

## BOOK REVIEW

*Love and Providence: Recognition in the Ancient Novel*. By SILVIA MONTIGLIO. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. ix + 256. Hardcover, \$74.00. ISBN 978-0-19-991604-7.

The old woman soon reappeared; she was supporting with some difficulty a trembling woman of majestic stature, glittering with precious stones and covered with a veil. "Remove the veil," said the old woman to Candide. The young man advanced and lifted the veil with a timid hand. What a moment! What a surprise! He thought he saw Mademoiselle Cunegonde, in fact he was looking at her, it was she herself! His strength failed him, he could not utter a word and fell at her feet. Cunegonde fell on the sofa. The old woman dosed them with distilled waters; they recovered their senses.

Voltaire, *Candide*, trans. Aldington

Silvia Montiglio opens her lucid and important study of recognition in ancient fiction by citing Voltaire's hilarious parody of recognition scenes in *Candide* (chapter 7), thereby signaling to the reader her awareness of the problematic nature of her subject. As Terence Cave observes at the outset of his landmark investigation of the concept and function of scenes of recognition in poetics, drama and narrative from Homer to Conrad (*Recognitions: A Study in Poetics* Oxford 1988): "Recognition" (*anagnorisis*) is unquestionably the least respectable term in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Mimesis, hamartia and catharsis are all serious matters: it is difficult to go far in literary criticism without knowing what they are. The very word *anagnorisis* is less familiar, and the lack of familiarity is a symptom of a suspicion ... easy enough to detect in the reactions of readers and critics, from Aristotle's day to ours ... recognition is reputed to be an implausible contrivance, a shoddy way of resolving a plot the author can no longer control ... such scenes are too neat to be real, like the mechanism of a cuckoo clock ... they are essentially funny, silly, and thus appropriate at best to comedy" (1-2).

But what then of the *Odyssey* in which recognition scenes seem to grow necessarily and organically from the plot and the logic of Odysseus' predicament that entails the precise moments at which his identity may be revealed and to whom, if he is to survive—a delicate matter of timing all but derailed by Eu-

rycleia's untimely gasp? The *Odyssey* may be the exception that proves the rule: even in Aeschylus and Euripides the recognition scenes may seem more contrived than amazing. But Montiglio is concentrating her study on a broadly comic set of texts; and one response to the critique of recognition scenes as too artificial to be cathartic—such as Cave suggests—is that they become part of the generic apparatus of certain kinds of fiction, more a matter of form than of content. And what is difficult to pull off in a genre of high seriousness may become a natural ingredient in lower, more popular forms such as romance that like to rewrite epic or tragic motifs to serve a happy ending, or in sophisticated comic novels that like to mock the methods of canonical texts, much as David Lodge's *Small World* parodies the plots of medieval romance: what in myth or legend is meant to evoke a sense of wonder—of the marvelous (*to thaumaston*) in Aristotle's terms—in lower, more realistic registers can easily turn preposterous and thus remind us of the gap between stories and experience.

Of course Aristotle values plot devices such as recognitions and reversals—of which recognition is a subset—for a very specific reason: he considers them the best means available to the poet for creating the emotional effects that constitute the very telos of tragedy as a genre. If such reasoning applies *mutatis mutandis* to Greek romance (or ancient fiction generally) what are the emotions that exemplify the genre—and motivates its devices—as Aristotle argues pity and fear do in tragedy? Montiglio argues persuasively that “the main function of recognition in the Greek novels is to confirm the lovers' unchanged and reciprocal love” (225), and this is certainly its thematic function, as she shows in meticulous detail.

But what of the question of value—or literary effect? Aristotle's analysis is meant to show us how to evaluate examples of the genre that he considers the summit of literary art rivaling and surpassing even Homer in virtue of its formal complexity. The question of literary value is always a difficult one, especially for authors and genres on the fringe of the traditional canon. Do the Greek romances manage to generate the cathartic voltage of the epic and tragic texts they so often allude to—or is that not the right question? If they do not, how and why have they impressed themselves on the literary imagination of writers as different as Sydney and Racine?

While most of the book is devoted to her exquisitely precise and perceptive close-reading of each and every recognition scene and quasi recognition scene in ancient fiction—as well as many of those in related genres such as epic, tragedy and comedy—the author does not shy away from addressing the question of

literary effect directly in the midst of her tour de force *explication* of Heliodorus: she acknowledges that “time and again hopeless situations are resolved by a *deus ex machina*” (122) but argues that this does not diminish the effect of the recognitions unless we apply a notion of probability from “our life experience” instead of “the verisimilitude from within the story” (122) as the basis of our response. She paraphrases with approval Cave’s observation that recognition epitomizes the working of literature itself with its capacity to astound us and argues that Heliodorus and the Greek novelists would endorse this view since “they label their recognition scenes ‘fictions,’ *plasmata*.” Heliodorus’ “recognitions happen *ex mēchanēs* and leave the spectators struck dumb with amazement” (123).

And of course these spectators are cues for the reader’s response. But given Aristotle’s famous preference for the “probable impossible” over the “improbable possible” what would he make of Chariclea’s recognition—the longest and most elaborate in ancient literature—that requires not one but two “improbable impossibles”? Doesn’t the verisimilitude within the story still need to persuade us to entertain its notion of the possible or probable? Of course a story can be emotionally persuasive without being plausible or even possible, as Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* or Shakespeare’s *Tempest* attest. Perhaps Coleridge’s insight into “the willing suspension of disbelief” is simply inscribed in the protocol of romance as a genre and to balk at the proliferation of the marvelous in “adventure-time” is no more relevant than it would be to observe vis-à-vis Kafka that no one has even turned into a cockroach. Be that as it may, Cave is onto something when he writes of recognition scenes “that more than any other literary motif or element, they have the character of an old tale” (3).

Just as her discussion of literary effect in Heliodorus raises the most basic questions, Montiglio’s painstaking analysis of one recognition scene after another consistently demonstrates the very kind of critical attention any apologia for the genre will require. Her knowledge of the ancient texts and traditions as well as the relevant scholarship is formidably broad and deep: seemingly nothing that bears on her argument escapes her notice. While focusing most of her account on the usual suspects – the five extant Greek novels plus Petronius and Apuleius—she also devotes a chapter to *The History of Apollonius of Tyre*, the Jewish novels (e.g. *Joseph and Aseneth*) and Christian narrative (i.e. *The Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions*) to explore the forms of recognition that differentiate these texts so clearly from their pagan Greek prototypes. In her epilogue the author considers whether recognitions in the Greek novels are best understood generically as tragic or

comic and traces the afterlife of three means of recognition— “autobiographical narrative, the voice and blood’s call” (232)— in later European literature. The result is a book that has much to teach us about how recognition scenes function in Western literature generally, not only in ancient fiction. I have no doubt that when Terence Cave discovers this book, he will recognize it as a gift of Providence, however improbable.

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