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Ancient Romance

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In the case of ancient romance, the usual difficulties of defining and discussing the literary genre are compounded by the fact that there is no word for it in either Greek or Latin in the classical period (in Byzantine Greek, interestingly, the word for prose fiction was *drama*). There is no discussion of romance as a genre by literary critics or rhetoricians in antiquity; indeed there is very little comment of any kind about romance in ancient writers, either approving or disapproving. Until recently there was very little comment on it by modern classical scholars either; the few surviving Greek and Latin texts included under the umbrella term “romance” were thought to be minor works, of limited literary interest to both ancient and modern readers. In the last 20 years, however, there has been a remarkable surge of interest in ancient romance.

The main focus of this attention has been a group of five Greek prose narratives by Chariton, Xenophon, Achilles Tatius, Longus, and Heliodorus, which are all concerned with love, travel, and adventure, in various combinations. In these five stories, obstacles of various kinds divide the protagonists, but eventually love triumphs: enemies are overcome, ordeals are endured, identities are established, and the young lovers settle down to happy married life (in the complete texts, at least). A number of tantalizing fragments of what seem to be romances predate the five complete romances; though not all conform to the description above, they do all involve some combination of the same basic ingredients, love, travel, and adventure. These three ingredients could also be said to be the main components of the *Odyssey*, which is sometimes described as a romance. Although it is set in the context of epic (the Trojan War), it concerns the travels and tribulations of an individual hero trying to get home to his faithful wife, a hero who is tested not so much for martial prowess and courage as for resourcefulness and marital commitment. The same three themes, love, travel, and adventure, are central to *The Ass*, attributed to an anonymous Greek writer known as Pseudo-Lucian, and its better-known Latin analogue, Apuleius’ *Golden Ass* (both written in the second century AD), precursors of the Bottom subplot in Shakespeare’s

A Midsummer Night's Dream: the hero's interest in magic leads to his accidental transformation into a donkey. These two *Ass* texts have their fair share of vulgarity, but Apuleius ends his story on a higher plane, surprisingly, when his hero becomes a devotee of Isis after being restored to human shape. Lucian's own version of this comic tale is lost (if indeed he did write one), but we do have his fantastic travelogues in the ironically titled *True Story*, described by a recent translator as "an early Baron Munchausen tale" (Reardon 1989: 619); it includes journeys beyond the Pillars of Hercules, to the moon, and into the belly of a whale. Another recounter of fantastic travels is Antonius Diogenes, whose *Wonders Beyond Thule*, supposedly a source for Lucian, survives only in a summary by Photius. Equally fantastic in parts, for all its historical basis, is the *Alexander Romance* (third century AD in its present form); this very popular "biography" of Alexander includes an account of his historical conquests, but also finds room for more bizarre episodes such as the begetting of the hero by an exiled pharaoh disguised as a god, and some close encounters with strange life forms on the frontiers of the known world. It certainly features love, travel, and adventure, but it does not have a happy ending, since Alexander is poisoned and dies young. All these texts are in Greek, apart from Apuleius' *Golden Ass*. There are far fewer Latin texts that can be categorized as romances. A marginal candidate is the scurrilous *Satyricon* of Petronius (probably written under Nero in the first century AD), with its vulgar parvenus and its homoerotic encounters, travel, and shipwreck; it survives only in fragments (including the famous account of the lavish feast given by the freedman Trimalchio), but it could be described as a lowlife romance. A less problematic candidate is the anonymous *Apollonius of Tyre* (*Historia Apollonii regis Tyri*, written in the late fifth or early sixth century); like Alexander, Apollonius is a king who travels a great deal, though in the eastern Mediterranean rather than in fantastic landscapes; but he fights no battles, and his main focus is domestic rather than political. Like the protagonists of the five complete Hellenistic romances, he finds love only to lose it, and reaches the happy ending only after many vicissitudes and journeys.¹

The motifs of separated families, discovery of identity, tests and ordeals, travels and adventures are common in classical stories of mythological and legendary heroes, yet such narratives are not described by critics as romances. The term is often applied to Shakespeare's late plays, but no one would use it for plays by Sophocles or Euripides. In fact, classicists tend not to use the term *romance* very much at all nowadays; they prefer *novel* or, if they wish to be more inclusive, *fiction*. The ancient romance/novel is a very fashionable area of scholarly activity at present, but it encompasses a range of texts which might seem surprising to non-specialists. In the Middle Ages the term *roman* could be used of a life of Christ, as well as of a chivalric adventure story. Classicists today often include in their discussion of romance/novel/ fiction some early Christian writings (second to third century) about the adventures of the early apostles and evangelists, stories which share a number of motifs and themes with the secular romances. One example is the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, in which the young virgin Thecla falls in love (in a chaste, spiritual sense) with Paul and follows him through a

series of adventures, repeatedly escaping attempts to martyr her, until the happy ending, which consists of her acceptance as a missionary. Another is the *Acts of Andrew*, in which Andrew not only converts many pagans but also rescues Matthias from the clutches of cannibals, and performs other heroic tasks, such as disarming robbers and killing a monstrous serpent, before going willingly to his death as a martyr. A third is the *Clementine Recognitions*, in which Clement is reunited with all the members of his long-separated family through the agency of St. Peter, who also converts Clement's pagan father. It seems very likely that early Christian writers used for their own purposes the secular narrative themes and structures popular at the time (perhaps in oral rather than written tradition): love at first sight, travel and shipwreck, separation and reunion. But Christian adventure narratives may also have contributed to secular romances. Bowersock (1994: chapter 5) has remarked on the popularity of the theme of apparent death (*Scheintod*) followed by apparent resurrection in the ancient romances, and speculates that these secular narratives were influenced by the death and resurrection of Jesus in the Gospel stories. He writes of the *Clementine Recognitions* that they "represent the appropriation, probably the inevitable appropriation, of a pagan and popular genre that itself owed so much to the miraculous narratives, both oral and written, of the early Christians" (Bowersock 1994: 141). He suggests a new name for this fusion of secular and religious narrative modes:

The stories of Jesus inspired the polytheists to create a wholly new genre that we might call romantic scripture. And it became so popular that the Christians, in turn, borrowed it back again – in the *Clementine Recognitions* and in the massive production of saints' lives. (Bowersock 1994: 143)

In view of such arguments, *The Secular Scripture* seems a particularly apt title for Northrop Frye's wide-ranging discussion of romance from antiquity to the present day. He does not spend a lot of time on ancient romance, but does note that "with the rise of the romantic ethos, heroism came increasingly to be thought of in terms of suffering, endurance and patience . . . This is also the ethos of the Christian myth" (Frye 1976: 88). He argues that this emphasis on suffering accounts at least in part for the prominence of heroines in romance.

Other marginal texts included in modern discussions of ancient romance are pseudo-histories and biographies, such as Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, a biography of the Persian king Cyrus the Great (fourth century BC); the *Life of Aesop* (the earliest fragments date from the second or third century AD); and Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* (third century AD). Also on the margins of romance are the supposedly eyewitness reports of the Trojan War by Dictys and Dares (actually produced in the late classical period); and Jewish novellas such as *Joseph and Aseneth* (possibly first century BC). It is impossible to include all such variations on romance in a short survey, so I shall discuss briefly the five complete Hellenistic romances, and then concentrate on the two narratives that were very well known in western Europe during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the *Alexander Romance* and *Apollonius of Tyre*.

The Hellenistic Romances

The five complete Greek romances are Chariton's *Chaereas and Callirhoe* (first century BC/AD); Xenophon's *Ephesian Tale* (second century AD); Longus' *Daphnis and Chloë* (later second century AD); Achilles Tatius' *Leucippe and Cleitophon* (second century AD); and Heliodorus' *Ethiopian Tale*, or *Ethiopica* (third to fourth century AD). A number of narratives also categorized by critics as romances are known only from fragments of manuscript or papyrus, or from summaries in ancient authors.² The most important of these fragments are the anonymous *Ninus*, which shows the king as a young man in love with his cousin (not named, but possibly Semiramis); Iamblichus' *Babylonian Tale*, apparently a story of separated lovers; Lollianus' *Phoenician Story*, two scenes of sex and violence which suggest that the original was a picaresque lowlife adventure perhaps comparable to the *Satyricon*; the *Iolaus*, also apparently a lowlife story told in both verse and prose, like the *Satyricon*; the *Sesonchosis*, about an Egyptian ruler; and *Metiochus and Parthenope*, a love story set in the court of the historical tyrant Polycrates of Samos. It is striking that some of these fragments seem to be about "historical" characters and events, as well as about love. This suggests that the five complete romances, which tend to focus on middle-class protagonists with no political connections, may not be especially representative of the genre – or perhaps that we need to change our definition.

The romances do not include mythological characters; they are realistic and everyday in their characters and setting (though not of course in the series of vicissitudes endured by the lovers, the startling coincidences and sensational crises). Some critics have been brave enough to offer broad definitions or rubrics for the analysis of the ancient romances. In his seminal study, Perry gave this definition:

An extended narrative published apart by itself which related – primarily or wholly for the sake of entertainment or spiritual edification, and for its own sake as a story, rather than for the purpose of instruction in history, science, or philosophical theory – the adventures or experiences of one or more individuals in their private capacities and from the viewpoint of their private interests and emotions. (Perry 1967: 44–5)

Winkler (1994: 28) is much more succinct and focuses on the love story: "The entire form of the Greek romance can be considered an elaboration of the period between initial desire and final consummation" (see also Bakhtin 1981: 90). Frye (1976: 24) makes a similar claim for romance in general. Of course, this is to restrict the term *romance* to stories of star-crossed lovers, and the happy ending to sex and marriage. Not all the Greek romances fit this model. For example, in what seems to be the earliest complete romance, Chariton's *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, the lovers marry at the beginning of the story.

Chaereas and Callirhoe, beautiful young people living in Syracuse, fall in love at first sight, and marry in spite of opposition from their families. Jealous enemies cause

Chaereas to doubt Callirhoe's fidelity. He kicks her, and she appears to die. When she recovers consciousness in her tomb, she is discovered by a tomb-robber and a pirate, who carry her off to Ionia and sell her as a slave. Her new master Dionysius falls in love with her and marries her; she is pregnant by Chaereas, but intends to persuade Dionysius that the child is his. Meanwhile Chaereas has found the open grave, and is searching everywhere for Callirhoe. Through the plotting of Dionysius' devoted steward, Chaereas is captured and sold into slavery, but still seeks his wife. Eventually the two husbands appear before the King of Persia to claim Callirhoe, but the King has to leave for war in Egypt, and takes Callirhoe with him. Chaereas and Dionysius both perform great feats in the hope of winning Callirhoe. Eventually Aphrodite decides to reunite the lovers, and brings about a recognition scene. The protagonists return to Syracuse and tell their story.

This is a fairly standard romance plot, though each of the five surviving Greek texts has some distinctive features. The *Ethiopica* begins in the middle of the heroine's adventures, and thus includes many accounts by various characters of earlier incidents; the happy ending involves revelations about her parentage and her return to claim the crown of Ethiopia. *Daphnis and Chloe* also involves revelations about the true identities of the lovers, but its most unusual feature is that the young protagonists do not travel more than a few miles for their adventures; it is set in the countryside, and the naïve protagonists remain extremely innocent, and extremely static, for most of the narrative. Daphnis has to be sexually initiated by an older woman, and after their wedding they continue to live a simple life in the country. The story does contain many of the usual romance motifs – pirates, foundlings, and a final recognition scene – but as Hägg comments (1983: 36), “the gradual awakening of love in two children of nature is the main theme, in contrast to the ‘love at first sight’ motif in the earlier novels.”

One important trait of all these five romances is the prominence of female characters (see Wiersma 1990). Usually they share the limelight with their lovers, but in Heliiodorus' *Ethiopica* Chariclea is clearly the central character. She is the daughter and heir of Ethiopian royalty, exposed at birth because of her white skin. She and her beloved Theagenes are repeatedly threatened, separated, and tested by a series of ordeals and adventures before the story ends happily, not just with her marriage but also with her discovery of her true parentage and identity and her return to her proper royal status in Ethiopia. Thus the romance has a political dimension, though this is not its main focus. In the other romances there is a more equal balance between the lovers in their adventures. In the works of Achilles Tatius, Chaereas, and Xenophon, the protagonists travel separately around the Mediterranean, enduring shipwrecks, pirates, brothels, slavery, amorous employers, unjust accusations, false deaths, and other ordeals before being reunited and reinstated in their original home.

Ordeals are important: in his discussion of these romances, Bakhtin uses the term *Priifungsroman*, or “novel of ordeal” (Bakhtin 1981: 100). He discusses them in the context of his theory of the chronotope, “the intense connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (Bakhtin 1981: 84), and points out that all the adventures in the ancient romances are extra-temporal in

that they have no lasting effect on the protagonists: the ordeals leave no psychic trace (Bakhtin 1981: 90). He stresses the significance of chance and coincidence in the plots: the protagonists never take the initiative, but simply respond to, or endure, whatever happens to them, until the happy ending when they return to normal domestic life. He also stresses, as do other critics, the focus on the individual rather than the state or society: "Social and political events gain meaning in the novel only thanks to their connection with private life" (Bakhtin 1981: 109; see also Perry 1967: 44–5, quoted above). This focus on private life has much to do with the time when they were composed.

The dating of most of the romances is highly problematic; only a very few can be reliably attributed to a named author, and even then the identity of these authors is not always certain. It used to be thought that the romances were the product of the period of Greek cultural revival known as the Second Sophistic, in the second and early third centuries AD (see Hägg 1983: 104–8). But Chariton is now believed to have been writing much earlier, at the end of the Hellenistic period (330–30 BC) or perhaps in the first century AD, and some of the recently discovered papyrus fragments are also early; the *Ninus*, for instance, was written down between 100 BC and 100 AD. Various critics have considered the literary and social factors that contributed to the development of romance in the late Hellenistic period, a time when literary tastes and trends were going through some significant changes. In the political sphere as well as the literary one, the old order was changing. The city-state, which made so many demands on its citizens and dominated their imaginations, was giving way to great empires, in which individuals had very restricted roles and responsibilities. Perry comments (1967: 7):

The age of Greek romance was similar to that of the modern novel in the centering of thought and feeling about the private concerns of the individual man apart from society, and the tendency to look outward in a spirit of wonder upon the endless varieties of nature and human experience, rather than inward to the nature of man in his more universal or more heroic aspects.

Reardon (1989: 7) makes a similar point: "The novel is a reflection of their personal experience, as the older forms of tragedy and Old Comedy had been a reflection of their civic experience." In Athens Old Comedy, with its concern for the safety and prosperity of the city-state, gave way to New Comedy, with its emphasis on individual lovers and their families. Hellenistic poetry focused heavily on love; the *Love Romances* or *Erotica pathemata* of Parthenius (first century BC) are prose summaries of verse and prose love stories featuring the vicissitudes of young lovers much like the protagonists of the romances, though they tend to have tragic endings (Hägg 1983: 122). New Comedy shares many motifs with the romances: problems of identity, the removal of obstacles separating lovers, recognition scenes and family reunions (see Trenkner 1958: many of these plays might be seen as the equivalent of the final episodes in the romances, when the lovers resolve all their problems, return home, and are recognized by or reunited

with their families). Frye argues that there is a general tendency in literary history for romance to come to the fore when the major genres can no longer be reworked and improved: “the conventions wear out, and literature enters a transitional phase when some of the burden of the past is thrown off and popular literature, with romance at its center, comes again into the foreground” (Frye 1976: 29). One of his examples is the Greek romances; another is Gothic romance in late eighteenth-century Britain.

Romance has often been sneered at as an unsophisticated genre. It used to be said rather dismissively that the Greek romances were intended for a female readership, but that is no longer the accepted view. It has been pointed out that the five complete romances show great interest in literature and rhetoric, with many philosophical and literary allusions, and sophisticated techniques such as *ekphrasis* (elaborate description of a work of art).³ When the romances were rediscovered in the Renaissance, they certainly found favor with sophisticated writers and readers (see Hägg 1983: chapter 8). Shakespeare assumed that some of his audience would recognize a reference to a moment of crisis for the heroine of the *Ethiopica* when he made Orsino contemplate killing his beloved Cesario/Viola: “Why should I not, had I the heart to do it, / Like to th’Egyptian thief at point of death, / Kill what I love?” (*Twelfth Night*, V.i.115–17). Racine loved the *Ethiopica* so much that after the sacristan at his Jansenist school had confiscated and burned two copies, he obtained a third and learned it off by heart before dutifully relinquishing it (Hägg 1983: 205–6).

Frye argues (1976: 23) that romance is “a form generally disapproved of in most ages by the guardians of taste and learning”; he mentions the legend that Heliodorus was a Christian bishop who was forced to choose between his bishopric and his writing, and chose the latter (107). It is suggestive that much of the action in the romances takes place in the eastern Mediterranean, where some of its authors lived. Winkler (1994: 35) sees romance as fundamentally un-Greek:

The narrative pattern of romance (as I have defined it) is a resident alien in Greek culture, a literary form born in and (presumably) appropriate to the social forms of a Near Eastern culture, and which has been Hellenized in the wake of Alexander’s conquests.

He draws attention to the fact that earlier Greek writers are not interested in sex and marriage, “*eros* leading to *gamos*,” but rather in *eros* as a dangerous and destructive force (Winkler 1994: 35). In the romances, however, as in New Comedy, love conquers all. It is not destructive in any significant way; many minor characters die in the course of the narratives, but this is not tragic or disturbing, and there is no doubt about the desirability of the lovers’ final reunion.⁴

The *Alexander Romance*

The definition of romance proposed by Winkler and others, an account of the events between the protagonists’ first feelings of desire and their satisfaction in marriage (or

reunion), may be appropriate for the five Hellenistic romances, but it does not work well for other classical narratives categorized today as romances, including the very popular *Alexander Romance*. There is nothing fictional about Alexander the Great, but within a few years of his death his history was being turned into a romance which proved so popular that versions of it survive not only in Greek and Latin and in all the European vernacular languages, but also in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Malay, Ethiopian, and even Mongolian. This is the *Alexander Romance* of Pseudo-Callisthenes, so called because in the Middle Ages it was incorrectly attributed to Alexander's physician Callisthenes. In fact it is not the work of any single author, but a hybrid of history and legend which accumulated over many centuries; there are three main versions, which have produced hundreds of descendants (see Cary 1956; Stoneman 1991). Alexander died in 323 BC. The *Ur*-romance was probably begun soon after his death, in the third century BC, though the earliest surviving manuscript (written in Greek) dates from the third century AD; it was translated into Latin by Julius Valerius in the late third or early fourth century. The title *Alexander Romance* is a modern one, of course.

Nectanebus, Pharaoh of Egypt, flees his country before it falls to Persian invaders. He comes to Macedonia and falls in love with Queen Olympias. He tells her that the god Ammon wishes to sleep with her, and then visits her himself disguised as the god; Alexander is the result. Later Nectanebus foresees correctly that he will be murdered by Alexander; as he is dying, he reveals their true relationship. Aristotle becomes Alexander's tutor. The boy tames the man-eating horse Bucephalus. When his father Philip dies, Alexander campaigns in Italy and Greece. He goes to Egypt and founds Alexandria; he is hailed as the reincarnation of Nectanebus. He goes to Asia and begins his campaign against the Persian king Darius; eventually he burns Persepolis and on the death of Darius marries his daughter Roxane. He writes to his mother about his adventures and his attempt to reach the end of the world, during which he encounters many fantastic peoples and animals. Not all his adventures end in success: he is unable to get to the bottom of the sea in his bathysphere; he misses a chance to drink the Water of Life; he is warned to turn back from the Islands of the Blessed, and from his flight into the heavens; the oracle of the Trees of the Sun and the Moon foretells his imminent death. He also has some successes, however (often when he is in disguise): he rescues Candaules' wife from her abductors, and outwits the clever queen Candace; he is accepted by the Amazons as their overlord; he visits the City of the Sun and the magnificent palace of Cyrus. In India he meets the Brahmins, naked philosophers with whom he discourses, and he describes this visit in a letter to his tutor Aristotle. He then returns to Macedonia, where he is poisoned through the machinations of the regent Antipater, and dies.

Here the historical achievements of Alexander, extraordinary enough in themselves, are embellished with motifs taken from myth and legend. The first is the story of his clandestine conception, a familiar motif in legends of heroes; it is reminiscent of the story of Merlin's part in Arthur's conception, and also of the story of Christ's birth.

Clearly the insertion into the Alexander story of Nectanebus, the last Pharaoh of Egypt, represents the Egyptian desire to be connected to the story of the great conqueror, and to extend his Egyptian connections beyond the founding of Alexandria. But, as many critics have pointed out, the *Alexander Romance* in the form in which it has come down to us cannot be pure Egyptian propaganda, since Nectanebus is presented as a trickster rather than a noble hero. He dies an ignominious death in a ditch, pushed in by his own son; this is a far cry from the tragic fate of Laius and Oedipus.

The descriptions of the wonders encountered by Alexander in the East draw on the vogue for fantastic travelers' tales (for instance Lucian's *A True Story* and Antonius Diogenes' *Wonders Beyond Thule*). The account of the Brahmans would fit that category too, but it can also be linked to the vogue for histories of holy men or aretalogies popular in the imperial period. It is striking that in his fantastic travels Alexander does not achieve his goal of reaching the end of the world. Again and again he is advised to turn back, and is told that his goal is inappropriate. In the Middle Ages he was often used in exemplary literature as an example of overweening pride or *hubris*, and this tendency is already visible in the *Alexander Romance*. In the Land of Darkness, two birds with human faces deter him:

“Why, Alexander, do you approach a land which is God's alone? Turn back, wretch, turn back; it is not for you to tread the Islands of the Blessed. Turn back, O man, tread the land that has been given to you and do not lay up trouble for yourself.” (II. 40; Stoneman 1991: 121)

When he is carried up into the sky by huge carrion-eating birds, a flying man warns him: “O Alexander, you have not yet secured the whole earth, and are you now exploring the heavens? Return to earth as fast as is possible, or you will become food for these birds” (II. 41; Stoneman 1991: 123). The triumphs are balanced by the failures, and of course the whole story ends bleakly, with Alexander's betrayal and murder.

The abrupt shifts of both content and style that characterize the *Alexander Romance* are likely to strike the modern reader as peculiar and not altogether successful. One chapter is plain narrative, giving historically attested accounts of Alexander's journeys and military practices; but the next may be a rhetorically elaborate speech, or a letter reporting on his travels among fabulous peoples of the kind represented on medieval world maps. Realistic and practical details of warfare are juxtaposed with fantastic accounts of exotic peoples and customs. Clearly this mish-mash found favor, since the text in its various recensions was disseminated so widely. Of course, many classical histories contain episodes which strike modern readers as pure romance – for instance, that of Herodotus; but the proportion of history to romance in these works tends to be rather different. Paradoxically, some of the elements in the *Alexander* which seem most characteristic of romance are historically attested, for instance, Alexander's adoption of various disguises. Whether or not the exotic stories of Alexander's adventures had any

basis in truth, we know that they were very popular: Strabo, writing in the first century AD, reports that "All who wrote about Alexander preferred the marvellous to the true" (2.1.9; Stoneman 1991: 9). Stoneman characterizes the *Alexander Romance* as "history becoming saga before our very eyes," a process familiar in more recent times too (1994: 120 and 118). But he sees it as more than just entertainment:

The *Alexander Romance* is a text which uses the freedom of fiction to explore more fully, through philosophical and psychological means, the quality of a particular historical epoch. Like *War and Peace* or *Waverley* it adds to history in order to explain history.

This may be true, but it is also the case that Alexander, like many heroes, had become a magnetic figure who attracted many stories of very different kinds, and of whom almost anything could be believed. It is striking that the readership assumed by the romance as we know it was apparently equally happy to read about battle formations and philosophers, Amazons and underwater exploration.

Various versions of the *Alexander Romance* were known in the Middle Ages (as were some other classical accounts of his life), and he was a very popular literary figure (see Cary 1957). Some writers simply related his deeds and adventures, interspersing more or less fantastic material with reliable history; his letter describing the Brahmins was often circulated separately. But other writers, influenced by the Stoics and by Christian polemicists such as Orosius, were more hostile:

Alexander was either fundamentally weak or fundamentally bad, and his continued prosperity, ascribed not to his own ability but to Fortune, encouraged his inherent weakness to yield to vicious influences, or his inherent wickedness to worsen as his power increased. (Cary 1957: 80)

It is instructive to compare the treatment of Alexander and Arthur. Arthur's mysterious and somewhat dubious birth story may well have been borrowed from that of Alexander. Both were raised to the throne when quite young, and both distinguished themselves early on by conquest. Both were included in the late medieval list of the Nine Worthies (three classical heroes, three biblical, and three medieval). Both stabilized and then enlarged their realms through war, and appeared unbeatable. Both died through treachery, before their time. But there the resemblance ends. In medieval romance Arthur is largely eclipsed by the knights of his Round Table, and especially by Lancelot. He rarely has adventures himself, or love affairs, and his final war against Rome ends in disaster. Alexander, however, is always the dominant character in his adventures; he is never eclipsed or even equaled by a lieutenant. He is constantly traveling, unlike Arthur.⁵ He has no permanent court; and he has a complicated love life, though it is not central to his story. He marries Roxane, daughter of the defeated Persian king Darius, as a political move. Queen Candace becomes an object of his desire in some medieval versions of his story, but in the classical *Alexander Romance* she is merely a resourceful opponent (though she does have

a portrait of him painted before she meets him, which no doubt encouraged medieval writers to develop her as a love interest). Apart from the opening story of Nectanebus' desire for Olympias, conquest and exploration are much more important in the *Alexander Romance* than romantic love. When Alexander meets his unhappy end, he writes a letter to his mother, and in one recension speaks his last words not to his wife but to his horse Bucephalus, which dies of sorrow after killing the treacherous slave who had administered poison to his master (Stoneman 1991: 157).

Apollonius of Tyre

Love is a very important element in the *Apollonius of Tyre* (*Historia Apollonii regis Tyri*), a narrative that may originally have been written in Greek, perhaps in the third century AD, but that survives only in a rather terse Latin form, written in the late fifth or early sixth century (see Archibald 1991, and 2001: 93–101). I have left it until last because, even more than the *Alexander Romance*, it both does and does not conform to expectations of ancient romance. At first glance the plot looks much like those of the five Greek romances, yet there are significant differences in the treatment of the familiar motifs of love, travel and adventure, separated families and recognition scenes.

King Antiochus of Antioch seduces his only daughter, and sets a riddle for all her suitors, killing those who fail. Apollonius of Tyre solves the riddle, detecting the incest, but the king tells him he is wrong, and gives him a 30-day respite. Apollonius flees, pursued by Antiochus' assassin. He is shipwrecked in Cyrene, where he is befriended by the king, whose daughter he marries. Antiochus and his daughter are killed by a thunderbolt, and Apollonius is invited to rule over Antioch. On the way there, Apollonius' wife apparently dies in childbirth and is thrown overboard in a coffin. It arrives at Ephesus, where she is revived by a doctor and lives in the temple of Diana. Apollonius leaves his baby daughter Tarsia with foster parents at Tarsus, and goes off to Egypt in despair. Tarsia grows up to be beautiful and clever. Her jealous foster mother tries to murder her, but in the nick of time she is carried off by pirates and sold to a pimp in Mitylene. She manages to preserve her chastity in the brothel. Apollonius, in despair after being told that his daughter is dead, comes by chance to Mitylene; Tarsia is sent to entertain him. After he answers her riddles they discover their relationship. Tarsia marries the local prince, Athenagoras. In Ephesus Apollonius is reunited with his wife. The villains are punished. Apollonius inherits the throne of Cyrene, and has a son.

This narrative can be read as three separate romance plots combined. One features Apollonius, who loses a kingdom, finds a wife only to lose her as well as his daughter, then eventually regains them both, and ends up with several new kingdoms and a male heir. However, there is a major gap in his story when he goes off to Egypt in despair as a merchant for 15 years (during which Tarsia grows up). Then there are the

stories of his wife and his daughter, who might be seen as two aspects of the standard Hellenistic romance heroine. His wife (unnamed in the earliest Latin versions) represents the motif of the protagonist separated from her beloved through the popular false death motif; but unusually, this is her only adventure. Once revived, she spends 15 years safe in a temple until it is time for the recognition scene.⁶ It is their daughter Tarsia who stars in many of the other conventional romance episodes and undergoes most of the ordeals: she does not know her parents, is forced to leave her home because of a jealous foster mother, is carried off by pirates, and undergoes an ordeal in a brothel before the happy ending. It is Tarsia who revives the suicidal Apollonius, not his wife; but as soon as his daughter is identified, he marries her off without any concern for her own wishes. If there was a love story between Athenagoras and Tarsia in the *Ur*-text, involving passionate desire and obstacles to happiness, no trace of it remains. After the recognition scene with her father, Tarsia never speaks again. In the final scenes the focus is on Apollonius both as king – administering justice, rewarding his loyal helpers, and begetting a male heir – and as husband, inheriting his father-in-law's throne and begetting a son at last. It seems that there is only room for one extended love story in this romance: it is the love of Apollonius and his wife which is more fully explored, but even so this is very muted by the standards of the Greek romances. She falls in love at first sight, but he does not; he seems accepting rather than enthusiastic about his marriage, though after the wedding we are assured that the young couple loved each other devotedly and passionately. They are not faced with the typical challenges of the earlier Greek romances, however: they have no difficulty in remaining chaste, and face no temptations or ordeals before their final reunion. All the vicissitudes are piled onto their daughter Tarsia. And in order for her to grow up, the story has to span more than 15 years, unlike the Greek romances (the *Ethiopica* begins in the middle, when the heroine is already grown up, with flashbacks to the time of her birth).

Like the *Alexander Romance*, the *Apollonius* has some historical roots, though they are much less explicit and much less significant. I have argued elsewhere that one source for the plot may have been the struggles between Antiochus III and the Maccabees (Archibald 1991: 37–44). As in the five Greek romances, all the places that Apollonius visits were real cities (in the eastern Mediterranean); there are no fantastic episodes or travels beyond the bounds of the known world. Apollonius is a king, and by the end of the story he has acquired two new kingdoms (Antioch and Cyrene). It seems striking that the final aspect of the happy ending is the birth of a son, who can put an end to the problems caused by only daughters as heiresses. Yet there is little comment on the qualities of a good ruler, or on political issues; these are much stronger in some later versions of the story, most noticeably in Shakespeare's *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*. Most strikingly, Apollonius is no warrior, and fights no battles; instead, his main characteristic is his learning, which helps him to solve the initial riddle and causes the princess to fall in love with him. Both the female protagonists are very learned too. This is not a feature of other ancient romances, and makes one wonder all the more where this story was produced, and for whom.

Critics have also been very exercised over the opening incest episode, which is shockingly explicit: Antiochus rapes his virgin daughter and leaves her dripping blood on the floor. It has been argued that this scene was tacked onto the *Ur*-romance in order to create a catalyst for the flight and subsequent adventures of Apollonius, but this seems implausible. As many critics have noted, the shadow of incest hangs over the story from beginning to end. All the main male characters have daughters, and their relationships with these daughters are crucial to their moral status. Antiochus rapes his daughter, prevents her marrying, and lives in sin with her till they are struck dead by a thunderbolt from heaven. Arcestrates admires and indulges his clever daughter, and allows her to marry a destitute stranger; the couple is reunited with him at the end just before his death, and he leaves his kingdom to them. Apollonius is separated early from his daughter, and when he meets her again their relationship is unknown to both of them. How will he treat her? He is strangely attracted to the clever girl sent to rouse him from his gloom, and she to him – but the recognition scene occurs before there can be any question of incest, and both are restored to their proper royal status. There is a clearly implied parallel between behavior as a father and behavior as a king; domestic tyranny indicates political tyranny.

Incest seems a dominant theme in the *Apollonius*, yet nothing is made of it at the end. One might have expected a final moral, such as is supplied in later versions of the story. Gower's narrator, the Confessor, explains to the young Amans "Lo thus, mi Sone, myht thou liere / What is to love in good manere, / And what to love in other wise" (*Confessio Amantis*, VIII.2009–11; "Thus, my son, you can learn what it is to love in a good way, and what to love otherwise"). Shakespeare is even clearer at the end of *Pericles* (Epilogue, 1–6):

In Antiochus and his daughter you have heard
Of monstrous lust the due and just reward.
In Pericles, his queen and daughter, seen
Although assail'd with fortune fierce and keen,
Virtue preserv'd from fell destruction's blast,
Led on by heaven, and crown'd with joy at last.

The phrasing here reminds us that Tarsia's ordeal in the brothel is reminiscent of the lives of virgin saints such as Agatha, Agnes, and Theodora, as much as of the vicissitudes of earlier romance heroines. The empire was officially Christian by the time the Latin text was composed: while there are no explicit references to Christianity in the text, apart from a vision of someone dressed like an angel, there may be some influence from hagiography and Christian romance in Tarsia's adventures, and in her characterization as a persecuted virgin.

It is not at all clear who might have constituted the intended audience of the Latin version as we have it. There are some literary allusions clearly aimed at the educated, but overall the style is not nearly as rhetorically polished and learned as that of the

Greek romances, which are all much longer and more leisurely in pace than *Apollonius*. Some strange gaps, inconsistencies, and failures of logic may be explained if it is an epitome of a longer and more complex lost Greek original. It is striking that the Greek romances do not survive in Latin translations, and were forgotten everywhere but in Byzantium until the Renaissance, when they were rediscovered, printed, and translated, and became very popular (see Beaton 1996; Hägg 1983, chapter 8). *Apollonius*, on the other hand, was read and referred to throughout the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance, when it was dramatized by Shakespeare as *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*. Versions of it exist in every European language, often much altered from the Latin original (see Archibald 1991): sometimes the story is made explicitly Christian, sometimes extra classical allusions are added to it; sometimes Apollonius is presented as Job, sometimes he becomes a chivalric hero, fighting both human and supernatural enemies, and showing a much stronger interest in love. It is curious that the most clumsy and undeveloped of the ancient romances should have had a much longer life than its more sophisticated and elaborate Greek predecessors. Was it really the only Latin version of a Greek romance of love and adventure? This seems unlikely, but until the sands of Egypt produce some papyrus fragments of lost Latin romances, we must treat it as a unique specimen.

Conclusion

Is there, or was there, really such a thing as ancient romance? It has become fashionable in modern literary criticism to say that “genres exist if readers think they exist,” or that “genres are essentially literary *institutions*, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public.”⁷ The further back one goes in history, the harder it is to be at all clear about the generic expectations of contemporary readers. There is currently much debate about who read the ancient romances. Does the scarcity of texts, and of allusions to them, indicate that they were not very popular? The Greek papyrus fragments emerging from the sands of Egypt have already changed the critical picture considerably by proving the existence of romances unknown a hundred years ago and pushing back the time-frame for ancient romance, though some of the newcomers survive only in a few pages, and their plots are not easy to discover. They may have been read aloud, though there is no evidence of this practice. Or were they read to pieces, as has been argued for Malory a thousand years later? It may be true, as Reardon says (1989: 12), that “on the whole, the novel made little lasting impression on educated antiquity,” but the novels we know are not the equivalent of Harlequin or Mills and Boon romances today. Certainly the intended audience was expected to catch the sophisticated literary and philosophical allusions, and admire the elaborate rhetoric: this suggests that the target audience was educated and as a consequence largely male. It seems clear, however, that, as Selden has argued (1994: 43), “there is no evidence that before the modern era the range of texts that we have come to call ‘the ancient novel’ was ever thought of together as constituting a

coherent group.” Indeed, modern critical expectations of ancient romance have changed considerably over the last two decades. Ancient romance remains a slippery and controversial topic.

See also: chapter 2, *INSULAR BEGINNINGS*; chapter 3, *THE POPULAR ENGLISH METRICAL ROMANCES*; chapter 9, *SHAKESPEARE’S ROMANCES*.

Notes

1. For translations of most of the Greek texts mentioned here, see Reardon 1989, which also includes some romance fragments and *Apollonius of Tyre*. Some variant versions of the *Alexander Romance* are added in Stoneman 1991. For details of editions and translations of both Greek and Latin texts, and critical comment, see recent studies of ancient fiction: Hägg 1983; Bowie and Harrison 1993; Tatum 1994; Morgan and Stoneman 1994; Schmeling 1996; Hock et al. 1998; Hofmann 1999.
2. For translations see Reardon 1989: 783–827. These discoveries have had a major impact on the study of ancient romance, in relation not only to date but also to content and popularity.
3. The romances themselves were sometimes incorporated into works of art: a mosaic in a villa near Antioch shows Ninus, Parthenope, and Metiochus, with their names beside them (see Hägg 1983: 18–23).
4. Cooper (1996: chapter 2) argues that the romances were intended to serve the common good by encouraging young lovers to do their civic duty by getting married and having children.
5. Such was his reputation as a traveler that in one medieval French romance, *Perceforest*, he visits England (Berthelot 1992).
6. The *Apollonius* seems to have been a source for Shakespeare’s *Comedy of Errors*, where the long-lost mother emerges from a temple to bring about the family recognition scene in the final act.
7. The quotations are taken from Todorov and Jameson respectively, cited in Selden 1994: 45 and 47.

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