

BOOK REVIEW

Narrative and Identity in the Ancient Greek Novel: Returning Romance. By Tim WHITMARSH. Greek Culture in the Roman World. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press. Pp. xii + 298. Hardcover, £60.00/\$99.00. ISBN 978-0-521-82391-3.

Introduction. Whitmarsh's central concern in this substantial and detailed book is how identity in the Greek romances is managed by narrative. To explain changes in narrative technique Whitmarsh rejects notions of paradigm shifts and narrow determinisms. In essence the Romance is a return narrative with a narrative of heterosexual desire superimposed, and gains its richness through competing impulses toward sameness and difference, order and disorder, the licit and the illicit, as Whitmarsh will show.

Chapter 1: The First Romances. For the iconic protagonists of Xenophon of Ephesus and Chariton, a healthy Greek polis culture is indispensable. This stability is disrupted by individualists (private and public desire). Their journeys offer sophisticated experimentation in symbolic geographical spaces. These narratives attempt (with partial success) to give closure and shape to the protagonists' lives.

Chapter 2: Transforming Romance. The narrative strategies of Longus and Achilles Tatius present Hellenism as both more widespread and more decentered, foregrounding the mediations (such as unreliable narrators or trains of translators) needed for interpreting alien cultures and classes, as well as the constructedness of a literary enterprise which grapples with new forms of identity. There is greater focus on the maturation of these non-traditional protagonists, one more oriented to the individual dimension, more a quasi-mystic transformation than a civic restoration.

Chapter 3: Hellenism at the Edge. Heliodorus' ambitious novel creates an even more unsettling rewriting of earlier (particularly Xenophon of Ephesus) and later romances. Mythical structures, especially the *Odyssey*, are central, and deeper religious and philosophical dimensions invite allegorical readings. Two adventure and return narratives, represented by two fathers, conflict and the mystery of Charicleia's "source" and her path to them is linked to the Nile and its mysteries. Heliodorus' Ethiopians are composite, stressing, as does Charicleia

herself, the fictiveness of notions of identity, as fits the diversity of the society of later antiquity.

Chapter 4: *Pothos*. Reading is an exercise in the processes of desire, as much about identity, knowing and experience as sex. The romances' conclusions affirm Hellenic values, while examining and challenging their norms in sophisticated (and sophistic) ways. Chariton's and Xenophon's protagonists desire social status as much as erotic fulfillment; in Longus' and Achilles Tatius' works mutual subjective erotic desire is paramount; in Heliodorus' romance carnal desire becomes a spiritualized and "chaste" desire, somewhat disconnected from social values. The romances' deviant, paiderastic and violent lovers offer dramatically engaging counter models. Concerns about normative and non-normative desire map onto different (but viable) ways of romance reading—for a morally satisfying ending, or to engage the disturbing sights along the way?

Chapter 5: *Telos*. "Closure" is connected to ideology, taste, and styles of reading. The desire for order/closure and for extreme possibility/illicit pleasure functions dialectically, as manifested in the varied responses of internal characters (or even the narrator) and those different styles of writing found in the narratives of the wanderings and in the triumphant conclusion. Whitmarsh compares the readerly awareness to the Freudian ego, the narrative's random, chaotic adventures to the id, and the normative conclusion to the superego. The reader can identify both with text's characters or assume a more distanced perspective, rather as events can be explained on both a human and divine level. Passages describing the effects of oracles, rumor and concealment are metanarrative forces, figures for open-endedness and diversity versus closure and repression.

Chapter 6: *Limen*. In the romance's "liminal" adventure time, identities are explored and tested; the protagonists, particularly females, become commodities in forms of symbolic and economic exchange to be redeemed at the conclusion. The motifs of wandering and exile figure prominently; e.g., wandering as pursuit of knowledge, or exile as evidence of principled resistance to authority or of freedom from normal social constraints. The *Odyssey* is a central intertext, yet unlike the romantic protagonists, Odysseus never (save once) contemplates suicide. The despondency of the romantic protagonists illustrates their failure to create true narratives of identity, agency and destiny; their attempted suicides are seen as ways of gaining control and closure. The role of Fate/*Tychê* is an attitude found in New Comedy, one also tied to philosophic debates about determinism and chance as applied to the lives of individuals as well as empires. These liminal periods, depending on the perspective, can be tragic (realistic) or comic (ideal-

ist). Wandering and narrative forms are connected. Digressions offer another form of narrative disorder, a narrative mode that Achilles' Tattius' text theorizes. Again, the romantic *telos* posits the possibility of stable happiness for individual and empire, although the wanderings/adventures/digressions suggest less normative alternatives.

In conclusion, Whitmarsh restates how the romance form becomes open and elastic, accommodating realistic, idealistic and allegorical interpretations and varied ways of seeing and thinking about culture, politics, religion and especially identity and the relation of the individual to the community, all managed through acts of narrative.

Whitmarsh's very fine book is most valuable in its articulation of the operations of narrative and for his readings of the romances, which expand on his earlier work, with impressive array of learning, both practical and theoretical. My two quibbles are that Whitmarsh does not look closely enough at how early Christian mentalities and narratives provide interpretive models, and he could pay closer attention to archetypal structures, although he is quite aware of the value of both. But again, a very fine book.

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