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Religion in the Ancient Novel

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Abstract: This chapter of the forthcoming *Cambridge Companion to the Ancient Novel*, ed. Tim Whitmarsh, (2007) surveys the pervasive presence of religion and the sacred in the extant Greek and Roman novels and addresses the much discussed issues of its roles and functions, with an emphasis on the challenges the topic poses to the interpretation of the genre's core erotic ideology. It also explores instances of the fictional imagination at work in absorbing, modifying, and creatively refining a few selected religious elements.

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Religion plays a central role in the plot of virtually every fictional narrative, influencing the lives, actions, mentality, practices, beliefs, and eventual fates of the characters (and narrators); the types, interventions, and motives of divinity or other uncanny forces; the use of mythological exemplars, and more broadly, the array of problems that the entire subject poses for interpretation of the genre's conventions. The novels are full of: temples, shrines, altars, priests, rituals and offerings, dreams (or oracles), prophecies, divine epiphanies, aretalogies, mystic language and other metaphors of the sacred (not forgetting, in addition, exotic barbarian rites). Indeed, religious elements, such as these, familiar to virtually any inhabitant of the ancient world, are richly attested, of course, in history and archaeology. The topography of any ancient city, for example, would be unrecognisable without its temples and shrines, its statues and votive offerings, its frequent public festivals and processions, and its generally familiar modes of worship. Such is the case in the novels, for all their differences, in which its characters range far and wide in the course of their wanderings and communicate with the sacred in these habitual ways, whether in the cities of Asia Minor (Ephesus, Miletus, Rhodes, Sidon, Byzantium), Egypt (Memphis, Thebes, Alexandria), Greece (Delphi, Corinth), Italy (Syracuse, Rome) and elsewhere

In considering the role of the gods in myth, belief, and practice, Donald Mastronarde remarks on their inconsistency. ‘At times, they are the guarantors of order and justice and as agents who operate in predictable manner open to straightforward explanation; at other times, they are the explanation of last resort for what is uncanny, unpredictable, unseen, inexplicable, or intractable for humans.’ And he continues, ‘this flexibility of the supernatural apparatus ... is also a function of a system of polytheism and the coexistence of individual gods with the notion of fate or destiny: *moira*, *daimōn*, and *tuchē*.’ Mastronarde is referring to the gods of the fifth-century genre of Greek tragedy, but what he observes could equally apply to the world of the novel, except for the vaster geographical sweep in the Hellenistic age and beyond, the unrelenting pressure of more dire circumstances at the mercy of fate or fortune, and the genre’s guarantee of a propitious ending with divine approval. Religion offered a creative and adaptable means of comprehending and exploring the central problems of existence, throughout the ancient world.

Religion and the erotic

In this polytheistic system that envisioned its gods in anthropomorphic guise, approaches to divinity acknowledged the supposedly unbridgeable gulf between mortals and those immortal powers that ruled the universe, but also believed in significant contacts that brought the two into frequent and intimate contact through a variety of means. Whether or not one was privileged to ‘see the gods’ or feel their presence in epiphany or dream, from Homer on, the gods have had their favourites, whom they protect, empower, save, and sometimes punish. Given the novel’s general focus on erotic

life and all-consuming passion, it should come as no surprise that the most active divinities are Aphrodite, Artemis, Eros, Pan and the Nymphs, and Dionysus, with the participation at times of Apollo, whether at his seat in Delphi (Heliodorus) or in mantic consultation (Xenophon). Helios is invoked briefly in Xenophon in his shrine at Rhodes and, of course, comes to the fore (now identified with Apollo, and alongside Selene) in the final proceedings in Heliodorus, even though these divinities are not primary agents of the plot. Tuchē (Fortune) is omnipresent, as are references to the nameless *daimones* who hound the protagonists.

The one innovation is the introduction of Isis, both in Xenophon of Ephesus and in the last book of Apuleius¹. The presence of this Hellenised Egyptian goddess, whose worship had spread over the Mediterranean in a variety of functions, including her mysteries, has stimulated lively debate, both as regards the so-called exemplary details of her myth (her arduous journeys in search of her beloved consort, Osiris) and her rites of initiation, whose details are known mainly to us from Apuleius. I shall return to this issue later when assessing the general religious climates of the novels and the theory that esoteric meanings were coded behind the texts.

¹ On the gods in the Greek novel see Alperowitz (1992). Hera and Athena, and indeed the rest of the Greek pantheon are absent, while Zeus in Achilles Tatius is represented in the opening ekphrasis of the abduction of Europa and mentioned with regard to various of his local shrines in Egypt. In Apuleius' tale of Cupid and Psyche, Venus, of course plays the leading role (to say nothing of Cupid himself), but other gods are invoked along the way: Mercury, Ceres, Juno, Pan, and at the end, Proserpina. In Petronius, Priapus is the regnant deity.

Odysseus may have his Athena, Sappho her Aphrodite, Hippolytus his Artemis. But the protagonists of the novel are merely members of a prosperous elite Greek society (even in the Roman novel). We may hear echoes of literary or mythical allusions (e.g., Helen, Iphigenia, Andromeda, Achilles, Odysseus) that lend their stories greater resonance and prestige, but in the end the vicissitudes of fortune give way to the legitimation of a social order, guaranteed by the gods, that endorses as its all-encompassing goal the conduct of sanctioned marriage under the proper auspices of family and community. Reassuring Leucippe's father in Artemis's temple of his daughter's genuine chastity, Clitophon appeals the other goddess: 'O Lady Aphrodite, do not be angry at us for spurning you! We did not want to wed without her father present. Now that he is here, o come to us too, we pray, and look kindly upon us' (Ach.Tat. 8.5.8.).

More broadly speaking, why should a love story of two young people, however well-placed as they may be, become a matter of greatest urgency, one that enlists the continuing attention of supernatural powers, 'to engineer the final reunion of the lovers, while Fortune and Chance, conceived as deities, will intervene to disrupt and prolong the action?'² Why should eros and its vicissitudes command a position that subsumes all else to its hegemony? Is there, for example, any intrinsic relationship between the erotic and the sacred, the sexual and the spiritual, the carnal and the transcendent, whereby literal and metaphorical levels may change places or interfuse with one another? In describing the first meeting between Theagenes and Charicleia, the narrator priest in Heliodorus can

² Anderson (1984) 75.

exclaim: ‘In that instant it was revealed to us that the soul is something divine and partakes in the nature of heaven. For at the moment when they set eyes on one another, the young pair fell in love, as if the soul recognised its kin at the very first encounter and sped to meet that which was worthily its own.’ (Hld. 3.5.4). Does Heliodorus articulate an underlying presumption that the genre of romance can overcome Plato’s division between celestial and vulgar love and promise more than the final satisfaction of earthly love? Or does it do no such thing, but rather exploit erotic paradigms and conventions under the umbrella of divinity to enhance a sentimental and sensationalist story?

Of all the unsolved (or rather, insoluble) problems facing a study of ancient prose fiction, this is the issue that is perhaps both the most tantalising and the most vexed. It is the alpha and omega of the novel, one that involves a quest for origins (the riddle of the genre’s appearance on the literary stage of the Empire) and its teleological purpose(s) – what it all ‘means’. The power of the erotic, of course, has a long history in Greek culture, celebrated in theogonies, hymns, lyric poetry, drama, and iconography. It is also a topic of discussion for philosophers and gains increased attention from the Hellenistic period on in accord with a greater emphasis on the individual and private life. But is more at stake in the narrativisation of desire: the journeys, the ordeals, the *Scheintods* (apparent deaths) and return to life, the constancy of the lovers, the themes of ascent and descent, and hopes of ultimate salvation in an eventual reunion? And if so, does this ‘higher truth’ redeem prose fiction of this kind from a generally negative appraisal in antiquity as a species of frivolous (and unsavory) entertainment? The biographical tradition that names

both Achilles Tatius and Heliodorus as Christian bishops³ may be read, after all, in two ways: either each eventually saw the light of conversion after their earlier literary follies or a bishop's prestige is sufficient to sanitise these texts and to pave the way for pietist or allegorical readings (which begin already, in fact, in later antiquity under the influence of Neoplatonism and Neopythagoreanism and continue on into the Byzantine period).⁴

The Apuleian paradigm

The range of interpretative positions in reading the significance of the pervasive presence of religious elements covers an entire spectrum of opinion that can roughly be divided between two poles, the secular and the sacred, with many shadings in between. The most irreverent view regards the divine apparatus as just that and no more, consisting of conventional motifs, intriguing décor, theatrical display, literary legerdemain or even mischievous parody, designed to seduce the reader, as has been claimed, for example, of the canny Egyptian priest, Calasiris in Heliodorus, who controls so much of the action. With the exception perhaps of Chariton, Xenophon of Ephesus and (arguably) Apuleius, the sacred apparatus is not unjustly open to charges of irony, tongue-in-cheek, sophistry, and, at the least, equivocation of serious intentions.⁵

³ See introduction, p. xxx.

⁴ See Philip's allegory of Heliodorus, printed in Colonna (xxx) and translated in Lamberton xxx. For a recent discussion and bibliography see Hunter (2005).

⁵ In general, see Anderson (1982) who examines the novels under the title of 'Eros sophistês'.

At the other extreme, however, is the notion that these works are, in fact, religious texts, some of which may even serve as propagandistic vehicles for certain cults (e.g. Apuleius and Isis; Heliodorus and Helios). One theory proposes that the plots of novels are secularised versions of the Egyptian sacred tale of the goddess Isis and her devotion to her consort, Osiris, that leads her to wander the earth, suffer ordeals, in a search for him that ends in a happy reunion. ‘The myth symbolised man’s [*sic*] voyage through life, through dangers and tribulations to final salvation.’⁶ The other, that of Reinhold Merkelbach, goes still further to claim that all the novels (with the exception of Chariton) are actually mystery texts, coded doctrines of rites and myths for initiates of their respective cults, but opaque to the ordinary reader. ‘The material of the plots corresponds to elements in mystery ceremonies: adventures, shipwreck, *Scheintod* are initiatory trials....the lovers’ union is the mystic marriage of the soul with god; and the form of each novel follows the myth of god in question’.⁷

One immediate problem, however, rarely mentioned, is that Merkelbach depended heavily upon a reading of a single text, the Latin novel of Apuleius (*Metamorphoses*). This picaresque tale of a man turned into an ass (and back again) combines farce, magic, mayhem and mystery in a series of bawdy and violent adventures that reaches its climax in the eleventh and last book, just when Lucius in bestial form has reached the limit of

⁶ Hägg (1983) 102, with reference to Karl Kerényi (1927, 1964). For a convenient summary of the details of the Isis myth, see Reardon (1991) 170-71.

⁷ Reardon (1969) 305, and see Merkelbach (1962). The gods of these mystery cults include Isis (Xenophon, Achilles Tatius, Apuleius); Dionysus (Longus); Helios (Heliodorus); Mithras (Iamblichus).

degradation and prays for salvation. Broadly speaking, the novel is constructed as a progression from magic to religion, each represented by a female figure -- the first in the wanton servant girl Photis and the second in the miraculous epiphany of the goddess. The plot leads from an initial (and disastrous) desire through sexual dalliance to learn the secrets of magical power (hence his accidental transformation into an ass) to the ultimate acquisition of a higher knowledge in the deity, Isis, who after all his sufferings, finally redeems him by her gracious intervention and restores him to human form. The price is initiation into her mysteries and a role in her cult as a priest enjoined to permanent celibacy. As Harrison puts it, 'Photis' initiation of Lucius into the false and enslaving mysteries of sex and magic can [in retrospect] be identified as an inferior and negative version of the true and final initiation into the chaste cult of Isis, where the service of the god is...true pleasure'.⁸ The unusually detailed account of Lucius' initiation and the ceremonies that celebrate the goddess in all her manifestations have led many to take the text as the record of a true conversion experience, even if some doubt the seriousness of Apuleius' intent.⁹ The language is certainly explicit: 'I came to death's frontier and trod the threshold of Proserpina; I was borne through all the elements and returned... I approached the gods above and the gods below, and worshipped them face to face.' This is as much as he can impart, he says, to the uninitiate (Met 11.23).

⁸ Harrison (1996) 512.

⁹ For a range of opinions on the veracity and seriousness of Lucius' conversion, see Winkler (1985) 204-47, Shumate (1996), Griffiths (1978), Sandy (1978), Mal-Maeder (1997), and Harrison (2000) 238-252.

Merkelbach's theory of *Metamorphoses* as an esoteric text also relied on an allegorical interpretation of the embedded story of Cupid (= 'love') and Psyche (= 'soul'; 4.28-6.23), which relates the trials and tribulations of the mortal Psyche to reunite with her beloved, the god Cupid, and her eventual elevation to reside with him in marital bliss on Olympus. Told by an old serving woman in the robbers' cave to console a kidnapped bride, the story in its local context forecasts what seems to be a perfect romance ending to Charite's woes (rescue by her bridegroom and subsequent marriage to him). Lucius and Psyche also have much in common: both characters who at first come to grief through weakness and *curiositas*, then wander and undergo a series of labours and sufferings, and who are finally rescued by the action of divine grace (Venus for Psyche, Isis for Lucius). The *Metamorphoses*, however, is not typical of the genre as a whole. The Platonising tale of Cupid and Psyche may indeed follow in part the trajectory of Isis in search of her lost beloved and resonate deeply with romance motifs,¹⁰ but the Greek idealist novel depends on the sufferings and ordeals of *both* hero and heroine, both masculine and feminine players. Even more to the point, Lucius' eventual rejection of sexuality and earthly desire seems rather a case of the *failure* of the erotic quest: a species of anti-romance, quite at odds with the majority of the extant novels.¹¹ Instead, the story

¹⁰ For the pertinence of Platonism throughout the work, see Harrison (2000) 252-59. Walsh (1970) speaks of a 'Platonist myth proceeding to an Isaic conclusion', 222.

¹¹ In fact, the tragic end of Charite's story (her husband murdered by a jealous rival, her vengeance upon him and her own death) signifies the end of the earthly romance plot that might have provided a model for Lucius.

devolves into a matter of two choices: bad knowledge (magic), bad sex (Photis); good knowledge (religion), no sex (Isis).

There are other reasons why the Apuleian focus on initiation should not be allowed to dominate the agenda. Rituals in mystery cults are defined as individual experiences, ‘a form of personal religion, depending on a private decision and aiming at some form of salvation through closeness to the divine.’¹² This fits the profile for Apuleius (on one interpretation), but again is not generalisable to all the novels. Nothing suggests that the aim of the novel was to bring about a closer relationship to the divine, despite the sacerdotal roles bestowed upon Charicleia and Theagenes at the end of their story (Heliodorus). Rather, centred in the here and now, its aim is to bring two human beings, a male and female, into the closest erotic contact, one eventually to be sanctioned by society – and the gods – in a relationship of marriage. Artemis is prominent in her initial role as guardian of chastity,¹³ but Eros is the guiding force, as is Aphrodite, who are mischievous, even at times malevolent, but ultimately endorse a triumphant finale in the face of ordeals undergone and faithfulness upheld. Theirs are the ‘mysteries’ that, as rhetorically invoked in Achilles Tatius, lend the proceedings an air of spiritual transcendence (a point to which I will return).

¹² Burkert (1987) 12-13.

¹³ Ephesus, the site of the goddess' most famous cult, is the point of departure and return for Xenophon's characters, whose home town it is; but also the destination in Achilles Tatius where Artemis' temple furnishes the location for the denouement of the plot, while in Heliodorus, Charicleia is already an acolyte of the goddess at Delphi and will ultimately become a priestess of Selene, Artemis's double.

While the theories of Kerényi and Merkelbach have been amply refuted (although on other grounds), they have, as one critic puts it, been ‘strangely influential.’¹⁴ It is as if the very idea of the novel as a potentially religious (hence, significant) narrative has raised the status of the genre and opened the way to a far more favorable assessment of its merits. ‘Parallels between life, myth, mystery ritual, and novel’ can be explained as resonant of human experience in general through scenarios of initiation or rites of passage that bring about change in the individual and affirmation of identity.¹⁵ ‘The novel is a metaphor of life and a metaphor of the mysteries’, declares another critic, and both share the same psychological validity.¹⁶ As Northrop Frye’s aptly titled *Secular Scriptures* suggests in Roger Beck’s reading: ‘Journeys out and back, descents to suffering and disintegration, ascents to joy and reintegration, these are the stuff of mysteries and of novels too’.¹⁷

¹⁴ Dowden (2005) 3. On the various refutations see Beck (2003), with literature.

¹⁵ Hägg (1983) 103.

¹⁶ Dowden (2005) 12, and see too (1999). But one might add that the metaphor of the mysteries is just that – a metaphor all too easily adopted.

¹⁷ Beck (2003) 150, citing Frye (1976) 97-157. His larger contention that ‘each [novel] in a different way answered to the aspirations of individuals in their encounters with divine providence and human fate...both were routes for going to meet the gods’ is not convincing. Bowersock’s (1994) suggestion (also dependent on Frye) of nascent Christianity’s influence on the novel is ingenious but has not won adherents. In general, a more appropriate model (oddly overlooked) is that of initiation into adulthood through rites of passage that follow the trajectory of separation-liminality-incorporation, as adumbrated by van Gennep (1960), although see Whitmarsh (1999); Lalanne (2006).

This desire to forge a link, however attenuated, between mystery cults and the novels is based to a certain degree on a claim of historical circumstances. The period that saw the rise of the novel and its flourishing under the Empire coincided with the spread of the so-called 'oriental' mystery cults throughout the Hellenistic world, and similar reasons are adduced to account for both phenomena. In an age of declining political power, so the argument goes, a loss of confidence in traditional religion, and a bewildering fragmentation of life. In the vast expansion of territories and mixtures of peoples, the individual felt a sense of psychological isolation and loneliness that led to a yearning for personal fulfilment and a promise of salvation. But is this description wholly accurate? Simon Swain points out that these ideas 'owe much to views first expressed during the early and middle part of the 20th century about the spiritual health of the ancient world during the early Empire.' It was 'suggested that traditional systems of religion were breaking down...and that cults arose to satisfy a feeling of rootlessness, which was eventually assuaged by Christianity.'¹⁸ Yet historians today, including Swain, are far more skeptical of this image of a society in crisis. Quite the contrary. Civic culture was flourishing, as were civic cults, and all the evidence points to the vitality of paganism that was enriched, not diminished, by syncretistic tendencies to assimilate new religious elements into existing structures.

¹⁸ Swain (1996) 106.

From mystery cult to religious pluralism

In fact, when we turn to the Greek novels in particular, Judith Perkins reminds us that ‘the romances are filled with numerous divinities in various civic manifestations and... portrayed their protagonists as being able to find gods to worship wherever they found themselves (e.g., Isis in Egypt, Helios in Rhodes, Artemis in Ephesus). This was one of the ways,’ she argues, ‘through which the romances conveyed a sense of their protagonists’ at-homeness in the many Greek cities of empire, rather than depicting, as some have suggested, individuals isolated in a large and fragmented world.’¹⁹ Moreover, the protagonists are all members of the elite, who are fully restored in their status by their communities upon their return home. Instead of celebrating ‘the private nature of personal desire rather than as a function of civic identity’ in the promotion of marriage and conjugal relations, as David Konstan had influentially argued, Perkins’ reading reverses the terms: ‘Social identity,’ she suggests, ‘began to be perceived or imagined through the language of personal attachment and marriage. The romance used the trope of marriage to talk about social identity and social structures’ rather than the reverse.²⁰ Likewise, as Swain remarks, ‘the novel’s origin lies not as reflection of unhappiness, individual or otherwise, but as another outlet for cultural ideals and formulas of the elite, as another expression of their cultural hegemony’ that focuses now on a new ethics of

¹⁹ Perkins (1995) 49. Nevertheless, one should not overlook the foreign and exotic aspects of the couple’s adventures.

²⁰ Perkins (1995) 66, refuting Konstan (1994) 266.

conjugality as a mode of Greek self-identity and a promise of continuity of their kind'.²¹ In these readings, the successful conclusion to the romance plot may be attributed to what 'Max Weber has called the 'theodicy of good fortune', the contention that the elite deserved to be exactly where they were in society', entitled to reclaim their wealth and status and assured of the gods' interest in their affairs.²² At the same time, while the fantasies of dangerous adventures and erotic passion may well 'supply a dimension of experience absent from the daily routine of a materially prosperous and secure readership', they also, if only vicariously, offer unsettling glimpses into a hostile world of mysterious forces beyond one's control.²³

Hence, we may still ask why such a 'theodicy' takes the form it does in the romance plot, which despite its often anachronistic historical settings, conventional mythological motifs, and amalgam of previous literary genres (or perhaps because of them), results in a new creation that reflects (and promotes) the religious worldview of the era in which they flourished. The evidence, scanty and scattered as it is, generally points to an increased level of religious engagement, one that promoted a desire for closer personal contact with the gods, especially through dreams, oracles, and epiphanies, reports of miracles, aretalogies, and mystery initiations. We can identify more strenuous efforts to control the workings of the universe and bring about the 'intervention of

²¹ Swain (1996) 109. The settings of these novels in the past also reinforces these ideas. See also Whitmarsh (2001) 17-20.

²² Perkins (1995) 55, relying on Gordon's discussion (1990) 238 of the 'veil of power'.

²³ Morgan (1995) 146.

superhuman powers in material world' through magic, astrology, theurgical operations, and other forms of occultism.²⁴ Theological speculations, the growth of allegory, and philosophical explorations of divinity and spiritual experience (as in Neopythagoreanism and Neoplatonism) also find their place in the conglomeration of beliefs and practices that make up this world under the Empire. In this proliferation of possible attitudes and activities, it is also acknowledged that the 'immense variety of religious experience, geographically, socially, and culturally in the Greek-speaking half of the Empire in the first four centuries CE,...makes it difficult to generalise with any certainty about the experience of later antique paganism or the reasons for its decline.'²⁵ Despite substantial indications from archaeology, inscriptions, iconography, and literary sources, no clear picture emerges of what has been called 'the shapeless profusion of polytheism' in this period, with what Macmullen calls the 'perceptible' occupying far less space than the 'debatable'.²⁶

What matters most finally is not the presence of such elements in romance texts. As Jack Winkler notes, 'every narrative from Homer to Nonnos refers at some point to the rites, language, and beliefs of ancient religions. The point of...analysis is to assess the interaction of religious information and fictional imagination',²⁷ as, in this instance, how

²⁴ Macmullen (1981) 70.

²⁵ Anderson (2001) 142, and referring to Macmullen (1981) 62-73, 'The Vitality of Paganism.'

²⁶ Macmullen (1981) 5. 'Debatable' for M. refers to 'the life that lay, not in paganism observed, but in paganism felt and thought out,' 49.

²⁷ Winkler (1980) 156.

that interaction serves the purposes of the genre's erotic themes. Accordingly, the remainder of this essay will take up three brief case studies of that fictional imagination at work in exploring how a few select religious elements are absorbed, adapted, and creatively refined within our texts.²⁸ First, the topos of 'godlike' beauty in Chariton of his heroine, Callirhoe, in its adaptation of mythic and literary antecedents to suit a vastly expanded political world; second, the reworking of philosophical (mainly Platonic) and mystical themes through rhetorical and sophistic practices (Achilles Tatius and Longus), and finally, the novel as sacred aetiology and the question of Hellenic standards (Heliodorus).

Divine beauty

From the earliest times, the Greeks saw something divine in beauty.²⁹ The epithet 'like to a god' or a simile comparing a mortal to a specific divinity (especially, Apollo, Artemis, and Aphrodite) are well-known poetic attributes epithets, from Homer on, used to describe figures endowed with a charismatic radiance. Virtually, all the novels allude to this topos, and in some instances even enhance this comparison by designating heroines as acolytes of a goddess (Artemis in both Xenophon and Heliodorus) or, as in the case of Psyche in Apuleius, are deemed rivals of a goddess herself (Venus).³⁰

²⁸ I follow a roughly chronological order, not so much to map shifts of interest and focus (although these are there) but because this is generally routine practice.

²⁹ See especially Jax (1933).

³⁰ See e.g. Létoublon (1993) 122-4.

In Chariton's case, however, the degree of rhetorical insistence on the sight of Callirhoe as something 'supernatural, miraculous or divine' far outstrips any of the other extant romances. Everywhere Callirhoe goes, she dazzles all who gaze on her; sailors, country folk, entire cities—in Syracuse, Ionia, and Persia. Advance notice of her arrival draws out crowds to see her to strongest effect in Babylon, where the Great King resides. The Persian court is perhaps the most appropriate setting to showcase Callirhoe, for it is here that all three strands of extravagant homage can be combined: to royalty, erotic beauty, and divinity. The notion that Callirhoe may be some goddess who has descended from heaven or arisen from the sea is a repetitive motif. The opening lines describe her beauty as 'more than human'; it was divine (*theion*) neither of a Nereid or a mountain Nymph at that, but of Aphrodite herself' (1.1). But it is only when she crosses the sea to Ionia that the comparison becomes a reality, when she appears to the onlookers as an actual epiphany of the goddess and an image of her dedicated in Aphrodite's temple is taken as a cult statue. As for herself, she is hardly mystified ('Stop making fun of me! Stop calling me a goddess – I'm not even a happy mortal', 2.3.7); This is a period, it is true, when more credence is given to divine epiphanies, whether in waking or dreaming. But the confusion between the goddess and her devotee lends the work a scopic intensity that fully merges the sacred and the aesthetic under the omnipotent influence of Eros.

In this oscillation between divinity and her incarnation, both Aphrodite and the human embodiment of her beauty are endowed with a universal, even objective value that crosses the boundaries between Greek and barbarian and indeed is a unifying element across the entire Mediterranean, the source of desire that animates political revolutions as well as private affairs. Despite the anachronistic setting and the allusions to mythic and

literary antecedents, critics have suggested engagement with contemporary realities, including a boost for Chariton's hometown, Aphrodisias, and perhaps a discreet reference to the Julio-Claudian house and Venus Genetrix, and hence to Rome. While no firm consensus emerges, the erotic fortunes of Callirhoe, the doublet of Aphrodite (but also of Helen, the Homeric hypostasis of the goddess) suggest some formidable new links between religion and politics.³¹

Sophistics of erotic theology

Achilles Tatius and Longus make strange bedfellows; the first is a sprawling tale of racy adventure, the second, a small scale miniature, set in an idyllic pastoral space. One suggests a cynical and knowing outlook on life; the other revels in an unimaginable innocence. Yet both texts are products of the extravagant rhetorical movement we call the Second Sophistic, most likely composed about the same time (in the second century CE), and for all their differences, both richly wrought in style and diction. Even more, both are preoccupied with the origins and nature of Eros, both heterosexual and homosexual, both feature an erotic teacher who gives indoctrination into the mechanics and metaphysics of sexual pleasure as a guide to life. Each teases the reader with allusions to mystic initiations -- explicit in the case of Ach.Tat (more of which later), and indirectly in Longus, whose work promotes the air of a sacred tale. Eros, as the text tells us, wants to

³¹ On epiphany, see Hägg (2002) and Zeitlin (2003); on the novelty of Callirhoe's position, see Biraud (1996) and Schmeling (2005); on contemporary realities, see Edwards (1994), Connors (2002), Alvares (2001-02), and Smith (2005).

make a ‘myth’ (*muthos*) out of Chloe (Long. 2.27.2) and the appearance of the city proprietor, Dionysophanes in the autumn last book slyly suggests the possibility of a divine epiphany.³² Finally, both are indebted to Platonic treatises on love, notably the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, for play as for profit.³³ The whole of *Daphnis and Chloe* is set in a rural landscape, reminiscent of the pastoral atmosphere of the *Phaedrus*, while the grove with its plane trees and fresh flowing stream that sets the stage for the entire narrative of Ach.Tat. is entirely suitable for listening to ‘tales of love’ (1.2.3). Even more, in both texts Eros wins the title of ‘sophist’ ((Ach.Tat. 1.101 and 5.27.4; Long. 4.8.1) in echo of Diotima’s famous description of Eros in the *Symposium* as ‘sophist’, who is always ‘doing philosophy’ (Plato, *Symposium* 203D). These two dialogues on Eros were much in vogue during this period, not just in relation to the novel, whose erotics would benefit from Plato’s prestige and authority (however playfully or ironically deployed). They generated a larger body of literature (e.g., Plutarch’s *Dialogue on love* and ps.Lucian’s more playful *Love stories*) that drew upon Plato’s spiritual elevation of Eros and its role in the education and enlightenment of lovers, but turned them finally, into platforms for current ideas about the sexes and their reciprocal relations that were

³² On *Daphnis and Chloe* as a mystical text involving Eros, Dionysus, with perhaps Orphic elements, see Chalk (1960) and less persuasively, Merkelbach (1988).

³³ See further Morgan, this volume.

oriented now towards marriage and its emotional pleasures, rather than pederastic love, as a means to the soul's ascent.³⁴

What is most noteworthy, however, are references to 'mysteries of Eros' (or Aphrodite) as an allocution for sexual intercourse, an expression we might take for granted, but which seems to be an innovative usage arising in this period.³⁵ According to Burkert, 'to speak of these mysteries became routine mainly under the impact of Plato's *Symposium*', where we may recall, the priestess, Diotima, initiated Socrates into these very 'mysteries' (209e5-210a2).³⁶ In Plato, the model was the Eleusinian mysteries, which would be familiar to any Athenian. But 'in later romances and related literature', Burkert continues, 'many a lover is prone to propose to his partner initiation into the mysteries of this special god'.³⁷ Closer inspection, however, does not indicate a

³⁴ On Longus and Plato, see Hunter (1997) and McQueen (1990) 168-74. On Ach. Tat. see Morales (2004) 50-53, Goldhill (1995) 78, 94-96, and more generally, the fine observations of Whitmarsh (2003). On both texts, see Alvares (2006) 16-18. On the *Phaedrus* in this period, see Trapp (1990) and on Plutarch and ps. Lucian, see Foucault (1986) 193-227, who speaks of 'a new erotics.'

³⁵ Reference to the *orgia* or *hiera* of Aphrodite in the same sense seems have been a jocular use confined to iambic, comedy, and mime: e.g., Aristoph. *Lys.* 832, 893; Cratinus 180 (Kock I), and Herod. 1.83. Archilochus refers to sex as 'the divine thing' (*to theion chrêma*), S 478.13-15 Page.

³⁶ On mystery terminology in the *Symposium*, see Riedweg (1987) 1-29.

³⁷ Burkert (1987) 107. He further remarks (108) that 'the language of the mysteries also became available for obscene allusions, as in the parody of Priapus mysteries in the house of Quartilla, in Petronius. Consider too that the very content of mystery cults, that which made them secret and

widespread use of this language in erotic contexts. In fact, we find the greatest frequency by far in none other than Achilles Tatius, as a sophistic turn of phrase deployed in the interests of seduction.³⁸ Melite, a presumed widow (her husband supposedly drowned at sea), is a mistress of eloquence, who strives to persuade the reluctant Clitophon (still grieving over Leucippe's second apparent death) to consummate their new marriage: 'Let us enter Aphrodite's inner sanctum', she pleads, 'and initiate ourselves into her mystic liturgy' (5.15.6; cf. 5.26.3; 5.26.10). Her pleas to Clitophon couched in mystic language aptly returns his own rhetoric to him, for he too had used the same terms in the first part of the text, but this time addressed to a still chaste Leucippe (2.19.4; 4.1.3). Earlier, he had begged his erotic teacher, his cousin, Clinias for help in approaching Leucippe – 'tell me how to begin: you have been an initiate for longer than me and you are already familiar with the mysteries of Eros before me' (1.9.7), but if the reply was that Eros is 'self-taught' (1.10.1; cf. 5.27.4), Clitophon eventually proved himself an adept, if also an ill-starred, pupil himself. The language of the mysteries should not surprise us, however, since Melite turned out to be the beautiful woman who appeared to him in front of the closed temple of Aphrodite, who promised him that soon the doors would open and he would even become a priest of the goddess. (4.1.3-8). Melite finally succeeds just once

unspeakable, may well have been the display of genital symbols, both male and female, and overt references to sexuality. See Burkert (1983) 270-71.

³⁸ Once in Char. (4.4.9), once in Hld. (1.17.2), and 21 occurrences in Ach.Tat. Other refs in Plut. *Erôtikos*, 762A, 769A, Alciphron 1.4.3; 1.22, and Ps.Lucian, *Erôtes*. 32.2. Critics who claim the 'mysteries of Eros' for Longus are using their own metaphor.

through a last bit of erotic philosophising (Eros teaches discourse as well, 5.27.1), turning Plato, his mysteries, and theology once again upside down.³⁹

Sacred aetiology and the question of Hellenic standards

In Heliodorus' *Charicleia and Theagenes*, the last, longest, and most complex of the extant novels (dated at the latest to the mid 4th century), 'religion' takes centre stage. Sacred liturgies, festivals, rituals, and processions are occasions for sumptuous spectacles. The dreams, omens, and oracles that thread their way through the text attest to the workings of destiny's mysterious forces. Divine agencies, for good or for ill, are felt to exert their power in a universe, whose riddling nature characters strive to interpret. Theosophical exegeses on the gods and forms of higher and lower wisdom hint at the esoteric and occult, with shadings of Neopythagorean and Neoplatonic elements. Above all, the cast of characters features a host of sacerdotal figures and religious functionaries. The three adoptive 'fathers' of the heroine, Charicleia, are each affiliated with important cult centers that span a broad geographical sweep: Greece, Egypt, and Ethiopia. Charicles presides over Apollo's shrine at Delphi; Calasiris is a voluntary exile from the temple of Isis in Memphis, while Sisimithres heads the council of wise gymnosophists in Meroe, where the regnant deity is Helios.⁴⁰ Even the bandit chief, Thyamis, whom we meet at the opening of the work, is a priest, son of Calasiris, whose post has been usurped by his

³⁹ On possible differences in the novel between the 'mysteries' of Eros and those of Aphrodite, see Bouffartigue (2001); for the outrageousness of Melite's propositions, see Anderson (1982) 32.

⁴⁰ On the gymnosophists, see Robiano (1992).

wicked brother (1.19.3). More surprising still, Homer's pedigree, we learn, in a learned disquisition, assigns him the role of bastard son to yet another Egyptian priest (3.14.2). Charicleia herself is an acolyte of Artemis in Delphi and once restored to her birthright in Ethiopia is, together with Theagenes, inducted into the priesthoods of Selene (Moon) and Helios (Sun) before they are wed. Her devotion to purity and chastity surpasses that of any of the heroines of romance that preceded her. Before she meets Theagenes, 'virginity is her god', laments Charicles. 'She has elevated to the level of the immortals, pronouncing it without stain, impurity, or corruption' (2.33.4-5). Even afterward, she embodies a piety and purity that, as one critic suggests, 'incarnates the moral and religious ideal of late antiquity'.⁴¹

Opinions are deeply divided as to the 'meaning of this obsession with the supernatural', more than is the case with any of the other novels, due as much to its remarkable literary qualities as to a mysteriosophic atmosphere that lends itself to allegorical speculation.⁴² A 'mixture of religiosity with erotic intrigue' that combines 'an aura of profundity with sensuous exoticism' perhaps best describes the work.⁴³ Ethiopia, the destined end of the journey for the couple and the setting of the last book, does indeed usher us into an exotic world. The Black Land of the Sun combines mythic aspects of the

⁴¹ Hani (1978) 268

⁴² Futre Pinheiro (1991) 359, and see n. 1 for a brief but comprehensive summary of critics and their views. In addition to Szepessy (1957), Heiserman (1977), Winkler (1982), Sandy (1982), and Morgan (1982), (1989), (1996), see also Whitmarsh (1999a), (1999b), and Chew (2007).

⁴³ Lamberton (1986) 148.

Golden Age with utopian fantasies. This theocratic state, ruled by a benevolent priest-king, with the support of a college of venerable sages, seems to suggest the end point of a 'hierarchy of religious enlightenment' that leads 'from Greek (good) to Egyptian (better) to Ethiopia (best).'⁴⁴

But whose enlightenment? For all its virtues, this land is one that practises human sacrifice, a ritual abhorred by the Greeks. It is what barbarians do. Achilles Tatius and Xenophon both contain scenes of such savage rites, as does the tantalising fragment of Lollianus' *Phoenician events*. But these are bizarre rituals of outlaws, in keeping with their marginal social position and criminal ways. In Heliodorus, by contrast, human sacrifice, to celebrate victory in war, is an ancestrally sanctioned custom (10.7.2), demanded by the populace. The king, Hydaspes' dilemma will be whether to fulfil his royal role as guardian of laws and mindful of his people's demands or to heed the religious authorities in the persons of the gymnosophists, who are guardians of justice in judicial disputes and also arbiters of the gods' wishes (10.9). The irony of the conflict is between piety towards the gods (in the form of the victory sacrifice) and the real piety, which is to abjure these savage rites. The arrival of Theagenes and Charicleia as the designated victims are the catalysts of this dilemma, and it is the resolution finally of their identity through a complex series of recognitions and brilliant coincidences (birth tokens, chastity tests, sudden arrival of Charicles from Delphi) that puts an end to this cruel practice. Romance is no longer an end in itself.

⁴⁴ Beck (1996) 144. On the representation of Ethiopia, see Lonis (1992) and Hågg (2000).

As Winkler observes, ‘the gods, it seems, wanted the otherwise blameless Ethiopians to accept a fundamental change in religious custom and to this end could find no better means than romance, one whose beauty and intricacy would astonish, charm, and successfully persuade them to abolish human sacrifice once and for all’. It is to this end they ‘have fashioned the entire plot of Charicleia’s life’ (10.7.1).⁴⁵ Whether or not this aetiological conclusion is ‘religiously meant’ (Winkler and others think not), is beside the point. Rather what counts is the bold originality that welds romance and religion together into a new and symbiotic relationship. In Ethiopia one can both assume priesthoods and celebrate matrimonies.

In this best of all possible worlds, the periphery has now become the center. What might this mean? Are we witnessing a new multicultural cosmopolitanism at this late date in a fusion of Helios and Apollo? Or does the decisive role of Sisimithres, leader of the Ethiopian sages, who both saves Charicleia at birth and now pronounces the gods’ will, indicate a shift from Hellenic hegemonic standards to endorse an ‘alien wisdom’?⁴⁶ Or conversely, given Charicleia’s upbringing at Delphi, does nurture trump nature, so that it is ‘the absorption of rational, civilised Greeks into their community that redeems the culturally ambivalent Ethiopians from the savage excesses of their own religion’ or better perhaps, restore them to the traditional image of their famous piety that this ritual aberration had compromised?

⁴⁵ Winkler (1982) 152.

⁴⁶ Cosmopolitanism, Bowersock (1994) 48; ‘alien wisdom’, Whitmarsh (1999b) 31-2.

The irony lies in the Greek provenance of the sacrificial motif, and this twice over, in a witty and subversive ‘intertextual play with the two *Iphigenias* of Euripides, where are combined the themes of a king who proposes to sacrifice his daughter for the public good and human sacrifice [demanded in a place] at the end of the world’.⁴⁷ In the land of the Taurians, Iphigenia, the priestess of Artemis rescues her goddess from these barbaric practices and transports her to Greece. Charicleia, for her part, an acolyte of Artemis in Delphi and now a priestess of Selene (the moon) has come *from* Greece *to* this distant land, where she will remain, unlike Iphigenia, both a sacred officiant and a lawfully wedded wife. Or finally, is this intricate tale the gift of Heliodorus, a Phoenician from the city of Emesa, himself a descendant of the Sun, who creates a fictional world in which it is the gods and not the mortals who author the plot?

Conclusion

This brief, all too brief, journey through the varieties of religious experience in the novel left out by necessity a few stops along the way. Xenophon of Ephesus might have been a point of departure, since it offers a plenitude, if not a surfeit, of religious motifs and elements: shrines and gods scattered everywhere across the Mediterranean, a redundancy of divinities, unexpected miracles, bizarre rites of bandits, to name only a few. But the confusion it engenders by the frenetic pace of the action and the deployment of conventions that sometimes defy logic, whether as to motivation or conclusion (the wrath of Eros at the beginning; the odd message of Apollo’s oracle, and especially the

⁴⁷ Morgan (2005) 311; already observed by Feuillâtre (1966) 120-21.

indecision as to the major divinity: is it Artemis or Isis) only demonstrates by its counterexample the artistry of the other works that have come down to us, for all its probable value as a vivid, if stylized, representation of a lively and varied Hellenistic milieu.

The most serious omission, however, in this essay is the lack of attention to Jewish and Christian works of prose fiction that were written in Greek. Recent trends in criticism have argued for a more multicultural view of the ancient Mediterranean in its diversity of religious beliefs and practices and have suggested a greater fluidity in the assessment of mutual interests and influences. But for all that, Jewish and Christian works differ quite substantially from their pagan cousins. Indeed, these so-called novels (or novellas) contain elements that belong to the romance genre: e.g., erotic motifs, trials and ordeals, the virtues of constancy, the prominence of women characters and emphasis on chastity. But the major difference is that all these motifs and conventions are deployed expressly in the service of religious ideology with none of the irony, ambiguity, authorial sleight of hand, and opportunism that may be read in a typical specimen of prose fiction. For Jews, these works (such as *Esther*, *Daniel*, *Tobit*, *Susanna*) offer affirmations not just of personal identity but also of communal support and salvation. While one novel, *Joseph and Aseneth*, presents an erotic tale that entails the conversion of the would-be bride to the worship of the Hebrew God, Christian texts are regularly geared towards this end in stories of wonder-working apostles (e.g., the so-called Apocryphal *Acts*), whose charismatic influence leads not to erotic fulfillment but to renunciation. Apuleius' Isis

book may suggest affinities with these non-pagan works, but they deserve extended discussion on their own.⁴⁸

Suggestions for Further Reading: For general studies of religion under the Empire, see Lane Fox (1987), Macmullen (1981) and Anderson (2001). On mystery religions, see Burkert (1987). There are no specific works dedicated to religion in the ancient novel, but every general treatment of the genre will allot some space to the topic. A good brief overview, however, can be found in Anderson (1987). See Beck (2003) and Merkelbach (2003) for recent discussions of mystery cults, holy men, and aretalogies. Frye's treatment of romance as 'sacred scripture' (1976) is the source of comparisons between mysteries, life, and romance and still required reading. For more sociological analyses, see Perkins (1995), Morgan (1995) and Swain (1996). On individual authors, I have found the following most useful. For Chariton, I suggest Edwards (1994), Schmeling (2005), and Zeitlin (2003). On Achilles Tatius, see Segal (1984) and Bouffartigue (2001). On Longus, Chalk (1960) on the mysteries and mythology of Eros and the role of Dionysus in the novel is the place to start, but for more nuanced views, see, e.g., Hunter (1996). The religious atmosphere of Heliodorus has elicited the most commentary. See, in particular, Heiserman (1977), Winkler (1982), and Sandy (1982). Morgan has written extensively on this novel and is always worth reading (1982), (1989), (1996). For recent innovative readings, see also Whitmarsh (1999a), (1999b), and Chew (2007). As for

⁴⁸ On Jewish novels see Wills (1995) and (2002). Other notable specimens of Christian prose fiction are Ps. Clement, *Recognitions*, and *Paul and Thecla*. For Christian prose fiction in general, see the convenient summary in Pervo (1996).

Apuleius, the role of Isis and the interpretation of Lucius' 'conversion' in the last book is the fullest representation of religion in action of all the ancient novels. One may consult with profit Winkler (1985), Shumate (1996), Griffiths (1978), Sandy (1978), and Mal-Maeder (1997). See also Harrison (1996) and (2000) 235-59, who offers a fine discussion of Platonism and Platonic motifs. On the tale of Cupid and Psyche, Kenney's edition (1990) is valuable as is Walsh's (1970) discussion, 190-223. The most authoritative work on the Jewish novel can be found in Wills (1995) and (2002). For Christian prose fiction, see Pervo (1987) and (1996) as well as the essays in Hock, Chance, and Perkins (1998). A recent and sophisticated reading of Christian and Greek fiction is Burrus (2005).

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