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"Hijacking Culture": Tony Harrison and the Greeks

Steve Padley

Robinson College, Cambridge, United Kingdom. **Steve Padley** is Teaching Fellow in English at Robinson College, Cambridge and Associate Lecturer with the Open University. He was educated at the Open University, the University of Sheffield, and Wolfson College, Cambridge where he completed his Ph. D. thesis, "Class and Politics in Tony Harrison's Poetry for Page, Stage, and Screen" in 1999.

This article addresses Tony Harrison's use of verse drama to explore the issues of cultural and social exclusion and reclamation that are central to his work for page, stage, and screen. I focus particularly on Harrison's engagement with the dramatic and imaginative world of the ancient Greeks, and his appropriation of the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and others to give a voice to those historically effaced from history, political power and culture on the grounds of language, class, and gender. Three examples of Harrison's theatre works form the basis of this study. His version of *The Oresteia* for the National Theatre in 1981 posed a critique of the enduring cultural orthodoxies surrounding the text and the gender relationships it depicts. These themes were further developed in his libretto *Medea: A Sex-War Opera* (1985), which failed to achieve dramatic realisation in its intended form. Both *The Oresteia* and *Medea* offered searching examinations of the link between patriarchal and cultural values; Harrison's *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* (1988; 1990) used the conventions of the Greek satyr play and fragments of Sophocles' *Ichneutae* to scrutinise questions of social and cultural dispossession at different historical periods. Harrison's poetry for the stage brings forceful, subversive, yet dramatically effective voices from the 'margins' into conflict with the exclusive world of classical literature and scholarship, in combative reworkings of ancient Greek drama that reveal urgent historical and contemporary resonances.

> Poetry is all I write, whether for books, or readings, or for the National Theatre, or for the opera house and concert hall, or even for TV. All these activities are part of the same quest for a public poetry […] I sometimes work with ancient originals written at times when poetry had the range and ambition to net everything, but if I go to them for courage to take on the breadth and complexity of the world, my upbringing among so-called 'inarticulate' people has given me a passion for language that communicates directly and immediately.
>
> Tony Harrison [1]

I

The social and political imperatives informing Tony Harrison's work are most explicitly addressed in his poetry for the page, but given Harrison's claim for a 'public' dimension to his entire œuvre, a fuller assessment of his work for various media is necessary. Harrison is an eclectic poet of the theatre, as a brief summary of his dramatic writings will testify. A long and productive association with the National Theatre began with his critically acclaimed translation of Molière's *The Misanthrope* in 1973 and an equally well-received adaptation of Racine in *Phaedra Britannica* (1975). In a series of increasingly ambitious productions with the same company between 1977 and 1985 Harrison recreated the medieval mystery plays for

[1] Quoted in *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies 1: Tony Harrison*, ed. by Neil Astley (Newcastle : Bloodaxe, 1991) p. 9.

the modern stage. Frequent revivals have followed since the mid-1980s, making *The Mysteries* Harrison's greatest commercial success in the theatre. Other collaborations have seen Harrison bring together poetry and music. *Bow Down* (1977), with Harrison Birtwistle, drew on versions of the traditional ballad "The Two Sisters" culled from various national cultures, and Harrison also provided a translation of the libretto of Smetana's *The Bartered Bride* for the New York Metropolitan Opera in 1978. More recently, Harrison has devised verse dramas on widely diverging themes. *Square Rounds* (1992) was a horrified and horrifying account of twentieth-century advances in technological and chemical warfare; *Poetry or Bust* (1993) commemorated the life of John Nicholson, a little-known nineteenth-century Yorkshire poet; and *The Prince's Play* saw Harrison reunited with the National Theatre in 1996 for an adaptation of Victor Hugo's *Le Roi s'amuse*.

The main inspiration for Harrison's theatre works, however, has derived from his affinity with the plays and dramatic practices of classical civilization. In the spirit of the original performances of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and others, Harrison has staged a number of unique theatrical experiences designed for specific times and places. On two successive nights in 1995 the Roman amphitheatre near Vienna was the site of *The Kaisers of Carnuntum*, the story of Commodus, the bloodthirsty and historically marginalised son of Marcus Aurelius, who witnessed his first slayings at the same venue. Another strikingly original venture took place on the excavated site of a proposed new theatre at Delphi, one of Harrison's favoured locations, where he staged a short piece, *The Labourers of Herakles* (1995), based on the earliest surviving fragments of Greek tragedy by Phrynichos. A comprehensive study of Harrison's verse drama is beyond the boundaries of this essay, so Harrison's relationship with the dramatic and imaginative world of the ancient Greeks will be my central focus. In his various translations and adaptations of the Greek dramatists Harrison has sought to interrogate the historical appropriation of such works as the preserve of a privileged audience. I will demonstrate how Harrison's linguistic, poetic, and dramatic strategies embrace issues of social and cultural exclusion, reclamation, and appropriation, and seek to give a voice to those habitually effaced from history, political power, and culture, particularly on the grounds of class and gender.

Harrison's reworkings of Greek drama are always composed with an ear for the contemporary resonance. In the performance of *Labourers* at Delphi, staged during a period of horrific ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, Harrison appeared on stage as The Spirit of Phrynichos, the marginalised outsider whose play *Halosis Miletou* was banned because of scenes designed to "sting the cowardly appeasers"[2] of his time. Harrison's speech as Phrynichos pointedly draws uncomfortable parallels in casting doubt on the capability of art to "redeem / the cry from Krajina or the Srbrenica scream."[3] The sense of impotent despair in the face of humankind's capacity for inhumanity is exacerbated by the deflating mockery of the Labourer who asks "Who the fuck was that?"[4] as the spirit exits the stage.

The failure of Harrison's play *The Common Chorus* (1992) to achieve realization on the stage is indicative of the significance he attaches to making such works relevant to the concerns of the day. The play comprised Harrison's second attempt to adapt Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* as a contemporary political parable; the first, *Aikin Mata*, co-written with James Simmons, was performed in 1964 at Ahmadu Bello University in Nigeria, in the shadow of an impending civil war. The threat of nuclear annihilation was the central concern of *The Common Chorus*, but before the project could be brought to fruition the play's concerns were rendered redundant, as Harrison admitted:

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[2] "The Labourers of Herakles", in *Plays Three: Poetry or Bust, The Kaisers of Carnuntum, The Labourers of Herakles* (London : Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 126.
[3] "The Labourers of Herakles", p. 143.
[4] *Ibid*., p. 145.

> Thankfully the Cold war has ended and my play has been marooned in its moment. The 'text', as Tarkovsky said of the film script, gets 'smelted' into performance. This text never went through that essential smelting process. If I wanted to do *Lysistrata* now I might have to begin again with a third and totally different version.[5]

Another dramatic text by Harrison which did not reach the stage as intended was *Medea: A Sex-War Opera* (1985), again commissioned by the New York Met, but never performed, due to Jacob Druckman's failure to complete the score.[6] A more detailed analysis of Harrison's treatment of the Medea myth will follow, and my main discussion of Harrison's dramatic explorations of issues of cultural and social marginalisation will also focus on two further examples of Harrison's engagement with Greek drama: his translation of Aeschylus' *The Oresteia*, first performed at the National Theatre in 1981; and the much revised and revived *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* (1988; 1990), based on the fragmentary text of a satyr play by Sophocles. The oppositions addressed in these works, between 'high' and 'popular' culture, colloquial dialect speech and traditional verse forms, and the expression of class and gender experience within an elevated literary discourse, are those at the heart of Harrison's poetry. Harrison's influences are diverse, deriving equally from an "immersion in great theatrical poets of the past" and an "early appetite and relish for the verse of the music-hall recitation and the pantomime."[7] This synthesis is most completely achieved in *Trackers*, which will be discussed later, but I will begin my analysis with reference to *The Oresteia*.

II

Peter Hall, who directed Harrison's *Oresteia* for the National Theatre, noted the survival of Victorian attitudes towards the classics — a perception of the ancient Greeks as "good public school types and members of the Church of England"[8] — in a production of 'Agamemnon' at Bradfield College in the mid-1970s. Hall remarked on the incongruity of seeing a bishop in the audience, "gravely following his Greek text, while the story of cannibalism, murder, and corruption was enacted before us" and concluded that although "to the Renaissance the classics were subversive — almost revolutionary […] to the English public school they were pillars of conformity."[9] It was this culturally potent prevailing wisdom that Hall and Harrison sought to challenge in *The Oresteia*.

The linguistic strategies of Harrison's version of Aeschylus's trilogy stake a claim for the culturally excluded, but also take account of the stylistic characteristics of the original and the practicalities of theatrical production. Harrison's use of northern English accents, idioms, and syntax suited both the requirements of his chosen verse form — an alliterative, twelve-syllable, four-stress line — and theatrical pragmatism. The text was to be performed by masked actors, and Harrison's belief that "the resonance of protracted vowels disturbs the mask"[10] contributed to his decision to use the characteristic short vowel sounds of northern speech. More significantly, in terms of his assertion of the validity of the dialect voice,

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[5] "Introduction", *The Common Chorus: A Version of Aristophanes' Lysistrata* (London : Faber and Faber, 1992), p. xvi.

[6] A version of Harrison's text finally achieved theatrical realisation in a very different form in 1991. The Volcano Theatre Company's *Medea: Sex War*, performed in London and Edinburgh, combined parts of Harrison's libretto with extracts from Valerie Solanis' notorious 1960's radical feminist text, *The S.C.U.M. Manifesto*.

[7] Quoted in Howard McNaughton, "Tony Harrison", in *Contemporary Dramatists*, 5th ed., ed. by K. A. Berney (London : St. James Press, 1993), pp. 280–282 (p. 281).

[8] *Peter Hall's Diaries: The Story of a Dramatic Battle*, ed. by John Goodwin (London : Hamish Hamilton, 1983), p. 237.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] "*The Oresteia* in the Making: Letters to Peter Hall", in *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies: 1*, pp. 275–280 (p. 279). First publ. in *Omnibus* (1982).

Harrison was able to justify his linguistic choices as a desire to reproduce the idiosyncratic tone of Aeschylus:

> As a Northerner I am drawn to the physicality of Aeschylus's language. I relish its cragginess and momentum. At school I was never allowed to read verse out loud because of my Yorkshire accent. They said I was a barbarian, not fit to recite the treasures of our culture. And while my translation of Aeschylus isn't what you could call a deliberate revenge, it is most emphatically a rediscovery of the dignity of the accent.[11]

Harrison foregrounds northern speech patterns from the opening lines of the trilogy. The forceful rhythms of the watchman's prologue to 'Agamemnon' introduce the distinctive alliteration and metrical regularity which characterises the verse throughout:

> No end to it all, though all year I've muttered
> my pleas to the gods for a long groped for end.
> Wish it were over, this waiting, this watching,
> twelve weary months, night in and night out.[12]

The watchman's conflicting emotions of relief, joy, and fear are communicated with colloquial freedom. Deliberately convoluted locutions and syntactical fragmentation emphasize the impact of large scale public events on the lives of ordinary people:

> Soon I'll be grasping his hand, Agamemnon's…
> Let him come home to us, whole and unharmed!
> As for the rest… I'm not saying. Better not said.
> Say that an ox ground my gob into silence.
> They'd tell such a story, these walls, if they could.
> Those who know what I know, know what I'm saying.
> Those who don't know, won't know. Not from me.
> (p. 191)

Harrison extends this almost Brechtian concern with the suffering of the citizenry in his deployment of the choral odes. The anguish of those mourning loved ones killed for a cause with which they feel no affinity is articulated in a powerfully empathetic vernacular diction:

> *my husband sacrificed his life*
> *my brother's a battle-martyr*
> *aye, for someone else's wife —*
> *Helen, whore of Sparta!*
> whisper mutter belly-aching
> the people's beef and bile: *this war's*
> *been Agamemnon's our clanchief's making,*
> *the sons of Atreus and their 'cause.'*
> Where's my father husband boy?
> where do all our loved ones lie?
> six feet under near the Troy
> they died to occupy.
> (p. 201)

The production also aimed beyond linguistic and formal considerations in its challenge to the assumed cultural function of the classics in the modern age. Most contentious of all was the radical emphasis on gender identity which Hall and Harrison sought to address. For Hall, *The Oresteia* represented a masculinist perspective on a period in which matriarchy had given way to a male-dominated society. The decision to employ an all-male cast for this production was intended to perform the function of abstracting the sexuality of the trilogy, judging by Hall's claim that in "the primitive world that Aeschylus portrayed, a masked man dressed as Clytemnestra is paradoxically more womanly than a woman."[13] Harrison, who wanted to

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[11] Quoted in Stephen Fay and Philip Oakes, "Mystery behind the mask", in *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies: 1*, pp. 287–290 (pp. 289–290). First publ. in *Sunday Times* (29 November 1981).

[12] *Theatre Works 1973–1985* (Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1985), p. 190. Further references will be given after quotations in the text.

[13] *Making an Exhibition of Myself* (London : Sinclair Stevenson, 1993), pp. 313–314.

extend the concept of gender polarisation by dividing the audience into male and female sections — an idea vetoed by Hall — drew extensively on feminist readings of *The Orestia* as an account of the establishment of a patriarchal society. This led Harrison to textually emphasise motifs of sexual difference and conflict, as in his recurrent use of the terms 'he-god' and 'she-god' to distinguish differences which were only implied in the Aeschylean original.

Sue Ellen Case has shown how the trilogy "enacts the 'battle of the sexes'", drawing on "Athenian cultural and political codes to prescribe that women must lose the battle."[14] Harrison and Hall's production attempted to illustrate the continuing contemporary relevance of the issues addressed in *The Oresteia*:

> To have women play in our production would seem as if we in the twentieth century were smugly assuming that the sex war was over and that the oppression of the patriarchal code existed only in past times. The maleness of the piece is like a vacuum-sealed container keeping this ancient issue fresh.[15]

The conclusion of the trilogy represents the overthrow of a feminine principle perceived as vengeful and threatening. Case's feminist reading of the text reflects the production strategies adopted by Harrison and Hall:

> Perhaps the feminist reader will decide that the female roles have nothing to do with women, that these roles should be played by men, as fantasies of 'Woman' as 'Other' than men, disruptions of a patriarchal society which illustrates its fear and loathing of the female parts. In fact, the feminist reader might become persuaded that the Athenian roles of Medea, Clytemnestra, Cassandra or Phaedra are properly played as drag acts. The feminist reader might conclude that women need not relate to these roles or even attempt to identify with them.[16]

Nevertheless, some critics have continued to identify a gender imbalance in Harrison's dramatic strategies. Luke Spencer detects a misogynistic element in the depiction of women in the theatre works which tends to show them as "at their best […] recalcitrant and irrational, at their worst masochistic and murderous,"[17] and contemporary reviewers of *The Oresteia* questioned the decision to use an all-male acting company. The fiercest attack came from Marina Warner, who saw this as the "single greatest enormity" of the production, and one which was compounded by the directorial decision which urged the actors "to play as men, with deep, undisguised voices, and jock straps showing through their *chitons*."[18] Harrison and Hall's carefully rehearsed and frequently reiterated defence of this production choice clearly failed to convince those critics who, sharing Benedict Nightingale's view, saw "no reason, except a respect for early custom which we signally fail to pay in the case of Shakespeare, why women shouldn't be represented."[19]

The textual evidence of Harrison's libretto for *Medea: A Sex-War Opera* suggests, frustratingly, that the critique of patriarchy and the stringent examination of gender relations which *The Oresteia* only partially delivered might have been more successfully accomplished had this later project reached the stage in its intended form. The profusion of literary and dramatic representations of Medea, which Harrison explicitly draws on, are testimony to the enduring and ambivalent fascination with the myth in male-dominated cultural production. As Marianne McDonald has shown, Medea remains "an inspiring symbol of civil disobedience"[20] whose experiences still resonate. Medea,

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[14] "Classic Drag: The Greek Creation of Female Parts", *Theatre Journal*, 37, 3 (1985), pp. 317–327 (p. 322).
[15] Tony Harrison, quoted in the programme for *The Oresteia* (National Theatre, 1981).
[16] "Classic Drag", *Theatre Journal*, 37, 3, p. 324.
[17] *The Poetry of Tony Harrison* (Hemel Hempstead : Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 66.
[18] "Hall Hath No Fury", *Literary Review*, 44 (1982), pp. 25–26 (p. 25).
[19] "Masking the Magnificent", *New Statesman* (4 December 1981), p. 30.
[20] "Medea as Politician and Diva: Riding the Dragon into the Future", in *Medea: Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy and Art*, ed. by James J. Clauss and Sarah Iles Johnston (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 297–323 (p. 301).

> as the exploited barbarian, can be the symbol of the freedom fighter […] In Africa, Haiti, and Ireland, as in other colonised countries, performances of *Medea* are staged as an affirmation of liberty. The play of the oppressor […] is co-opted as a weapon directed at the oppressor's heart […] The Medea myth often supplies the vocabulary for expressing modern political concerns; she is the exploited 'other' who fights back.[21]

Harrison's approach to Medea is encapsulated in the epigraphs which precede the text in *Theatre Works*: Levi-Strauss's contention that "we define the myth as consisting of all its versions," and William Irwin Thompson's description of myth as "a polyphonic fugue for many voices."[22] The opening scene directly invokes these assertions, as a male chorus chants a litany of hate and hostility comprised of extracts from dramatic and operatic versions of the Medea story. Harrison's unfulfilled idea of dividing *The Oresteia*'s audience on gender lines seeks some kind of on-stage realisation here, in a work textually and structurally predicated on oppositions. As the men's incantations continue, two temporally and thematically juxtaposed processions are simultaneously taking place; one, the wedding march of Creusa, regal and opulent; the other, Medea's journey to the electric chair, sombre and chilling. A Chorus of Women is then introduced to begin the repudiation of the myth which has been constructed around Medea. The operatic tradition which yokes together female suffering and aesthetic beauty is revealed as a practice which sanctions patriarchal abuse within 'high' culture:

> When the mother's pain's the maximum
> you want pure, pear-shaped tones to come
> and not a screech.
> No matter if she's got TB
> so long as air for the high C
> gets through one lung.
> She dies of stabwounds, fever, pox
> and all *you* care, up in your box,
> is how it's sung.
> Tosca, Carmen, Butterfly,
> it seems all women do is die
> in music drama.
> A woman is what men desert;
> in opera (as in life!) men hurt
> and harm her.
> (p. 369)

The role of the Chorus of Women is to explicitly address the historical weight of negative cultural representations of the female principle. As with issues of class and language, Harrison sees gender as another determinant of cultural exclusion. The enduring potency of dominant patriarchal attitudes in myth, literature, and culture since that time is keenly attested to in *Medea* by the women's eloquent counter to the polyphonic incantations of the male chorus:

> As the sex-war's still being fought
> which sex does a myth support?
> you should be asking.
> […]
> Beneath *all* Greek mythology
> are struggles between HE and SHE
> that we're still waging.
> In every quiet suburban wife
> dissatisfied with married life
> is MEDEA, raging!
> (pp. 370–371)

[21] *Ibid.*, pp. 301–302.
[22] *Theatre Works 1973-1985*, p. 364. Further references will be given after quotations in the text.

The Chorus of Women incisively scrutinises the link between patriarchal and cultural values, the eloquence of their discourse reversing traditional associations of the female with the private speech of the *oikos* against those of the male with the public rational debate of the *polis*. By contrast, the repetitive, rabble-rousing chanting of the male chorus would probably, in production, have evoked the unsophisticated cacophony of a football crowd or other vociferous mob gathering, in spite of the 'high' cultural provenance of their words. Harrison effectively strips away the layers of "male mythologising" (p. 368) to reveal patriarchal oppression incorporated in the very fabric of cultural production, not least by depicting what Carol Rutter has called "the *original, erased* version"[23] of the Medea myth. The main achievement of Harrison's *Medea* resides in the cogently argued polemical statement of anti-patriarchy, articulated more forcefully here, through devices such as the choral debate between male and female, than in the less coherently structured strategies of *The Oresteia* which were left open to critical misrepresentation.

III

Harrison's *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* has been described by the actor Jack Shepherd, who first played the dual roles of Grenfell and Apollo, as a play which functions on

> several different levels at more or less the same time, in three different historical periods, containing both a painstaking reconstruction of a Greek satyr play, an account of how that play came to be unearthed and an altogether different account of how a discerning class has come to *own* high culture, keeping it well out of the reach of the undiscerning masses.[24]

The play opens with a dramatisation of the discovery of fragments of Sophocles' satyr-play, *Ichneutae*, by the archaeologists Bernard Pyne Grenfell and Arthur Surridge Hunt at Oxyrhynchus in 1907. Grenfell and Hunt are aided in their search by a group of Egyptian peasants, or fellaheen. The papyrus they unearth tells how Hermes stole the cattle of Apollo to use their skins in his creation of the lyre, and how Apollo attempted to recover the cattle with the help of a group of satyrs, led by Silenus. In Harrison's play the discovery of the papyrus heralds the transformation of Grenfell and Hunt into Apollo and Silenus, while the fellaheen become satyrs in order to enact both the Sophoclean fragments and Harrison's imaginative 'filling-in' of the textual gaps. Harrison has frequently reworked the play's closing scenes to suit the specific character of each venue in which it has been performed, to demonstrate how, as Marianne McDonald suggests, "each place has its own élite; each place its own oppressed."[25] The theme of social and cultural dispossession was brought up-to-date in the National Theatre production of 1990 as the satyrs returned to the stage, first in the guise of football hooligans to deface the set with aerosolled obscenities, and finally, against a backdrop designed to resemble the theatre's exterior, as the homeless of 1980s London who in reality congregated nightly in the surrounding area.

Harrison both incorporates and undermines the conventions of the satyr play to give a contemporary political focus to a relatively unconsidered aspect of classical culture. In ancient Greece, the satyr play was performed as a coda to the conventional three-part tragedy, and has endured an uncertain reception from classical scholars who have been unable to reconcile its bawdy irreverence with the intensity of tragic suffering which preceded it. However, Harrison's reading of the relationship between satyr play and tragedy suggests, by contrast, a sense of social and cultural inclusiveness. For Harrison, the satyr play provides the key to what he calls "the wholeness of the Greek imagination," compared to which our later division

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[23] "Notes", in Tony Harrison, *Permanently Bard,* ed. by Rutter (Newcastle : Bloodaxe, 1995), p. 162. In Harrison's text Medea has fourteen sons, who are stoned to death by a mob of Corinthian men, rather than the more widely accepted version of the story in which Medea's two sons die at her hands.

[24] "The 'Scholar Me': An Actors' View", in *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies: 1,* pp. 423–428 (p. 427).

[25] "Harrison's *Trackers* as People's Tract", in *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies: 1,* pp. 470–485 (p. 471).

of Greek drama, and art in general, into categories of 'high' and 'low' are revealed as artificial:

> In the satyr play, that spirit of celebration, held in the dark solution of tragedy, is precipitated into release, and a release into the worship of the Dionysus who presided over the whole dramatic festival […]. The satyrs are included in the wholeness of the tragic vision. They are not forgotten or forced out by pseudo 'refinement.'[26]

It is appropriate, therefore, that Harrison used the satyr play to render such divisions of 'high' and 'low' contemporary, by evoking the painful scenes of dispossession visible outside the theatre in which the London performances were staged in 1990.

Harrison's approach is consciously laden with paradox. His strident egalitarianism and forceful social critique clash with the exclusivity of the contemporary theatre-going experience. It is debatable, given the social and economic narrowing of the potential audience for theatre in late twentieth-century Britain, whether even a work as powerfully realized as *Trackers* can be anything more than a futile political gesture, reaching only an already enlightened audience. Nevertheless, the play has proved one of Harrison's most successful dramatic ventures. Although originally intended only for a one-off performance at Delphi, the reworked text has been revived on a number of subsequent occasions at venues as diverse as the National Theatre in London, Salt's Mill in Yorkshire, and the Roman amphitheatre at Carnuntum. Most recently, in 1998, Harrison's long-time collaborator, the actor Barrie Rutter, brought the play to Harrison's native Leeds. In the decade since its first performance *Trackers* has unarguably reached a wider audience than was first envisaged, and confirmation of its dramatic significance was bestowed by the play's inclusion in the National Theatre's list of the hundred best plays of the twentieth century.[27]

The contemporary political concerns that Harrison sought to articulate in *Trackers* forced him to be selective in his adherence to the conventions of the satyr play. Dana F. Sutton has identified some of those characteristics and it is instructive to distinguish which of them Harrison retained and which he adapted or rejected. Unlike Greek comedy, the satyr play, Sutton claimed, generally avoided reference, satirical or otherwise, to contemporary figures or events. Such features are, however, the thematic heart of Harrison's play, especially in its National Theatre incarnation, which mounted a scathing critique of the dominant political ideologies of its time. The despairing conclusion of the London production, with Silenus frozen in a silent scream on behalf of his fellow satyr Marsyas, contravened another of what Sutton saw as the governing principles of the genre, that "almost by definition a satyr play must have a happy ending."[28] Harrison's interpretation of the cultural status of the satyr play fundamentally contradicts Sutton's claim that it served as mere comic relief. While Sutton perceived only "a simple, and readily-comprehensible polarization of heroes and villains."[29] Harrison found a depth, even in the partial evidence of Sophocles' *Ichneutae*, which allowed him to debate social, cultural and political themes, to create "a satyr play which darkens."[30]

In his deployment of broad linguistic registers, however, Harrison stayed faithful to the satyric tradition, which drew on the dramatic devices of tragedy, but did so with an increased emphasis on the colloquial and the bawdy, as well as a greater metrical freedom. The central recurring theme of Harrison's work, the historical reluctance of 'high' culture to

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[26] "Introduction", *Trackers*, p. xi.
[27] Stephanie Merritt, "A Slag-Heap in Ferrybridge", *Observer Review* (11 April 1999), p. 7.
[28] "The Satyr Play", in *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature, I*, ed. by P. E. Easterling and B. M. W. Knox (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 346–354 (p. 352).
[29] *Ibid.*, p. 352.
[30] Tony Harrison, quoted in Marianne McDonald, *Ancient Sun, Modern Light: Greek Drama on the Modern Stage* (New York : Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 131.

incorporate working-class experience in anything other than a subordinate role, is at the heart of *Trackers*. Silenus and his satyrs are firmly placed in diametric opposition to Apollo and Kyllene, in the same way that the fellaheen in the opening scene are socially subjugated to Grenfell and Hunt. That is not to say that only the satyrs inhabit the rhyming couplets of Harrison's verse with a subversive, down-to-earth demotic speech. Apollo, too, is prone to forthright colloquial diction: "You'll get gamma minus rammed up your arse!"[31] Harrison here observes the characteristics of the satyr play as well as his own linguistic agenda, in adopting a more relaxed register and treating with some irreverence a figure repeatedly celebrated in 'high' classical literature. The rhyming couplet is a particularly effective device in the context of this play, enabling Harrison to lampoon Apollo by allocating him some of the play's most deliberately excruciating rhymes:

> What's that smell? I thought I could discern a
> somewhat suspicious smell from a taverna.
> It seemed for a moment that smell might mean a
> meal of my moo-cows washed down with retsina.
> (p. 92)

Harrison's use of this rhyme-scheme is equally adaptable to the Received Pronunciation of Grenfell and Hunt and to the Northern English speech of the satyrs. The quest to find suitable forms to equate to those of Greek drama shows the rhyming couplet to be well suited, especially in approximating the *stichomythia* of the original texts. This is used to particularly good effect when the actor playing the roles of both Grenfell and Apollo is forced to interrogate himself:

> GRENFELL Please leave me alone. Please, please go away.
> APOLLO I'll pursue you until you track down my play.
> GRENFELL I promise. I promise. Now get out of my mind.
> APOLLO No, till you find it I'll stay right behind.
> GRENFELL I have a pistol, Apollo. I might have to shoot.
> APOLLO And you might just regret that, Grenfell, old fruit.
> (p. 88)

The revisions that Harrison undertook for the London staging of *Trackers* carried considerable thematic significance. The National Theatre version is less self-consciously scholarly, with many classical allusions jettisoned in favour of references to contemporary political issues. Silenus, for instance, uses the audience's ignorance of ancient Greek for a satirical swipe at the British government's education policy in the late 1980s:

> Perhaps there's a doctor… some don from Queen's
> who can tell the less educated what this means.
> What's up? Been struck completely dumb
> or is it the National Curriculum?
> (p. 97)

Structurally and symbolically the play shares common ground with Harrison's poem *v.* (1985). The central dialectic of that poem, between the poet-narrator and his rebellious skinhead *alter ego,* is echoed in the ferocious verbal and physical assault which the satyrs inflict on Silenus when they reappear towards the end of the play as graffiti-spraying vandals. In *v.*, however, the emphasis is on social, rather than cultural dispossession, as the skinhead's politically charged invective dismissively rejects the efficacy of elevated literary discourse to address public themes, insisting "it's not poetry we need in this class war."[32] In *Trackers*, Silenus, unlike the narrator of *v.*, is portrayed as a dispirited supporter of existing social and cultural hierarchies, resigned to his satyr status and the need to preserve it:

> So I don't make waves. I don't rock the boat.
> I add up the plusses of being man/goat.

[31] Tony Harrison, *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* (The National Theatre Text), p. 89. Further references will be given after quotations in the text.
[32] *V.*, 2nd ed. (Newcastle : Bloodaxe, 1987 [1st publ. 1985]), p. 22.

Unlike my poor flayed brother, Marsyas
I've never yearned to move out of my class.
(*Trackers*, p 126)

In *v.*, the narrator *has* moved out of his class, but his defence of it is privileged over the need to preserve cultural orthodoxies, as the poem's formal and linguistic strategies demonstrate. Form and metre are only validated in Harrison's work if they can bear the weight of "a language that has not normally been granted permission to inhabit"[33] poetic discourse. The disaffection of both the skinhead of *v.* and the satyr-hooligans of *Trackers* finds an outlet in the rejection of literature as a means of effecting social change. The skinhead's "A book, yer stupid cunt, 's not worth a fuck!" (*v.*, p. 19), is echoed in the satyrs' rebellion against their supporting role in classical drama:

SATYR 1 Fuck! Fuck!
Who gives a fuck?
Who wants a place in papyrus or book?
SATYR 2 Fuck! Fuck!
Fuck being part
of all that poncy Apollonian art.
(*Trackers*, p. 127)

The narrative focus of *Trackers* is the marginalisation of the satyrs from cultural advancement, and the re-enactment of such practices at various historical moments. Their later reappearances, as hooligans, and finally as the London homeless, relocate cultural and social dispossession in more contemporary frames and reveal the enduring hierarchical values which create such oppositions. In a typical strategy of inversion the satyrs-as-homeless repeatedly invoke fragmentary phrases of ancient Greek from the Oxyrhynchus document to an uncomprehending audience, until dissuaded by Silenus's explicit revelation of the paradox:

I wouldn't bother, boys, if I were you.
Them fucking petitions'll never get through.
You can stand there and petition all week
and get bugger all. No one knows Greek.
(p. 134)

The play's conclusion reveals carnivalesque features that echo those encoded in the opening scene. The remnants of Greek culture put to practical use by the fellaheen as compost for their crops are finally shredded for use as insulation against the harsh conditions endured by rough sleepers, and as ersatz lavatory paper, invoking a Rabelaisian fascination with bodily functions. Silenus's eventual disaffection with his role as guardian of cultural hierarchies leads him to summon up and then overturn the twin authority figures of poet and Greek god. The recurring question of the social and cultural value of 'high' art when the majority of a society is denied access to its products is encapsulated in Silenus's final speech:

He was sensitive, a poet, was Sophocles,
he wouldn't have wanted his satyrs to freeze.
But he was a poet and he'd probably follow,
when it came to the crunch, the laws of Apollo.
Well, I'll be his spokesman and say I don't mind
if you use my papyrus to wipe your behind.
I am happy that my long-lost Satyr Play's
divided up into Andrex and dossers' duvets.
(p. 135)

Silenus concludes by breaking the sanctions against satyr participation in the tragic form, defiantly defending his actions with a colloquially understated "Not bad for a satyr for his first go" (p. 136), before preparing himself to face the inevitable punishment from Apollo's flayers. The final image — "*His mouth opens in a silent scream*" (p. 136) — provides a

[33] Quoted in *Ancient Sun, Modern Light*, p. 133.

chilling reminder that cultural marginalisation can be a precursor to more savage forms of repression.

In order to focus attention on cultural exclusion throughout almost every significant period of dramatic and literary achievement, and to invoke the contemporary resonances of such a debate, Harrison seeks to inhabit the forms of 'high' art with a strident, subversive, yet theatrically convincing voice from the margins. Important paradoxes remain unresolved, admittedly, such as the fact that one of the spaces in which these works have been performed, the National Theatre in London, draws its audience mainly from a relatively small, metropolitan, social and cultural *élite.* Furthermore, it was only with reluctance that Harrison agreed to further performances of *Trackers,* having originally intended it as a one-off production at Delphi. The idea of the single production at a thematically appropriate site, by definition an exclusive concept, is one which has been inspired in Harrison by the single performance nature of original Greek classical drama, and is one he has brought to fruition in *The Labourers of Herakles* and *The Kaisers of Carnuntum.* By its very exclusivity, however, this aspect of Harrison's work seems fundamentally at odds with the poet's often reiterated desire to widely disseminate his public poetry.

"Poetic language, as we know from Shakespeare, can take in the crude and the holy almost in the same line, and that English talent seems to me to be a very important one."[34] This observation, made by Harrison in 1983, provides a key to the poet's recurrent use of Northern English dialects and characteristically English formal and metrical practices. The drama of ancient Greece provides an intriguing site for Harrison's quest for cultural reclamation. His work has sought to challenge the perceptions of exclusivity and élitism that have beset classical literature and scholarship since the Victorian age, along with the equally enduring idea that poetic language should be confined only to the constrained registers of Standard English and Received Pronunciation. The marginalised voices of the socially and culturally deprived echo urgently and unapologetically throughout Harrison's combative reworkings of the 'public' poetry of the ancient Greek dramatists.

[34] Quoted in John Haffenden, "Interview", in *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies: 1* (pp. 227–246), p. 243.