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Achilleus Tatos, Leukippe und Kleitophon. Rhetorik im Dienst der Verführung

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Of the surviving Greek novels, Achilleus Tatos’ Leukippe and Kleitophon is the hardest nut to crack. It is the only one whose story is told by an internal first-person narrator, the protagonist Kleitophon, but his act of narration is introduced by a frame in which another first-person narrator, an anonymous one, relates how he met Kleitophon in Sidon after being shipwrecked and encouraged him to tell his story. However, the frame is not closed at the end of the novel, and the text ends with the conclusion of Kleitophon’s narrative. This elaborate structure introduces multiple interpretative uncertainties. Is Kleitophon to be read as a wholly trustworthy narrator? Is the anonymous first narrator to be read as simply reporting his narrative verbatim, or is he responsible for at least some of the novel’s literary qualities and ironic attitude towards its protagonist? To what extent is the first narrator to be identified with or distanced from the author? Why is Kleitophon at the beginning of the novel alone in Sidon and not happy, when his narrative concludes with an apparently conventional happy-ever-after marriage to Leukippe, his one true love? Within the main story itself, Kleitophon is a problematic romantic protagonist, who defies generic rules by getting into the heroine’s bedroom for some premarital sex (only to be thwarted by her mother), and, after the heroine’s second apparent death, enters into a marriage with Melite, a rich widow of Ephesos, but only consummates that marriage after the miraculous reappearances of both Leukippe and Melite’s first husband, Thersandros, so laying himself open to the double charge of adultery and infidelity. Here again questions are raised as to what sort of narrator Kleitophon is. How far is he to be taken as justifying his conduct contrary to the evidence of the ‘facts’? Is he himself responsible for the ironic way in which the text represents him, or does the irony belong to the frame-narrator? Or to the author? How, in short, are we to make sense of Achilleus Tatos? Or perhaps the point is that the sense is infinitely elusive.
This important new book does not claim to have all the answers, but it has some interesting questions (which is more important), and explores many interesting ways to approach them. Schmid-Dümmler (S-D) does not attempt to analyse the entire novel. Rather, the meat of her analysis consists of two sets of very close readings: firstly of the beginning of the novel (including its title and authorial ascription and the lack of closure of the frame narrative at the end), and secondly of the parallel sequences when Kleitophon uses his powers of rhetoric on Leukippe and later when he is on the receiving end of Melite’s persuasion. The suggestion is that an overarching theme of erotic rhetoric connects these two sections (in the service of narrative of love, and in the service of seduction), and a relatively short conclusion throws down a gauntlet or two in the direction of an integrative interpretation. However, I think that most users of the book will find the most profit and interest in its exploration and command of detail; and after all the paradigm of scholarship is that big ideas should grow upwards out of an analysis of details rather than be imposed on them from above.

A particularly praiseworthy aspect of S-D’s approach is its respect for the reading-order of the text: the recipient of a text must construct its meaning progressively, integrating details retrospectively but without the benefit of knowing what is still to come. So her analysis kicks off with a discussion of the anonymous first narrator, whose series of *ekphraseis* characterise him as rhetorically aware and as interested in myth and love (*ἐρωτικός*), a key quality which connects him Janus-like to both Kleitophon and the external recipient of the text (who may or may not be the same as the first-narrator’s narratee; these narrative levels are mapped out in elaborate but helpful diagrams). In several ways he presents a congruence with Kleitophon, leading in due course to the interesting suggestion that Kleitophon might, like the first narrator, be in Sidon as the result of a shipwreck survived, an event that would help fill the gap between the end of the novel and its beginning. He is in fact the ideal recipient of Kleitophon’s narrative, and also a cypher of the ideal recipient of Achilleus’ novel, so that the membranes between the multiple narrative layers are oddly permeable, and in effect the recipient is allowed to feel that Kleitophon (or the first narrator’s version of Kleitophon) addresses him directly. This sort of analysis, of course, employs the tools of formalist narratology to describe literary effect in a way that would not have been available to Achilleus.
or his original readers (and indeed to pre-modern readers and scholars). Nevertheless, effects can be experienced regardless of a particular conceptual vocabulary capable of articulating them, and another remarkable feature of S-D’s discussion is her meticulous contextualisation of *Leukippe and Kleitophon* within its own cultural horizons. So she gives us an extended comparison of the opening of the novel with the procedures of the other Greek romances, most profitably Longus’ *Daphnis and Chloe* (but she leaves open the ticklish questions of relative dating and direction of influence, if any). Both novels begin with an anonymous internal narrator viewing an art-work in a space sacred to a deity important in the story, and both involve mediation of the painting into text by a third party, Kleitophon’s role being analogous to (but clearly different from) that of Longus’ exegete; in both cases the frame apparatus serves both to authenticate the story and to distance it from the actual experience of the protagonists, in other words to stress its fictionality. S-D also examines the possible paratextual elements of Achilleus’ novel, including its title (though acknowledging that there was some fluidity about book-titles in general) and the cultural connotations of the author’s name, including possible Egyptian significations of ‘Tatios’ (which an appendix proves to be the true reading against the ‘Statios’ of some witnesses).

Her sensitivity to the multicultural environment of a novelist writing in Greek in Alexandreia (probably) about Sidon during the period of the Second Sophistic is another recurrent feature of the book, particularly in the discussion of the first narrator’s *ekphrasis* of the painting which he is gazing at when accosted by Kleitophon. The first narrator identifies the subject as the abduction of Europe by Zeus in bull-form, but the multivalent iconography allows the recipient of the novel to make connections, as it were behind the narrator’s back, with Astarte (the recipient of the narrator’s thanks-offerings in Sidon), Selene (with a textual clue at 1.4.3), Ariadne, Aphrodite, Isis and Artemis. The last of these goddesses resurfaces with Melite, native of Ephesos whose patron goddess seems to have been a Near Eastern Mother Goddess, never fully assimilated to the Olympian Artemis; her association with bees is possibly behind Melite’s honeyed name. Cumulatively, over the length of the book, S-D builds a reading for control of the protagonists’ story by a syncretistic goddess of many aspects. However, she is clear that these aspects are refracted through Greek perceptions of the Mediterranean deities: Achilleus may have lived in a multicultural
world, but he looked at it through Greek eyes, not as a representative of any non-Hellenic culture.

It is not news that there is something going on between Achilleus and Plato, and particularly that the locus amoenus where the first narrator takes Kleitophon to hear his story is a rewriting of the setting of the Phaedrus. In another strand of her treatment of the frame, S-D explores the Platonic intertextuality at length, with due acknowledgement to Ian Repath’s as yet unpublished PhD thesis. Her argument here partly concerns the unstable reallocation of the Platonic roles of Sokrates and Phaidros, both as teller and recipient of erotic μῦθοι (Achilleus has fun with the idea that even within the fiction Kleitophon’s story is of questionable truth-value), and, implicitly, as ἐραστής and ἐρώμενος, prefiguring the way in which Kleitophon will switch from being ἐραστής of Leukippe to ἐρώμενος of Melite. More speculatively, and here following Karení Mheallaghí’s lead, she excavates a discourse about literacy and orality, etymologically linking the Egyptian possibilities of Tatios’ name (so implicitly a pseudonym?) to that of the god Theuth who appears in the Phaedrus as the inventor of writing (Pl.Phdr.274d); just as Plato problematises Theuth’s invention as a threat to memory and wisdom, so Achilleus seems to call into question the authenticity of the first narrator’s record of Kleitophon’s narrative. A step too far, perhaps, but one in the right direction.

A final subsection of this first part examines the connotations of Sidon as a meeting-place for the novel’s two ego-narrators. The fact that Sidon features as the home of stupid people in a few jokes of the Philogelos leads to the interesting suggestion that the narrators are humorously characterised as σχολαστικοί, the pre-eminent butt of the Philogelos’ jokes. Here again the conclusion seems to be in the right area, although the route to it is problematic, particularly as neither narrator is a native or resident of Sidon. Nevertheless, the σχολαστικός offers an important counter-cultural perspective on the Second Sophistic and is very much at home in Achilleus’ generic subversion. Eventually S-D reaches the obvious conclusion: that in the novel Sidon occupies a liminal position between the narrator’s reality and the world of the fiction.

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1 Some uses of Plato in Achilles Tatius’ Leucippe and Cleitophon, Warwick 2002.
The second half of the book is largely concerned with erotic rhetoric in the narrower sense: the means of persuasion exerted on Leukippe by Kleitophon and on Kleitophon by Melite. Inevitably much of the argumentation involves stylistic analysis and identification of rhetorical devices, and equally inevitably this leads S-D to extensive paraphrase of the passages in question, particularly the series of speeches when Melite attempts to persuade Kleitophon to consummate their marriage during the voyage from Alexandreia to Ephesos, and again after the reappearance from the dead of both Leukippe and Thersandros (this time successfully). Despite the danger of simply stating the obvious, this kind of analysis is worth doing and can be illuminating, but perhaps it is done better in a commentary than in a discursive monograph. Frankly I found some of the pages in this half a bit of a slog, but again there is much profit to be had from S-D’s accumulation of well-seen detail. In particular, Platonic intertextuality is documented at length (though much of this is already in Repath’s thesis), and the structural and verbal parallels between the two sequences are exposed to an extent that I, for one, found added considerably to my knowledge and understanding. A section-heading describes this effect as ‘gleiches Skript, andere Rollenverteilung’: in both cases, for instance, Kleitophon finds himself torn between two women (Leukippe and his affianced half-sister Kalligone, and Melite and Leukippe), describing the beauty of Leukippe and Melite respectively in similarly horticultural terms, acting on advice from friends and fleeing from parental difficulties with a view to marriage (though the flight from Tyre follows Kleitophon’s seduction of Leukippe, whereas the flight to Ephesos serves as context and prelude to Melite’s wooing of Kleitophon).

Melite plays a generic role as ‘the other woman’, but is far more than a simple love-rival. S-D explores her connotations at length, including the honeyed persuasion hinted at by her name, her relation to Ephesian Artemis, and her status as widow of Ephesos in a detailed comparison with the story known from Petronius and Phaedrus. It occurs to me that perhaps Melite’s name is partly chosen for its assonance with Miletos and hence as a signal that this part of the novel, with its anti-romantic ethos, draws on the tradition of Milesian tales. In any case, S-D makes a convincing case that Melite can be read as the protagonist of a second romance that begins halfway thorough the novel, in which she has the active role and the male Kleitophon the willing passive. In the last analysis, her role is analogous to that of Lykainion in Daphnis and
Chloe, who educates Daphnis in the mechanics of sexual intercourse: both women find a sort of satisfaction for and healing of their own desires; both women act as instruments of the novels’ presiding female deities, and at the same time prepare the hero for matrimonial sex with a virgin bride; it is through Melite that Kleitophon graduates from bought sex with sex-workers to the possibility of an adult loving and permanent relationship. But is Melite pregnant by Kleitophon at the end of the novel? Has Leukippe found out?

I like this book a lot, but it is not an easy read, and it is difficult to summarise. Its origins in a doctoral dissertation show in its occasional tendency to labour its points, and its super-conscientious engagement with the secondary bibliography, even when there is little gain in doing so. Readers will need to have the text of Achilleus open on their desks. It is conceptually sophisticated in its application of narratological theory, but also sensitive to textual nuance and cultural context. I particularly like its determination not to read against the grain of the text, but to discover the grain and read with it with precision. Anyone working seriously on Achilleus Tatos in future must read and digest.

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