4. THE ANCIENT READERS OF THE GREEK NOVELS

Ewen Bowie

I

As Cleitophon begins to fall passionately in love with Leucippe in Achilles Tatius' novel, he hits on a stratagem for catching glimpses of her in the part of his parental home that had been set aside for her and her mother when they arrived as refugees from Byzantium (1.6.6 cf. 5.1). He takes a book and perambulates the house in such a way that from time to time, facing the doorway behind which Leucippe is to be found, he can raise his eyes from the book over which he is bent and glimpse his beloved. Achilles does not tell us what sort of a book it was, and we are free to suppose that it might be precisely the sort of book that he has written and that we are reading. The uncertainty left by this brief mention of a (presumably) literary text, the only such mention in our extant corpus of Greek novels whether complete, summarised or fragmentary, is an appropriate metaphor for the obscurity attaching to the readership of these works in the ancient Greek world. The issue has been alive since Rohde, and has been much debated since Perry's Sather lectures were published in 1967, particularly over the last decade.¹ Yet although some more evidence has been gathered and arguments and distinctions have been refined, the subject is still one where the best that can be offered is plausible inference and not proof.

The lack of what can reasonably be termed evidence is at the heart of our problem. Hence it is possible for some scholars to hold that the novel developed in the late Hellenistic period precisely as a literature designed for a new category of reader, men and women who were literate but not intellectual, residents of huge Hellenistic cities whose déracinement encouraged them to identify with the often isolated characters in the novels and to find meaning for their own lives in the pattern of their adventures, and for others to hold that the texts were primarily produced for and read by the same social

and intellectual élite who read Plutarch and historians or attended
philosophy lectures. The following discussion will necessarily traverse
ground already much trodden by both these groups (the latter of
which has included me) and the most my reader can hope for is
map with clearer definition of important features, not one in which
The Answer is unambiguously marked.

A definition that must be essayed at the outset is that of the novels
themselves. Are we dealing with a single genre, or should the “ideal”
romances, in which a pair of heterosexual lovers is central and chastity esteemed, be seen as different from a more lubricious form apparently represented by Lollianus’ Φοινικικά and the Iolaus story, and should yet a third type be seen in the 24-book Τὰ ὑπὲρ Θόυλην ἀπίστα of Antonius Diogenes, in which the central couple are brother and sister, not lovers, and extensive and fantastic travel is a more important element than love? In the absence of ancient literary theory we are again denied any demonstrable conclusion. But we may argue that both Lollianus and Antonius Diogenes read more effectively if they are taken to involve some parody of the “ideal” romance, and that any propositions about readership should take account both of generic links and of diversity between individual specimens.

A similar question must be addressed concerning the relation be-
 tween the novels that have been argued to be less ambitious and that in most cases also seem to be earlier (Ninus, Parthenope and Metiochus, Chariton’s Chaereas and Callirhoe, Xenophon’s Anthia and Habrocomes and arguably the supposed Greek original of Apollonius king of Tyre) and those by common consent described as sophistic” (Achilles Tatius’ Leucippe and Cleitophon, Longus’ Daphnis and Chloe and Heliodorus’ Charicleia and Theagenes). Can a conclusion about readership reached for the one group be expected to hold in any degree for the other? Again the sorts of intertextuality with the earlier works that have been detected in the sophistic novels do something to hold the two groups together. At the least the readers of the sophistic novels are, it seems, expected to know what the stereotypical features of the earlier novels were and to admire the adroitness with which the sophistic novelist handles them: such features are the pirates, perhaps even Phoenician pirates, that invade Longus’ pastoral Lesbos, or the sort of story implied as gripping by the responses of Cnemon to Calasiris’ narrative in Heliodorus.²

² Longus 1.28.1 (Τῷριον v, retained by Vieillefond; Πάρριοι f; Πύρραξιον Reeve). For Cnemon as a simple-minded audience, Winkler (1982).