THE ANCIENT GREEK NOVEL AND ITS HEROINES: A FEMALE PARADOX

BY

S. WIERSMA

In this paper I discuss some aspects of the dominant role played by the heroines in the ancient Greek novels. I try to make clear that from the viewpoint of the audience they probably acted within the bounds of familiar and socially acceptable female behaviour.

First I shall survey the historical background of the ancient Greek novels (I). Next I shortly treat late Hellenistic milieu in comparison with the settings of the novels (II). Finally, I deal with the paradoxical combination of modesty and prominence which is characteristic not only of the actions and behaviour of the heroines in the Greek novels but also of certain public roles upper-class women could play in Hellenistic society (III).

I. The writers of ancient fiction took some trouble to furnish their stories with a touch of reality, and, unlike some of their imitators in Renaissance and baroque European literature, they eschewed philosophical digression. Apparently, they set out to concoct series of events following a ‘natural’ course.

They tried to make their books agreeable pieces of entertainment. Accordingly, they developed a variety of effective tools as, for instance, the subtle play of literary allusion, and the practice of evoking the exotic atmosphere of faraway countries, evoking the thrill of adventure, and other stock devices of narrative. No less effective, however, was the special kind of realism referred to above. They knew about the appeal of balance: the heavy weight of (unavoidable if implicit) ethics is compensated for by lovely and sometimes fruitily presented episodes of happiness and pleasure. Moreover, they make the plots of their works develop at two levels: the heroes have to go through bizarre sufferings and grotesque experiences, but at the same time the scene for their experiences appears to be set in terms of a real human society. We may safely
assume that already the ‘creators’ of prose fiction were anxious not to lose their public’s attention by losing all traces of recognizable social reality.

What do we know about that ‘reality’? We are in possession of some facts about the historical context and social background of the ancient novel. Erwin Rohde, while dating Chariton, still waivered between the fifth and sixth century A.D. Recent, and more systematic, studies of Chariton’s classicism, or even ‘atticism’, are a solid basis to place his work no later than the beginning of the first century B.C. ¹) As Chariton’s romance is probably the first complete surviving one, the structurally very complicated narrative by Heliodorus may be the last. There is some reason to suppose that in his account of a given siege Heliodorus imitated a comparable description in the work of Julian, the Roman emperor, and hence he must have been working in the latter half of the fourth century²). We may conclude that ancient fiction was written and read from as early as the second century B.C. until the end of the fourth A.D. ³).

We have a fair knowledge not only of the period of the ancient novel’s development, but also of the geographical region where this genre came into existence and the area of its distribution. The most convincing picture is given by T. Hägg, who, partly deviating from and partly following Perry’s and Reardon’s views, arrives at the


2) The description of the siege of Syene in Egypt ‘has some striking similarities with Emperor Julian’s description of the siege of Mesopotamian Nisibis in AD 350’ (T. Hägg, op. cit. 59). Of course, these similarities, as Hägg observes himself, are relevant only if the emperor ‘is giving an authentic report of an historical event’. Cf. R. Keydell, Polychronion: Festschrift F. Dölger (Heidelberg 1966), 345-50.