

## TWO GREEK SYLLABLES IN WHARTON'S 'THE PELICAN'

Edith Wharton's knowledge of the Classics was not impeccable. In the second sentence of her first published story, 'Mrs. Manstey's View' (1891), she writes of a poor neighborhood that 'the gaps in the sidewalk would have staggered a Quintus Curtius'. The editor of the Library of America edition provides a note:<sup>1</sup>

1.6-7 the gaps . . . Curtius ] Roman historian whose ten-book life of Alexander the Great, *De Rebus Gestis Alexandri Magni* (c. 41-45), begins with book 3 and has gaps between books 5 and 6 and in book 10.

This is all true, but entirely irrelevant. If the gaps in Quintus Curtius stagger anyone, it is the reader, not the author, who died long before his works were partially lost. In any case, all the major Roman historians are lacunose, and there is no reason why Wharton should have mentioned the relatively obscure Curtius rather than Livy or Sallust or Tacitus, or mentioned a historian at all, for that matter.<sup>2</sup> She must have meant the Roman hero Marcus Curtius. According to the legend in Livy (7.6.1-6), a bottomless chasm opened up in the Forum in 362 BC, and the soothsayers said that the gods demanded the sacrifice of 'the chief strength of the Roman people' (*quo plurimum populus Romanus posset*). The young soldier Marcus Curtius concluded that Rome's strength was in 'arms and valour' (*arma virtusque*),<sup>3</sup> and performed a formal *devotio* to the gods below, plunging into the chasm in armor and on horseback. The place was identified with the Lacus Curtius, a pit or pond in the Forum, still visible today, though long since filled in. Marcus Curtius perfectly suits Wharton's (rather frigid) simile, since he was not one to be staggered by a mere gap in an ordinary sidewalk. She, or perhaps her editor, should therefore have written 'Marcus Curtius' or just 'Curtius', not 'Quintus Curtius'.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Edith Wharton, *Collected Stories 1891-1910* (New York, 2001), 1 (text) and 924 (note by Maureen Howard).

<sup>2</sup> The text of Petronius, with dozens or hundreds of smallish lacunae, would have provided a far better parallel.

<sup>3</sup> The English translations are from *Livy: Rome and Italy*, ed. Betty Radice (Harmondsworth, 1982), 103.

<sup>4</sup> She may well have known the story from Hawthorne (*The Marble Faun*, XVIII), but he calls him 'Curtius' without the *praenomen*.

So much for the Curtii. The solution to the error in the fifth paragraph of ‘The Pelican’ (1898) is less obvious:<sup>5</sup>

Mrs. Amyot had two fatal gifts: a capacious but inaccurate memory, and an extraordinary fluency of speech. There was nothing she did not remember— wrongly; but her halting facts were swathed in so many layers of rhetoric that their infirmities were imperceptible to her friendly critics. Besides, she had been taught Greek by the aunt who had translated Euripides; and the mere sound of the αῖς and οῖς that she now and then not unskillfully let slip (correcting herself, of course, with a start, and indulgently mistranslating the phrase), struck awe to the hearts of ladies whose only ‘accomplishment’ was French— if you didn’t speak too quickly.

The two bits of Greek are not words and make no sense as written, in this or any context.<sup>6</sup>

I see three possible approaches to the problem:

1. They look most like the dative plural endings of the first two declensions. However, these should be spelled -αις (pronounced like ‘ice’) and -οις, with hyphens because they are not whole words, and without breathings, which go only on the first syllable of a word beginning with a vowel.<sup>7</sup>

2. If we take them as whole words, the only possibilities are αἰ and οἰ, the feminine and masculine plural forms of the definite article, the latter familiar to English speakers in the phrase *hoi polloi* (οἱ πολλοί), ‘the many’, where the masculine plural is used for a mixed group. This would again require two changes: rough breathings (‘) for smooth (ˊ) and Roman *s* for Greek *sigma* to make English plurals of words that are already plural in Greek. The proper spelling would be ‘αἰs and οἰs’, and the first syllable would now sound like ‘highs’, not ‘ice’. The lack of accents is no problem: αἰ and οἰ are two of the ten proclitics (words that have no accent) in classical Greek. The order, however, is

<sup>5</sup> Wharton, *op.cit.*, 77, with no note. Though I have not tried to check every edition, this error, like the other, goes back to the first magazine and book publi-cations.

<sup>6</sup> There is a word spelled omicron-iota-sigma, but it is disyllabic and therefore has a diaeresis as well as an accent and a breathing: ὀΐς. But when would Mrs. Amyot have had occasion to mention an obscure Homeric word for sheep? And what possible word could go with it to make a pair?

<sup>7</sup> The order, feminine before masculine, is not a problem. As in Latin, the first declension is the feminine model, so it might easily come first, though adjectives normally give the genders in the standard ancient order masculine-feminine-neuter.

disquieting: in the declension of the definite article, the masculine precedes, and there is no obvious reason why  $\alpha\iota$  should come before  $\omicron\iota$ .

The main problem with both of these interpretations is that there is nothing particularly dubious or interesting about the pronunciation of definite articles and dative plurals in classical Greek.

3. The only plausible interpretation is that the letters represent neither whole syllables nor whole words but the diphthongs  $\alpha\iota$  and  $\omicron\iota$ , whose English pronunciation was, and still is, twofold or even threefold, with pedantic and traditional variants. They should therefore be printed without breathings, and the third letter should again be Roman *s* rather than Greek *sigma* to make them plural: ‘the mere sound of the  $\alpha\iota$ s and  $\omicron\iota$ s that she now and then not unskillfully let slip’. What this means is that Mrs. Amyot had a habit of pedantically pronouncing (e.g.) Greek *Timaios* and *Phoibos* as ‘Tim-Eye-us’ and ‘Foy-bus’, and then condescendingly ‘correcting’ herself with the traditional Anglicized ‘Tim-Ay-us’ (or perhaps ‘Tim-Ee-us’) and ‘Fee-bus’. The first of Wharton’s Greek syllables should sound like ‘eyes’, not ‘ice’ or ‘highs’, and *mutatis mutandis* for the second.