The Myth of the Heroine

For the five Greek and three Latin novels which survive whole, all of the Greek and two of the Latin have young heroines of such outstanding beauty that they have become the subject of discussion by all people. The word heroine is probably too generous for what might better be the female protagonist. There is little that is heroic about these very young women except perhaps in their ability to survive. The passive nature of the female protagonist is almost as disconcerting as that of the male and appears to many modern readers as a defect in the characterization. For many modern readers the success of most forms of classical literature rests on the depth of the characters portrayed: Achilles, Antigone, Clytemnestra, Oedipus, Dido, even Aeneas.¹

Since almost all female protagonists are more or less passive, perhaps it was a tenet of the genre of the ancient novel that they were expected to be passive: the heroine of the Greek novel was never meant to be dominant like Antigone or Clytemnestra. For a partner the female protagonist chooses an equally passive male.²

¹ My problems with the passive nature of the protagonists in the Greek novel might be a fault in my perception. If the ancient Greek novel is infused with the spirit of romantic love, the passivity of the hero and heroine could be natural, as Frye (1976) 88 explains: “With the rise of the romantic ethos heroism comes increasingly to be thought of in terms of suffering, endurance, and patience.” Beye (1982) 71ff. seems to conclude that the ancient novel stands in a long line of works in which romantic love is operative. Rudd (1981) 140-58 picks his way carefully through the minefield of the literary tradition involving romantic love and concludes that while courtly love has no classical precedent, romantic love does. He rejects the premise of C.S. Lewis (1936) 4 that romantic love was known in the West only after the 11th century. For a structural analysis of the passive hero/heroine, cf. Nolting-Hauff (1974) 417-55.

² Egger (1990) 175ff. comments on the passivity of the hero vis-à-vis the heroine and these two vis-à-vis other characters.
The Myth of Person

The passive nature of the heroine and hero of the ancient Greek novels strikes us at first as outside the tradition: it was the Greeks after all who gave the Western world the first and most influential concept of a hero and heroine. At the literary level of the novel, however, the tradition of the hero seems to have changed. As Reardon ([1991] 46) has demonstrated, we do not really know what the ancients thought of the ancient Greek novel, unless their virtual silence indicates disapproval.³ The result is that we do not know how or why this change from aggressive to passive protagonists occurred, nor do we have a clue as to what the ancients made of it, if anything. We are thus left to our own devices.

If it were possible for us to find a modern parallel to the Greek novel and to its passive protagonists, we might be able to come to a better understanding of the nature of this new genre. Even though the ancient Greek novel has only a limited influence on later literature, it seems best not to consider any of those later writers and works suspected of being influenced by the Greek novel, because we would not have an independent judgment but a continuation, a copy, as it were, of the original. Thus we shall want to exclude from consideration as modern parallels those authors like Richardson, Fielding, Sidney, Baudion, Aleman whom Wolff, Turner, or Sandy have identified as writers (probably) influenced by the Greek novelists.⁴ Well known composers of romance like Walter Scott and William Ainsworth prove that all romances have something in common,⁵ but they do not nicely address our special concern of passive protagonists.

This paper is thus not a study of the reception or Nachleben of the ancient Greek novel in modern literature, but an attempt to find another group of novels, quite unrelated to the Greek novels, which shows, however, a number of literary similarities to the Greek novels and also similarities in social institutions which help to give rise to its popularity. In our search for a theoretical basis for an origin of the Greek novel and why the Greek novel is the kind of novel it is and

³ A letter (No. 66) attributed to Philostratus is addressed to a Chariton and claims that no one is interested in Chariton’s work; cf. Schmeling (1974) 160-5.
⁵ Frye (1976).