Whitmarsh, T.

*Narrative and Identity in the Ancient Greek Novel. Returning Romance.*
isbn 9780521823913.

In this intellectually challenging book, Whitmarsh sets out to study the ways in which identity (social, sexual and cultural) is both ‘turned’ and ‘re-turned’ in the narratives of the five extant Greek romances. As in his other works, Whitmarsh refuses to see the relationship between literature and history in terms of cause and effect. This book presents a challenge to contextual readings that perceive the Greek romances as the products of cultural shifts. The romances are neither straightforward reflections nor mere epiphenomena of historical realities. They do, however, provide sophisticated means to deal with the complexities of culture and identity. The book is divided into two parts. The first part (pp. 25-108) consists of a diachronic account of the romance form emphasising its flexibility in adapting to sociocultural changes and its resourcefulness in offering multiple models of identity. One of the important aims of part one is to challenge the idea that the romances are a product of a cultural shift from public to private. Convinced that this view is indebted to an anachronistic conception of the self as an autonomous subject, Whitmarsh argues that the Greek romances continued to offer narrative models for relating individuals to their communities, be it the *polis*, the family or the cosmos. Part two (pp. 139-253) examines in more detail three aspects that are largely responsible for the flexibility and ambiguity inherent to narrative models of identity: desire (*pothos*), ending (*telos*) and liminality (*limen*).

In chapter one, Whitmarsh characterises Chariton’s *Callirhoe* and Xenophon’s *Anthia and Habrocomes* as “the most ‘civic’ of the romances” (p. 26). The return narrative of these early romances presents the *polis* as the *conditio sine qua non* for a civilised and happy life. Although Eros disrupts the initial state of social harmony, the consummation of the protagonists’ erotic desire at the end of the narrative simultaneously signifies their reintegration in the community of the *polis*. What happens in between should not be explained in terms of the characters’ psychological development, their acquisition of mature selfhood, but in terms of a ‘passage rite’. After a period of liminality in symbolic space

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1 Although the title speaks of narrative and identity in the ancient Greek ‘novel’, Whitmarsh instead uses ‘romance’ throughout the book. With romance he refers to a subcategory of heterosexual return narratives within the broader category of the novel. The terminology does not imply a difference in quality or value.
outside the Greek homeland the protagonists are reintegrated in their home communities.

Chapter two describes how the urban Hellenocentrism of the first-century romances gives way to other possibilities for relating self to community in later narratives. In the romances of Achilles Tatius and Longus, the polis loses its dominant position and traditional Greek values are decentralised, which provides space for a greater sensitivity to cultural diversity. In Leucippe and Clitophon, the return narrative is more domestic than civic and tends to prefer the rural over the urban. This is even more the case in Daphnis and Chloe where the countryside takes centre stage. Another tendency of the later romances is the increasing awareness of the ‘constructedness’ of narrative and the changeability of identity. In the case of Leucippe and Clitophon, for example, the Phoenician origins of the unnamed primary narrator and the unreliability of Clitophon (a particularly self-interested internal narrator) draw attention to the limitations of narrators and the artificiality of narratives of identity. The fact that in the later romances identities can be transformed is exemplified by the relocation of the marriage from the beginning to the end of the narrative signalling that the protagonists’ journey is more a transition than a return.

In chapter three, Whitmarsh shows how Heliodorus’ Aethiopica reinvents and transforms the romance tradition by denaturalising the paradigms established by earlier romances, most notably those of Xenophon’s Anthia and Habrocomes. Heliodorus’ romance, for example, is not structured alongside the centre-periphery return paradigm of the Odyssey followed by the other romances. The protagonists, instead, are travelling from Greece to Ethiopia, since Homer conceived as the very edge of the world. Typically for Heliodorus, however, there is a twist to this inversion of the established paradigm. Seen from the perspective of Charicleia, who is of Ethiopian origins, the story can in fact be seen as a home-coming narrative. In this way, the reader is led to reflect both on the conventional structure of the romance narrative and on the idea of Greece as the centre of the world.

The fourth chapter, which is the first of the second part of the book, deals with the various ways in which desire motivates the plot of the romances. Desire, for Whitmarsh, functions as ‘the lifeforce’ of the plot (p. 144). It is first generated, then frustrated and in the end consummated. In the civic romances (most notably in Chariton) erotic desire is translated almost entirely into a socialised desire for reintegration in the polis community. In the second-century romance, desire is primarily sexual and marriage more a means to an end. And in Heliodorus, desire again works differently: the protagonists desire lawful marriage as the only possible compromise between erotic needs and moral purity. On the one hand, romances are socially normative: they show