Marx, Marshall, and ‘the good water-nymphs’
Geoffrey Fishburn

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Recognition of a simple typographical error in the name of a Greek poet quoted by Alfred Marshall leads us, first, to identification of the source of the error (Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital*) and the correct identity of the poet; and second, to comparison of the uses to which the verse in question was put by the two writers. Marx, it is argued, expresses a better grasp than did Marshall of the reality to which the poem refers.
Marx, Marshall, and ‘the good water-nymphs’*

1 Introduction

Alfred Marshall, in the second (2 May 1873) of his six Lectures to Women, declared that:

Some time ago, when people wanted to grind their corn, they worked at the mill themselves, and very hard work it was. Then the water mill was discovered, and the Greek poet sang about it, ‘Rest from your labour, the nymphs have undertaken it, hour after hour, year after year’ etc. Since then we have a more powerful servant than water: steam. (Raffaelli et al. 1995, p. 92)

Marshall did not tell his audience – which included the still single Mary Paley, to whom we owe notes of the lectures and input to the final form (Raffaelli et al. 1995, p. vii) – neither the name of ‘the Greek poet’ nor the source from which he had taken the poem; but the precise source was known to Marshall, as his own outline for the lecture (along with his original translation of the poem) shows:

The effect of mechanical improvements.

A Greek poet sang when the cornmill was first driven by water:

‘Spare your wearied limbs ye maidens that grind the corn, the unwearied labor of the water nymphs will drive your wheels: while the water foams as it dances in its endless course, sleep the sleep of the blessed; sleep and thank the Gods.’

(K.Marx Kapital 398)

(Raffaelli et al. 1995, p.135)

This lecture was one of six delivered at Cambridge before an all-woman audience (Raffaelli et al. 1995, p.130 n.5). A decade later, on 19 February 1883, at Bristol and before what we may suppose was a somewhat different audience – as he had written to H.S. Foxwell on 9 February, ‘I am in for 3 lectures in a workmans quarter of Bristol on Progress & Poverty’ (Whitaker 1996, p. 153, letter 113)² – Marshall now identified the poet (as he believed him to have been) and his source for the poem, now supplying another version:

Laments that the progress of invention has not lightened labour, nor improved the lot of the labourer, are as old as machinery itself. One of the first machines was the flour-mill driven by water. Karl Marx, the great German Socialistic writer³, quotes a Greek poet, Antiparos, who says:

Spare now your weary limbs, ye women that work at the hand-mill;
Spare them, and sleep while the cock crows to wake you in vain.
For the good water-nymphs have undertaken your labour,
And they hop lightly along over the spokes of the wheel:
So that the great thing turns on its axle, ceaselessly groaning,
Making the vast mill-stones grind out the nourishing corn.
Let us then live the light lives of our fathers, and resting from labour,
Gladly enjoy the rich gifts granted by bounteous Gods.

(Stigler 1969, pp.184-5)

Thirty-six years on, with now his fame and authority secured, we read:

The services which water has rendered to industry and trade always have been so general as to be inconspicuous; and therefore apt to be underrated. But water power was the first to raise hopes that mankind might be eased from severe toil by the benignant help of Nature.

to which is attached the footnote:

As to the hopes raised by water power, Karl Marx quotes Antiparos, a Greek poet, whose hexameters may be rendered thus:

[As for the verse above except the last line now reading:

Gladly enjoy the rich gifts freely bestowed by the Gods.]

(Marshall 1919, p. 774 and n.1)

There was though no ‘Antiparos’ who was the author of the verse. This simple typographical error did not however originate with Marshall but from the source from which he took it, Karl Marx’s Das Kapital; and in examining the contexts of the verse in the writings of each we shall show two contrasting approaches.

2 The poet

The poet’s name – as ‘Antiparos’ – is in Das Kapital, where the poem is in a footnote attached to a sentence in the main text beginning ‘Und Antiparos, ein griechischer Dichter aus der Zeit des Cicero, …’ (Marx 1909, p. 378). However, the author of the poem was not some ‘Antiparos’ but rather Antipatros of Thessalonica, correctly originally so identified as such by Christian Graf zu Stolberg (Stolberg 1782, p. 312), the source for the poem given in the footnote. Antipatros (or Antipater in Latinised form) was a poet ‘whose datable poems range between c. 11 BC and AD 12’ (The Oxford Classical Dictionary), or alternatively, ‘[who] flourished over the change of eras -- say 20 B.C. to A.D. 20’ (Gow 1966, p. 5), that is, in either case, slightly later than ‘der Zeit des Cicero’ (d. 43 BC).

3 The poem

The first English translation of Das Kapital did not appear until 1886, that is, three years after the Bristol lecture, and so well after the original Cambridge Lectures to Women. Marshall had studied German and had read Marx directly -- ‘I read his book in 1870’ (Whitaker 1996, p. 302, letter 276) -- and although Mary Paley, who had received distinctions in Divinity and German in the 1870 and 1871 Cambridge Higher Local Examinations for Women (Raffaelli et al. 1995, p. 52) could well have had some input at a later date, we may reasonably suppose that the translation, at least to begin with in Marshall’s own outline notes for the 1873 lecture, is his, taken not from the original Greek but from Stolberg’s translation of the verse as it appeared in the footnote in the German edition of Marx:
Ich gebe hier die Stolbergsche Uebersetzung des Gedichts, weil es ganz so wie die früheren Citate über Theilung der Arbeit den Gegensatz der antiken 
Anschauung zur modernen charakterisirt.

"Schonet der mahlenden Hand, o Müllerinnen, und schlafet
Sanft! es verkünde der Hahn euch den Morgen umsonst!
Däo hat die Arbeit der Mädchen den Nymphen befohlen,
Und itzt hüpfen sie leicht über die Räder dahin,
Dass die erschütterten Achsen mit ihren Speichen sich wälzen,
Und im Kreise die Last drehen des wälzenden Steins.
Lasst uns leben das Leben der Väter, und lasst uns der Gaben
Arbeitslos uns freun, welche die Göttin uns schenkt."

("Gedichte aus dem Griechischen übersetzt von Christian Graf zu Stolberg, Hamburg, 1782.")

(Marx 1909, p. 378 n.156).

In the subsequent Samuel Moore-Edward Aveling (ed. Frederick Engels) English translation
the entire footnote, attaching to:

And Antiparos, a Greek poet of the time of Cicero, hailed the invention of
the water-wheel for grinding corn, an invention that is the elementary form
of all machinery, as the giver of freedom to female slaves, and the bringer
back of the golden age.

is given (Marx 1904, pp. 406-7), now comprising both the original German verse and a
translation of it:

I give below the translation of this poem by Stolberg, because it brings into
relief, quite in the spirit of former quotations referring to division of labour,
the antithesis between the views of the ancients and the moderns. "Spare the
hand that grinds the corn, Oh, miller girls, and softly sleep. Let Chanticleer
announce the morn in vain! Deo has commanded the work of the girls to be
done by the Nymphs, and now they skip lightly over the wheels, so that the
shaken axles revolve with their spokes and pull round the load of the
revolving stones. Let us live the life of our fathers, and let us rest from
work and enjoy the gifts that the Goddess sends us."

"Schonet der mahlenden Hand, o Müllerinnen … [etc., as above]

4 One verse, two approaches

The epigram of ‘Antiparos’ expressed what we would now more prosaically call ‘labour-
saving technical progress’; but for all that Marshall had taken, and apparently continued to
take, the verse (and the associated typographical error*) exclusively from Marx, his argument,
I shall now argue, is essentially at odds with that of the original.

Marshall, as we have seen, employed Antipatros, with varying degrees of refinement
of translation, four times in all (taking his 1873 outline and lecture notes as separate). His
argument was consistent: how the invention of the water-mill had first shown the benefit of
labour-saving technical progress. However, in 1873 his argument is slight and the translation
of Antipatros, at least as given publicly, incomplete; and in 1919 the verse, with attendant
reference to Marx, appears in a footnote which relates only by a common theme of ‘water’ to
the main theme of the section to which it is attached (3. The expansion of the carrying
capacity of ships, and of the business unit in the shipping industry.). In his fullest treatment of
the main subject, in the 1883 Bristol lecture, Marshall inserts the verse after beginning with ‘Laments that the progress of invention has not lightened labour, nor improved the lot of the labourer etc.,’ but by his own reading of the verse it is, and we can hardly imagine that it would have been otherwise for Antipatros, in praise of the supposed liberating benefits of technology: ‘Let us then live the light lives of our fathers, and resting from labour, Gladly enjoy the rich gifts granted by bounteous Gods.’

Marshall then follows the verse with:

The Greeks, with their genial climate, thought that the first use of machinery was to lessen toil. But, in the North of Europe so many things are necessary which are not wanted in the South; food, clothing, firing and housetoomustbe on so much costlier a scale, that the Northerner's chief hope is to increase his income: to diminish his toil is a secondary question with him. And as invention after invention has been made, hope after hope has been formed that poverty and extreme hard work would pass away, but hope after hope has been [in some measure] disappointed.

This excursion into techno-anthropology identifies the source of the ‘laments’ not as being in the new technology per se, but rather as a consequence of ‘hope after hope [having] been disappointed.’ This is a much weaker argument, and much less forceful reason for ‘laments,’ than in Marx, as is now shown.

When the context in which the verse was originally used by Marx is examined we find that it is being employed not in any way for the purpose of praise of technology but, in characteristically ironic fashion, to quite the opposite effect. The verse (in Marx) is towards the end of the section beginning:

b. Prolongation of the working-day.

If machinery be the most powerful means for increasing the productiveness of labour – i.e., for shortening the working time required in the production of a commodity, it becomes in the hands of capital the most powerful means, in those industries first invaded by it, for lengthening the working day beyond all bounds set by human nature. It creates, on the one hand, new conditions by which capital is enabled to give free scope to this its constant tendency, and on the other hand, new motives with which to whet capital’s appetite for the labour of others.

In the first place, in the form of machinery, the implements of labour become automatic, things moving and working independent of the workman. etc. (Marx 1904, pp. 400-1)

And then, after argument to sustain this point, and the sentence ‘… an invention that is the elementary form of all machinery, as the giver of freedom to female slaves, and the bringer back of the golden age’ to which the footnote with the verse is attached, the section concludes with:

Oh! those heathens! They understood, as the learned Bastiat, and before him, the still wiser MacCulloch (sic) have discovered⁹, nothing of Political Economy and Christianity. They did not, for example, comprehend that machinery is the surest means of lengthening the working-day. They perhaps excused the slavery of one on the grounds that it was a means to
the full development of another. But to preach slavery of the masses, in order that a few crude and half-educated parvenus, might become “eminent spinners,” “extensive sausage-makers,” and “influential shoe-black dealers,” to do this, they lacked the bump of Christianity. (Marx 1886/1904, p.407)

5 Assessment

Metaphor, even poetic metaphor, has as we know a place in the most ‘scientific’ of narratives; but at all times the distinction between image and fact must be clearly held. The possibility that this was not so with Marshall – or at least, he was content for it not to be so in the minds of his auditors/readers -- leads us back to examine directly the verse as translated and used by him. The problem is not so much as, has been noted, that the poem appears to fit oddly with the notion of ‘laments’ with which it was at one point introduced by Marshall but – unlike in the case of Marx, where it serves to accompany his mock-indignation (“Die Heiden, ja die Heiden!”) – in that he appears not to have appreciated, or at any rate did not think it worthy of comment, the unreality of the social and economic situation which is described. We may allow him in his own translation the poetic licence of ‘good’ water-nymphs although this is not supported by any translation of which I am aware, much less in the original Greek10, but we must seriously question the connection which the sentiments which the verse expresses had with economic reality.

The idea of the miller-girls being able to ‘sleep while the cock crows to awake you in vain’ (Marshall tr.) is romantic nonsense: whilst there is room for argument as to whether labour-saving devices have been, for the ordinary person, truly ‘liberating’ (and for the industrial worker, at least in the view of Marx, they were anything but), there is no evidence that in antiquity technological innovation ever changed slave to free, or even added to the leisure-time (such as it might ever have been) of the slave.

Then there is the matter of who will enjoy the fruits of technological innovation (and why). We read (Marshall tr.):

Let us then live the light lives of our fathers, and resting from labour,
Gladly enjoy the rich gifts granted by bounteous Gods.

Clearly, it is another group, and no longer the miller-girls (slaves) who are being addressed -- unless we suppose that they are mill-owners too! – but the mill-owners, bidden to enjoy ‘the light lives of [their] fathers.’ We may dispute Marx’s interpretation of reality, but not that it was reality which he was attempting to interpret; the kindest which can be said of Marshall is that he either completely missed, or chose to ignore, Marx’s point. Antipatros’/Antipater’s verse is an elegant fancy which would have appealed to his patron, the aristocratic L. Calpurnius Piso (48BC - AD32, consul 15BC etc.12); what Marshall endorses is a fantasy. Marshall at times showed great insight, but here at least he appears to have been ‘Eyeless in Gaza at the Mill with slaves.’13
References


This spelling (as similarly ‘laborer’ in the title of the lectures) was consciously employed by both Alfred and Mary for effect, in what would then be identified as an expression of ‘radical’ (and what would later be called ‘progressive’) thinking; see Raffaelli et al. 1995, p. 129 n.1.

Marshall seems to have thought little of the strength of opposition, as he wrote on 22 July to Foxwell: ‘Trying to refute George in Bristol was like throwing myself against a door that is not fastened. There was no resistance anywhere.’ (Whitaker 1996, p. 166; letter 128.)

‘Marshall proposed to omit the phrase "the great German Socialistic writer" in the published version.’ (Stigler 1969, p. 185 n.2)

It should be noted that the reference to p. 790 given in Raffaelli et al. 1995, p. 130 n.8 is to the second edition of Marshall 1919; the change in pagination and the reasons for it are explained by Marshall in that edition at p. ix.

Although Marshall was to later explicitly name ‘Antiparos’, his original ‘Greek poet’ seems to have misled at least one writer: ‘Marshall’ s own notes record a remark from Homer, as cited in Das Kapital, p. 398, on the technology of mills as a sign of industrial progress’ (Groenewegen 1995, p. 272 n.)*. The invention of the water-driven grain-mill was decidedly post-Homeric; indeed, we owe to his contemporary M. Vitruvius Pollio a prosaic description (Vitruvius, De architectura, 10.5.2) of the technology which the poet celebrated:

Vitruvius probably wrote between 25 and 23 B.C.; the epigram … dates from about the same time, and shows that in Vitruvius’ day the water-driven grain-mill was no longer a mere theoretical possibility. The poem would presumably not have been written then if the water-mill had not been introduced very recently; … (Moritz 1958, p. 131)

The Name Index in Marx 1967 gives ‘Antipatros (c. 11 A.D.),’ a date more precise than the classicists would allow.

Marshall to an unknown correspondent, 20 October 1889. However, it is also stated that ‘Marx’s Capital [was] bought [by Marshall] probably during a trip to Germany in 1868’ (Groenewegen 2006, p. 121). We can reconcile this with the ‘first read in 1870’ by reassigning the purchase date to Marshall’s 1870 Berlin visit, or by supposing the earlier purchase date but a deferred reading as he was still as we know (Groenewegen 1995, p. 187) learning German, or by treating Marshall’s 1889 recollection as being at fault.

The statement that ‘In both cases [1883 and 1919] the poet’s name was changed to Antiparos’ (Raffaelli et al. 1995 p. 130 n.8) must be rejected as misleading: Marshall, as
Aveling-Moore-Engels were also to do, simply repeated a typographical error. Although the typographical error continued for some time in translations of *Das Kapital* (see, for instance, Marx 1904, p. 406), the text has been correct at least since the Moscow edition (Marx 1954, p. 385).

9 We should not overlook a certain intent of irony on the part of Marx here: elsewhere he writes of ‘Bastiat, Frédéric (1801-1850) – French vulgar economist; propagated the theory that harmony of class interests exists in bourgeois society’ and ‘McCulloch, John Ramsay (1789-1864) – English bourgeois economist, vulgariser of Ricardo’s economic theory, ardent apologist of capitalism.’ (Marx 1963, pp. 500, 503)

10 For the original Greek and translations in addition to those already given see Gow and Page 1968, pp. 63, 62; Moritz 1958, p. 131; Waltz and Soury 1974, p. 33.

11 As with ‘good’ earlier, ‘light’ here is Marshall’s.

12 Hornblower and Spawforth 1996.

13 *Samson Agonistes* 41 (as original).

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"Ισχεὶ τε χεῖρα μιλαίων, ἀλετρίδες, ἐβδετε μακρά, κῦν ὅρθυν προλέγη γῆρως ἀλεκτρύνων. Δησ γὰρ Νῦμφαίοι χερῶν ἐπετείλατο μόχθους. αἱ δὲ κατ’ ἀκροτάτην ἀλλόμεναι τροχῆν ἄξωνα διενέουσιν· ὅ δ’ ἀκτίνεσσιν ἐλκταῖς στροφῆς Νισυρίων κοῖλα βάρη μυλάκων. γενόμεθ’ ἀρχαίοι βιότου πάλιν, εἰ δίχα μόχθουν"

Antipatros of Thessalonica
*Anth. Pal.* ix. 418