Introduction

In 1907, an author in the Classical Review used the occasion of his lukewarm review of a handbook on Greek social life, T. G. Tucker’s *Life in Ancient Athens*, to look back wistfully at his youthful reading. Tucker’s volume documented the life of its fictional Athenian Pasicles. The reviewer complains that Pasicles ‘is the Charicles of our boyhood brought up to date and not allowed to “sow any wild oats” or run into scrapes. One gets the impression… that the writer has had in view the requirements of young ladies attending college or extension lectures…[the schoolboy] will read it as most of us read Charicles, but probably not with quite so much relish.’ (W. C. F. A., 1907, p. 117).

The reviewer looks back fondly at Charicles, the fictional fourth-century Athenian invented by Professor Wilhelm Becker in 1840 for his volume on Greek social life. Consisting of a novella charting the life of the ephebe Charicles and extended essays (*excurses*) detailing the German scholar’s source analysis, the book took its plan from the author’s previous volume on the social life of Augustan Rome. *Charicles* was circulated in British public schools in Frederick Metcalfe’s English version from the late 1840s onwards. In the course of the narrative, the young Charicles returns to Athens from exile, narrowly escapes financial and moral ruin at the hands of a Corinthian pimp, discovers he is the abandoned son of a virtuous wealthy man, survives a shipwreck, foils a plot to forge a dead man’s will, and marries the same man’s virgin widow. By contrast, the reviewer complains, Tucker’s sanitised Pasicles is exceedingly uninteresting. The intrusion of the ‘young ladies’ of requires a clean-cut hero, and perhaps, a cleaner Athens. Tucker belongs to a world of widening opportunities, where knowledge of Greek is not assumed, whereas Becker belongs in the exclusive world of the public school bound by Greek and Latin, now seemingly lost (Stray, 1996).

My interest in *Charicles* stems from its position as a work from which elite and non-elite could access and interpret the Greek world. Handbooks on Greek ‘social history’ such as *Charicles* have received surprisingly little attention from modern scholars, despite their importance as sites of multiple receptions of ancient and modern materials and as participants in historiographical debates. This article constitutes an attempt to fill this gap in the scholarship. In the first section, I introduce Wilhelm Becker and Frederick Metcalfe. In section two, I discuss the rationale employed in the writing of the *Charicles*, using a comparison with the *Gallus*. The third section discusses the didactic plot of the *Charicles*, highlighting Becker’s use of the figures of the Corinthian betana and the Athenian widow-virgin to symbolise Charicles’ growth to manhood. I will conclude by considering the *Charicles* as a re-discovery of Athens that the Athenian ephebe and the English public schoolboy experience together, forging an identification of the latter with the former, just as contemporary scholars sought kinship with ancient Athenians.

The author(s)

Wilhelm Becker (1796-1846) was Professor of Classical Archaeology at the University of Leipzig, publishing on Roman topography (Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, 1982, p. 124). Becker’s foray into the ancient social life derived from his reading of Plautus, which led him to produce a work on Roman society consisting of a novella and a number of *excurses* on social themes. The novella was a fictionalised life of the poet Cornelius Gallus, who rose to prominence under Augustus, was involved in the conquest of Egypt, and later became *praefectus*. The historical Gallus incurred the wrath of Augustus in his supposedly grandiloquent behaviour as *praefectus*. Possibly indicted by the Senate, Gallus committed suicide. Gallus was famous as an author of love elegies addressed to his freedwoman mistress under the pseudonym Lycoris. Becker’s 1838 *Gallus, oder römische Sinnen auf der Zeit Augustus: zur genauren Kenntnis des römischen Privatlebens* took its narrative from Suetonius and Cassius Dio, charting the actions of the hero leading to his suicide. *Gallus* was rendered into English in 1844. *Charicles: Bilder altgriechischer Sitten, zur genauren Kenntnis des griechischen Privatlebens* followed in 1840, and was also translated by Metcalfe.

*Gallus* and *Charicles* were marketed in Britain as texts for schoolboys, as is clear from adverts in *John Bull* listing...
the volumes among other ‘approved schoolbooks’ (Anon., 1871, p. 33; Anon., 1874, p. 33). In 1867, a reviewer could remark that both volumes had ‘long been in use…in the Colleges and higher schools of this country’, and were ‘almost as necessary pieces of furniture for the table of the student of classical literature as is the Dictionary of Antiquities’ (Anon., 1867, pp. 242 - 243). In his third edition, Metcalfe referred to ‘the extensive use of these works in our public schools and universities’ (Metcalfe, 1866, v). In considering the English Charicles, I discuss it as a text in its own right. Metcalfe did not seek the ‘translator’s invisibility’ (Venuti, 1994, p. 1), but instead commented on his editorial decisions, saying that he had remodelled some of Becker’s paragraphs, cut out some excurses, and claimed that the work has been ‘adapted’ rather than simply translated (Metcalfe, 1866, ix-x). While all translations are by their nature adaptations, Metcalfe’s professed aim is to not just produce an English version that communicates the meaning of the German, but to render it more inviting to the Anglophone reader.

The parallel lives of Gallus and Charicles

The narratives of Gallus and Charicles lend themselves to comparison. Charicles begins with a sentiment from Plutarch:

‘ολλά τράγωμα βραχύ πολλάκης καὶ ρήμα καὶ πατιδια τῆς ἐμφάσιν ἦθους ἐποίησε μᾶλλον ἢ μάχαι μυρόνεκτοι’ often a small deed such as a saying or a joke makes a better revelation of character than battles in which tens of thousands die.

This epigraph, a section of a longer sentence from the introduction to the Life of Alexander, highlights Becker’s conscious adherence to a Plutarchan model. Timothy Duff notes that Plutarch aims to shape not only the ‘Lives’ (biographies) as works, but also through them, the lives of his readers (Duff, 1999, p. 17). ‘Character’, in Becker’s work, has a different meaning – Plutarch delineates the characters of ‘great men’, whilst Becker’s aim is ‘faithfully to describe the character of a people.’ (Becker, 1861, xiii). Charicles is moulded to be a representative of his age, who emerges from the sources independently: ‘[t]he materials …seemed spontaneously to suggest the course of the narrative’ (Becker, 1861, xvi). Like the desired ‘Urtext’ of conservative philology, Charicles’ life is (to re-use the words of Charles Martindale) ‘[p]roduced in an apocalyptic moment of creation.’ Charicles rises, like ‘Athena out of the head of Zeus’, from the scattered textual remnants of the Greek world (Martindale, 1994, p. 4). In contrast, the epigraph to the Gallus comes from Ovid’s Amores, describing Gallus’ fame ‘from west to east.’ This Gallus’ renown inextricably with his public poetic expression of his private experience of love. Becker claimed that he chose Gallus because his ‘fortunate rise from obscurity to splendour and honour, intimacy with Augustus, love of Lycoris, and poetical talents, render him not a little remarkable.’ (Becker, 1866, xiv). Gallus can be used to create a convincing and engaging narrative, not least, as an early reviewer suggested, because his name is famous but little is known about his life, allowing ample scope for fiction (Anon., 1847, p. 338).

Gallus as a Roman, is characterised by Metcalfe as ‘a citizen of the world’, while the Greek is ‘the personification of exclusiveness…local in his tastes and habits’ (Metcalfe, 1866, ix). In the preface to Charicles, Becker sought to explain his choice of protagonist:

‘It did not seem desirable, as was done in Gallus, to link the narrative to any historical occurrence, because among the Greeks the private life of every important personage is much harder to separate from the public doings…For the same reason a point of time has been selected in which public life had begun to fall into the background, while the egotistic spirit of the age gave a greater prominence to individual interests.’ (Becker, 1866, xvi).

The fourth century has long been depicted as politically a poor relation to the fifth, but here Becker uses its supposed shortcomings as a resource for his discussion of private life. In the case of the Romans, Becker similarly rejects the earlier Republican period in which ‘domestic relations sunk then unto insignificance, compared with the momentous transactions of public life.’ (Becker, 1849, xv). Augustan Rome supplies a narrative figure that represents the domestic and the public, and it is Gallus’ comments about Augustus in the private realm that lead to his disgrace in the public. Fourth-century Athens, by contrast, supplies only ‘domestic’ detail. Charicles’ story ends in the privacy of the thalamos, with the protagonist happy but unheroic; Gallus’ story ends with a public funeral at the behest of the Senate, with even Augustus mourning.

So while the exceptional Gallus is an ideal subject for Becker’s work on private Rome, Charicles’ utility lies in his normality. Seen in this light, Charicles is suggestive of what Georg Lukács described as the ‘mediocre hero’ who ‘sides passionately with neither of the warring camps in the great crisis of his time.’ The mediocre hero is able, when necessary ‘to fight bravely, but never to become fanatically partisan.’ (Lukács, 1962, p. 37). Charicles is capable of bravery, as when he leaps towards a burning pyre to rescue his future bride from the flames (Becker, 1866, p. 175), but has nothing to be partisan about. Lukács argues that the ‘mediocre hero’ functions in the historical novel to illuminate the ways in which ‘the split of the nation into warring parties always runs through the centre of the closest human relationships.’ (Lukács, 1962, p. 41). Charicles’ apolitical stance suggests that he is a hero of this model, but with one important difference. The ‘mediocre hero’ described by Lukács exists in a period of historical turmoil which he must navigate. Charicles is mediocre because he belongs to an era devoid of great historical crisis. In contrast, Gallus’ Rome may have ‘pushed the private into view’, but it was still a political age in which one could die heroically. Charicles is a non-combatant, living in the wake of the Battle of Chaironeia of 338, when Athens lost control of her foreign policy to the Macedonians. Charicles’ companion Cresiphon refers to the terror felt in Athens at the news of her defeat, in a passage that draws on Lycurgos’ description of ‘women standing at their doorways, seeking news of their husbands.’ Chaironeia stands as a mark
of the end of Athenian political history. On seeing the distraught women at the doorways, the defeated Athenian and his historian have nowhere to go except inside the house.

The Bildungsroman of Charicles

Charicles allows the reader to discover Athens as the fictional hero (re)discovers the land of his childhood. The narrative fits Moretti’s characterisation of the Bildungsroman revealing youth as involving ‘an uncertain exploration of social space.’ (Moretti, 1987, p. 4). The social spaces Charicles must navigate include the brothel, the agora and the symposium. Charicles has been living outside Athens for years, and is known as the son of Charinos, who had been exiled from Athens after Chaireneia. Charicles travels back to Athens to claim his patrimony, staying in Corinth on the way where he is nearly ensnared by an *betaira*. His encounters with women take place outside Athens, as it is away from the busy polis that he first sees his future wife. Back in Athens, he finds that the woman is called Cleobule and is married to an elderly kinsman, who conveniently dies. Cleobule’s new *lyrion* is the elderly and kindly Sophilos. Charicles finds out that he is really the son of Sophilos, but was taken in as a baby by his ‘mother’ who had found him exposed. The reunion of father and son is a happy one, and Sophilos asks Charicles to marry Cleobule. The last scene ends at the closed door of the *thalamos* (Becker, 1866, p. 214). As Becker noted, the form of *Charicles* suggests the plot of ancient comedies, long considered as post-political texts concerned with the domestic. 

The story is framed around two episodes involving ‘bad’ and ‘good’ women at the beginning and end of the narrative. These episodes, taken together with their relevant *excursus* (one on the *betaira* and one on *the women*, which demonstrates a categorical separation), are a reflection of and a contribution towards the contemporary debate about the ‘status’ of Athenian women, which has been traced elsewhere (Katz, 1998; Katz, 1976; Pomeroy, 1978; Blok, 1987; Brown, 2011). Marilyn Katz has noted that the nineteenth-century debate ‘was generally constructed with reference to the status difference between *betaira* (noncitizens) and legitimate wives.’ (Katz, 1992, p. 79). I would add that what the *betaira* ‘is’ becomes a riddle to be solved later authors, as this helps to define the mysterious Athenian wife. Later Anglophone writers appear torn between their admiration for accomplished females and their abhorrence for prostituted women. Aspasia became the paradigm of the problematic female; educated and a companion of Pericles, but a foreign prostitute. Victorian scholars dealing with Greek social life tend to split the category of *betaira* into two: the ‘bad’ courtesans, who attract men with their physical charms, and the educated who seek the company of distinguished men.11

Charicles meets his would-be seducer in Corinth. The young man deliberately goes to stay at the house of Sotades, to which he attracted by the reputation of its women. A confusion of female categories encourages Charicles’ dalliance, as although the mother of Sotades’ daughter ‘was not the person to reject a well-filled hand, that sued for the favours of her daughters… outwardly, [the women] avoided the appearance of regular hetaerae.’ (Becker, 1866, p. 23). Appearance and reality are often opposed in *Charicles*, and the word *outward* draws our attention to the reality beneath. In the excursus accompanying this scene, Becker accuses the Greeks of this era of ‘an addiction to sensual enjoyments’. (Becker, 1866, p. 242). However, Charicles is partially exonerated by his normality vis-à-vis his historical context; as a fourth-century Athenian adolescent, he ‘sees nothing dangerous in this game, which was one of very common occurrence.’ (Becker, 1866, pp. 36-37). His innocence is stressed in his inability to recognise the peril.

There are four members of this family in the inn: Sotades, the owner, who is described as a pimp, his wife Nicippe, portrayed as an *betaira* past her sell-by date, and Stephanion and Melissa, the young *betaira* posing as Sotades’ daughters. To draw the young man in, Sotades allows him to breakfast with his family. There follows a description of Melissa, who flirts with Charicles: ‘[She was] just budding into womanhood… with a nameless grace in every movement of her softly-swelling limbs… the easy familiarity with which Melissa seated herself between him and her mother… little accorded with the reserve of Grecian virgins.’ (Becker, 1866, pp. 32-33).

Melissa’s seductive acts (which include allowing Charicles to kiss her shoulder, drinking from the same goblet as him, and slapping him) are all carefully footnoted to prove their veracity in the ancient textual record (Becker, 1866, p. 33 n. 25). Melissa is characterised by youthful beauty and flirtation, and even in the subsequent plot seems insipid. Nonetheless, the condemnation of Greek courtesans in the excursus to the scene is unequivocal. Some *betaira* may seem acceptable, ‘when, as sometimes happened, they attracted, not so much by the subtle arts of studied coquetry, as by their merry sprightliness[.]’ But even these ‘good’ courtesans are bad, and ‘on closer examination, we may compare them to baskets of noxious weeds and garbage, covered over with roses.’ (Becker, 1866, p. 246). Becker tantalises the imagined young male reader with sensuous descriptions of Melissa and Stephanion, before denigrating the same women in powerful terms. It is the mystery of the girls, and the difference between outer appearance and inner substance, that entices Charicles: ‘That the damselfles were hetaerae, was clear enough; but the very veil of secrecy they adopted made them the more alluring.’ (Becker, 1866, p. 34). If they were openly *betaira* they would not have interested Charicles; their deceptiveness and availability makes them appealing.

Charicles eventually gets his ‘secret’ meeting with Melissa, and they lie together on a couch scented with roses, which possibly covers the stench of previous debaucheries and Melissa’s true nature as a ‘basket of noxious weeds and garbage’. Sotades, of course, has arranged this, and storms into the room feigning outrage. His aim is to detain Charicles and extort money: ‘Villain!’ he exclaimed… ‘Wilt thou disgrace the house, and seduce the daughter of an honest man?’ Charicles retorts ‘it’s notorious that her charms support
your house’ (Becker, 1866, p. 39). Meanwhile, Charicles’ friend Ctesiphon and his drunken entourage show up to save Charicles; their entrance signalled by a ‘peal of shrill laughter.’ Mocking Sotades, they ask him ‘shall I tell you to whom Stephanion belongs by a written contract? who enjoyed Melissa last?’ (Becker, 1866, p. 42). Becker follows the narrative in Against Neaira, in which the defendant is accused of being a foreign prostitute posing as an Athenian wife, and of extorting money out of a man caught with her ‘daughter’. In a footnote to Ctesiphon’s revelation that Melissa is not Sotades’ daughter, Becker notes ‘[t]his was the case with the reputed daughters of Stephanos’ (Becker, 1866, p. 41, n. 43). This comment shows Becker taking the prosecution’s characterisation of Neaira and Stephanos for granted, and colluding with the speaker Apollodoros. Becker announced that the most realistic material could be found in the Attic orators (Becker, 1866, xiv).12

This re-working of the solemn orator’s plot makes laughing-stocks of Sotades and Melissa, rather than portraying them as the serious threats to the sacred sikes of Athens which Apollodoros insisted Neaira and Stephanos represented (Patterson, 1994, p. 199). Sotades becomes more ridiculous the more enraged he becomes, while Melissa is a voiceless cipher, expressing herself only through gestures. Even though Melissa’s charms are said to be in part due to her conversation, she is given no lines of dialogue. The light-hearted tone of the scenes is mingled with expressions of disgust at Corinthian debauchery. Becker argues that it is necessary to describe betainai because of the prominent position which [they] occupied …[my] intention in this work being to paint the individual traits of character, and not to omit even the minutest feature[,]’ (Becker, 1866, p. 241). The betainai are key to Greek life and a discussion of them cannot be omitted.

It is notable that Charicles’ misdemeanour occurs before he reaches Athens. Although the reader is briefly introduced to Athenian flute-girls in a symposium scene, Charicles does not personally interact with them. Corinth is Athens’ decadent ‘other’, a topography through which Charicles must pass in order to reach the Athens which is at once that of his childhood, and of his maturity. Charicles’ escape in Corinth can be seen to contrast with his love-marriage towards the end of the novel. When he visits Aedepos, he and his friends come across an Athenian wife and her retinue of female slaves, and we find out that she is the married to the dying Polycles. Becker’s description of the woman is not dissimilar to his description of Melissa: she has ‘sparkling brilliancy’ in her eyes ‘mingled with a look of soft rapture’, and ‘the mouth was like a rose-bud just on the point of unfolding its leafy chalice.’ (Becker, 1866, p.128). This description is derived, as Becker indicates, from Achilles Tatus’ description of Leukippe.13 Just like Tatus’ narrator, Charicles is smitten with the lady he sees. Both Melissa and Cleobule are characterised by youthful beauty; Melissa was ‘just budding into womanhood’, and the comparison of Cleobule’s lips to an opening rosebud suggests ripening. Unlike Melissa, this lady does not invite Charicles’ glances. Charicles bursts in on the scene in order to reunite the lady with her lost slipper, and she reacts with shyness, but both instantly fall in love.

Cleobule’s virtue is demonstrated by her tenderness towards her dying husband, her hesitancy to appear before men, and her grief at Polycles’ death (Becker, 1866, p. 164). It is following Polycles’ death and the recovery of the will that the reader discovers that there is yet another boon to wedding Cleobule. When Sophilos asks Charicles to marry Cleobule, Charicles is hesitant. Sophilos asks him if he is unsure because of Cleobule’s widowhood, and announces that her ‘bridegroom never escorted her to the thalamos, for he was a dying man … Search Athens through, and you will not find a damsel who could with more confidence enter the grotto of Pan at Ephesos’ where the unchaste are punished (Becker, 1866, p. 183). Cleobule the loving wife is in one respect not a wife at all – she is a virgin. Not only this, she is more virginal than any other girl in Athens, and would easily pass the test of Stephanion at Tatius’ novel. Cleobule has proved to be the perfect wife and companion for Charicles in her devotion and virginity.

Cleobule and Melissa are conceptually related to each other by similarities and differences, as they exist on opposite ends of the spectrum of women whom Charicles encounters. Cleobule speaks only to her female slaves; Melissa had no dialogue at all. Melissa’s night-time extramarital activities were symbolised by the opening and closing of doors; Cleobule is afraid to be seen by men even inside the doors. Melissa appears to the outside world as a virgin; Cleobule appears to be a ‘wife’, but is in truth still an untouched ‘bride’.

(Re)discovering Athens

Charicles’ entrance into Athens is ultimately his rediscovery of his home. At one point, Charicles describes the beauty of the landscape outside the walls of Athens, and his friend Ctesiphon asks why he is explaining this – does he think Ctesiphon himself has never been beyond the walls? While Becker in a footnote says this exchange is based dialogue in Plato’s Phaidros, it also serves to draw the reader’s attention to the fact that Charicles describes things that Athenians already knew (Becker, 1866, p. 47). Charicles’ discovery is a re-discovery; he grew up in Athens, he was exiled to Argos, and returns on the verge of manhood. Could the reader’s response to his words be considered a re-discovery too? Is the reader to be understood as re-discovering an Athens he knew beneath the heavy weight of Greek prose composition and grammatical tables? The reader is invited to empathise with the experiences of the hero; he must avoid the ruin occasioned by poisonous courtesans to fall into the arms of his Cleobule, who, he is told, will love him immediately. Emphasis is given to the hidden world of the Athenian citizen, and the difference between outward appearance and underlying intention.

One reviewer condemned Charicles because of the hero’s normality, complaining that ‘we [are not] introduced to a single real or imaginary personage of any consideration’, and questioned why the late fourth century was chosen (Anon., 1848, p. 406). It could be this very mediocrity that constitutes Charicles’ appeal. Charicles experiences a comfortable normality. He does not struggle for the material means for his existence, he succeeds in his minor tussles, makes mistakes from whose
consequences he is protected, and ultimately gets what he wants. The novel places the ephebe-schoolboy in the centre of life; the slaves, family members, workers, whether benign or threatening, have no experiences that are not related to his. They are there to serve him and his wants, or prevent him from achieving those wants. I suggest that Charicles could not be placed in the fifth century because drawing the reader's attention to the 'hidden side' of the Periclean age would compromise its dignity. Similarly, Republican Rome maintains its austerity, whereas Gallus hailed from the era of imperial intrigue. Both Gallus and Charicles are allowed to look back at a glorious political past in whose wake they both stand; Gallus can denounce Augustus as a tyrant alien to the Republic, and Charicles can imagine the world before Chaireiona.

The reviewer this article began with regrets the loss of the Greek boy who was allowed to enjoy the company of prostitutes without consequence, who had his role in discovering the existence of a fraudulent will, who is involved in a shipwreck and saved by his slave, who is granted a wealthy virtuous wife who loves him despite never having exchanged a word with him. Charicles may be mediocre, but he has it all. He is a source of identification for the schoolboy in a world of temptations, with a life in many ways more desirable than that of Gallus. Charicles may lack 'definite traits of character', but he gets to play, unlike poor Pasicles.

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