of these attitudes. But Harrison has devised a number of ways in which these matters are further addressed. Indeed for as long as the papyrologists remain in their original form and the chorus is still made up of fellaheen, the imposed order is retained. However, after Apollo appears, the dynamics change. Surely there is fundamental significance in the fact that the first appearance of Apollo is effected through the chant of the fellaheen; it is effectively they who summon him from his dormant state and from the past. From that point on, everything changes. Grenfell is possessed by Apollo, while Hunt is transformed into Silenus and the fellaheen are replaced by a chorus of satyrs.

both versions, since they contain important differences. References in this paper are made to both texts, marked D and NT.

The new characters replacing the former ones are all quite outrageous, but it is obvious that the satyrs are meant to represent the fellaheen within the satyr play. Grenfell as Apollo confirms this by exclaiming

> Well? Well? Where are they? Nothing to be seen.
> They're unreliable like the fellaheen.
>
> D 385-6, NT 391-2

The difference after the transformation is that within the genre of the satyr play the fellaheen may have a voice, in a way that in the first, the historical part of the play, as well as in reality, they had not. But Harrison, at the same time as giving them that voice, undermines it by having them speak in a working-class Northern accent, in stark contrast to the received pronunciation of the Grenfell and Hunt characters.[4] Harrison here paints the fellaheen in Gramscian terms as the quintessential subaltern; with the imagery offered by his choice of genre, the satyr play, the fellaheen are even (partly) dehumanized.[5]

The play then moves into an exploration of the satyrs' role in the recovery of Apollo's lyre and their interest in it, which is halted by those in charge. Apollo:

> My advice is stick to being satyrs
> and don't go meddling in musical matters.
>
> D 858-9, NT 799-800
>
> and satyrs, half-beasts, must never aspire
> to mastering my, and I mean *my*, lyre.
>
> NT 823-4, milder in D 888-9

But the satyrs gradually assert their role in the process of the recovery of the heritage of antiquity: «Who's indispensable to the papyrologist?», asks Silenus (D 1008) «Us!» shout the chorus of satyrs in reply.

> Silenus: Who scrabbled in sand to find bits of Greek?
> Chorus: Us!
> Silenus: Who pulled from oblivion the words that we speak?
> Chorus: Us! Us! Us![6]
>
> D 1011-4

Despite this assertion, Silenus makes a chilling return to order:

> We have to keep a proper distance though.

[4] The social connotations of accent, mostly the contrast between local dialects and RP, are a central theme in Harrison's poetry. See Handley 2016, 15-17.
[5] The theme of (part) dehumanization in a colonial setting is also present in *Phaedra Britannica* (Harrison 2002), see Ploix 2018, 242.
[6] Echoing the poem *Them & [uz]* (Harrison 2016, 133-134), see Astley 1991, 13.

We're meant as Calibans to serve a Prosepero.
Deferential, rustic, suitably in awe
of new inventions is what your satyr's for.
But we mustn't, as you heard, actually aspire
to actually *play* your actual lyre.

D 1016-1021

The fact that the order he is calling for is the power structure of colonialism is clearly spelled out by the reference to Caliban and Prospero, characters from Shakespeare's Tempest, who, as updated by Octave Mannoni, are the emblems of colonizer and colonized in literature (Mannoni 1990).

While, as mentioned above, post-colonial criticism in *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* has not been acknowledged in "western" bibliography, there is one example from Egypt, where a classicist identified and creatively interacted with Harrison's commentary. Though discussing this at length is beyond the scope of the present publication,[7] this paper would be incomplete without at least a mention of it: a few years after the publication of *The Trackers*, Egyptian classicist Ahmed Etman, influenced by Harrison's work and clearly picking up on the threads discussed so far, attempted his own reconstruction and adaptation of Sophocles' fragments. He came up with a play, *The Goats of Albahnasa*, that grounds the discussion on the teaching of classics in Egypt, as well as Egypt's claim on the classical tradition. One of the main points made by Etman is the important role played by Egypt in the preservation of papyri, which are of paramount importance as vehicles of ancient knowledge and literature. Etman argues through a series of literary stagings, that contrary to orientalist ideas regarding Islam, Classics is not only relevant to Egypt, but arabic scholarship pioneered the field many centuries before the west claimed it as its own. Also, since papyri are found in its sands, Egypt is primely involved in the process of the recovery of knowledge. Crucially, Etman picks up from Harrison's post-colonial criticism of early papyrological practices and further identifies the continuing coloniality in the field of Classics, since the European scholars featured in his play cannot comprehend what interest Egyptians might possibly have in Graeco-roman antiquity. «The library of Alexandria!» one of them exclaims, «Who on earth knows anything about it here in Egypt?!».

Going back to my main reference today, I would like to end by suggesting that Tony Harrison's *Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* should function as a blueprint for how to teach Classics in the 21st century. No one can rewrite the history of the discipline, but teaching Classics – even more so Papyrology – should include raising students' awareness of the ideologies upon which the subject was conceived of and consolidated. At the very least we should be mindful of not perpetuating and normalizing the power dynamics through which it came to be.

[7] An article, discussing both plays, is in preparation.

Bibliography

Astley, N. 1991, "The Wizard of [Uz]: Preface", in N. Astley (ed.) *Tony Harrison: Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies I*, Newcastle upon Tyne, 10-13.

Blackburn, R. M., Marsh, C. 1991, "Education and Social Class: Revisiting the 1944 Education Act with Fixed Marginals", The British Journal of Sociology 42 / 4, 507-536.

Griffith, M. 2015, *Greek Satyr Play: Five Studies. California Classical Studies. No. 3*, Berkeley.

Handley, A. 2016, *Constructing Identity*, Frankfurt am Main / New York.

Harrison, T. 1990, *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*. London.

– 2002, *Plays 2: The Misanthrope, Phaedra Britannica, The Prince's Plays*, London.

– 2016, *Collected Poems*. London.

– 2017, *The Inky Digit of Defiance: Selected Prose 1966-2016*, edited by Edith Hall, London.

Mannoni, O. 1990, *Prospero and Caliban. The psychology of colonization.* Ann Arbor, MI.

Ploix, C. 2018, "Reterritorialization and aesthetic transformations: the case of Tony Harrison's *Phaedra Britannica* and *The Misanthrope*", Perspectives 26 / 4, 478-494.

Rylance, R. 1991, "On not being Milton", in N. Astley (ed.) *Tony Harrison: Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies I*, Newcastle upon Tyne, 114-128.