

## **Iphigenia in Oxyrhynchus and India: Greek Tragedy for Everyone**

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### **Introduction**

One of the most remarkable finds in the rubbish dumps of Oxyrhynchus was the tattered script for a comic performance set in India and starring a Greek maiden named Charition (*POxy* 413). This precious text – referred to here henceforward as *Charition* - takes us with unparalleled vividness into the world of popular theatre entertainment under the Roman Empire in the early or mid-second century AD,<sup>1</sup> a time at which theatres were being built all over Roman Egypt.<sup>2</sup> *Charition* is a rare example of a type of performance that was enjoyed in many cities such as Oxyrhynchus, far inland in Upper Egypt, on a tributary of Lake Moeris that formed a branch of the Nile. It offers our most extended example of the delineation of the Fool in mime, which is a type of role that informed more elevated and influential literature, including the self-presentation of the Apostle Paul in his account of the flight from Damascus.<sup>3</sup> In *Charition* it is the Fool who supplies most of the humour, playing off the lines given to others by misunderstanding their meaning, taking them too literally, or imitating them to comic effect.

The text is also a significant document in theatre history, since it is intimately related to the circumstances of its performance. It indicates the speakers with a rare degree of specificity ('A' is Charition, 'B' is her slave who acts as the Fool, 'T' is Charition's brother, and there are several other designated roles); it is unique in offering

several 'stage directions' of a percussive kind (*tumpanismos*, *krousis*, *krotalismos* and 'fart'), indicating where drums, cymbals or other instruments were to accompany the action, dance and song.<sup>4</sup> Yet its recent Italian editor Santelia is probably misguided in thinking that the text represents a *complete* performance script.<sup>5</sup> There are reasons for thinking that it is a musician's copy, telling him when to play his percussion instruments -- instructions which would not require a transcription of the entire dialogue. On the other hand, it may represent a substantial section from a 'performance outline' to be used by the director of the entertainment, as Wiemken argued in his brilliant *Der griechische Mimos*; it includes the necessary information concerning cues for the entrances, exits, commencement of new sequences, and detailed dialogue where sound effects are required, but assumes that the individual actors will expand the spoken and sung material by improvisation. Wiemken is surely correct in thinking that the demands of staging would require a fully scripted version of the challenging passages containing barbarian speech, metrical sections and choral responses, but that the surviving textual record of the play is in other respects compressed.<sup>6</sup>

The entertainment offered subject-matter that was, in comparison with the other surviving evidence for Greek mime, rather unusual. *Charition* enacts a plot rather different from the domestic quarrels, cobblers' shops and quotidian crises that Herodas, together with the anonymous fragments and those attributed to Sophron, have led scholars to associate with Greek mime. For the entertainment in *Charition* consisted of what would now be called 'musical drama' or even 'comic operetta'; although it included song-and-dance routines, and was undoubtedly aiming at laughter, it was neither revue nor vaudeville: it enacted an identifiable adventure narrative. The importance of the action at the expense of mimically elaborated character has led some scholars to question whether it should be described as a mime at all: other terms that have been suggested include 'farce', 'music hall', and 'burlesque'.<sup>7</sup> *Charition* also entails an exotic

setting, an exceptionally large cast, at least two groups equivalent to choruses who speak and sing in unison,<sup>8</sup> and the flamboyant juxtaposition of prose and verse.<sup>9</sup>

At the beginning of the papyrus text there is to be a discussion of how salvation might be procured through farting; the Fool says that he contains the necessary equipment in his bottom, and addresses a prayer to a divine personification, Lady Fart, mentioning a statue of her made of silver (1-8).<sup>10</sup> At this point somebody announces ‘they’re here’; to the sound of drums a group of voices (indicated by the direction ‘all’ – *koi[nēi]*), interspersed by an individual female voice, delivers noisy utterances in sounds intended to represent a barbarian language – ‘*aboraton*’, and ‘*malalagabroudittakota*’. This continues for several lines until the Fool, accompanied by cymbals, releases the air from his ‘fully compressed bottom’ (17); in farts compared with the effect of a noisy storm at sea, he sends the barbarian chorus – some at least of whom are female – packing to the river Psolichus (40).

The next episode (41-54) sees the Fool, Charition and Charition’s brother discussing their plans for escape. The Fool suggests that Charition remove some of the objects dedicated to the goddess in the temple at which the drama is set; she refuses, in elevated language, to offend the goddess by such impiety. She tells him to prepare wine for the local people to drink neat, since they are unaccustomed to its effect and will not understand that it needs to be diluted. She then goes inside.

At this point there arrives the Indian King, to the sound of drums and with an entourage of ‘Indian chiefs’ (*promoi*, 90). They are all apparently fresh from a bath (*leloumemoi*, 56), which the following sequence implies was connected with the rituals they were about to perform. It consists of a drinking scene, and the text offers detailed indications to its original user concerning the correct (and increasingly frequent) moments for cymbals and drums to be struck.<sup>11</sup> The king, two other individual barbarian voices, and the barbarian ensemble babble ever more incoherently as lots are cast, drinks

are poured for them by the Fool, and Charition's brother ensures that the wine is kept undiluted.

As the Indians become intoxicated, they begin to respond (still in their own language) antiphonally to their king (83-4); at the climax of this scene, he bursts into Greek song, in Sotadean metre, leading the 'barbarian and immense chorus' (*[ba]rbaron anagō choron apleton*) to their goddess, Selene (88). The rhythm of their dance is to be accompanied by their steps, which are distinctive, since at least three adjectives of unclear meaning are used to describe them: the command to dance is reinforced by Charition's brother (93). At this point the Fool farts once more, and on the brother's instructions trips up the king, before binding him fast with 'sacred girdles' (93).

Cued by the stage direction 'many drums: finale (*katastolē*)', there now ensues the closing sequence of the entertainment, which is delivered in iambic and trochaic verse. The Indians are drunk, their king has been tied up, Charition reappears, and discussion takes place with the captain of the Greek ship about its readiness for departure. It is close by and probably visible. Charition is full of fear, and prays to the goddess (96-106): most scholars have assumed that she was about to be offered as a human sacrifice to Selene. But the fun with the barbarians is far from over, since their women now appear, equipped with 'huge bows', from the hunt (115-18). If not actually Amazons, they share many features with those matriarchal archers of Greek tradition. Charition uses a word of their language – *alemaka* – which they repeat in response (124), and it is clear that she thinks she can thus control them from the rebuke she addresses to the Fool: 'Wretch, they took you for an enemy and almost shot you' (125-7). With another tremendous fart, he carries out his stated intention of blowing them, like the group of barbarians on stage at the opening of the papyrus text, all the way to the river. The last lines involve a discussion between Charition, the Fool and the ship's captain about their imminent departure: Charition repeats her pious refusal to rob the temple, and the captain tells the Fool to offer the barbarians more undiluted wine.

### **Ethnicity, Class and the Oxyrhynchus Audience**

This sequence of actions, involving the planning and execution of the escape of a Greek heroine and her brother, by sea, from a barbarian community, reveals a plot that is a linear descendant of one the most respected and familiar of Greek tragedies, Euripides' *Iphigenia among the Taurians*.<sup>12</sup> In both dramas the Greeks win both by physical means (the Fool's powerful farting is a substitute for the physical fights which Orestes and Pylades have with the Taurians) and more intellectual ones: the barbarian king in both plays is devout but gullible, and a trick can be played on him in relation to the ritual practices in the temple cult of his indigenous goddess. The setting is a temple of the goddess near the coast, and a major issue is whether the Greeks should take objects dedicated to her there with them when they abscond. There are therefore no structural differences between the basic plot outlines of this Oxyrhynchus musical comedy and Euripides' play: the differences are in detail. For example, the trick played on the Indian captors exploits their inexperience of alcohol rather than (or in addition to?) their ignorance of Greek rites for washing away pollution. But it is the heroine in both plays – Iphigenia or Charition – who is clever enough to think up the stratagem. If the role of Charition was performed by female actor, which is possible, the scene would have taken on an even more insouciant tone.<sup>13</sup>

The motif of initiating barbarians in the pleasures of wine was one which would have had a real resonance in Egypt, a beer-drinking region to which it was indeed Greek immigrants who had originally introduced viticulture.<sup>14</sup> In another Greek tragedy, Aeschylus' *Suppliants*, the fact that Egyptians drink beer rather than wine is a component in the ethnic caricature and presented as a sign of their inferiority (953).<sup>15</sup> But the ancestry of this archetypal story leads back, of course, far beyond tragedy to the *Odyssey* book 9, where Odysseus escapes from the 'supernatural barbarian' Polyphemus by making him drink wine, and blinding him when he has become intoxicated. The

Cyclops story was a theme in which comedians always delighted. As Sandy put it, the *Odyssey* was adapted in ‘for many a piece of low comedy’, citing Aristoxenus’ inclusion of *Cyclops Humming* and *Odysseus Solecising* (*Kuklōps Teretizōn* and *Odusseus Soloikizōn*) amongst the repertoire of *gelōtopoioi*.<sup>16</sup> Both these titles are suggestive of the vocal possibilities that attracted humorous performers.

The ancient motif of escape-from-barbarians is one that seems to have been assimilated first by the tragedians when writing their satyr plays – for which the *Odyssey* was a favoured source of plots (e.g. in Aeschylus’ *Proteus* and *Circe* as well as Euripides’ *Cyclops*).<sup>17</sup> Later, the motif was adopted by Euripides in his famous escape tragedies, *Helen*, *Andromeda* and *IT*, the first two of which were certainly first performed in 412 BC; this may also have been the date of the première of *IT*, although many scholars assume it was slightly earlier. The impact that the escape-from-barbarians plotline made is clear from the Aristophanic comedy *Thesmophoriazusae*, produced a year later in 411 and a clear parody of the whole plot type as well as a repository of parodies from individual examples, especially *Helen* and *Andromeda*.<sup>18</sup>

But in 411 BC I doubt if anyone realised just how influential this type of escape drama – and especially *IT* – would prove. *IT* looks at the encounter with ethnic difference from a variety of perspectives: religious, ethical, social and emotional. The profundity of the resonances for peoples engaged in encounters with ethnic difference as a result of their colonial agenda is certainly one of the main reasons why *IT* resurfaced so consistently in the ancient theatre, in the many revivals suggested by the vase evidence,<sup>19</sup> and in the Latin tragic adaptation by Pacuvius. When Lucian includes ‘the story of the descendants of Pelops....the slaying of Agamemnon and the punishment of Clytemnestra’ in his list of themes suitable for realisation in pantomime (*On Dancing* 43), the balletic masked dancing of tragic themes that became so popular as an imperial entertainment, it suggests that the adventures of Iphigenia and Orestes in the Black Sea were performed in

that medium as well. It has also been suggested that *IT* informed the plots of Roman comedies including Plautus' *Miles Gloriosus*<sup>20</sup> and *Rudens*.<sup>21</sup>

The play's staging of a symbolic colonial fracas has a great deal to do with its longevity in the theatres and opera houses of the post-Renaissance world: Fantham and Questa are surely correct in identifying both *Charition* and *IT* as forerunners of Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, Rossini's *Italian Girl in Algiers* and the many other 18th and early 19th-century operas enacting the escape of a European woman from the clutches of the Ottoman Turks.<sup>22</sup> The exportability of the colonial theme must also underlie the play's generic mutability and versatility, for of all canonical tragedies, *IT* surely reappears in the greatest variety of non-dramatic ancient media and genres, from Pompeian wall painting to imperial sarcophagi,<sup>23</sup> Ovid's *Tristia* to Lucian's *Toxaris* and the tirades of the Church Fathers against pagan mythology and culture (e.g. Tertullian *Apol.* 9). It has been seen as an important archetype structuring the journey into the barbarian hinterland described in Xenophon's *Anabasis*.<sup>24</sup> Its plot often forms the basis of an escapade by one of the heroines of ancient fiction, such as Anticleia in Xenophon of Ephesus' *Ephesian Tale* book 3, who represents herself as dedicated to the goddess Isis in order to repel the advances of the Indian prince Psammis.<sup>25</sup>

The play's cultural penetration and stamina tell us a great deal about the dominant concerns of the ancient Greek- and Latin-speaking communities of the ancient Mediterranean world, who were constantly negotiating issues of ethnic identity and difference. The audience at the Oxyrhynchus theatre on the south-western side of the town, in which we can assume that *Charition* was performed, was no exception. The Oxyrhynchites were an ethnically hybrid colonial community, perhaps partly descended from Greek immigrants, who lived under the authority of an absent Roman emperor. They cultivated indigenous and theriomorphic Egyptian gods, even if their cults were publicly syncretised with those of Greek deities (Neith with Athena, for example). Greco-Egyptian families sometimes took double-barrelled names including one element from

each language, and individuals of Egyptian birth took Greek names, although Greek-speaking families were less likely to learn the Egyptian language than Egyptians to learn Greek. This mixed society did perhaps produce in those who felt they were Greek, and therefore superior, a strain of 'low-level contempt'.<sup>26</sup> One Oxyrhynchite's letter reads, 'Please send me a policeman with a warrant against Lastas. He has afforded me considerable violence. Don't forget! You know how Egyptians are.'<sup>27</sup>

The discourses of ethnic difference and of social class were inextricably related. The administrative structure of Oxyrhynchus rested on a hereditary class system; the rights of citizenship, or membership of the elite and inherently Hellenic institution of the gymnasium, were ancestrally transmitted. Being civilised and cultured is therefore presented in Greek correspondence by Oxyrhynchites as equivalent with being Greek, whereas lower-class identity could render one liable to accusations of being an Egyptian and a barbarian, or at least behaving like one. It may have been resented that from the Roman viewpoint, at least, many Greek-speakers counted for practical and administrative purposes as 'Egyptians'. There is anxiety about ethnic identity informing the request of a third-century correspondent, who writes: 'Please don't think me a barbarian or an inhuman Egyptian'.<sup>28</sup>

The story enacted – however riotously – in *Charition* is unlikely to have brought anything but pleasure to the more educated members of this island of Greek-speakers, far from the sea, whose identity was dependent on their sense that they were the custodians of Hellenic tradition. Moreover, from time to time they must have felt vulnerable to invasion and domination by barbarians beyond their gates: the 'Revolt of the Herdsmen' in 171/2 was an example of Nile Delta brigands becoming a more serious and organised threat. Two of the major differences between *IT* and *Charition* are that, in the latter, the actual process of linguistic translation between Greek and a barbarian tongue becomes a dominant feature, and that the heroine can speak the local language. It



must not be forgotten that the Greek community in Roman Egypt daily faced this type of bilingual situation in reality.<sup>29</sup>

Regardless of their anxieties, it seems that Oxyrhynchites across the class spectrum enjoyed their entertainments and were prepared to pay for them: a second-century account records the outlay of 496 drachmae for a day's performance by a *mimos*, 448 drachmae for a reciter of Homer, and payments for music and to a dancer.<sup>30</sup> It is revealing that one gymnasiarch curried favour with his public by donating money in order to subsidise the cost of theatre tickets.<sup>31</sup> The size of the theatre suggests that it was designed to include lower-class spectators. Estimated by the archaeologist Flinders Petrie to have been large enough to hold over 11,000 spectators,<sup>32</sup> out of a population estimated by some at only 15,000,<sup>33</sup> this was a substantial civic space. It was the scene of festivals, overseen by the *epistratēgos*, to greet the proclamation of a new emperor or watch an ephebic display.<sup>34</sup> But there are also signs that the theatre was attractive to Oxyrhynchites high up the social scale. One ambitious young man had gone as a student to Alexandria intending to find scholars to teach him Rhetoric. In the letter he wrote to his prominent father (who held the office of High Priest of the Nile), there are two separate and rather ominous references to a scandal 'about the theatre' in which they had both been embroiled.<sup>35</sup>

### **Literacy and Genre**

A tragedy by Euripides may be burlesqued in *Charition*, but we know that his tragedies were also still being performed, unadapted, in Oxyrhynchus. Several Oxyrhynchus papyri have long been identified, by marginal sigla indicating changes of speaker, as almost certain to have been used during rehearsals of Greek tragedy for performance.<sup>36</sup> One important example contains six fragments of Euripides' *Cresphontes* (*POxy* 2458); the marginal notations indicate not changes in speaking role, but rather the several parts in the play assumed by a single actor.<sup>37</sup> Recently, however, the publication of a new

papyrus (*POxy* 4546) has thrown unprecedented light on the ways in which individual actors prepared themselves. It shows that actors could be given texts of their own lines in a play. Dated to between 100 BC and 50 AD, it contains the thirty lines spoken by Admetus at Euripides' *Alcestis* 344-82, but excludes the lines delivered in the stichomythia by his interlocutors -- the actor playing *Alcestis* (seven lines: 344, 346, 347, 348, 355, 357, 376), and the chorus (two lines: 369-70). Marshall's study suggests that no other criterion for the selection of these lines fits the form taken by the text in the papyrus.<sup>38</sup> It is most unlikely to be a schoolboy exercise in copying out, unless its purpose was performance-related. The large handwriting is designed to be easily read, perhaps by an actor who needed to practise movements as well as oral delivery.<sup>39</sup>

Euripides' *Cresphontes* and *Alcestis* therefore seem to have been performed in Oxyrhynchus, and it is possible that his *IT* was staged there as well. Who was in the audience at the performance of such tragedies? Modern scholarly discussion of *Charition* has repeatedly suggested that there was a correlation between the Oxyrhynchus spectator's level of literacy and the type of stage play he or she enjoyed. This is how Eric Turner in 1952 influentially imagined the audience of this entertainment:

For the bulk of the inhabitants, Egyptian in name and writing Greek (if they are not actually illiterate)... life offers a hard round of toil in order to live. The apparatus of daily life is scanty, and it is often pawned to satisfy the tax-collector. But there are holidays from labour - twenty days a year are specified in apprenticeship contracts - and ill-spelt letters reveal the anticipation of family reunions on such occasions. No doubt these are the people who crowded the theatre to applaud the mime of *Charition*.<sup>40</sup>

Turner here draws a link between the type of person likely to 'applaud' *Charition* and shaky levels of literacy. The link is reinforced in his subsequent concession, 'But there

will have been members of the higher classes who applauded this performance, for their papers show that many persons in comfortable circumstances, including Roman citizens, could not write.’<sup>41</sup> The question of whether or not this entertainment would be found pleasurable is, according to Turner, determined specifically by literacy and not by ‘class’.

This is dangerous ground for several reasons. The issue is clouded because the nature of the evidence means that we have little idea what educational level and what understanding of Greek literature and theatre was achieved by what proportion of Oxyrhynchite society. It is important not to patronise the Oxyrhynchites by underestimating the levels of literary sophistication and confidence that they enjoyed: the literary culture of late antique Egypt, at least by early Byzantine times, was vital and flourishing,<sup>42</sup> and Nonnus of Panopolis’ *Dionysiaca* assumes a considerable level of erudition and literary experience. At one end of the scale the owner of an impressive Oxyrhynchite private library seems to have owned a copy of Euripides’ *Hypsipyle* as well as Pindar’s *Paeans* and an extensive collection of prose writers.<sup>43</sup> It is important to remember that the tradition of Oxyrhynchite scholarship goes back to at least the second century B.C., when this town was chosen as home by Satyrus the biographer (a copy of whose *Life of Euripides* was preserved by his adoptive city).<sup>44</sup> Since Oxyrhynchus was a ‘mere nome-capital, not a Greek foundation’, the range of classical Greek literature that has been found there has been found by one historian of ancient Egypt actually ‘astonishing’.<sup>45</sup> There is evidence not only of book-learning at Oxyrhynchus, but of individuals specifically interested in both tragic plots and character construction in comic drama. *POxy* 2192, a letter of the second century, includes this postscript:

Make and send me copies of Books 6 and 7 of Hypsicrates’ *Characters in Comedy*. For Harpocration says they are among Polion’s books. But it is likely

that others, too, have got them. He also has his prose epitomes of Thersagoras' work *On the Myths of Tragedy*.'

Below this, another person has made a note suggesting circles of readers and booksellers well known to one another:

According to Harpocration, Demetrius the bookseller has got them. I have instructed Apollonides to send me certain of my own books which you will hear of in good time from Seleucus himself. Should you find any, apart from those which I possess, make copies and send them to me. Diodorus and his friends also have some which I haven't got.<sup>46</sup>

There is evidence that girls as well as boys could attend school, and that secondary education entailed the study of set canonical Greek texts, including tragedy: one example of a rather poorly copied exercise reproduces the prologue of Euripides' *Phoenissae*.<sup>47</sup> Yet we do not know what proportion of the population experienced such an education. Oxyrhynchus was a town with a substantial number of specialist tradesmen (and some tradeswomen), who are unlikely to have enjoyed high levels of education or long periods of leisure in which to read and write.<sup>48</sup> In *IT* the heroine is recognized by her brother when she has to dictate a letter detailing her identity because she does not know how to write, a plot device much admired by Aristotle (*Poet.* 1454a5-10; 1455b1-10). If the author of *Charition* retained this famous *anagnōrisis*, it will have struck chords with the many Greek-speakers in his audience

### **The Politics of Burlesque**

The second problem, however, raised by Turner's correlation of literacy levels with the enjoyment of theatrical genres is the assumption that semi-literate or illiterate people

would not enjoy a serious production of *Cresphontes* or *Alcestitis*, when the popularity of Euripides in antiquity implies the opposite. *IT* was well regarded by Aristotle, meriting comment and praise in the *Poetics*, even though the philosopher himself preferred plays that ended with the protagonist suffering ill fortune. And Aristotle, as Sifakis has done so much to illustrate, regarded tragedy as a medium that had something to say not only to philosophers but to all members of a citizen audience (*Poet.* 1448b 8-19).<sup>49</sup> It was only because tragedies such as *IT* proved popular at both ends of the social spectrum that it would even occur to composers of comic operas like *Charition* to use them as the basis of their plots. The Greek-maiden's-escape-from-the-barbarians story type was only so successful in the burlesque theatre because it had been so successful on the more serious tragic stage, and had therefore enjoyed wide circulation and cultural penetration across several centuries.

Similarly, there is no reason to assume that an educated individual could not find pleasure in *Charition*. People do not cease to find scatological or ethnic humour amusing just because they can spell accurately. Moreover, the spectator with a thorough knowledge of *IT* would also have had access to the more intellectual pleasures to be derived from detecting the ebb and flow of the prototype in the parodic adaptation. For *Charition* represents a rare example of a type of ancient theatre that despite its signal popularity has almost completely disappeared – *burlesque* of canonical tragedy. It seems to have been Cratinus who invented the idea of a comic drama that parodied serious literature, in his *The Odysseuses*, which (like *Charition*) featured a Greek ship as a dominant part of the stage action, and centred on the story of Greek brain outwitting savage brawn, in its parody of the Cyclops episode.<sup>50</sup> It may have been Aristophanes who pioneered the theatrical burlesque of specifically of *theatrical* productions in his treatments of Euripidean tragedy (for example, of *Telephus* in *Acharnians* and of *Aeolus* in *Aeolosicon*), although it was a type of humorous drama with which the name of the comic poet Plato is particularly associated. By the mid-fourth century, Greek

theatre-goers will have been struck by the degree to which the comic poets had come to depend on the plays of the tragedians. Eubulus made his name with his travesties of popular Euripidean tragedies including *Ion*, *Auge* and *Antiope*. The convention of literary parody is also apparent in the Hellenistic mimes of Herodas.<sup>51</sup>

But mythological travesty – of epic as much as tragedy – was also a staple in the Atellan farce, and this indigenous Italian taste may be reflected in the garbled version of the Trojan War that Trimalchio recites in Petronius' *Satyrica* 59.3-5. The mimographer Valerius' fragments suggest that deprecation of the tragic style was a consistent source of laughter in Latin-language mime: one of his characters asked why another is using tragic verses and a tragic costume -- *Quid hic cum tragicis versis et syrma facis?*<sup>52</sup> It has been argued that 'mimic spoof' of weighty intellectual authors was one of the most important idioms of Roman popular theatrical performances, and one of the prime pieces of evidence supporting this view specifies Euripides – along with Menander, Socrates and Epicurus -- as one of the august Greek figures most vulnerable to this approach (Jerome *Ep.* 52.83 = *PL* 22.535).<sup>53</sup> This is surely reminiscent of the effect of the contrast between the highflown tragic speech of Charition and the scatological humour of the Fool.<sup>54</sup>

If burlesque is approached as a form of what is now termed 'popular culture', with a view to understanding the mass communication systems in the society that produced it rather than to pronouncing aesthetic judgement, it raises important theoretical issues in all literary cultures for a variety of interlocking reasons.<sup>55</sup> For a start, burlesque can help us reconstruct which *original* texts made the most impact on the imagination of previous eras. Shakespeare has provided material for an astonishing number of humorous versions precisely because Shakespeare is so widely and deeply disseminated through different levels of culture.<sup>56</sup> Greek tragic theatre has been susceptible to burlesque in every period at which it has been enjoyed in performance; comic versions of *Oedipus Tyrannus* can today be downloaded on the Internet. In Victorian Britain, comic burlesques of Greek tragedy became popular in the mid-century

popular theatre – the plays that were burlesqued included Sophocles’ *Electra* and *Antigone*, Euripides’ *Medea*, *Alcestis*, *Bacchae* and *Iphigenia in Aulis*, and even Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* and *Prometheus Bound*.<sup>57</sup> This phenomenon raises a range of questions relating to the levels of literacy and indeed access to classical culture enjoyed by the socially heterogeneous audiences at Victorian burlesques, especially those who gathered at some of the more demotic London theatres, which attracted the poorest members of the working classes as well as fun-loving aristocrats. Burlesques of famous tragedies -- *Hamlet* as well as *Antigone* – were also enjoyed by academics, judges, in addition to prestigious literary authors such as Dickens. To them it offered the pleasure of recognizing detailed references to the serious ‘undertext’, just as we can surely imagine the more educated Oxyrhynchites thinking about the Euripides they read at school as they sat down to enjoy *Charition*’s escape from India alongside their semi-literate neighbours. These, however, may have been educated primarily through the dissemination of myth through theatre and other visual media rather than papyrus rolls.

Burlesque of an archetype that is fundamentally familiar to everyone can in fact offer a powerful sense of social unity and cohesion. The ideological project of a performance like *Charition* is extremely complex. On the one hand it could be seen as a witty subversion of the texts underpinning an education in classical Greek literature that was the preserve of the upper classes in Roman Egypt, with all that might imply for an audience including many people who had no access to the privileges associated with such an education. Yet although it was ostensibly mocking or repudiating a tradition of canonical tragedy, *Charition* was simultaneously *appropriating* the tradition for its audience. Parsons suggestively compares the experience of watching this burlesque of Euripides with the parodic retelling of the labours of Heracles also found at Oxyrhynchus, with its comic-book ink cartoons.<sup>58</sup> Like 19th-century classical burlesque, *Charition* surely belongs to that sub-category of burlesque literature which comic theorists identify with travesty—the ‘low burlesque’ of a particular work or story achieved

by treating it ‘in an aggressively familiar style’.<sup>59</sup> Such a ‘familiar’ treatment paradoxically implies a form of cultural ownership. The audiences enjoyed the sense of cultural possession which their own familiarity with some aspects of the tragic canon, affirmed in burlesque, then bestowed upon them.

Moreover, to look at a tragedy through a comic lens has serious ideological ramifications. In an important study of the all-pervasiveness of the comic spirit in Victorian culture, Roger Henkle defines the Victorians’ ‘comic attitude’ as the avoidance of the upsetting aspects of a subject, or a reduction in the consumers’ confrontation with its social implications.<sup>60</sup> This is exactly what both Victorian burlesques of tragedies and *Charition* seem to have done with their harsher aspects. The process of turning serious tragic myth into comic musical theatre implies a ‘moral distancing’ which allowed rapists and murderers and those responsible for other terrible crimes to be inspected without psychological jeopardy.

It is easy to deride this type of theatre as appealing to the lowest social common denominator, but a different perspective can suggest a rather more complicated picture. Indeed, the fact that the Oxyrhynchites enjoyed this kind of burlesque drama, which parodies a canonical tragedy, might suggest that their tastes were relatively refined. There is indeed a good deal of unsophisticated humour apparently derived from bodily noises, but there is also the much more sophisticated pleasure to be derived from bathos, especially the deliberate contrasting of the elevated diction of tragedy spoken by *Charition* with the coarser speech registers of some of the other characters.<sup>61</sup> The heroine, with whose subjectivity the audience is asked to identify, moreover, is the most refined character in the play, which invites the audiences to adopt her perspective on the more uncouth characters and on the barbarians. What is even more interesting is that everyone in the audience will have known someone called *Charition*, shown to be a popular name in Roman Egypt from papyri containing census returns.<sup>62</sup>



*Charition* offers its audience a heroine with exotic adventures in foreign parts, but one more approachable and much easier to identify with than the Euripidean Iphigenia, priestess of Artemis, daughter of a Mycenaean monarch, rescued by the gods from a sacrificial altar before mysterious translation to the Pontus. There are other signs that the tragic material is being treated in a way that would make it more familiar and accessible to the audience; rather than the arcane aetiological details of the rituals to be founded in Attica in memory of the episode in the Tauric Chersonese, the discussion between Charition and the Fool centres (twice) on whether it is appropriate to steal from temples with statues of goddesses within them. It just so happens that we have a record of a scandal in the mid-second century AD concerning the theft of gold from the statue of Athena Thooris, the Most Great Goddess of the Oxyrhynchites, from her grand temple complex.<sup>63</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The remote inland community of Greeks in Oxyrhynchus may have responded with particular warmth to plots set in motion by a shipwreck on distant shores far across the ocean. But this scenario seems to have been associated strongly with mime. Seneca refers to a *mimed shipwreck (mimicum naufragium)*;<sup>64</sup> the famous list of stage properties in the Berlin Papyrus 13927 includes a representation of a river and ship's tackle.<sup>65</sup> The popularity of the shipwreck theme in ancient Greek literature generally and in mime in particular reminds us that, as Northrop Frye put it, 'of all fictions, the marvelous journey is the one formula that is never exhausted.'<sup>66</sup> We do not know how Charition arrived in India, but her cultural ancestress Iphigenia arrived in the land of the Taurians by decidedly 'marvellous' means. The adventures that Odysseus undergoes on his voyage certainly explains much of the cultural penetration of the *Odyssey*; like the Cyclops episode in the *Odyssey*, *IT* enacts one of the archetypal colonial encounters, indeed, it may well have been born more or less directly out of colonial activity. In the

present state of our evidence, we cannot know for certain whether *IT* was ever acted in the theatre of the Black Sea city of Tauric Chersonesos itself, the most northerly Greek theatre ever to have been discovered. But the traditional date of the foundation of that city – 421/0 BC – is extremely close to the estimated date of the first production of the tragedy, sometime between the Peace of Nicias and 411 BC. We can be sure, however, that the myth portrayed in the tragedy appealed to those choosing artworks to lay in Pontic graves, such as the fourth-century krater with a relief from the story found in Dionysopolis-Balchik.<sup>67</sup>

The widespread influence of *IT* reminds us of the global context in which *Charition* should be read, however provincial the inland town in which it was performed. Trade in spices, silk and other luxury goods flourished between the Roman Empire and southern India, as Ptolemy's *Geography* and the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* attest. Goods were brought to Berenike or Myos Hormos (Quseir al-Qadim), great trading centres and Ptolemaic and Roman terminuses for the sea routes from India. From the coast, goods would be carried westward across the desert along the old route to Quft (Coptos) on the Nile, and thence shipped up the river to Alexandria.<sup>68</sup> Oxyrhynchus, about ten miles west of the Nile, was hardly remote from this great trading route. Peter Parsons has suggested to me that it is perfectly possible (although of course quite unprovable) that Egyptian Greeks trading in India would need to learn at least one of the languages (like a British East India Company employee in the 18th or early 19th century), especially if they settled in one of the trading posts on the west coast.<sup>69</sup> Such a merchant could conceivably have retired home to Oxyrhynchus, having made his fortune, to regale his neighbours with tales about the strange people he had encountered and specimens of their language.<sup>70</sup>

Berenike has produced texts in Tamil-Brahmi and where 'considerable finds of south Indian domestic pottery', which 'suggest that Indians were residents as well as visitors'.<sup>71</sup> And it is from Quseir al-Qadim that some fragmentary epigraphic remains of

trade with India have survived. There are two short inscriptions in Old Tamil dating from the second century AD. There is also an ostrakon in Prakrit, written in a non-calligraphic variety of the script that has been found in southern Indian sites and dates from the second to third century AD. Its text has previously been interpreted as an epitaph for a merchant named Vishnujit Na[y]ak[a, but Salamon has recently proposed a different reading involving three individuals with the Indian names Halaka, Vinhudata (= Visnudatta), and Nakada (= Nagadatta?), along with a list of specified quantities of oil, meat, and wine. Salomon argues that it 'represents an interesting case of a non-Indian type of record written in an Indian language and script, evidently the work of Indians travelling or residing in Egypt. These Indians were no doubt merchants engaged in the flourishing trade between India and Rome.'<sup>72</sup> Prakrit and Old Tamil are both languages of southern Indian, the area in the subcontinent where most Roman coinage has been found.<sup>73</sup>

The question of Indian languages leads us into perhaps the most interesting aspect of the mime, on which there has never been scholarly agreement, and that is the sound-picture it paints of oral communication in India. The linguistic caricature may simply be pure fantasy, a set of deliberately ludicrous noises designed solely to amuse. But if this is the case, it is unlike other comic caricatures made by barbarians in earlier Greek and Latin drama, which tend to imply a sensitivity to some of the pronunciations specific to Scythian, Persian, or Punic.<sup>74</sup> In 1904, shortly after the first publication of the papyrus, it was suggested by a European philologist that the author of *Charition* was actually informed by knowledge of a specific language of ancient India – a Dravidian dialect from the South.<sup>75</sup> But in the circles of western classical scholarship this idea was summarily dismissed.<sup>76</sup> A solitary exception was E.P. Rice, who even suggested that Indian actors could have been involved in the production of the mime in Egypt, and that the barbarising sections are the transliterated record of their lines:

It strikes me as quite possible, and not unlikely, that the long foreign passages, especially those of the King, were delivered by *native Indians*, who had been brought across the sea to Egypt; and that these parts were written in Greek, either because their own vernacular had not been reduced to writing or because they were illiterate in it.<sup>77</sup>

Yet Rice was an exception, and otherwise there was scarcely any audience of classicists for the interesting discussions of the text by Indian scholars of the 1920s and 1930s, who even attempted to translate the passages in what they believe to be the Kannada language.<sup>78</sup> The English-language versions by the Indian historians R. Shama Sastri (then Director of Archaeological Researches in Mysore) and Baskhar Saletore both make plausible sense, although I am in no position to judge the extent to which either version relates to the sounds recorded in the papyrus, which these scholars believe are in Kannada that has been transliterated into Greek.<sup>79</sup>

More recently, in 1985, the case was made by a further Indian scholar that what the barbarians in *Charition* are actually speaking is Tulu (another ancient Dravidian tongue).<sup>80</sup> In the present state of our knowledge there can never be certainty, but the question should surely be approached with an open mind. What is really fascinating, however, is the discovery of scholars in what was still a part of the British Empire engaging so fully with the work of European classical scholars and with the long history of contact between the 'western' world and India. Few scholars of Greek in the 1920s and 1930s would have been able to discuss fragmentary texts of any ancient Indian language with anything like such competence, or cosmopolitan intention. The author of *Charition* surely believed, like Aristotle, that Greek drama offered something to everybody, but he would nevertheless probably have been surprised and pleased to hear that his riotous burlesque of the *IT* theme would help to ensure that Greek tragedy would continue even in the 20th and 21st century to fascinate people on a truly international level.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'Surely the single most important piece of evidence for the style and performance of Greek mime in Egypt of the 2nd century A.D', an example of the 'fantastic entertainments' whose significance 'for our understanding of ancient popular culture is...compelling' (Fantham (1993), 168). The papyrus itself is of the 2nd century AD: the likely date of composition is late 1st or 2nd century. See Page (1942), 337.

<sup>2</sup> See Alston (2002), 244 for the evidence attesting to the construction of new theatres at Ptolemais Euergetis in 114-15, at Apollonopolis Heptakomias in 117-18, and at Hibeh in 139 AD.

<sup>3</sup> 2 Corinthians 11.32-3; see Welborn (1999), 126.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion of the musical stage directions see Skulimowska (1966). The uniqueness of the stage directions offered in this text relative to all our other surviving theatre papyri is well brought out by Gammacurta (2006).

<sup>5</sup> Santelia (1991), 21.

<sup>6</sup> Wiemken (1972), especially 72-6; see also Fantham (1993).

<sup>7</sup> See Sudhaus (1906), 269-70, and, on burlesque, further below.

<sup>8</sup> For the history of the chorus in drama down to imperial times, see of course Sifakis' brilliant Appendix I in Sifakis (1967).

<sup>9</sup> Grenfell and Hunt (1903), 44; Sandy (1974), 341 n.34; Santelia (1991), 75-80. In the musical finale prose yields to polymetric canticum, mixing iambic, trochaic and Sotadean verse.

<sup>10</sup> The text used throughout is Cunningham's improved and reordered Teubner text (1987), 42-7.

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<sup>11</sup> Other sources stress the noisiness of the fanfares that accompanied exits and entrances and finales in popular theatre under the Roman Empire: see e.g. Petronius' *Satyrica* 31.4-6, 32.1.

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed discussion of the models for *Charition*, especially *IT*, see Santelia (1991), 12-34.

<sup>13</sup> Female mines are of course attested (see especially Webb (2002)), and several scholars, including Sifakis (1966), have argued persuasively that women sometimes performed in comedy in imperial times.

<sup>14</sup> Parsons (2007), 105.

<sup>15</sup> See Hall (1989), 133.

<sup>16</sup> Aristoxenus cited in Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 1.19 = frag. 135 in Wehrli (1945); Sandy (1974), 344.

<sup>17</sup> Hall (2006), 165-6.

<sup>18</sup> Hall (2006), 241-52.

<sup>19</sup> Taplin (2007), 149-56.

<sup>20</sup> Santelia (1991), 9-7.

<sup>21</sup> Little (1938), 211 n.1.

<sup>22</sup> Fantham (1993); Questa (1979), 11-33. On those plays see also Hall (2006), ch. 8 and Wright (2005).

<sup>23</sup> For the sarcophagi see Bonanno Aravantinos (1993).

<sup>24</sup> See Calhoun (1921).

<sup>25</sup> See Grenfell and Hunt (1903), 42. Little (1938), 211 goes so far as to say that the plot of *Charition* is closer to 'a popular story by Xenophon of Ephesus' than to *IT*.

<sup>26</sup> Parsons (2007), 43.

<sup>27</sup> *POxy* vol. 42, no. 3061.

<sup>28</sup> See Turner (1952), 131.

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<sup>29</sup> Parsons (2007), 126.

<sup>30</sup> *POxy* vol. 7, no. 1050; see also vol. 3, no. 519. See the discussion of Alston (2002), 245-6.

<sup>31</sup> Mitteis and Wilcken (1912), no. 33; see Parsons (2007), 52 with n.5.

<sup>32</sup> See Turner (1952), 129.

<sup>33</sup> Alston (2002), 331-3. The estimate of 6,000 proposed by Ellis (1992), 18 seems implausibly small.

<sup>34</sup> Turner (1952), 130-1.

<sup>35</sup> *POxy* 18.2190, a revised text of which is published in Rea (1993).

<sup>36</sup> Occasional attempts are made to argue that the very existence of substantial numbers of papyri of tragedy, especially by Euripides, is indicative not just of a vital tradition of reading and studying his plays in much later antiquity, but of regular theatrical performances. See especially Pertusi (1959). For more general remarks on the Euripidean finds at Oxyrhynchus see Krüger (1990), 257.

<sup>37</sup> Two actors are indicated,  $\alpha$  and  $\gamma$ , suggesting that actor  $\beta$  had made an appearance previously. Turner (1962), 76 concludes that ‘this papyrus represents an acting copy...presumably...used for actual representation in the theatre of Oxyrhynchus’. See also Donovan (1969), 76-8.

<sup>38</sup> Marshall (2004).

<sup>39</sup> See Obbink (2001), 19 and the discussion in Marshall (2004), 28-9 and n.5.

<sup>40</sup> Turner (1952), 131.

<sup>41</sup> *POxy* vol. 14, no. 1681. See Turner (1952), 131; Parsons (2007), 37.

<sup>42</sup> Cameron (1965).

<sup>43</sup> Parsons (2007), 150-1

<sup>44</sup> Turner (1952), 137

<sup>45</sup> Bell (1948), 81.

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<sup>46</sup> Turner (1952), 136.

<sup>47</sup> *POxy* vol. 45, no. 3244.

<sup>48</sup> For the many trades in Oxyrhynchus see Daris (2003), supplement 3.

<sup>49</sup> See above all Sifakis (2001), 35-7.

<sup>50</sup> Cratinus fragments 143-57 *KA*. See Bakola (forthcoming), ch. 5, section 1.1; Hall (2008), 38-9.

<sup>51</sup> Crusius (1892), 15, 54, 124, 126, 127.

<sup>52</sup> Valerius, line 192, in Bonaria (1965).

<sup>53</sup> Sandy (1974), 338.

<sup>54</sup> It is interesting that the fragment of a Greek picaresque novel found at Oxyrhynchus (no. 3010) and published by Parsons (1971) seems to have included both quotation from Euripides and the figure of a Fool. The papyrus dates from the mid-second century.

<sup>55</sup> For a discussion of the history of the debate over ‘popular culture’, see Lowenthal (1961).

<sup>56</sup> See the excellent account of Shakespeare in the context of the dichotomy between ‘high’ and ‘popular’ culture in Hawkins (1990), 103-38. Pruett (1992) is an indication of the extent to which research into ‘popular entertainment’ has now become respectable within the Academy,

<sup>57</sup> See Hall and Macintosh (2005), ch. 13.

<sup>58</sup> *POxy* 22.2331; Parsons (2007), 152-3.

<sup>59</sup> Jump (1972), 2.

<sup>60</sup> Henkle (1980), 4-6.

<sup>61</sup> Santelia (1991), 64-5 argues that the solemnity of the language used by Charition is appropriate to her role as priestess, rather than an indication of a generic link with tragedy.

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<sup>62</sup> P. Meyer 9 (a census return) from Arsinoe (Fayum) shows that Charition was a regularly used name by ordinary families in mid-2nd century AD.

<sup>63</sup> Parsons (2007), 48-9; *POXy* vol. 8, no. 1117 (dating from 178 AD).

<sup>64</sup> *De Ira* 2.2.5; cf. Petronius, *Sat.* 117.7 and Mart. *Spec.* 26.

<sup>65</sup> *PBerol* no. 13927 = Manteuffel (1930), no. 17. Sandy (1974), 343 suggests that the shipwreck in Petronius, *Sat.* 114.1-7, which has sometimes been regarded as an element in Petronius' parody of Greek love romances, following Heinze (1899), was actually inspired by shipwrecks in mime.

<sup>66</sup> Frye (1957), 33.

<sup>67</sup> Robinson (1932), 550.

<sup>68</sup> A famous mid-Ptolemaic inscription at the shrine of Pan of the Desert at El-Kanais, near where the desert road reaches the Nile at Edful, has controversially been emended to read as the thanks recorded by a 'wise Indian', *sophōn Indos*, in return for a safe journey: see Tarn (1938), 370.

<sup>69</sup> In an extended study of the possible influence that the performances by travelling Greek actors may have had on the development of Sanskrit drama in southern India during its formative phase two millennia ago, Free (1981), 83 points out that Greek mercenaries appear in this medium, and that Greek merchants are a presence in Tamil literature.

<sup>70</sup> Personal communication, 21st November 2007.

<sup>71</sup> Bagnall and Rathbone (2004), 291.

<sup>72</sup> Salomon (1991), 733.

<sup>73</sup> Wheeler 1951, 360-7; see also Wheeler (1946).

<sup>74</sup> Hall (2006), chs. 8-9.

<sup>75</sup> Hultsch (1904).

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<sup>76</sup> The criticisms of Barnett (1926) were fairly damning, especially the objection that no example of the Dravidian language exists from anything like as early as the 2nd century AD.

<sup>77</sup> Rice (1929), 221.

<sup>78</sup> A noteworthy exception was Rice (1929), who paid close attention to Shama Shastri's study.

<sup>79</sup> Sastri, R. Shama (1926); Saletore (1936). The translations, and the differences between them, are conveniently reproduced and discussed in Varadpande (1981), 98-110.

<sup>80</sup> Shivaprasad Rai (1985); see also Salomon (1993).

<sup>81</sup> This essay emerges from the research project on the ancient reception of canonical Greek drama currently being conducted at the AHRC-funded project at the Oxford Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama. It has benefited enormously from the advice of both Richard Alston and Peter Parsons; while I have irresponsibly ignored some of their comments, I am very grateful to both of them. My interest in the ancient reception of the classical Greek tragic canon was first inspired by the work of Gregory Sifakis, and I have learned more than I can say from his publications on Aristotle's *Poetics*.