

NATURE AND CULTURE
IN TONY HARRISON'S
*THE TRACKERS OF OXYRHYNCHUS**

Leticia González Pérez

Universidad de Almería (España)

<Letigp22@gmail.com>

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ABSTRACT

The aim of Tony Harrison's *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*, highlighted as one of the 100 best plays in the twentieth century by the *National Theatre Millennium Poll*, is to bring the dramatic genre of the satyr-play back to life. There is only one complete original version in existence along with scat fragments, in comparison with the greater quantity of classical tragedies which have survived. *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* is a reworking of the papyri fragments of the satyr play *Ichneutae (Trackers)* by Sophocles, which was inspired by the Homeric Hymn to Hermes. In this article, the idea is to analyse Tony Harrison's version for the National Theatre, focusing on the importance of nature and culture in the play. The elements of classical tradition remaining from the hypotexts by Sophocles and the Homeric hymn will be explored, together with the ones which have been modified in the version by Tony Harrison and the reasons. There will be an analysis of how the elements of culture stem from the exploitation of nature and the reasons why nature is treated as an inferior being despite the fact that it is the main source of culture. This is exemplified in the contemptuous treatment of the satyrs by Apollo, and especially in the flaying of Marsyas. Furthermore, the analysis will be focused on the way nature eventually takes revenge and how this is portrayed in the play. Finally, the reasons behind Tony Harrison's reelaboration will be examined, and the conclusion will involve a critical analysis of *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*.

KEYWORDS: Tony Harrison, *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*, nature and culture, satyr play, classical tradition, reception.

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RESUMEN

La obra teatral *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*, de Toni Harrison, elegida como una de las 100 mejores obras de teatro del siglo xx por el *National Theatre Millennium Poll*, representa el deseo de revivir el género del drama satírico, del que apenas se conservan ejemplares en comparación con las tragedias clásicas. *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* es una reelaboración de los fragmentos papiráceos encontrados del drama satírico *Ichneutae (Trackers)* de Sófocles, basado, a su vez, en el himno homérico a Hermes. En este artículo nos proponemos analizar la versión de Tony Harrison, centrándonos en el papel de la naturaleza y la cultura en la misma, examinando qué elementos han pervivido y cuáles han sido modificados en *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* en comparación con el hipotexto de Sófocles y con el himno homérico a Hermes. Analizaremos la forma en la que muchos elementos de la cultura surgen de la explotación de la naturaleza, y cómo, a pesar de ser ésta fuente de cultura, es tratada como un ser inferior, como podemos ver en el trato de Apolo a los sátiros, y especialmente en el episodio del despellejamiento de Marsias. También nos centraremos en la venganza de la naturaleza y cómo este hecho se refleja en la obra. Finalmente, buscaremos las razones de las reelaboraciones de Tony Harrison y realizaremos un análisis crítico de la obra.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Tony Harrison, *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*, naturaleza y cultura, drama satírico, tradición clásica, recepción.

*Memory runs a marathon, a human mind relay from century to century to
recreate our play. Memory, mother of the Muses, frees from oblivion the
'Ichneutes' of Sophocles*

Tony Harrison 1991: 20

1. INTRODUCTION

The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus, one of the most distinguished plays by Tony Harrison, stems from the desire to bring the genre of the satyr play back to the stage. According to Tony Harrison, there is a great juxtaposition between the ‘high’, *i.e.* classical tragedy and even comedy, and the ‘low’ art, *i.e.* the satyr play.¹ Patrick O’Sullivan & Collard argue that this “is the most enigmatic for modern viewers and readers”² due to the fact that there is only one complete ancient satyr play left, Euripides’ *Cyclops*, in contrast with the great amount of tragedies and comedies that have endured until the present day. Notwith-

¹ As Harrison (2004: 11) explains “dramas became text divided into ‘high’ and ‘low’ art. The loss of the satyr play is both a symptom and a consequence of this division.” From now on, all quotations from *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* will be as per the National Theatre Version as published in Harrison, Tony (2004) *Plays 5: The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus, Square Rounds*. London.

² Cf. O’Sullivan & Collard (2013: 1).

standing, satyr plays are essential in order to understand classical tradition and the culture of Greek theatre. These plays belonged to a tetralogy created by a poet, and they were performed after three tragedies, by the same actors, as part of the festivals held in the city of Dionysia. Satyr plays dealt with heroic myths, one example being the confrontation between Odysseus and the Cyclops Poliphemus in Euripides' *Cyklops*, but with a chorus composed of satyrs lead by their father Silenus. As Lissarrague (1990: 236) defines it: "Take one myth, add satyrs, observe the result."

Satyrs were depicted "as animal-like men with the tail of a horse, assine ears, upturned pug noses, reclining hair-lines, and erect members. As companions of Dionysos they were usually shown drinking, dancing, playing tambourines and flutes and sporting with Nymphae."³ O'Sullivan & Collard go on to add that these satyrs "treated heroic myths in a burlesque fashion, and exploited the lechery, cowardice and buffoonery of the chorus of satyrs and their reprobate father Silenus for humorous effect" but as they remark, satyr plays should not be depicted as parodies of heroes or public images in the same way as other types of comedies, since "they invariably keep to the realm of heroic myth and do not, as a rule, explicitly lampoon public figures and contemporary events."⁴

The fact that satyr plays were performed after the three tragedies in the tetralogy could have had different purposes: First, a psychological one, such as the great relief the audience felt during the satyr play after having attended the three tragic plays. Also, there could have been a religious aim since, due to the use of the chorus of satyrs in the orchestra, it was in the sphere of Dionysos, the god whom the audience had come to celebrate in the theatre.⁵ Moreover, a socio-political scheme was plausible because it was "a way of integrating the peasant element into urban-centred tragedies". Finally, its didactic goal was related to the desire of showing values and ways of behaving correctly with the audience through the mischief of the satyrs.⁶

³ Cf. <<http://www.theoi.com/Georgikos/Satyroi.html>> [16/05/2015]. See also Goldhill (2004: 67-71) and Hornblower & Spawforth (1998: s. u.).

⁴ Cf. O'Sullivan & Collard (2013: 3-4).

⁵ In Calame's words: "There are, none the less, numerous close links between the performance of the chorus of satyrs in the orchestra of the theatre and the cult offered by the spectators to Dionysos the Liberator by their very presence at the tragic and comic contests." Cf. Calame (2010: 66).

⁶ All these purposes are explained by Calame (2010: 78) according to the ideas described by Voelke (2001: 30-1 and 381-412).

If only more satyr plays had survived, we would have a better understanding of the Greek culture and this particular kind of drama.⁷ As Tony Harrison argues:

Without the satyr play we cannot know enough about the way in which the Greeks coped with catastrophe. The residue of a few tragedies might give us the illusion of something resolutely high-minded, but it is a distortion, with which post-Christian culture has been more comfortable than the whole picture. (8)

Therefore, with *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* he is attempting to provide the satyr play with the consideration it deserves, as Marshall (2011: 557) explains: “This play encouraged a reconsideration of the intended function and reception of satyr play in their original performance context.”

Tony Harrison is famous for his work as a translator, poet and dramatist engaged with classical tradition, but he is especially well known for the great controversy of some of his works, especially his poem “V” which was broadcasted on TV and startled the public due to its obscene language.⁸ The most recurrent topic of his work is social injustice, particularly regarding the working class. As Rudd (2010: 4) points out: “His poetry speaks to readers who have grown up in a working-class setting but struggled to reconcile this with the ‘high brow’ nature of literature and poetry.” This theme is also developed in *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* through the social inequalities between the ‘high’ cultivated characters, Apollo and Cyllene, on the one hand, and the ‘low’ class, the satyrs, on the other.⁹ Nevertheless, this paper will focus on a different topic, *i.e.* nature and culture’s role in the play, not only because it is something that has not been examined in such depth as sociopolitical concerns, but also because nature is the source of everything, and as explained in the play version, —and as can be seen in our daily life—, it is always ruthlessly exploited for the sake of culture and civilisation.

⁷ As O’Sullivan & Collard (2013: 20-21) explain “Had more satiric drama survived, however, we might well have evidence of wisdom and other sympathetic qualities on the part of these paradoxical creatures (the satyrs). We find, for instance, if short-lived, courage in standing up to Polyphemus in Cyclops.” Satyrs are famous for their most significant characteristics: lechery, drinking and eating, laziness and cowardice. This has been highlighted by the loss of many plays, since other qualities of the satyrs have disappeared with them. Cf. Melero (1988: 414-5).

⁸ See Rudd (2010: 1).

⁹ Therefore, Tony Harrison not only reelaborates the *Ichneutae* to bring back the missing fragments to stage, but also with a political agenda, as Burton (1991: 25) points out “He saw these creatures (the satyrs) as cultural outcasts deprived of opportunities to rise from the lowly situation to which others had condemned them.”

Regarding *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*' plot and stage versions, it is important to bear in mind that Tony Harrison wrote two different versions: The first one was to be performed in Delphi Stadium, and the other one in the National Theatre in London. The main idea of the play comes through in a similar fashion in both versions, as Marshall (2011: 559) argues "The ideas that underpin both plays are very similar [...] Harrison is concerned with the cultural divisions that exist in modern Western societies between high and low culture, art and sport, and with the class divisions between their respective audiences." The main difference is that in the Delphi production he wanted to underline the main differences between ancient Greek performances and modern ones whereas in the National Theatre version he wanted to highlight social injustice through the example of the homeless people actually living near the National Theatre.¹⁰

The plot can be divided into three sections:¹¹ First, the story begins with the two archeologists, Grenfell and Hunt, who went to Oxyrhynchus, Egypt, in 1907 searching for papyri and who hired the help of Egyptian men, the fellaheen. In the second part, Grenfell is possessed by Apollo, Hunt turns into Silenus and the fellaheen become the chorus of satyrs. Grenfell/Apollo is obsessed with finding a particular papyrus, the *Ichneutae* by Sophocles—which is actually the hypotext of *Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*—¹² and orders Silenus and the satyrs to find the papyrus and then his lost cattle. In the third part, when they have found the papyrus, the play becomes the *Ichneutae* itself. The satyrs then go on a quest to find Apollo's lost cattle as they know they will be rewarded with gold and their freedom if they find it. Eventually, it transpires that Hermes is the one who has stolen the cattle, and has created a new instrument with the shell of a tortoise: the lyre. In the play version by Harrison, Hermes does not play an important role, since the confrontation quickly comes to an end with Apollo getting the lyre. The real confrontation is at the end, when Apollo refuses to allow the satyrs to use the lyre on the grounds that they are not cultured enough to use it and, on top of that, their reward is "bars of gold, in fact ghetto blasters wrapped in gold foil." (132). This is the main refiguration¹³ by Tony Harrison, —in which the satyrs rebel

¹⁰ See Marshall (2011: 559).

¹¹ This division has been made according to the analysis of *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* carried out by Cámara Arenas (2001: 130-34).

¹² As explained in the abstract, *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* is an adaptation of the surviving fragments of Sophocles' *Ichneutae*, which was a satyr play based on the Homeric Hymn to Hermes.

¹³ Some of the vocabulary which is used in this essay is proposed by Hardwick (2003: 8-11).

against Apollo and they then become hooligans and use the remnants of the papyri for their bedding.¹⁴

As mentioned previously, this paper will firstly focus on the role of nature in culture, how the characters take advantage of nature and destroy it for the sake of culture *e.g.* the killing of the tortoise or the mistreatment of the satyrs, considered as being inferior. As per the outrage of nature, close attention will be paid to the slaying of Marsyas, a satyr who was flayed alive for trying to play the flute. Following that, we will examine how nature takes its revenge in the play and finally there will be a critical analysis of the ending of *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*, since, despite being a satyr play, it ends like a tragedy. The analysis as a whole will be divided into three main considerations: First, how each topic is depicted in the *Ichneutae* and the Homeric hymn will be scrutinised. Then, there will be a comparison of these elements to Tony Harrison's refiguration; and considerations will be taken into account regarding which elements have remained more or less unaltered in his stage version and which ones have been modified. The reasons behind his reelaborations will be explored and finally, the paper will conclude with a critical analysis of *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*.

2. CULTURE OUT OF NATURE. CULTURE ABOVE NATURE

The exploitation of natural resources has always been a topical issue throughout the existence of humanity. Nowadays it is widely accepted that nature provides humans with the essential supplies we need. However, nature is not perceived as being an equal or superior entity by humans, but as an inferior element subordinated to culture. This irony of culture emerging from the ruthless exploitation of nature is developed not only in Tony Harrison's *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*, but also in its hypotexts, Sophocles' *Ichneutae* and the original Homeric Hymn to Hermes.

Animals are the main target of this exploitation of nature in the myth. Hermes, as a new-born child, creates the lyre using a tortoise shell and different body parts from cows. In the Homeric Hymn—which begins with the birth of Hermes—¹⁵ the exploitation of nature is present from the very begin-

¹⁴ This scene takes place in the National Theatre version. Conversely, in the Delphi version, the satyrs use the papyri to create a football and play with it. As previously mentioned, in our analysis the focus will be on the National Theatre version.

¹⁵ Since the Homeric Hymn is not a satyr play, the main topic is the confrontation between Hermes and Apollo. As such, it is especially focused on Hermes' birth, his theft of the cattle and his confrontation with Apollo. On the other hand, in Sophocles' *Ichneutae*, and in *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*, the main characters are Apollo and the satyrs.

ning when Hermes leaves his cradle and sees the tortoise outside the cave. The harshness of Hermes killing the tortoise sets the tone for the role of nature during the rest of the poem; Hermes does not feel any remorse while slaying it:

[To the tortoise] 'I will take and carry you within: you shall help me and I will do you no disgrace, though first of all you must profit me. It is better to be at home: harm may come out of doors. Living, you shall be a spell against mischievous witchcraft; but if you die, then you shall make sweetest song' [...] Then he cut off its limbs and scooped out the marrow of the mountain-tortoise with a scoop of grey iron.¹⁶

In the Homeric Hymn it is also described how Hermes was the first to create fire from piles of wood and the way he wove together a pair of sandals with "tamarisk and myrtle-twigs, fastening together an armful of their fresh, young wood, and tied them, leaves and all securely under his feet as light sandals."¹⁷

The last element of nature slain for the sake of culture in the Homeric Hymn is Apollo's cattle. Hermes, after having created the lyre —(with other animals' body parts besides the turtle's shell)—,¹⁸ steals Apollo's cattle. He then cuts each part of the cows' bodies into pieces and divides them into twelve parts in honour of the gods.¹⁹

Regarding Sophocles' *Ichneutae* and its refiguration in *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*, the satyrs are the ones searching for the cattle in order to get their reward of gold and freedom. Moreover, the chronological order of the story is different, since, as we have mentioned above, the Homeric hymn begins with Hermes creating the lyre with the tortoise shell and then going to the mountains of Pieira, where he steals the cattle. In *Ichneutae* and *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*, however, Hermes does not appear until the end. Also, the lyre is created not only with parts of the tortoise but also with Apollo's cattle.²⁰

¹⁶ Quotes from the Homeric hymn are taken from the translation by Evelyn-White found in <<http://www.theoi.com/Text/HomericHymns2.html>> [16/05/2015]. Cf. *h.Merc.* (34-38).

¹⁷ Cf. *h.Merc.* (81-85).

¹⁸ "Also he put in the horns and fitted a cross-piece upon the two of them, and stretched seven strings of sheep-gut." Cf. *h.Merc.* (49-51).

¹⁹ Cf. *h.Merc.* (115-130). Hermes is even tempted to devour the cows' meat, whose smell is most alluring for his voracious appetite, but, being a god who wants to be honoured on Olympus, he rejects the idea. Mortals, though, will sacrifice cattle in honour of the gods and eat the meat.

²⁰ It is assumed, although the fragments are missing, that Sophocles' *Ichneutae* ends with the confrontation between Hermes and Apollo: "In the missing end of the play Apollo was probably beguiled by the sound of the lyre, and similarly accepted its gift as compensation for the cattle" Cf. O'Sullivan & Collard (2013: 339). Since Tony Harrison has reelaborated the

As O’Sullivan & Collard (2013: 339) argue: “Sophocles has Hermes making the lyre at the cave itself with hides from the stolen cows —a clever dramatic device which engineers all the stage-business with the satyrs’ search and fright at the underground noise.” Moreover, it is in fact Cyllene who talks to them about the creation of the instrument, with neither Apollo nor Hermes appearing in the scene, as occurs in the Homeric Hymn. This foreignization originally produced by Sophocles and then appropriated by Tony Harrison aims to make the satyrs the main characters together with Apollo, as mentioned above.

Notwithstanding, the most important topic to analyse is the characters’ attitudes towards the destruction of nature for human purposes. For the characters who belong to civilisation (Hermes, Apollo, Cyllene) this exploitation is conceived to be something normal, they even believe they are doing nature a favour by killing it off because it will be more useful dead than alive.²¹ This mistreatment is clear in the three texts: First, in the Homeric Hymn where Hermes kills the two cows and the tortoise violently (see above). This scene is not explained in the other play versions but the reprehensible attitude of the “civilised” characters towards nature becomes even clearer, as is seen in *Ichneutae*, e.g. when Cyllene talks about Hermes playing the lyre “He enjoys playing with it and singing (a melody?) to it [...] this is how the boy devised a voice for a dead creature.”²² Tony Harrison follows the same pattern of the *Ichneutae*, as can be seen in the words of Cyllene: “The baby I nurse devised it in a day from a dead creature a source of joy [...] Dead it has a voice. Alive it was dumb.” (120-21) Further clarification is provided by Apollo when he insults nature and especially the tortoise and his own cattle:

From that unpromising, unlikely start / from bareness and shit we have brought
ART! / This mottled tortoise, this creeping thing / joined to my cattle makes
dumb nature sing / [...] I rather think the tortoise population / will be proud to
make music for higher creation / [...] The gods decreed a fixed scale in creation
/ from the Olympian, like me, to the crustacean, / and almost at the bottom of
the scale, / even below your sort with hoof and tail, / and tail bearers with no
part human, come / creatures like this tortoise, who are dumb / [...] Closer to
the latter, / low on the scale of being, comes the satyr. (130)

Ichneutae, including the missing fragments, in this version the satyrs explain to Apollo that his cows are in the lyre: “The strings of that thing came from your herd’s guts / and them were the horns that waved once on their nuts.” (126).

²¹ Culture leads nature into perfection by means of violence and manipulation. There is a hierarchy in the world from raw nature to ingenious industry in terms of culture and/or art.

²² Cf. O’Sullivan & Collard (2013: 369).

This scene explains the gods (and humans') feelings towards nature in no uncertain terms, which is seen as an imperfect source for humans' needs. Moreover, they do not only kill animals for their own interest, but they also destroy plants to create the papyri, which are humorously used by Hermes as nappies.²³ Furthermore, Tony Harrison uses the spoiling of nature for the socio-political purpose of emphasizing the difference between social classes, as we can see in Apollo's insulting speech towards the satyrs and later on regarding the metamorphosis of satyrs into hooligans (see above).

On the contrary, the satyrs are the only characters in both plays that feel sympathy for the destruction of nature, since they half belong to it due to their goat and horse like physical appearance. As such, they are also treated as inferior beings. In Sophocles' *Ichneutae* there is no clear evidence—due to the lack of fragments—about the sorrow they feel after finding out that animals have been killed to create an instrument, however, their actions show they truly belong to nature, as they are obsessed with sex and food.²⁴

Tony Harrison tries to show the satyrs' mixed feelings towards nature as they are half-goat/horse, half-man, thus, on the one hand, they are untamed as they belong to savage nature and they feel pity for the animals sacrificed in order to create a musical instrument. On the other hand, they also want to be part of the human world as they want their reward in gold and they even want to play the lyre because they are fascinated when they hear it, calling it "sweet serenade."²⁵ This contradiction is made even more evident when the chorus says: "When Nature made use of for Man's needs / my heart, at least the goat part of it, bleeds. / But when I hear the lyre, all the rest / the two thirds human part's impressed." Their following words show their concern for the destruction of nature:

We're always in things from the very start, / the creation of fire, the lyre, wine and art. / We're envoys of Nature who give their consent / to surrender the sub-

²³ In the words of Apollo: "Little fellow! But you're scarcely fit / to give the lyre recitals with pants full of shit. / You're frankly disgusting. I think that the lyre / requires a performer in more formal attire. / Change your crappy papyrus while I serenade / these lowly satyrs with the lyre that you made." (129).

²⁴ This is made evident when Cyllene reprimands them for their wild behaviour in front of her: "You've always been a child, however: now you're rampant like a goat with a flourishing yellow beard! Stop making that smooth knob longer in pleasure." Cf. O'Sullivan & Collard (2013: 373).

²⁵ This bittersweet feeling they have is expressed in the whole fragment: "Summat's been flayed / for this sweet serenade." (124) They are sad because an animal has been killed but at the same time they are amazed by the sound it produces.

stance they use to invent. / Woodlands for barbecues, crushed grapes for wine,
/ but where will a satyr start drawing the line? (130-131)²⁶

3. THE FLAYING THEME. MARSYAS

The destruction of nature for the benefit of culture is one of the main topics of the so-called Homeric Hymn, Sophocles' *Ichneutae* and Tony Harrison's *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*, who goes one step further and uses this topic to condemn social injustices towards unlearned people, through the behaviour of the satyrs against the mistreatment they receive from Apollo and Cyllene. As previously explained, satyrs are half-human, half-animal and they are mainly concerned about drinking, eating and having sex. They are also cowards and very naïve. They tend to celebrate every human creation and want to be part of it, as we see when they discover the beautiful sound the lyre makes when Apollo plays it: "The satyrs are enraptured by the melody (of the lyre), so much that when Apollo has finished his recital the Satyrs all rush forward and crowd round Apollo, reaching up towards the lyre." (131). However, Apollo will under no circumstances let the satyrs play this instrument, as he cruelly puts them in their 'natural' place:

My advice is stick to being satyrs / and don't go meddling in musical matters.
/ You don't need lyres. You're natural celebrators / stuck between animal and
human status. / You need no consolation of high art. / [...] Your 'music', and I
put that firmly in quotes, / is suitable only for brutish men/goats. / [...] This is
now my lyre and I define / its music as half-human, half-divine, / and satyrs,
half-beasts, must never aspire / to mastering my, and I mean my, lyre. (131-132)

²⁶ The relation of satyrs with culture is especially seen in Marsyas, as will be explored in the following section of the paper. However, Hownblower & Spawforth (1998: *s. u.*) make an interesting remark about satyrs that is worth bearing in mind. Satyrs should be seen not only as wild animals, but also for their wisdom and accomplishments: "Analogous to this contrast is the ambiguity of the satyrs as grotesque hedonists and yet the immortal companions of a god, cruder than men and yet somehow wiser, combining mischief with wisdom, lewdness with skill in music, animality with divinity. In satiric drama they are the first to sample the creation of culture out of nature in the invention of wine, of the lyre, of the pipe, and so on. Silenus is the educator of Dionysus. King Midas of Phrygia extracted from a silen, whom he had trapped in his garden, the wisdom that for men it is best never to have been born, second best to die as soon as possible (Herodotus 8. 138; Aristotle fr. 44). And Virgil's shepherds extract from Silenus a song of great beauty and Satyrs and silens - Oxford Reference 12/06/15 21:02 wisdom (*Eclogues* 6)." Unfortunately, as previously mentioned, the loss of satyr plays and the influence of latter cultures had an impact on the perception of satyrs, and consequently, they were only distinguished by their main, less civilised, characteristics.

Satyrs possess both divinity and bestiality within themselves, but they are excluded and forbidden to take part in cultural events due to their wild, hybrid nature. As McDonald (1991: 473) clearly states: "Satyrs are used to react to civilisation's discoveries: one tests things out on the masses. They are required to serve, although they would rather participate."²⁷

In both Sophocles' *Ichneutae* and in Tony Harrison's stage version, this marginalisation comes under the spotlight. However, in the *Ichneutae* it is not as evident as in *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* due to the missing fragments²⁸—including the absence of the part where the satyrs are not allowed to play the lyre. Tony Harrison emphasizes this exclusion with a political agenda. As previously explained; he seeks to condemn the unbridgeable gap between the learned and the unlearned, *i.e.* the utmost contempt from the upper class towards the lower, who, in the same way as Apollo's treatment of the satyrs, are not allowed to take part in culture; thus, they sometimes take an aggressive stance, as will be analysed in the next section of this paper.

To highlight this discrimination, Tony Harrison draws attention to Marsyas. He was a satyr who liked playing the flute, —like the lyre, a musical instrument from the civilised world. He took it from Athena, who actually invented it but threw it away since she did not like the look her cheeks took on when playing it. Marsyas took the flute and since he played it very well, he confronted Apollo in a contest judged by the Muses, but unfortunately he lost when Apollo ordered him to play it upside down. After that, Apollo flayed Marsyas alive as a punishment for having challenged a god to a musical contest, something inferior beings should never under no circumstances contemplate.²⁹

In *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*, the episode of Marsyas is brought to light towards the end of the play. After the short confrontation between Apol-

²⁷ Oliver Taplin also offers an interesting explanation on the matter that highlights the fact that satyrs straddle culture and nature, but that does not mean they are not part of culture: "Satyrs are not part of culture, but they are not totally separate from it either: they are on the very borderline between the strange, alarming and anarchic world of the wild on the one hand, and on the other the civic Athens of democracy, of the Parthenon and, not least, of comedy and tragedy." Cf. Taplin (1991: 461).

²⁸ One of the few fragments in the *Ichneutae* where rejection towards the satyrs is seen is when Cyllene gets out of the cave and confronts them for the noise they are making. She treats them with superiority: "You beasts of the wild, why have you invaded this grassy, wooded hillside, the home of the wild things, with this loud shouting? What's this technique? What's the change from the work you had before in pleasing your master, when you were always drunk with wine and had fawn-skins slung round you-and you balanced your thyrsus easily in your hand, and would shout the Bacchic cry close behind the god, together with your family nymphs and a throng of followers." Cf. O'Sullivan & Collard (2013: 361-363).

²⁹ Cf. <<http://www.theoi.com/Georgikos/SatyrosMarsyas.html>> [18/05/2015].

lo and Hermes, Apollo takes the lyre and plays it, and as we have said, the satyrs want to give it a try but Apollo cruelly forbids them to do so. Instead, he gives them their reward through Cyllene for having helped him. The reward consists of ghetto-blasters wrapped up in gold paper (see above). The surprise on their faces when they see these objects is similar to “primitives confronted with a product of civilisation (as Harrison says ‘sometimes they are like Cheetah in the Tarzan films getting hold of a camera’).”³⁰ After this, the scream of Marsyas rings out from the ghetto-blasters, and as such the satyrs cannot even dance to it. This is followed by Silenus’ speech, one of the most outstanding monologues of the play. He tells the satyrs about Marsyas’ ill-fated story with heartbreaking words, *e.g.* when he recalls the exact moment the latter was killed:

I was there. I was there. / I heard his sickening screams rend the air. / The sound of the skin as it started to tear. / [...] The first thing they cut off and flung to the dogs / was his cock, the next thing his clogs. / They kept a bull mastiff as deffatter/demeater / and they tanned the hide in the mastiff’s excreta. / My brother’s flayed skin was flung in a pit / with a brew-up of boiling water and shit... (142)

Tony Harrison probably puts these words in Silenus’ mouth with the purpose of raising awareness about the violence that the privileged exert over those who dare to trespass the limits which confine the latter to their place ‘by nature’. The appalling thing is that this violence is expressed not only in terms of torture and vexation but also of butchery and farming. Marsyas is treated like an animal in a slaughterhouse and his skin is used as a flag and as a musical instrument whose sound reminds us of his story.

Silenus discusses Marsyas’ flute playing skills. He cannot understand why the satyr was killed for the mere reason that he could play the instrument as well as a god, but, unfortunately, ‘high’ culture would never let a ‘beast’ play music:

³⁰ Cf. McDonald (1991: 478). Tony Harrison uses the ghetto-blasters to make reference to the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ music. While Apollo takes the lyre, he gives the satyrs the ghetto-blasters, which represent the lower class and their music. Marianne McDonald clarifies this: “Apollo keeps the lyre for himself. As in the past, when Marsyas dared to pick up the flute that Athena discarded and was flayed for trying to rival the gods, **so the gods and upper classes have kept sophisticated art for themselves while allowing lower classes limited access; their art was allowed as long as it was inferior.** Scholars hardly open Oxford to fellaheen, and for a long time the inner sancta were barred to those from Leeds.” (Bold letters my emphasis) Cf. McDonald (1991: 480).

He'd crossed the bounds. / Half-brutes aren't allowed to make beautiful sounds. / And can't you just hear those Muses say: / 'Who gave a common satyr license to play?' / Music's an inner circle meant to exclude / from active participation a beast so crude. / 'How can he be virtuoso on the flute? / Look at the hooves on him. He's half a brute!' / His one and only flaw was to show that flutes / sound just as beautiful when breathed into by brutes. / It confounds their categories of high and low / when your Caliban outplays your Prospero. / If Marsyas had touched it and said 'Ooo' / the way us satyrs are supposed to do, / but he went and picked it up and blew the flute / and that was trespassing for the man/brute. (137)

The reference to Shakespeare's *The Tempest* speaks volumes. Silenus points out that there are echoes of Marsyas' story in the destruction of every humble living creature that has been killed for the sake of 'culture': "Wherever in the world there is torture and pain / the powerful are playing the Marsyas refrain. / In every dark dungeon where blood has flowed / the lyre accompanies the Marsyas Ode." (138)

Silenus' speech has a wide range of purposes, including the ones we have just mentioned, but he especially wants to advise the chorus of satyrs not to become entangled in the gods' activities if they want to avoid dying the way Marsyas did, but also to prevent them from destroying the papyri where their only connection to 'high' culture resides, something which will be discussed in the next section of this paper.

With Marsyas' story, Silenus wants to condemn the injustices the lower class suffers, but since he knows that unfortunately there is nothing they can do to change their situation, he prefers to stick to being a satyr even though it means being treated as an inferior being:

I don't rock the boat. / I add up the pluses of being man/goat. / Unlike my poor flayed brother, Marsyas, / I've never yearned to move out of my class. / In short, I suppose, I'm not really averse / to being a satyr. I could do a lot worse, / I just have to find the best way to exist / and I've found, to be frank, I exist best pissed. (139)

4. NATURE GETS REVENGE. THE AGGRESSION AGAINST CULTURE

The exploitation of nature for the benefit of culture has damaging consequences: global warming or the extinction of a wide range of species of fauna and flora, to name but a few. We could even go as far to say that in the end it is actually nature who defeats culture, since it always gets its revenge in the form of natural disasters or even in something as simple as the cycle

of life: Every living being dies and becomes part of nature. In *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*, Tony Harrison tries to develop the topic of the revenge of nature through symbols and in particular, with a focus on the violence of the satyrs after having received the ghetto-blasters as an insult to their class. This topic belongs to Harrison's political agenda of condemning the marked differences between social classes. This subject neither appears in the Homeric hymn nor in Sophocles' *Ichneutae*. In the latter, we do not know whether something similar was mentioned since some of the fragments are missing.

In *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus*, the revenge by nature arises at the beginning of the play, when Grenfell and Hunt are searching for the lost papyri with the fellaheen. At first, the group is in Egypt, in the desert, where many papyri have been discovered under mounds of dust and rubbish. Paradoxically, the state of dirtiness has preserved the most precious pieces of culture from Antiquity. Grenfell, the papyrologist, despises all the papyri which have to do with the mundane lives of real people and their financial predicaments and he is only concerned with finding literary papyri. His utter neglect for the suffering of people in Antiquity is similar to his attitude towards the fellaheen. Nature both preserves and destroys the fragile papyri, which requires the joint collaboration of both the upper and lower classes. For Grenfell: "One can't be ever off the strict *qui vive!* / The desert! The desert can do a person in / unless one imposes the strictest discipline / and part of the discipline that I impose / is having all our boxes divided into rows." (93)

Grenfell criticizes the fellaheen because they do not understand the importance of the papyri and use them as fertilizers. —Once again, we see the topic of social exclusion in the rude words of Grenfell towards the fellaheen. However, the paradox here is the fact that papyri are now used as compost for plants as well as fumigation; thus, nature, for its own benefit, has ended up destroying culture by using plays like the *Ichneutae*.

These chaps, our Fellaheen, can't see what's unique / about scraps of old papyri in ancient Greek. / We ship back papyri and decipher them at Queen's / but the natives used to use them as compost for their greens! / These treasures of a soul-enriching ancient tongue / shovelled on to barrows and used like so much dung! / Just imagine Homer, Sophocles and Plato / used as compost for the carrot and potato. / They even burn papyrus for the fragrance it releases / and fumigate their fetid tents with long-lost masterpieces. / Papyri! Insects gnaw them. Time corrodes / and native plants get potted in a mulch of Pindar's Odes. / Horrible to contemplate! How can a person sleep / while Sophocles is rotting on an ancient rubbish heap! (94)

Later on, Grenfell is completely possessed by Apollo and the god becomes the leader. Besides grieving about his lost cattle,³¹ he is also offended by the destruction of the play in which he had the main role: “All my speeches, all my precious words / mounting mounds of dust and millipede turds. / Ages under rubbish, sand and desert heat / then to be resurrected only half complete.” (105)

However, the moment when nature gets its most important revenge is at the end of the play. After having been given the ghetto-blasters—which, as we have said, provide Marsyas’ screaming as music, so they cannot even dance to it—the satyrs are fed up with the humiliation they are put through from the gods as representatives of high culture, so now dressed as hooligans, they take revenge by destroying the papyri on which Sophocles’ *Ichneutae* is written, as they rudely say: “Fuck! Fuck! / Who gives a fuck? / Who wants a place in papyrus or book. / Fuck! Fuck! / Fuck being part / of all that poncy Apollonian art.” Silenus is the only satyr who does not want to let Marsyas’ story fall into oblivion and hopes to bring the satyr play back to its original status as part of the ‘high’ culture, so he does his best to convince the rest of satyrs not to destroy the papyri: “Send the scholars to me, I’ll tell ‘em, I’ll tell ‘em / the violence and filth that made the first vellum. / So don’t harm the papyrus. It’s one vital clue / the lyre depended on such lads as you. / It’s taken years, and such trouble, to reconstruct / so don’t you destroy it...” (140-2) However, they do not listen to him, in fact, they beat him and spray him with paint.³² In addition, he wants to attempt to change the fate of the satyrs in the same way Marsyas did, but he is too much of a coward to do it and fears being played alive: “This is my big chance. But I don’t dare. / A lifetime’s conditioning makes

³¹ In relation to the destruction of nature by humans and how it is treated as a mere means for a better end, it is interesting how Apollo, who believes an animal is much better dead for the sake of art, at the beginning of the play is worried about his lost cattle, as he says: “Though I’m a deity and in everything divine / I still can get kerpertled about my kine. / You can’t imagine how much it deeply grieves / even a god like me to lose his beeves. / My heart, though an immortal’s, absolutely breaks / to think of all my loved ones turned into steaks. / Some light-fingered lout has filched by kine / that could well be kebabs washed down with wine.” (105). Possibly Apollo is not actually worried about the death of his cattle, but that the cows are being used to create something so ordinary like meat to be eaten.

³² He knows he cannot do anything about them when he sees a piece of papyrus painted with graffiti with the name of Marsyas written all over it wrongly spelt. “They don’t see it, do they, silly young fools, / how divine Apollo divides us and rules / [...] But look in the end it’s that that makes you cry. / They’ve spelt my brother’s name with an ‘I’ / [...] Marsyas would have organised schools / to teach better spelling to these bloody fools. / With face and body bloodied do I qualify / to move up from ‘low’ art into the ‘high’?” (144).

me refrain / from attempting, a satyr, the high tragic strain. / A lifetime's conditioning makes me afraid / that to step a rung higher will get meself flayed." (145)³³ He only wants to put the satyrs back where they originally belonged, so he asks the audience to read a few Greek words to help them,³⁴ but since the audience do not respond and he knows he cannot solve his conundrum, he gives up and decides to become a hooligan like his sons. He destroys more fragments of the papyrus and, as is explained in the following fragment, he tells the satyrs/hooligans to use them as bedding and to clean themselves. Nature therefore eventually destroys culture in the form of the papyrus and satyr plays still continue to be confined to the realms of 'low' art.³⁵

And if I'm stuck here in this freezing void / that papyrus up there can be better employed / [...] Here, lads, some bedding. Make a thick layer / of Sophocles against his freezing night air. / [...] Here, make earplugs of this, so no Birtwistle number / will rudely break into your South Bank slumber. / And here it's âá and ááááá / take it and use it after a crap. / He was sensitive, a poet, was Sophocles, / he wouldn't have wanted his satyrs to freeze. (146-47)

5. NO HAPPY ENDING. SATYRS ENTER TRAGEDY

In conclusion, it is interesting how *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* does not end in the way a satyr play should despite the attempts of Tony Harrison to rewrite a play of this kind. As we have said, the satyrs decide to destroy the papyrus where Sophocles *Ichneutae* is written after being excluded from 'high' art. Tony Harrison obviously has his reasons to turn this satyr play into a sort of tragedy, which will be explored in this final part of the paper.

To begin with, it is important to bear in mind that since *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* is very much a satyr play, there are many elements Tony Harri-

³³ On the traditional cowardice of Silenus, Cf. O'Sullivan & Collard (2013: 13 and 340-1).

³⁴ "All I'm asking, begging's for you to recite / a few words of Greek to release me tonight / of the sun and the clear sky that shone on our play / when we last did it in Sophocles' day / [...] Don't I deserve a little reward? / I'm not even asking you to applaud. / Just help me get away from this bloody cold river / that doesn't half make a poor satyr shiver." (145-46).

³⁵ This reworking by Tony Harrison is connected with his main purpose of condemning the marginalisation of the low culture in the world of 'high' art. As Coveney (1991: 457) explains "The reincarnation of the satyrs as the dispossessed of the South Bank, whom we stepped over to attend Harrison's play, just as he stepped over them to direct it, becomes a lament for the disintegration of a worthwhile popular culture. Apollo's rewards for the trackers are gold bars; but the gold is just wrapping for a ghetto blaster." In ancient Greek culture, satyr plays were part of 'high' art, but throughout the centuries satyr drama has been relegated to 'low' art.

son used for the Delphi and National Theatre performances that resembled the performances in Ancient Greece *e.g.* he wanted *The Trackers* to be performed in the Delphi stadium in open air, with only two main actors and a chorus.³⁶ Furthermore, the chorus of satyrs display the same behaviour as the ancient ones, and, as we already know, it is based on a real satyr play, Sophocles' *Ichneutae*.

However, he gives the play his personal touch, since the majority of his works are chiefly based on political and social concerns, in relation to the excluded part of society; Burton (1991: 25) explains how the satyrs resemble the same hooligans that appear in his controversial poem *v*: "Football hooligans are responsible for the graffiti and desecration in *v*, and football hooligans appear in force in Harrison's 'new play with ancient core', [...] Always fascinated with satyrs [...] he saw these creatures as cultural outcasts deprived of opportunities to rise from the lowly situation to which others had condemned them." The satyrs in *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* are as cowardly and lustful as the ones in the ancient satyr plays. However, in this modern version, in the end they "act more like Dionysus in the *Bacchae* than the Bacchic chorus in that play, who like Silenus praise moderate happiness [...] Like Dionysus, the satyrs here choose to destroy if they are ignored."³⁷

In Tony Harrison's appropriation of the genre of satyr drama, a new way of confronting the socio-political issues of 'culture' and 'art' is theatrically displayed. In my opinion, ancient Greek satyr drama becomes a source of inspiration due to it freely showing, both amusingly whilst at the same time seriously, the hybrid nature of humankind, intertwined with gods and animals. Satyrs reflect this image of ourselves imaginatively and accurately and this is mirrored on the theatre stage. Their enthusiasm for technology as part of civilisation actually represents our own enthusiasm. However, we should also share their sympathy for nature and its spoiling for the sake of progress and culture. The dominating prevalence of culture separates us from nature and creates an insurmountable gap between two worlds that should not be kept apart. Indeed, they should be joined together and collaborate with generous reciprocity. Raw nature needs to be channelled as much as culture needs to always keep its feet on the ground and an eye on the environment. Despite

³⁶ "It was in Delphi, so powerfully presided over by Apollo, that *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* had its unique one performance world premiere on 12 July 1988 in the ancient stadium. It was a joint production between the National Theatre Studio and the European Cultural Centre of Delphi. I have always wanted to prepare a piece for *one* performance. This was what the ancient dramatists did. In the theatre I most admire, poets, and I stress, poets, wrote for actors they knew and for a space they knew." (18).

³⁷ McDonald (1991: 478).

its humorous style, the lesson which the poet —Tony Harrison— draws is a tragic and unrelenting one: violence and scorn only beget more violence and resentment. Nature therefore becomes a metaphor of the wild and untamed, be it flora, fauna, or unlearned people.³⁸

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³⁸ Also worthy of quotation are Hallie Marshall’s conclusions: “Both groups of satyrs (from Delphi and National Theatre) have discovered that there is no place for them in twentieth-century art, where high and low culture do not meet. [...] For the London production, Harrison drew attention to the community of homeless people who were living in the area adjacent to the National Theatre, associating literacy levels with people’s differing fortunes, both within the world of his play and in the real world. Apollo claims for himself poetry, music, and their cultured audiences, while expelling the satyrs from their own play, out of the theatre, forcing them to join the ranks of the Southbank homeless, who had similarly been excluded from society by Thatcherite policies.” Cf. Marshall (2011: 559).

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