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978-0-521-82391-3 - Narrative and Identity in the Ancient Greek Novel: Returning Romance

Tim Whitmarsh

Excerpt

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TRUE ROMANCE

Habrocomes, my child, I am not a settler or a native Sicilian but an elite Spartan, from one of the powerful families there, and very prosperous. When I was a young man and enrolled among the ephebes, I fell in love with a citizen girl by the name of Thelxinoe, and Thelxinoe returned my love. We met at a time when an all-night festival was being held in the city, with a god's guidance, and enjoyed the pleasure that our meeting had promised. For a while we used to meet in secret, and swore repeatedly to each other that our relationship would last till death. But one of the gods must have been spiteful. While I was still classed among the ephebes, Thelxinoe's parents agreed to her marriage to a young man called Androcles, who had by this time also fallen in love with her. At first, the girl had to invent all sorts of excuses to put off the wedding, but in the end she was able to arrange a meeting with me, and she agreed to elope from Sparta with me by night. We both dressed up as young men, and I even cut Thelxinoe's hair, on the very night before her wedding. Escaping from the city we came to Argos, then Corinth, where we boarded a ship and sailed for Sicily. When the Spartans learned of our escape, they condemned us to death. We lived out our days here, short of material comforts, but happy in the belief that we enjoyed every kind of pleasure, because we were with each other. Thelxinoe died here not long ago, but her body remains unburied: I keep it with me, maintaining my loving relations.

(Xenophon of Ephesus 5.1.4–9)

The extraordinary story of Aegialeus the fisherman is one of a number of mini-novellas narrated by minor characters within Xenophon of Ephesus' *Anthia and Habrocomes*, a Greek romance of the first century CE.¹ It is

¹ This introduction presumes a certain familiarity with the romances: for orientation, see the Appendix, where issues of dating are also discussed briefly. I use the term 'romance' for the heterosexual erotic narratives of travel and return, on which this book focuses, and 'novel' as a more extended category covering works like the *Alexander Romance* and *The Life of Aesop* (both are, in any case, anachronistic).

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clearly an experiment with the romance mode. The themes of young, reciprocated, heterosexual love and adventure, fidelity and final happiness resonate with the primary narrative. This story of passion that survives beyond the florescence of youth, despite deprivation, is offered as a lesson in both the power of love and the harsh physiological and material realities of life. Habrocomes, Xenophon's male protagonist and the recipient of this story, responds by drawing a conclusion that he applies to himself too: 'now truly (*alēthōs*) I have learned that true (*alēthinos*) love is not limited by age'.² A true lesson about true love.

But this story is also heavily counter-realistic. It is a grotesque parable about the delusions wrought by love. Aegialeus has (we learn) embalmed his wife in the Egyptian fashion, so that he can maintain the illusion that she is still living: 'I speak with her constantly *as if she were alive*, and lie with her, and take my meals with her.'³ The final sentence of the story cited above (which I have translated 'maintaining my loving relations') could be taken to mean that he kisses and even has sex with the corpse.⁴ Aegialeus' account of a life of poverty, exile, old age and death is not simply (as Habrocomes takes it) a story of true love; it is also about the denial of truth, about the concealment of present realities beneath a carapace of past memories. The lovers were, Aegialeus tells us, 'happy in the belief (*dokountes*) that we enjoyed every kind of pleasure, because we were with each other':⁵ this belief (*doxa*) that they remain prosperous is a fiction willingly entertained. Similarly, when Aegialeus proceeds to show Habrocomes her corpse, lovingly embalmed in the Egyptian manner, he tells him that 'she does not appear to me as you see her; instead, my child, I imagine her as she was in Sparta, as she was when we escaped. I imagine the all-night festival, the promises we made.'⁶ Aegialeus seems neurotically obsessed with replaying his own teen romance, and adopting it as a substitute for reality. But it is not simply a case of false consciousness: he is fully aware that Habrocomes will see things differently, whereas he

For titles of the romances I use the girl-boy forms, which I believe to be original and generically definitive (Whitmarsh (2005b)); for convenience I abbreviate in the cases of Xenophon (full title: *The Ephesian affairs of Anthia and Habrocomes*) and Heliodorus (*The Ethiopian affairs of Charicleia and Theagenes*). Morgan (2004c) 491–2 discusses the relationship between Xenophon's embedded narratives and his primary narrative; to his list I would add the story of Eudoxus at 3.4, reported in indirect speech.

² νῦν ἀληθῶς μεμάθηκα ὅτι ἔρωσ ἀληθινὸς ὄρον ἡλικίας οὐκ ἔχει, Xen. Eph. 5.1.12.

³ ταύτηι . . . ἀεὶ τε ὡς ζώσῃ λαλῶ καὶ συγκατάκειμαι καὶ συνευωχοῦμαι, Xen. Eph. 5.1.11.

⁴ φιλῶ ('love', but also 'kiss') καὶ σύνειμι ('conjoin with'), Xen. Eph. 5.1.9.

⁵ ἡδόμενοι . . . πάντων ἀπολαύειν δοκοῦντες, ὅτι ἦμεν μετ' ἀλλήλων, Xen. Eph. 5.1.8.

⁶ οὐ γὰρ οἷα νῦν ὁρᾶται σοὶ τοιαύτη φαίνεται <ἐ>μοί, ἀλλὰ ἐννοῶ, τέκνον, οἷα μὲν ἦν ἐν Λακεδαίμονι, οἷα δὲ ἐν τῇ φυγῇ· τὰς παννυχίδας ἐννοῶ, τὰς συνθήκας ἐννοῶ, Xen. Eph. 5.1.11.

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himself lives in a world of 'belief' and 'as-ifs'. As a first-person (strictly, a homodiegetic) narrator, he stands both inside the story, living its fictions, and outside it, exposing them.

Romance is centrally about simple truths: the complementary, yin–yang love of a girl and boy of the same station, comparable beauty and (roughly) equal age; a love tested through ordeals of separation and endurance, and redeemed through reunion and return. But literary narrative seems incapable of sheer simplicity. As we can see in the case of the story of Aegialeus (deliberately chosen from the romance usually reckoned the least artful), story-telling can be complex, self-conscious and metafictional even when it handles what is, at one level, a parable with an obviously universal relevance.

This book is about identity in the Greek romances, and the ways that it is turned and re-turned through narrative. Identity is, of course, a hugely complex topic, spreading into history, philosophy, anthropology, psychology, sociology and cultural studies (particularly of postcolonialism, gender, race and sexuality).⁷ What I mean, for the purpose of this book, is primarily the set of categories of selfhood presumed, legitimised or questioned in the romances themselves. We can see immediately that Aegialeus uses a number of markers to identify himself. He is 'not local' to Sicily or a 'settler' (Sicelot, or Greek colonist), but an outsider, specifically a Spartan. He is a member of the elite (the Greek describes him as a 'Spartiate', of the city's politically dominant class) and wealthy. Although the sentence expressing these claims omits the verb by ellipsis, the implication is that Aegialeus perceives this as a present-tense identity, which he still holds even in exile. He also refers, however, to transitory stages through which he has now conclusively passed: 'when I was a young man . . . enrolled among the ephebes . . . classed among the ephebes' ('ephebes' being males on the cusp of (*epi*-) maturity (*hēbē*)). A third mode of identity is the assumed disguise: 'We both dressed up as young men, and I even cut Thelxinoe's hair.' These identities are provisional, strategic and designedly false; they will be shed when their usefulness is outlived. Finally, we have a less specific set of self-descriptors referring to mental and emotional states, principally the happiness generated by the illusory love. Even a brief story like this presents a rich narrative of identity. Aegialeus defines himself in terms of his city of birth, Sparta, but never achieved the secure status of adulthood there: he left while still an ephebe, not yet a man, just as Thelxinoe left

⁷ Discussion and references at Whitmarsh (2001a) 35–7; see now also du Gay *et al.* (2000), a sample of classic essays from a variety of fields.

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before she became a woman (i.e. wife). In place of their real, Spartan identities, they adopt first the false disguises they need for their escape, and second the consoling fictions that they are still the people that they were when they first met. There is a notable self-reflexivity to this narrative of identity: Aegialeus does not simply tell Habrocomes about his past, but also reveals the role that such story-telling plays in sustaining his fabricated world in the present. Narrative creates identities to inhabit in the present, as well as accounting for the past.

That identity is a species of narrative is a truism in certain circles. Inspired by Paul Ricoeur's monumental *Time and narrative*, Alasdair Macintyre's *After virtue*, Charles Taylor's *Sources of the self*,⁸ and psychoanalytical critiques of the enlightenment identification of the person with consciousness, certain scholars have claimed that (to quote one) 'the self, or subject [is] a result of discursive praxis rather than a substantial entity having ontological priority over praxis or a self with epistemological priority, as originator of meaning'.⁹ Even the social sciences, traditionally hostile to qualitative analysis, have caught the narrative bug.¹⁰ It is not my aim in this book to validate such ideas. My approach is historicist: I aim to show not what identity *is* (in a universal sense), but how it is configured within a particular body of literature. It happens that that body was (as we shall see presently) both durable and culturally central in the period under discussion, but narrative was certainly far from the only medium available to ancients for articulating and exploring identity. Numerous other media presented themselves (to name but a few: inscriptions, monuments, clothing, statues, coinage), which may have a narrative dimension, but are not constituted as narratives in any strong sense. Ancient theories of identity were numerous (principally from philosophers¹¹ and medical writers, but we should include jurists too), but narrative does not play a central role in them.¹²

⁸ Ricoeur (1984–1988); Macintyre (1984), esp. 204–25; Taylor (1989), cf. esp. 47–8 ('we grasp our lives as a *narrative*', 47). On problems around the definition of 'narrative', see Ryan (2007).

⁹ Kerby (1991) 4.

¹⁰ For the general point, see Somers (1994), who argues that narrative studies offer better prospects for comprehending the perspectives of the dispossessed (see 613–17 on the social sciences' rejection of narrative); also Polkinghorne (1995) and (more leisurely and epideictic) Bruner (1987). For an excellent study along these lines of narratives of motherhood, see Miller (2005). For a critique of the 'psychological narrativity thesis', see Strawson (2004), although his argument founders on the odd claim that episodic experience (which he opposes to diachronic) is not a form of narrativity. In chapters 5 and 6, we shall distinguish between 'paradigmatic' and 'syntagmatic' (roughly the equivalent of Strawson's episodic) narrative.

¹¹ Gill (2006) focuses on Stoic and Epicurean ideas of selfhood, with plenty of lateral glances towards Galen (as well as Seneca, Vergil and Plutarch).

¹² Gill (2006) 69–73, on the minimal role of memory in ancient definitions of selfhood.

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Greek romances are not identity narratives in the sense that modern philosophers understand the term, which is to say articulations of individual selfhood. Certainly, we do find figures (like Xenophon's Aegialeus) telling their own stories, sometimes at great length: one of the romances, Achilles Tatius' *Leucippe and Clitophon*, indeed, is almost entirely narrated by the male protagonist. But, of course, such accounts are always embedded in larger narrative frames, which are themselves fictionalised. *Leucippe and Clitophon* is not an ingenuous attempt to express Clitophon's identity, it is an experiment with a literary mode, building on a tradition of first-person narratives stretching back to Homer's *Odyssey*. Yet, as we have begun to see in the case of Xenophon's Aegialeus story, ancient romances do indeed encode paradigmatic models of identity, and have their own ways of theorising it. To understand what identity is doing in such texts, we need first to explore how narrative works in them, about the formative roles of genre and cultural context.

INVENTING ROMANCE

The Greek romance appears to have emerged in the first century CE, in Asia Minor. In antiquity it survived until at least the fourth century CE (whereafter it continued to influence poets such as Nonnus and Musaeus, as well as martyrologists and historians);¹³ it was later revived in mediæval Persia and Byzantium.¹⁴ There are five texts that survive complete: from the first century, Chariton's *Callirhoe* and Xenophon's *Anthia and Habrocomes*; from the second century, Achilles Tatius' *Leucippe and Clitophon* and, perhaps also, Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe*; and, from the fourth century, Heliodorus' *Charicleia and Theagenes*. Although in many ways different, each deals with a shared stock of narrative themes: the love of a young heterosexual couple, the trials that come between them, and a joyous reunion at the end. All are set in an imaginary, more or less classicising (i.e. Roman-less) world; Chariton's and Heliodorus' works are explicitly located in the classical period. In addition to the extant texts, we have a number of summaries by Photius, the swashbuckling ninth-century bishop of Constantinople, and an ever-increasing corpus of papyrus fragments that seem to share these concerns with young love.¹⁵ Some (like the fragmentary

¹³ Below, n. 61.

¹⁴ For an up-to-date introduction to the Byzantine novels, see Burton (2008), with further literature. On the Persian version of *Meriochus and Parthenope*, see see n. 16 below.

¹⁵ The most substantial collection of fragments and summaries is SW; all fragmentary romances are cited from there, unless otherwise stated. Five more fragments have been published in the interim: *P. Oxy.* 4760–2, 4811, 4945.

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romances of *Sesonchosis*, *Ninus* and *Metiochus and Parthenope*)¹⁶ are based on historical or pseudo-historical figures; others, such as Iamblichus' *Babylonian affairs* and the Panionis fragment (*P.Oxy* 4811), are, like the extant texts,¹⁷ fictional. These romance texts should be seen against the back drop of a larger canvas of diverse novelistic literature of the imperial and even Hellenistic periods,¹⁸ including the *Alexander romance*, the *Wonders beyond Thule* of Antonius Diogenes, the *Life of Aesop*, *Apollonius King of Tyre*, the various *Ass* narratives,¹⁹ Lucian's *True stories*, and the anonymous *Joseph and Aseneth*. Two themes distinguish the romance from other novels. The first is the reciprocated heterosexual love that we have already seen exemplified in Aegialeus' story. The second is that of travel and return. This, I have argued, is conspicuously *absent* for Thelxinoe and Aegialeus: they are compelled to create ersatz identities because they do not return to assume their proper adult roles in Sparta.²⁰

Why did the romance, this particular species of the ancient novel, emerge when it did, and why did it achieve such success? This question has occupied scholars since Pierre-Daniel Huet's *Lettre-traité de l'origine des romans*, which argued that the romance was a west-Asian form that spread into Greek during the Hellenistic period.²¹ Erwin Rohde's pivotal *Der griechische Roman und seine Vorläufer* (1876), the founding work of modern scholarship in the field, is largely dedicated to retracing the Hellenistic Greek sources of the romance.²² But whereas older scholarship focused on producing narratives of diachronic development, critics since Perry's *The ancient romances* (1967) have tended to emphasise the congruity between the romances and

¹⁶ For *Metiochus and Parthenope*, see HU, which includes as well as the Greek fragments and testimony an edition and translation of an eleventh-century Persian translation, 'Unşuri's *Vāmiq u 'Adhrā*.

¹⁷ Notwithstanding that in Chariton's *Callirhoe*, the historical Hermocrates (Syracusan general at the time of the Athenian invasion) is father of the protagonist.

¹⁸ Modern discussions of Hellenistic prose fiction: Ruiz Montero (2003); Whitmarsh (2010d).

¹⁹ Scholarship has focused primarily on the triangular relationship between the pseudo-Lucianic *Ass*, Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* and the lost *Metamorphoses* of Lucius of Patrae (Phot. *Bibl.* cod. 129): see esp. Perry (1967) 211–18; Van Thiel (1971); Mason (1994). The picture has been changed, however, by the publication of *P.Oxy.* 4762, a different version of the narrative (featuring, intriguingly, a 'third-person' (i.e. what narratologists call 'heterodiegetic') narrator). The implications of this have yet to be fully absorbed by scholars in the field.

²⁰ Comparably, Montiglio (2007) reads Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* as a rejected return narrative.

²¹ Huet (1670) 11: 'l'invention [des Romains] et deüë aux Orientaux: je veux dire aux Egyptiens, aux Arabes, aux Perses, & aux Syriens'. More recent versions of the west-Asian argument, differently nuanced, can be found in Barns (1956), Anderson (1984), and Rutherford (2000); discussion at Stephens (2008). I shall address this issue in a forthcoming book, *The romance between Greece and the East*. 'West-Asian' is intended as a more neutral designation than the Eurocentric 'near-Eastern'.

²² Other studies searching for literary origins: Lavagnini (1922) (local history); Giangrande (1962) (prose paraphrases); S. West (2003) (women's tales).

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the cultural context of imperial Greece.²³ These contextualising readings fall, broadly, into three different camps:

- (i) The first, emphasising the role of 'private' emotions and selfhood, sees the romance as the expression of a general reorientation away from the public sphere towards the inner person. Sometimes this is expressed in terms of a supposed transformation in civic culture: Greeks, it is claimed, had lost their sense of collective identity amid the vast territories of the Hellenistic and Roman worlds.²⁴ A slightly different version of this interpretation, routed through the work of Paul Veyne and Michel Foucault, sees the romance in the context of an increased emphasis upon the 'care of the self': the elites under the empire, it is claimed, turned to self-discipline as a compensation for the political authority they had now lost.²⁵ Yet another variety reads the romances as religious parables of virtuous suffering and redemption, expressing the world of the mystery cult.²⁶ The usual assumption is that the texts were composed by and for elite males, but sometimes the emphasis upon emotional vulnerability is explained in terms of a demographically expanded readership, now incorporating the 'bourgeoisie'.²⁷
- (ii) A number of critics have seen the romance as the product of a supposed reorganisation of sexual protocols in the imperial period. Foucault is influential here too, concluding the third volume of *The care of the self* with a brief chapter claiming the romances as articulations of a 'new erotics' of heterosexual mutuality, contrasting with the hierarchical phallocentrism of the classical period.²⁸ They have been held to articulate the supposed centrality of marriage to the Greek aristocracies in the imperial period,²⁹ the new prominence of women,³⁰ and the identification of the sexual being with the innermost core of selfhood (a theme of Foucault's own work).

²³ In fact, Perry's contextual analysis was already preempted by Rohde, who devotes a large section of his book to the 'Second Sophistic'.

²⁴ Perry (1967), esp. 57–60; Reardon (1969) 293–4, (1991) 28–30; Morgan (1995) 143–7.

²⁵ Konstan (1994); MacAlister (1996); Toohey (2004).

²⁶ Kerényi (1927); Merkelbach (1962), (1988) (cf., implicitly, Petri (1963)). This view, which has not found general favour, is critiqued and/or nuanced by Turcan (1963); cf. also 1992), Geyer (1977), Stark (1989). See however Beck (2003) and Zeitlin (2008), who explore religious overtones more subtly.

²⁷ Hägg (1983); Holzberg (1995). Similar claims have been made for the 'Jewish novels' of the Hebrew Bible: see e.g. Wills (1995) 3–6.

²⁸ Foucault (1990), followed by Konstan (1994); refinements in Goldhill (1995). This general approach is discussed by Morales (2008). See further below, pp. 159–60.

²⁹ Cooper (1996); Swain (1996) 101–31.

³⁰ John (1987), (2003); Egger (1988), (1994a), (1994b); Liviaballa Furiani (1989); Wiersma (1990); Montague (1992); more circumspectly, Haynes (2003) 1–17.

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- (iii) The third hypothetical context for the romances is the so-called ‘second sophistic’. When this term was (apparently) coined by Philostratus in the third century CE, it referred to a form of epideictic oratory, in which the speaker took on the persona of a figure from myth or history (VS 481, 507).³¹ When modern critics write of the ‘second sophistic’, however, they are usually making grander claims, about a supposed trend towards self-conscious Hellenic revivalism underpinned by the reinvention of links with the prestigious classical past. It was, again, the enormously influential Erwin Rohde who revived the phrase, linked it particularly with a supposed concern with the defence of ‘national-Hellenic’ (*national-hellenisch*) values against supposed eastern infiltration and Roman oppression,³² and located the romance within this supposed movement. Modern criticism tends to downplay the troubling distaste for ‘the East’ that Rohde’s model seems to both identify and endorse, putting the emphasis instead on anti-Romanism (so that the ‘second sophistic’ becomes a postcolonial rather than an anti-Semitic allegory).³³ Against this, others have reinvented the second sophistic as a more playful, ‘postmodernist’ culture, revelling in its secondariness, self-awareness and sophistication. Here too, the romance has been seen as a prime exhibit, for its clever refashioning of traditional themes.³⁴

We need to be careful here, since each of these contexts has its problems. As far as (i) goes, we can certainly point to the ability of romance narrative to go behind the scenes and portray emotions, but this kind of zooming technique is, in fact, as old as Homer. More problematic still is the belief that post-classical culture was mired in alienated ennui: this is little more than a modernist fantasy, and in some cases a teleological attempt to create a crisis for Christianity to resolve. There is no evidence for wide-scale anxiety, or for the collapse of *polis* culture.³⁵ Inscriptions, monuments and literary sources (from Dio Chrysostom to Libanius) testify to the ongoing importance of civic culture, even if political structures were in flux. Conversely, public identity is extremely important to some of the romances, notably those of Chariton and Xenophon. The romances certainly contain expressions of despondency (as we shall see in chapters 5 and 6), but these are directed

³¹ This paragraph in part summarises the critique at Whitmarsh (2005a) 6–9; cf. also (2001a) 42–5.

³² Rohde (1914) 319.

³³ See Bowie (1970) 9–10 on Chariton and Heliodorus; also Anderson (1993) 156–70; Whitmarsh (2001a) 78–87.

³⁴ See esp. Goldhill (1995), with ix on the second sophistic (and xi on their ‘wit, verve and outrageousness’); also, less directly, Morgan (1995) 142–3.

³⁵ Swain (1996) 106 effectively critiques the ‘anxiety school’.

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against fortune and malign gods rather than faceless world empires; and, what is more, they are almost always proven to be misguided. The romances do not demonstrate a shift from public to private identities, for no such shift had occurred. Instead, we should be focusing upon the question of how individual romances structure the relationship of private to public.

Explanation (ii) – proposing a rise in conjugal ideology – is more helpful, since we can certainly point to an increased emphasis upon the representation of the virtues of marriage in a variety of media (epigraphy, literature and philosophy) from the late first century BCE onwards,³⁶ and a growing celebration of self-control, endurance and fidelity shared between Jewish, Christian and Greco-Roman cultures.³⁷ On the other hand, it is once again far too simplistic to speak of a shift from hierarchical to symmetrical models of sexuality. Classical sexual protocols were not exclusively dominated by phallocentrism and power.³⁸ Narratives of reciprocal heterosexuality redeemed in (the re-establishment of) marriage are in the Greek tradition as old as the *Odyssey*, and lie at the heart of Hellenistic new comedy; marital devotion in the face of oppression is the theme of Xenophon's celebrated narrative of Panthea and Abradates;³⁹ ideas of sexual symmetry can be found articulated in classical mime.⁴⁰ Conversely, there is plenty of evidence for asymmetrical pederastic desire in the imperial period.⁴¹ The picture that emerges is of subtle adjustments in a complex system, rather than of a sudden, decisive break.

Explanation (iii), the 'second sophistic', also has its difficulties. There is no doubt that the romances (with the exception of Xenophon's *Anthia and Habrocomes*) are highly sophisticated products of elite, educated Greek culture.⁴² They are also composed in a prose (a hallmark of imperial Greek

³⁶ See van Bremen (1996) on the epigraphic record. Milnor (2005) links the reorientation closely to Augustus; see esp. 239–84 on the centrality of marriage to philosophers such as Musonius Rufus (see also Whitmarsh (2001a) 109–13; Nussbaum (2002)). See also Swain (2007) 146–52 on the intriguing Bryson, who survives only in Arabic translation.

³⁷ The classic statement of this position is Brown (1990a), summarised at (1990b). Perkins (1995) integrates the romances into her study of the ethics of endurance.

³⁸ Davidson (2007) is controversial, but on this point (I think) absolutely right.

³⁹ Xen. *Cyr.* 4.6.11, 5.1.2–18, 6.1.45–51, 6.4.1–11, 7.1.29–32, 7.3.2–16. The importance of this narrative for the romances is well-known: see most recently Capra (2009) on Xenophon. The Panthea story was rewritten (perhaps as a rhetorical novella) in the second century CE by one Celer (Philostr. *VS* 524).

⁴⁰ Xen. *Symp.* 9.6: 'the boy and the girl are kissed by each other' (τὸν παῖδα καὶ τὴν παῖδα ὑπ' ἀλλήλων φιλεῖσθαι).

⁴¹ Below, p. 160.

⁴² On the evidence for elite readership, see S.A. Stephens (1994); also Bowie (1994). Cavallo (1996), by contrast, argues on papyrological grounds that the reading public for the romances diversified in the second century; but his argument depends heavily upon judgements as to what 'un lettore non abituato a testi di cultura superiore' (35) would expect from a text.

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aesthetics)⁴³ with marked Atticising tendencies (in the cases of Achilles, Longus and Heliodorus), and their intertextual reference points are broadly in line with those of other imperial authors.⁴⁴ But whatever it was (and I am increasingly sceptical that it was anything very much), the ‘second sophistic’ was not a unified, manifesto-led organisation. If the romances share some features with other literary productions of the era, it does not follow that they are entirely of a piece with them. We should be particularly careful about Rohdean claims that the era was dominated by a stridently defensive Hellenism. The disturbing political implications apart, it posits a wholly implausible uniformity across a huge time and space, in an age long before nationalist mechanisms like print media. I shall argue in the course of this book that Chariton and Xenophon do display a Hellenocentrism of a kind, subtle and complex in Chariton’s case. Achilles Tatius and Longus, however, configure identity very differently. Iamblichus and Heliodorus, finally, offer direct challenges to the Hellenocentric model.⁴⁵

What is crucial is to get away from the paradigm shift model. Relationships between historical processes and the invention of cultural forms are, as a rule, complex and multiform. In some cases we can certainly point to social or political events that impel new genres: for example, the ‘May 4th Movement’ of 1917, which created the conditions for the rise of the vernacular Chinese novel.⁴⁶ More typically, however, literary works are shaped by multiple influences, which may include, alongside social, political and cultural shifts, the conservatising effects of canons and traditions as well as the idiosyncratic creative aspirations of individual authors. Scholars of Greek tragedy, for example, have retreated from the dogma that the genre was entirely shaped by Athenian democracy. There are, of course, democratic resonances in the interplay between named individuals and anonymous collectives, the relativisation of authority, and the emphasis upon the fall of royal households. But sceptics are right to point out that such themes are already found in literature predating Athenian democracy,⁴⁷ and indeed that they are ‘civic’ rather than narrowly democratic.⁴⁸ Democracy may be a necessary cause of the emergence of tragedy, but it is not a sufficient one: a full account would need also to address other genealogies of the genre, for example, in Dionysiac ritual, epic narrative and choral festivals.

⁴³ On the prosiness of imperial Greece, see Whitmarsh (2005c).

⁴⁴ For general overviews see Fusillo (1989) 17–109; Morgan and Harrison (2008) 218–27.

⁴⁵ For Heliodorus’ ‘multiculturalism’ see Bowersock (1994) 29–53; Whitmarsh (1998), (1999); Perkins (1999); below, chapter 3.

⁴⁶ Zhao (2006), esp. 83–6. ⁴⁷ Griffin (1998), esp. 48–9.

⁴⁸ Rhodes (2003), titled ‘Nothing to do with democracy’; also Taplin (1999) on tragedy’s trans-civic portability.