

All's Well that Ends Well? A Reflection

K.R. BRADLEY

University of Notre Dame & University of Victoria

Slaves and Masters in the Ancient Novel

Edited by Stelios Panayotakis and Michael Paschalis with an Introduction by
Costas Panayotakis

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The Greek and Latin novels of the Roman Imperial age mirror the reality that throughout the Mediterranean world in which their melodramatic stories are set slavery was a ubiquitous institution. Every extant novel takes for granted that the slave is a form of property over which rights of ownership are absolute, and that obedience to the will of the slave-owner is a normative expectation. Slave characters are seen accordingly filling an array of occupations, from the managerial to the menial; they are frequently bought and sold, and they receive rewards for meritorious behaviour and punishments for disobedience (often brutally inflicted). Slavery does not emerge consequently as an enviable condition but as the antithesis of a privileged freedom to which there is no universal claim. It is an unquestioned element of social and economic organization whose associations are entirely shameful.

Given the novels' fanciful plots, however, this summary might be said to overstate real-life circumstances, with authors exaggerating the misfortunes of slavery for the sake of the sensationalism their chosen form of literary creativity demanded. Yet as far as I can tell, it is largely borne out by historical evidence, especially the evidence of Roman law. The capital penalties of crucifixion, exposure to wild beasts, and burning alive once reserved for slaves alone were extended in the Imperial age to free persons of low status convicted of capital

offences, as Peter Garnsey long ago demonstrated.¹ But the fact that the penalties had always previously been primarily associated with and applied to slaves speaks for itself, and casts doubt on any suggestion that Roman law softened over time in its general attitude towards slavery. Costas Panayotakis is fully justified therefore in stating that the conditions in which slaves are represented in the novels are authentically grounded. The point is lucidly made in his Introduction to this collection of studies of slavery in the ancient novel, a subject that appears to have been relatively neglected in the profusion of research on the texts concerned of recent decades.² The volume, elegantly produced, is the outcome of the Seventh Rethymnon International Conference on the Ancient Novel held at the University of Crete in 2013. With contributions from a series of experts in the field it deserves genuine appreciation.

Not surprisingly perhaps, its contents tend to the literary rather than the historical. They illustrate the manner in which individual authors were, or might have been, indebted to literary forebears in portraying slave characters, with putative connections much in evidence to the traditions of comedy, epic, and tragedy. A dazzling literary context is evoked in the case of Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe* to advance the proposition that the prominence of animals in the work, together with the associations they raise, compensates for the novel's small cast of human characters, leading to the speculative question whether slavery is to be associated metaphorically with Rome's domination of the Greek world in the era of the novels' composition.³ In Xenophon's *Ephesiaca*, by way of contrast, slavery *tout court* is seen as a patterning device that to some degree rescues the work from its reputation as the weakest of the principal stories.⁴ There is certainly much to ponder therefore in approaches of this kind, their appeal lying in the ingenuity of interpretation brought to bear. Yet the extent to which ancient readers absorbed in the derring-do of the novels will have been conscious of the connections proffered is an issue unconsidered, and whether what seems visible now affected reading the novels then remains an open question. Would for instance enjoyment of the erotic

¹ Garnsey 1970.

² Nothing, or nothing of substance, appears in such standard works as Perry 1967, Hägg 1983, and Reardon 1991 (written in the shadow of Frye 1976). Whitmarsh ed. 2008 pays the subject no more than passing attention, while Cueva and Byrne 2014 omit it entirely. Doody 1996, in contrast, shows considerable awareness of the realities of ancient slavery and Scarcella 1996 provides systematic details, with conclusions nonetheless I find unacceptable. Ávila Vasconcelos 2009 is an exception in the case of Apuleius, and Owens 2020 is now a breakthrough for the Greek romances (see below n. 36); note also Owens 2021.

³ E. Bowie, "Animals, Slaves and Masters in Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe*" (107-125). For the latter possibility Lavan 2013 is a relevant comparandum.

⁴ S.M. Trzaskoma, "Slavery and Structure in Xenophon of Ephesus" (55-73).

encounter between Lucius and the slave Photis in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* have been enhanced in the moment by realizing that Photis owes more as a literary construct to comedy than to elegy?⁵ Or enjoyment of Heliodorus' *Aethiopica* be deepened by seeing Phaedra as a prototype of Demainete and Arsace in their immoderate pursuit of sexual gratification (aided by the unscrupulous Thisbe and Cybele)?⁶ A demonstration that whatever the novels' allusive content, comparison of non-fictional sources reveals some relationship to historical reality is more in line with Panayotakis' introductory statement.⁷ And certainly from the viewpoint of a student of slavery, the essential question must always be what the novels contribute to its history in antiquity at large: the texts are after all a form of historical evidence.⁸

In this the lead comes from Panayotakis' reference to "the complex two-way relationship which operated between slaves and masters in the ancient novel" (X). In real life the relationship between slave and master was precisely that: a relationship. It is a commonplace of historical writing, however, that penetration of the relationship is difficult, if not impossible, when the near total absence of evidence from those who had experienced slavery makes reliance on prejudicial records from representatives of slave-owning interests overwhelmingly unavoidable.⁹ The recovery of slave psychology is an especially hazardous undertaking. Fiction may, however, help to redress the balance, and in what follows I offer some remarks to this effect from Chariton's *Callirhoe*. My intent in so doing is simply to stress the importance of bringing to the fore the assumptions that underlie the narrative in a manner that could perhaps be applied to the corpus as a whole.

"You are her master, with full power over her, so she must do your will whether she likes it or not. I bought her for a talent." So the rural steward Leonas to his master Dionysius once Callirhoe has become Dionysius' slave (2.6.2). The words make clear on any definition of slavery that formally the chattel slave lay at the total disposal of the slave-owner in a state tantamount to social non-existence.

⁵ R. May, "Apuleius' Photis: Comic Slave or Elegiac Mistress?" (203-220). Why not see the episode as a "normal" instance of mutually enjoyable casual sex for its own sake between a young man on the make and a compliant slave-girl (not his own, as implied [203])?

⁶ J.R. Morgan and I. Repath, "Mistresses and Servant-women and the Slavery and Mastery of Love in Heliodoros" (139-160).

⁷ K. Dowden, "Slavery and Despotism in Iamblichos' *Babyloniaka*" (75-94).

⁸ The number of historical studies cited in the volume is notably minimal. I refer below to various contributions of my own, which lead to a much wider range of bibliography, simply for the sake of convenience. Bradley and Cartledge eds. 2011 is a suitable starting-point.

⁹ For a sample of the kinds of materials available from slaves or former slaves see Bradley 2018.

Which is confirmed in this case by the connection between slavery and death when Callirhoe exclaims on two early occasions, “But if I cannot live as befits my birth, I choose to die as a free woman” (2.5.12), and, “So, if Dionysius merely wants me as a concubine to satisfy his passion, I will hang myself rather than submit to being treated like a slave” (3.1.6).¹⁰ In a comparative context Orlando Patterson famously established an equation between slavery and social death decades ago, and for antiquity there is much to be said in its favour: the choice prisoners defeated in warfare seem often to have had to make between enslavement and execution (or suicide) provides the necessary conflation.¹¹ It does not follow, however, that social death was accompanied by servile passivity, as is sometimes thought. It was impossible to deprive slaves of human reason and human emotion, no matter that they were conceptualized as commodities. Their ability to perform delegated tasks and to feel pain when physically punished or pleasure when rewarded is otherwise inexplicable. Regardless of where they were located along the great range of servile statuses identifiable, slaves were not automata. In fiction, Lucius the servile Ass provides the supreme example of the slave’s retention of the human capacity to think and to feel.¹²

The novelist Chariton, I think, understood this better than some modern historians, because it is on the slave’s ability to think and to feel that the action of *Callirhoe* often depends. In historical literature the attribution of motive to explain the actions of a slave can only be approximated when the historian has no experience of slavery or no reliable sources of information on which to draw. Tacitus’ ascription of alternative motives to the slave who murdered the senator Pedanius Secundus in the reign of Nero is exemplary (*Ann.* 14.42). But in fiction the situation is different. Here the protagonists, status notwithstanding, are all products of the writer’s imagination in a human universe for the creation of which he alone is responsible. Consequently, if the novelist assumes the thoughts and feelings he gives to his fictionally free characters to be plausible, he must assume the same for the thoughts and feelings he gives to the fictionally servile; and if his story is to succeed he must assume further that his readers will share his assumptions. In turn, since the ability to think and to feel leads to the possibility that decisions can be made and actions taken, fiction opens up an avenue for recognizing servile initiative and agency. The proof comes from Callirhoe herself, whose descent

¹⁰ Translations throughout are those of Goold 1995. Note that “slavery” does not appear in the index of Tilg 2010.

¹¹ Patterson 1982; cf. for Rome Buckland 1908: 3: evidence from law. The concept involves loss of identity, as seen in the present collection by A. Billault, “Achilles Tatius, Slaves, and Masters” (95-105) at 101. For definitions of slavery see the options in Lenski 2018: 47-51.

¹² Bradley 2012: 59-78. Vlassopoulos 2021 is an extreme reaction to Patterson.

from freedom to slavery never deprives her of her human reason and sensibility, or of an ability of some sort to act.¹³ From which it follows that the absolute power of the master in the master-slave relationship becomes subject to constraint, given the degree to which the slave is prepared to act in compliance with, or in opposition to, the master's dictates, the choice depending on the extent to which the slave's individual interests are affected. In the simplest terms possible, if there is any legitimacy to the *coup de foudre* that strikes so many men at the sight of Callirhoe, and to the pains and torments and machinations to which love, or desire, then leads, there must be an equal legitimacy to the gamut of emotions experienced and actions consequently carried out by the characters in the story as a whole, no matter what their social standing.

It comes as no surprise therefore that Chariton can create slave characters who are rather more than inanimate ciphers. Plangon, the wife of Dionysius' slave steward Phocas, comes to feel an affection for Callirhoe that, she says, not only supersedes the affection felt for her master, but induces her to relinquish her obligations to him (2.11.6; 2.10.3). In the incident moreover where Dionysius suspects Phocas of knowing of an attempt to seduce Callirhoe, Phocas' reaction is to try to hide the truth, "not so much from fear of Dionysius, but he knew that Callirhoe would ruin him and his family if she found out what had happened" (3.9.6)—a statement that seems an especially convincing representation of the sort of emotional predicament in which a slave, even a domestic steward, might sometimes find himself. At a later stage the Persian eunuch Artaxates is in utter psychological turmoil when his campaign to persuade Callirhoe to submit to the desire of the Great King fails. He feels "anger at Callirhoe, sorrow for himself, and fear of the king" (6.6.1), an amalgam of emotions compounded by fear of the response of both Callirhoe and the king's angry wife Statira (6.6.2). There is no reason within the fictional world of the story at large to doubt the "reality" of such servile experiences. Nor is there any reason to doubt the "reality" of servile initiative as the logical extension of the capacity to think and to feel when decisions are made and actions taken. Free characters sometimes construe certain servile actions, if only potential actions, in what I take to be stereotypical but nonetheless authentic terms. The three slaves who accompany the letter-bearer Hyginus from Caria to Miletus can be suspected at Priene of being fugitives, not so much because of their dissolute behaviour, but because at all times in antiquity slaves commonly ran away in efforts to escape servitude (4.5.4; cf. 2.1.8). They also sometimes engaged in open revolt, and this allows for the brief episode that leads to a

¹³ The same is obviously true of other free persons in the novels who find themselves temporarily enslaved. Callirhoe is a particularly good example, however, if as critics sometimes observe Chariton's work is regarded as a proto-historical novel.

suspenseful moment for the hero Chaereas (in more senses than one), when he narrowly escapes crucifixion following his presumed involvement in an abortive revolt by a chain-gang of sixteen slaves on Mithridates' Carian estate (4.2.5-7). Few details are given, though the episode presumes readers who knew that in real life slaves sometimes rebelled, and that crucifixion might well follow in the event of failure.¹⁴ Other actions, however, are crucial to the plot's development. Despite his rough treatment from Dionysius, the incredibly loyal Phocas takes it upon himself to secure at Miletus the capture of the ship from Syracuse carrying Chaereas and his companion Polycharmus that leads to their enslavement. The decision is his alone, made in the interests of his master, but one requiring organizational skill and bravery (3.7.1-3). His loyalty to Dionysius may stretch the limits of credibility—it does mine at least—but Chariton expected ancient readers to accept it for what it was.

It is Plangon, however, a character whose portrayal is highly developed, who offers the prime example of servile agency in the story, with real narrative consequences.¹⁵ At an early stage Dionysius entrusts Callirhoe to her care, with the specific instruction that she is to promote her master in Callirhoe's eyes as a potential love-object. This is no ordinary command, but one that assumes a genuine, if asymmetrical, relationship between two human subjects in which the nominally absolute master surrenders authority in deference to the superior ability of the chattel on whom he must now depend in order to secure what he cannot attain by himself. Absolute power is not at all absolute, and social anonymity is not synonymous with powerlessness. Indeed, the "naturally shrewd" Plangon understands Dionysius' intent all too well (2.6.5), and she is able to decide for herself whether to accede to, or to deny, her master's will. She emerges as a scheming slave of the first order, and Dionysius can sometimes see through her schemes (2.7.6). But if in the formally inferior position she is his match at every turn, able to engage with him in lengthy conversation and to decide what best suits her own circumstances. In Dionysius' plans to win Callirhoe she is his "only resource," and Dionysius is again compelled to acknowledge his impotent dependence on her by offering to free her if only Plangon will use her powers of persuasion to his advantage (2.7.8). This, I think, is an archetypal example of two-way interaction in which negotiation between master and slave is of the essence, with the pendulum of power swinging back and forth as the drama of the plot unfolds. It continues through the extended section of the story in which a fateful decision has to be made about Callirhoe's unforeseen pregnancy, where Plangon is again the driving force in leading Callirhoe to decide to keep and to protect her child by agreeing to marry

¹⁴ For slave fugitives and revolts, see with references Bradley 2011: 364-373.

¹⁵ See Schmeling 1974: 144-147.

Dionysius and claim him as the child's father (2.8.4-3.1.1). Chariton characterizes this as "servile cunning" (2.10.7), drawing once more on a literary *topos* of servile behaviour that seems more than ironically deployed when Plangon, in bringing Dionysius news he wants to hear, alleges no deception in reporting Callirhoe's words on the matter (3.1.5). Yet she is allowed the full display of human intelligence in formulating a solution to a seemingly insuperable problem, and exercises great influence in securing Callirhoe's acquiescence to the ruse she has devised. In contrast, Dionysius' inability to secure the hand of Callirhoe by himself is palpable throughout the episode, and no matter that Plangon might genuinely be motivated by affection for her charge, she completely dupes her owner. No doubts remain about who has the upper hand in the relationship, and once more it is the fictionality of the plot as a whole that makes Plangon's actions credible. The tensions that her strategy generates are reflected when Callirhoe seeks Plangon's emancipation from her new husband to forestall betrayal, in yet another example of Dionysius' weakness as a theoretically omnipotent slave-owner (3.8.1).

The late counterpart of Plangon in this illustration of constant relational give and take is the eunuch Artaxates, who like Plangon is a figure "naturally shrewd" (6.7.9). His relationship with his master the Persian King of Kings Artaxerxes is again, as it must be, asymmetrical, but the room for manoeuvrability Artaxates enjoys is enormous, and the boldness with which he tries to use his influence is exceptional. He not only recommends a course of action to an Artaxerxes now in turn captivated by Callirhoe; he cajoles, calculates, and misleads him. And in his efforts to convince Callirhoe to submit to his master he is insistent, disrespectful, and threatening, far surpassing the norms of servile comportment expected before a person of loftier status. Altogether he is to my mind a less sympathetic character than Plangon, perhaps because his conniving is so blatantly self-serving: "remember me" are the words with which he closes one address to Callirhoe as he instructs her how to behave towards Dionysius (6.5.7), prompting from Chariton a rare, and noteworthy, authorial intrusion: "Indeed every slave, when he speaks to anyone about his master, has to give prominence to himself as well, in the hope of profiting personally from the conversation" (6.5.5). As for Artaxerxes, all he can do is wait to see if the emasculated slave can produce the result an all-powerful King of Kings cannot. The degree of (blatantly ironic) dependence on slave agency is once more unmistakable.

As I have intimated, critics often rightly point out that Plangon and Artaxates are variations on the type-figure of the cunning slave whose origins can be detected by literary excavation—digging down through Plautus until Greek New

Comedy is reached at the bottom of the trench.¹⁶ No amount of such unearthing, however, will explain why the type of the *servus callidus* came into existence in the first place, or indeed what the implications of the inherently prejudicial term “cunning” might be. For this, the historical conditions of life in slavery have fully to be examined and the implicit psychological demands considered from the servile point of view. (Comparative evidence can help.) The type then emerges as a reflection of the slave’s constant struggle for self-survival that, as Phaedrus was well aware, sometimes included a need for coded communication.¹⁷ Here it is impossible to do more than assert that slaves survived in real life by working within the contours of the slavery system, accommodating themselves to it or finding various ways to resist it, but in either case relying on the practical application of intelligence, a “cunning” that from their perspective did not necessarily carry negative connotations at all but quite the reverse. Since Chaereas’ chain-gang of slaves has been mentioned, however, I will refer to one study of material evidence of particular interest. It concerns a group of sixteen (no less!) small figurines of high Imperial date from military sites in Britain and along the Rhine-Danube frontier that show prisoners chained at the neck, wrists and ankles. They are thought to represent the initial enslavement of prisoners intended for markets in the Roman heartland, with the captives’ heavily leonine heads suggesting connections in the Roman mind between slaves and wild animals.¹⁸ The physical and psychological effects on the prisoners can only be matters of speculation. But they were presumably severe, and the objectification of human flesh involved is in any case undeniable, comparable to that of the slave body represented by the collaring of recaptured runaways. At an early Roman date Lucilius (917-8W) had associated a collared fugitive with a dog.

¹⁶ Represented here by K. De Temmerman, “Noble Slaves: The Rhetoric of Social Status Reversal in the Ancient Greek Novel” (19-35) at 25. See also Billault, “Achilles Tatius” 98 and S. Montiglio, “They Get By Without a Little Help From Their Slaves: The Exceptional Destiny of Chariclea and Theagenes” (127-137) at 127.

¹⁷ J.B. Lefkowitz, “Reading the Aesopic Corpus: Slavery, Freedom, and Storytelling in the *Life of Aesop*” (233-257) connects Phaedrus 3 *Prol.* 33-38 here to the distinction posited between the ways Aesop speaks before and after manumission (254). See Bradley 1987: 150-153 for explication, and for the historical conditions concerned Bradley 1990; 2015a; 2022 (a final statement), with references. Every historian of slavery knows that trickster traditions are staples of slave cultures worldwide, and that they are integrally connected to modes of behaviour motivated by self-interest and resistance. In the case of the Greek romances, the scheming slave is one embodiment of the guile Frye (1976: 65-93) identified as intrinsic to romance as a whole, which needs, however, to be studied in historically specific terms.

¹⁸ Jackson 2005.

It seems to me therefore that there is much in Chariton to support the view of the relationship between slave and master as I have described it elsewhere: “a vibrant contest that was always being fought in the arena of the mind.”¹⁹ Within the interstices of the execution of the orders the master was empowered to issue, the slave always had an opportunity to calculate before action was taken, and to leverage servile power against that of the master. The master of course always retained the advantage. By one means or another he could easily dispose of a disfavoured or unruly slave. But his authority was not as absolute as formality claimed it to be; and while legally all men were free or slaves (Gaius *Inst.* 1.9) ties of mutual dependence were not thereby excluded, so that in everyday life negotiation and adjustment were always cardinal elements of the interplay between the two. From that everyday world the major episodes of *Callirhoe* to which I have referred present in fiction a set of realities with which any ancient reader of the novel will have been familiar. They were conditioned by a host of factors—proximity, trust, experience, gender: variability was inevitable—but the constantly evolving, constantly dynamic character of the relationship itself is clear enough.²⁰ Chariton’s reader, I stress, does not hear in his story the voices of actual slaves. The indirection of the fictional form cannot be forgotten, nor the tradition that servile freedom of speech was impermissible (e.g. Arist. *Rh.* 3.14.10-11; [Longinus] *Sublim.* 44.4-5). For the assumptive reasons I have explained, however, the fictional voices of characters such as Plangon and Artaxates cannot be dismissed as unrealistic. And it is in this sense that Chariton’s story has historical value. To concentrate on literary inheritance alone is to occlude the human capabilities of the enslaved, and to imagine that they accepted uncritically and always the moral standards of those who held them in subjection.

That value is one, moreover, that extends beyond the basic usefulness of disclosing the quotidian character of relations between master and slave as the novel’s readers knew it. Chariton’s story contains many references to the physical brutality that lies at the core of slavery, and while some slaves might hold positions of responsibility or engage in face to face discussions with their owners on an almost equal footing, the threat of violence to which all were constantly exposed is inescapable. If the story assumes loyalty of slave to master as a cultural norm, so too the master’s right to make slaves pay with their bodies for any faults perceived, and even the most compliant slave is unable to evade the vagaries of the master’s temperament. So Leonas finds himself struck and chastised by an

¹⁹ Bradley 2011: 382.

²⁰ The variable of gender is well brought out here by J. Hilton, “The Role of Gender and Sexuality in the Enslavement and Liberation of Female Slaves in the Ancient Greek Romances” (1-18).

angry master (2.3.6), although a high-ranking bailiff responsible for Dionysius' acquisition of Callirhoe, while the ultra-loyal Phocas and Plangon are at one point saved from the threat of death, after another irrational outburst from Dionysius, only through the importunings of Callirhoe herself (2.7.2-7). Phocas later still is put to the test of torture when Dionysius suspects a plot to seduce Callirhoe (3.9.5-7).²¹ Crucifixion, torture by fire, scourging and the rack, consignment to the chain-gang—all are stock features of the narrative. And in Mithridates' argument at the grand trial in Babylon that sex with a slave does not amount to adultery, there is more than a tacit acknowledgement of the female slave's constant exposure to her master's carnal appetite (5.7.3).

True enough, these forms of cruelty are not the preserve of slaves alone. The (literal) freebooter Theron suffers the fate of crucifixion, which I regard as an example of the application of a traditional slave punishment to a person of non-servile status of the kind to which I referred at the outset. But they remain integral to the servile condition regardless, and the truly remarkable fact about them, the fact that cries out for critical attention, is that no form of physical brutality applied to slaves ever warrants any display of authorial protest, outrage, or condemnation. Inferentially, moreover, none is expected from the story's readers. Chariton can play on his readers' sensibilities, contriving a certain suspense when it seems that Chaereas is to die on the cross, so that they breathe a sigh of relief when, in the very nick of time, Polycharmus secures his release, thereby permitting the story to continue in a conventional "and then" mode.²² Yet the crudity, the barbarism, of crucifixion itself is never challenged. Similarly, the reader is alarmed when the aristocratic heroine is abducted and sold into slavery. What will be her fate? What tribulations will she undergo? Will she ever be rescued and restored to her rightful free place in society? But the traffic in human merchandise, the commodification of the human being and the degradation to which it leads, again provokes no critical authorial response and presumes none in the story's immediate reception. Slavery as an institution is never called into question, nor is there any indication that injustice is implicated in the social order. Such blindness to human misery duly seeps into modern scholarship: "The slaves' legal position is certainly bleak, and Chariton has no reason to emphasize it, as it is a well established and traditional matter of fact; in the unobtrusive unfolding of the tale, however, they are the objects (!) of gratitude and mercy which mitigate the harshness of their life."²³

²¹ The compliment Callirhoe pays the free Chaereas of never having struck a slave makes him something of an oddity (1.14.7).

²² Frye 1976: 47.

²³ Scarcella 1996: 234. The notion that a hypothetical continuation of the story of Chariclea and Theagenes could include "the abolition of slavery" (Montiglio, "They Get By" at 136) I consider impossible.

The resolution of the story magnifies the absence of shock or horror I am trying to bring out. Chariton's story demands a happy ending, as specialists in the genre to which it belongs endlessly observe.²⁴ Hero and heroine are blissfully reunited, and with their adventures and misadventures concluded everything returns to normal. As Chariton announces at the beginning of his final instalment: no more piracy, slavery, trials, fighting, suicide, war, captivity; only happiness. All's well that ends well, it seems, with even Dionysius content as he keeps Chaereas' son as his own. What the return to normality means institutionally, however, is a restoration of the social *status quo ante*, in which the privileged remain privileged and lesser mortals continue to know the place to which life has assigned them. Slavery and slave-owning are utterly unaffected. The privileged expect to continue to have their servile domestics and rural workers available as always in the past, with no hint expressed of anxiety about this or of any need for social change or amelioration. Whether everyone in the story is happy with the happy ending is in fact debatable, and a question as far as I can tell never critically asked. Moral simplicity can consequently come to be deemed a characteristic of romance at large.²⁵

For the sake of emphasis, and contrast, I divert at this point to Herman Melville's novella *Benito Cereno*, a story of a failed slave insurrection aboard a Spanish ship transporting among other goods a cargo of human merchandise from the Old World to the New in 1799. The aspect of interest is the subterfuge carried out by the slave leader Sabo when the ship, beleaguered but under rebel control, is boarded by a well-intentioned American sea captain hoping to render assistance as the vessel approaches a small island off the coast of Chile. In order to deceive the well-meaning Amasa Delano, Sabo plays the role of faithful slave to Benito Cereno, the rebel-held ship's nominal captain but who in fact is Sabo's hostage, and through an elaborate ruse involving the collaboration of his fellow slaves, he creates the impression that the ship is fully in Don Cereno's charge. This despite the murderous atrocities that have taken place at sea, and the reality that Cereno's authority has been utterly destroyed. In fear for his life, Don Cereno is forced to lie to Delano about the circumstances of his ship's parlous condition, and while his ambivalent comportment arouses suspicions, the American fails to understand what is truly happening, seeing in Sabo's behaviour only "that affectionate zeal which transmutes into something filial or fraternal acts in themselves but menial; and which has gained for the negro the repute of making the most pleasing body servant in the world; one, too, whom a master need be on no stiffly superior terms with, but may treat with familiar trust; less a servant than a devoted companion."

²⁴ Cf. here De Temmerman "Noble Slaves" 19-20.

²⁵ Frye 1976: 50-53.

Sabo's stratagem is brilliantly carried out. At one point he shaves his "master" in what Amasa Delano takes to be a daily routine of compliant etiquette, with Cereno nonetheless in fear for his life. (It is as if Melville knew Martial's poem [11.58] of the danger represented to his master by a slave barber who might cut his throat unless the slave's request for freedom and cash were immediately met.) The subterfuge fails only when in desperation Don Cereno throws himself into the small vessel taking Delano back to his own ship and the truth is bloodily revealed. Sabo, predictably perhaps, is in the end torturously executed, and as in Chariton's novel order is eventually restored. Yet the tone of Melville's story is completely different because its context is completely different. The work, based on a real incident and by no measure a romance, belongs to the mid 1850s, when issues of abolitionism of a sort that never arose in antiquity were soon to lead in the United States to civil war; and as has often been remarked the fabricated name of Don Cereno's ship, the *San Dominick*, could hardly fail to remind contemporary readers of the revolution in the Caribbean half a century earlier, when Toussaint L'Ouverture instigated a massive slave rebellion on the island of Saint Domingue that led to the creation of the state of Haiti. The subject of C.L.R. James' classic history, the story of the "Black Spartacus" is now retold by Sudhir Hazareesingh with new material bringing to light the great role Toussaint played in writing the constitution of the new state.²⁶

Throughout *Benito Cereno*, however, Sabo and his companions are protagonists who arouse in the reader apprehension, suspicion, and unease of a kind that slave characters in Chariton's novel never elicit. Their actions subvert the established order in a manner that has no classical counterpart, and Sabo is no mere trickster, a latter-day Aesop continually outwitting his master in a war of wills in a world where slavery is incontestable, but a resourceful and inventive architect of a plan to secure his freedom and that of his African followers. Contemporary readers of Chariton might well remember the precedent of the original Spartacus—he was never forgotten—but they did not live in an age of revolution and agitation for human rights where the powers Toussaint left behind of "Man's unconquerable mind" were likely even to be contemplated, let alone adopted.²⁷ Their acceptance of the categorization of slaves as "good" and "bad" or "faithful" and "unfaithful" is evidence of a moral code in which servile behaviour could never be understood in terms other than those imposed from above, and which altogether

²⁶ James 1938; Hazareesingh 2020.

²⁷ William Wordsworth, "To Toussaint L'Ouverture," for the context of which, including Wordsworth's friendship with the abolitionist Thomas Clarkson, see Bate 2020: 232-236. For Spartacus' enduring memory see Schiavone 2011: 113-114, and for the emergence of fear in other classical slavery contexts see Serghidou ed. 2007.

failed to allow that viewed from below the code's definitions might be disputed according to contingency and the motives that inspired action.

The happy ending of *Callirhoe* is matched by the happy endings of all the complete classical novels. In the Greek romances the separated lovers are reunited, while in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* happiness is found in the hero's experience of self-dedication to a salvific goddess. In every case the world returns to what it was before the long sequences of trials and misfortunes recounted began, with any subsequent author free to package the same narrative elements into another inconsequential fairy tale. In every case therefore the novels embody what I take to be a disturbing complaisance in their reaffirmation of the established social order, the historically unchanging character of which can be understood not least by the complementary evidence of Artemidorus' *Oneirocritica*, an important document for social history in the high Imperial age, in which the meaning of dreams, slaves' dreams included, is consistently determined by the dreamers' social status and occupation.²⁸ They imply that readers had no wish to be provoked in any way to think of slavery as a morally contentious issue, and even less as a potential cause of danger. Achilles Tatius might have his Clitophon in anguish when reading of the servile torments endured by his darling Leucippe (5.19); but it does not occur to Clitophon, or to his creator, to question them as inherently inhumane or to think in terms of a system in need of reform. And while readers of Apuleius might well have shared for a moment Lucius' horror at the sight of the miserable mill-workers with whom, as the Ass, he was forced to toil (*Met.* 9.12), Apuleius *ipse* took for granted at his trial in Sabratha that no one could have found objectionable his wife's ownership of chattel slaves on the grand scale (*Apol.* 17; 93.4). Instead, throughout the corpus the brutality of severe physical punishment, either threatened or implemented, remains a consistent feature of slave experience, so that in the final specimen, Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*, there are still to be found grisly details on "the pains of starvation and torture," on shackling and beatings, and an especially graphic description of execution by fire (publicly relished), from which the heroine Chariclea, who had earlier lamented that to become a slave was "a fate worse than any death," is, of course, miraculously saved (5.7; 8.5; 8.9).²⁹

It is in the novels' indifference, therefore, to the enormities and degradations of human suffering, other than in the temporary impact they make on ill-starred aristocrats, that their chief historical importance lies. Unlike Melville's story, they evoke no anxiety about the legitimacy of slavery, but consist with antiquity's wider failure to apply, or even discover, any socially improving doctrine of

²⁸ See Bradley 2015b with references.

²⁹ Scarcella 1996: 268 comments: "in spite of the threats of atrocious punishments, the slaves' condition appears tolerable in Egypt."

significant practical consequence. The happy endings are happy only for elite readers unmindful of, or unbothered by, Epictetus' knowing exclamation, "Every slave desires to be free" (4.1.33), or readers at least untroubled by the *status quo*.³⁰ Nothing is to be found comparable to the counter-pastoralism from a later age of George Crabbe that could produce such lines as, "Where plenty smiles—alas! She smiles for few—/And those who taste not, yet behold her store,/ Are as the slaves that dig the golden ore,—/The wealth around them makes them doubly poor."³¹ A happy ending might sometimes include the award of freedom to such favoured slaves as Lamon and Myrtale in *Daphnis and Chloe*, expunging Lamon's earlier consciousness of his impotence and the couple's fear of the arrival of a master they hardly ever saw (3.31; 4.8); but their good fortune is fortuitously individualistic, not attributable to reformist zeal. Ellen Finkelpearl has to be sure discerned in Apuleius' masterpiece a "social awareness startling in antiquity."³² But if genuine it is a rarity as far as I can judge in the corpus of ancient novels as a whole. Altogether, their depiction of servile capacity notwithstanding, these works are statements of ideological complacency for a collusive readership that reveal above all the vast chasm, far more than chronological, that separates antiquity from the modern world. They do not look to systemic change, their authors perhaps aware of the assimilationist potential that manumission could bring to the ex-slave.³³

It will always be important to refine knowledge of the structure, sources, and aesthetics of the Greek and Roman novels, as do many of the contributors to the present collection. No one, I think, would disagree with the contention that slavery "is for all the novelists a standard way to put a hero or heroine in erotic jeopardy," a means, that is, to create narrative complication and to advance a plot.³⁴ Northrop Frye made clear, however, if only indirectly, that whatever structural elements can be identified across the ages in the form of romance, the specific social conditions and conventions of a given period cannot be disregarded when individual examples are assessed.³⁵ Since in the classical case slavery is one of those

³⁰ Epictetus 4.1.33-37 needs, however, to be read in full for the complications of the material demands of independence that sometimes led to regret (cf. Daphnis' outburst at *Daphnis and Chloe* 4.28). Note relatedly the benefits of slave disguise put forward here by C. Panyotakis, "Slavery and Beauty in Petronius" (181-201).

³¹ See Williams 1973: 87-95.

³² Finkelpearl 2010: 485.

³³ Bradley 2019.

³⁴ Trzaskoma, "Slavery and Structure" 64.

³⁵ He failed, however, to provide details on any case discussed. Cf. similarly Alpers 1996: 324-348, where the reader of a discussion of *Daphnis and Chloe* is never made aware of the servile status of Daphnis and his foster-parents.

conventions, the collection might best be regarded as a vital seed-bed for a much more extensive examination of its multi-faceted subject to follow. Intriguing questions are everywhere raised. Could educated former slaves have found in the fall and rise of Chaereas and Callirhoe behavioural paradigms of therapeutic benefit? Does Trimalchio's banquet reveal the impossibility of ex-slaves ever escaping their servile past? What truth lies behind a statement like that of Heliodorus' Theagenes: "a man subject to a master tends to hate the master to whom he is bound" (7.26)? And what can be gleaned from the pitiful remark in the anonymous *Onos*: "Thus I learnt by experience that a slave should do his duty without waiting for his master's hand" (42.17)?³⁶ A comprehensive investigation is urgently needed, one that combines, and enriches, literary with wide-ranging socio-cultural and historical perspectives. And perhaps not for narrow academic reasons alone. For as the passage I quoted from Melville intimates, certain issues of contemporary public concern are connected to the legacy of New World slavery, and by extension to its Greek and Roman antecedents. Intense investigation accordingly is more appropriate than ever. In such an enterprise, the dynamics of social power the novels display might serve as a starting-point, and the happy endings of their stories be duly exposed to rigorous interrogation.³⁷

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³⁶ W. Owens, "Callirhoe: A Therapeutic Slave Narrative" (37-53). J. Bodel, "Liber esto: Free Speech at the Banquet of Trimalchio" (161-180). De Temmerman, "Noble Slaves" 27. M. Paschalis, "Masters and Slaves in pseudo-Lucian's *Onos* and Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*" (221-232) at 231. Owens' argument is developed in Owens 2020. If, as there temptingly maintained, Xenophon of Ephesus and Chariton were ex-slaves sympathetic to slavery's indignities and wrote with a readership in mind that included former slaves, the problem of the happy ending I have tried to identify becomes more problematical still. It implies a world in which individual self-interest always, and unalterably, took precedence over any notion of a common good.

³⁷ I am deeply indebted to Ellen Finkelpearl for discussing a draft of this essay with me. She is not to be presumed to agree with anything I have said.

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