

W.M. OWENS

The Representation of Slavery in the Greek Novel. Resistance and Appropriation
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Since the publication of Perry's *The Ancient Romances. A Literary-Historical Account of their Origins*,¹ in which the motif of enslavement surfaced only sporadically, slavery as a theme has increasingly become a valued hermeneutic tool in the analysis of ancient novels. The step change was prompted by Bakhtin's remarks on the social polyphony of the novels, while the work of historians such as Hopkins and Bradley, among others, nudged scholarship more widely towards a productive exploration of the issue of slavery in a genre which has often been viewed as primarily foregrounding elite perspectives.² In more recent years, the potential of investigating the dynamics between fictional slaves and slave-owners in depth has been taken to the next level, facilitated by the many asides in which the enslaved protagonists of the novels voice their various takes on oppression and captivity. A patent example of this new interest is the 2013 Rethymnon International Conference on the Ancient Novel, the seventh of its kind (RICAN 7), dedicated entirely to the exploration of the power dynamics between the enslaved and those who exercised the powers of ownership over them. The conference led to the publication of a focussed volume—*Slaves and Masters in the Ancient Novel*, edited by Stelios Panayotakis and Michael Paschalis—that demonstrated lucidly across fourteen chapters the riches that Greek and Roman novels continue to constitute for the exploration of the topic. Among those fourteen chapters, one was devoted to the analysis of Chariton's *Callirhoe*, by William Owens.³ In this

¹ Perry, B.E. 1967. *The Ancient Romances. A Literary-Historical Account of Their Origins*. Berkeley.

² Bakhtin, M.M. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*. Austin: 259-422 (but note that Bakhtin ascribes in fact a rather low level of polyphony to Greek and Roman works of fiction); Hopkins, K. 1993. 'Novel evidence for Roman slavery', *Past & Present* 138: 3-27; Bradley, K. 2000. 'Animalizing the slave: the truth of fiction', *Journal of Roman Studies* 90: 110-25. Note, however, also the absence of any concentrated exploration of slavery as a subject from both Whitmarsh, T. (ed.) 2008. *The Cambridge Companion to the Greek and Roman Novel*. Cambridge and Cueva, E.P. and Byrne, S.N. (eds.) 2014. *A Companion to the Ancient Novel*. Malden and Oxford.

³ Owens, W.M. 2019. 'Callirhoe: a therapeutic slave narrative'. In Panayotakis, S. and Paschalis, M. (eds.) *Slaves and Masters in the Ancient Novel*. Groningen: 37-53.

contribution, Owens made the case for the novel's therapeutic dimension with regard to those among its readers who knew slavery from experience. In particular, to Owens, "Chariton suggests that the right sort of story might serve as a form of therapy, a therapy that itself entailed some pain in the telling, but which, nonetheless, could eclipse the shame of slavery."⁴ In short, Owens suggested a dialectic relationship between the novel itself and the experience of slavery. Owens's intervention opened up a fresh window on the gains we might derive for our understanding of ancient slavery from this genre that goes beyond the excavation of observational insights into the lives of the enslaved. It is, therefore, to be welcomed that Owens has now followed up on his novel take on the five Greek romances in a dedicated monograph, which is the subject of the present review.⁵

In *The Representation of Slavery in the Greek Novel. Resistance and Appropriation*, Owens sets himself the ambitious aim of providing a comprehensive treatment of slavery in the five canonical Greek novels, and does not disappoint. Following his earlier work on the topic, the author argues that slavery lies at the core of the genre of the ancient novel. This would not be a particularly original claim, given that the centrality of slavery in this context has been long acknowledged, constituting a crucial element to enliven the plot, a metaphorical embellishment to address the displacement of the elite in the changing world of the *polis*, and a cryptic means to discuss socio-cultural aspects, including religious initiations. Owens, however, far from deeming reference to slavery a technical, figurative, or allegorical tool, places slavery in the novelistic context by taking into account the social, juridical, and economic realia of this institution, showing how these are an integral part of the literary construction of slavery. Besides opening a window onto the lives of the enslaved, Owens's approach, then, sets the stage for a deeper cross-pollination between literary and historical perspectives in the examination of ancient slavery.

Each chapter is devoted to the discussion of a single novel, with the exception of Chapter 3, which compares the findings from Chapters 1 and 2, concerned respectively with *Ephesiaca* and *Callirhoe*. Before approaching each novel, a helpful summary of their intricate plots is offered, followed by a recapitulation of the traditional appreciation of the texts at hand and their recent reassessments. Owens is rather thorough in acknowledging previous scholarly contributions and keeps clarity and accessibility as priorities throughout his argumentation.

⁴ Owens 2019, 52.

⁵ See also Owens, W.M. 2021. 'Reading Apuleius's *Cupid and Psyche* from the slave's perspective: the tale of Psyche *ancilla*'. In Kamen, D. and Marshall, C.W. (eds.) *Slavery and Sexuality in Classical Antiquity*. Madison: 239-253.

Before exploring the novels in depth, the **Introduction** discusses various methodological matters, helpfully familiarizing non-specialists in slavery studies with some concepts surrounding slave-ownership in both the Greek and the Roman worlds, as well as the generic affiliations of slavery. The theoretical framework of the book is also presented here: the conceptualization of slavery employed throughout is that of social death, famously elaborated by Orlando Patterson.⁶ Owens contends that this approach is especially helpful because Greek novels display a “human perspective of the characters” (p. 5) rather than economic and legal aspects, thereby turning the gaze on the experience of the enslaved and, hence, their experience of social death. Moreover, following William Fitzgerald,⁷ the Greek novels, written by those who claimed ownership rights over other humans, are conceived as a repository of the issues and contradictions arising from the slave–master relationship; the complexities of this power dynamic are exploited and managed through literary invention, giving prominence to the slave-owner’s perspective but also leaving traces of the slaves’ influence on that perspective. Additionally, the book makes use of James Scott’s distinction between public and hidden transcripts to sift through the slave-owners’ discourse, looking for traces of both masterly sympathy and servile subversiveness (so-called).⁸ The chief argument underpinning the book is also revealed in the Introduction: Owens contends that the emphasis on enslavement is peculiar to the Greek novel as a new genre because slavery had a particular significance for its inventors. To make his case, a chronological approach is adopted, focussing on Xenophon’s *Ephesiaca* and Chariton’s *Callirhoe* first. These novels, Owens comments, “subvert the way the elite thought about slaves” (p. 2), demonstrating an interest in this institution *per se* and a critical eye to its cruellest and most unjust aspects; the later novels, on the other hand align progressively more to what has become known as the typical elite view of slavery, which is deprecating or, at best, dismissive, employing the theme of slavery as a means to create suspense and melodrama, or for philosophical and rhetorical display. Biographical aspects account for this difference in attitudes: Xenophon and Chariton wrote their works experimenting with the genre, possibly incorporating their experiences as ex-slaves, and keeping in mind a mixed readership, including people who were freed from slavery just like

⁶ Patterson, O. 1982. *Slavery and Social Death. A Comparative Study*. Cambridge.

⁷ Fitzgerald, W. 2000. *Slavery and the Roman Literary Imagination*. Cambridge and New York.

⁸ Scott, J.C. 1990. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven and London. In using Scott and in claiming that enslaved people actively shape the conditions of their enslavement, Owens’s exposition is reminiscent of the approach of Forsdyke, S. 2020. *Slaves and Slavery in Ancient Greece*. Cambridge, a work which Owens cites profusely.

them.⁹ But, Owens cautions, as freed slaves and slave-owners themselves, Xenophon and Chariton have also assimilated the conceptual framework of the upper class they now belong to; for this reason, these authors' seeming sympathy with the enslaved and their critique of the institution is to be understood as being mediated throughout by more traditional elite views.

Chapters 1, 2, and 3 detail further this bold argument based on *Ephesiaca* and *Callirhoe*. These chapters' undoubted merit is that of clarifying, once and for all, that Xenophon's and Chariton's engagement with slavery is much more complex than hitherto acknowledged. In *Ephesiaca*, explored in **Chapter 1**, Owens identifies a progression into slavery by the two enslaved protagonists Habrocomes and Anthia, through multiple iterations of the same folk-tale motifs. The adventures of the two protagonists follow similar patterns and, in facing them, the couple seem to adopt behaviours which are progressively more unscrupulous and aimed at survival—in other words, more servile. The more pitiless the slave-owners/villains whom the two lovers oppose, the more extreme their reactions are. Intriguingly, when their conduct is not morally immaculate, the third-person narrator jumps in apologetically. Owens sees these explicit interventions as expressions of sympathy for the enslaved, carrying also an open recognition of the injustice and struggles enslaved persons experienced daily.¹⁰ In **Chapter 2**, on Chariton's *Callirhoe*, the same kind of empathic stance is somehow counterintuitively explained as pinpointed at “allusions, silences and inconsistencies” (p. 57). These would form an implicit narrative of slavery, as opposed to an explicit one in which elite values and preconceptions prevail. The chapter captures well Chariton's sophisticated use of contrasting narrative approaches. However, one may raise the objection that the implicit and edulcorated retelling (and re-enacting) of servile misadventures by the hero and the heroine (rich in cuts when inconvenient behaviours and decisions are concerned) might simply be another means to further distance the elite protagonists from their ephemeral experience of slavery, rather than an expression of advocacy for actual slaves. Apart from the tension caused by assuming sympathy from two diametrically opposing attitudes (being vocal about

⁹ The case for a sub-elite, and actually enslaved, audience is made powerfully for Roman comedy in Richlin, A. 2017. *Slave Theater in the Roman Republic. Plautus and Popular Comedy*. Cambridge. An enslaved readership, or in any case the representation of an enslaved perspective, in the context of the cruelty of slavery, has also been proposed for a work that sits roughly halfway chronologically between the two early Greek novels, i.e. Petronius' *Satyricon*; see Roth, U. 2021. ‘Speaking out? Child sexual abuse and the enslaved voice in the *Cena Trimalchionis*’. In Kamen, D. and Marshall, C.W. (eds.) *Slavery and Sexuality in Classical Antiquity*. Madison: 211-238.

¹⁰ Thus Owens notes that “the motivation for rationalizing the protagonists' bad-slave behaviours is that it was necessary for their survival in slavery” (p. 49).

the most disturbing aspects of slavery and dismissing them *tout court*), the argument is challenging as justifications and eloquent silences are only present when the enslaved protagonists (and thus elite people who will eventually regain their privileged status) are oppressed. In fairness, Owens also considers what one may call actual slave characters in his arguments; but he maintains his views that these, too, benefitted from the sympathy shown to the elite protagonists by Xenophon and Chariton, namely that this sympathy is extended to them because they have strong bonds with the heroes and the heroines. In characterizing these enslaved attendants positively, though, the authors are simply, one may argue, replicating the stereotype of the good irreprehensible slaves—especially if we consider that their fidelity is kept even when their masters are enslaved in *Ephesiaca*. These “good slaves” have no psychological depth and the same applies to the other type of slave characters who, at the other end of the elite cliché spectrum, are portrayed as quintessentially malicious and manipulative (for example Plangon in *Callirhoe*).¹¹ That said, these first two chapters illustrate well how the Greek authors did not downplay the cruelty of the slave-owners under whose power the protagonists ended up. Indeed, Owens clearly demonstrates that even the most humane of them (such as Dionysos in *Ephesiaca*) emerge as being far from benevolent if seen from the perspective of the enslaved. One might wonder, however, whether this (more or less veiled) criticism is moved by Xenophon and Chariton to these slave-owners *qua* slave-owners or *qua* main villains who impede or delay the reunion of hero and heroine. Cruel slave-ownership associated with real slaves does not appear as contested.

Based on the sympathy-argument, **Chapter 3** tries to make sense of the admittedly paradoxical nature of the two novels, explaining how these works may indicate in their quite different ways that Xenophon and Chariton may have previously experienced slavery themselves. The servile past of the author of *Ephesiaca* is assumed on the ground of his use of folk-tales, while the author of *Callirhoe* is suggested to have been a freedman (and thus a former slave) owing to his profession as *hypographeus*, supported by reference to epigraphic evidence (without however citing any actual such evidence). The identification of the authors’ servile past is an important building block for Owens’s argument that the novels were written with an original readership of ex-slaves in mind. Targeting

¹¹ The portrayal of the enslaved as either ‘good slaves’ or wholly malicious is well known from other genres, and has been well explored by modern scholarship: e.g. Stewart, R. 2008. ‘Who’s tricked? Models of slave behavior in Plautus’ “Pseudolus”’. In Bell, S. and Hansen, I.L. (eds.) *Role Models in the Roman World: Identity and Assimilation*. Ann Arbor: 69-96; Stewart, R. 2012. *Plautus and Roman Slavery*. Malden and Oxford, 50-53; Thalmann, W.G. 1998. *The Swineherd and the Bow: Representations of Class in the ‘Odyssey’*. Ithaca: 84-100.

them was possible, as freed persons might not only have been educated (and thus, according to Owens, more aware of the injustice of their earlier condition) but also made their mark in society in the first century CE (even if Owens rather hastily sketches the role of the freed person exclusively through Suetonius' *De grammaticis et rhetoribus* and the *Suda*).¹² Nonetheless, this point links to a further explanation for the assumed freed readership: the novels describe the experience of slavery in such a fashion that only people who had endured it would have been able to appreciate the description fully. Problematically though, this assumption is supported through the mention of certain realia of slavery that are mostly taken from Roman law and the Roman agricultural treatises, two genres with which especially elite slave-owners had great familiarity, but perhaps were not the 'standard' former slave turned master.¹³ One may also wonder, given the ubiquity of slavery in ancient society, and granted that (freeborn) Greeks and Romans were moulded in a slave-owner mentality from their cradle (at least those with the skills and leisure to enjoy the latest novels), is it really possible to suggest that the servile experiences depicted in the novels require own experience of slavery for a full understanding? The question is addressed in the final sections of Chapter 3, which speculatively bolster the argument of a readership that included those who knew slavery first hand, discussing topoi which are appreciated as resonating especially vividly with ex-slaves: the *Scheintod* of the heroine would signify the social death of slaves; the love of the protagonist would be a proof of the slaves' moral worth and also an expression of the great privilege of creating "a secure family" (p. 107) after manumission; the unheroic conduct of the male protagonists would echo the emasculating effect of slavery on men, while the use of the noble character of the enslaved, rooted in traditional story-telling, would constitute an affirmation that slaves might indeed be noble-minded, a point indirectly proven, in Owens's view, by the high-born names that the leaders of revolts understood as slave rebellions attributed to themselves.¹⁴ In their totality, the first three chapters aptly explore diverse points of view and nuanced perceptions of slaves on part of the elite, while demonstrating how the higher strata of society acknowledged the constraints with which real slaves would have had to grapple. Pushing this

¹² This criticism also appears in Jackson, C.R. 2021. "The ancient novel and slavery". *The Classical Review* 71: 6-9.

¹³ Some of the sources cited by Owens include Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, Cato's *De agricultura*, Columella's *De re rustica*, and some Ulpianic passages from the *Digest*.

¹⁴ In particular, at p. 108, Owens mentions two leaders of the so-called Sicilian slave revolts, Eunus and Salvius, who took up the names Antiochus and Tryphon respectively, associating themselves, in Owens's view, with Seleucid rulers. Owens also brings up Claudius' freedman Pallas, who claimed to descend from the homonymous son of Evander.

acknowledgement and nuanced perception to the point of sympathy for the enslaved, and simultaneously suggesting a critical attitude towards harsh slave-owners, while additionally proposing a sub-elite readership on the part of formerly enslaved individuals, the first part of the book presents an intriguing argument, even if extensive corroboration is not always offered.

Chapter 4, on Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe*, contains a few instances in which the relevance of what Owens defines as actual slavery is, in the opinion of the present reviewer, overstated. The author highlights the reality of slavery in Longus by pointing out that some of the fears and actions of the slave characters in the story would have manifested themselves in the lives of real enslaved people. This contention is built on illustrating these fears and actions by reference to other sources in which these appear, more than exploring the underlying issues and realities argumentatively; moreover, some of the realia described do not add depth to the proposed reading of the novel (for example the fact that—as in Longus—slaves were anxious about the inspection of their master on agricultural estates, or that filth and manure were part of the slaves' daily reality).¹⁵ The point of this illustration is, then, to argue that Longus, as an elite writer by his own admission, contributes to “aestheticize and naturalize domination” (p. 143). And yet, Owens contends, the novel might contain an affirmation of slavery as an institution that, although grounded in nature and characterized by domination, if enhanced and moderated by *politikē technē*, tended towards justice and humanity. Less persuasive than the previous chapters, this chapter has nonetheless the merit of scratching the idyllic surface on the countryside of Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe*. Owens discovers a system of erotic and social domination as well as of economic compulsion which, although not exclusively concerned with slavery, does give us a different, far from rosy, picture of the bucolic peacefulness of the novel at a deeper glance. Additionally, the philosophical considerations inferred from *Daphnis and Chloe* render this text a bridge between the first two novels, in which slavery is discussed in itself, and the last two, where slavery, in Owens's view, is employed to simply signify something else.

Chapter 5 moves to Achilles Tatius' *Leucippe and Clitophon*. Here enslavement is experienced by just one of the protagonists, Leucippe, occupying merely the second half of the novel. The lesser level of engagement with slavery and its realia is made additionally explicit in the depiction of supporting slave characters, which, as Owens acutely observes, is wholly suited to the interests of the free Clitophon. The protagonist's positive or negative evaluation of them depends merely on whether they might benefit him (ignoring, for instance, that hindering

¹⁵ The sources cited for this by Owens are, again, Cato's *De agricultura* and other passages from Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe*.

his plans they are acting loyally to their own owners); and indeed slave characters appear exclusively when they play a role in Clitophon's seduction of Leucippe. When not instrumental, they are cast in silence even in those situations and contexts where one would definitely expect to find them. Despite this lesser oscillating concern with slavery *per se* in the text, Owens explores the interactions between Clitophon and his slave Satyrus, who has a prominent role in Clitophon's plan, through the lens of Hegel's master-and-slave dialectic. Doing so asserts the dependence of Clitophon on Satyrus, who anticipates his owner's actions and feelings well before he himself reveals them to him. Some of Satyrus' actions are seen as potential ways of sabotaging his master; in turn, the lack of gratitude and even acknowledgment of Satyrus' often decisive support for Clitophon are intended as a way of undermining his great influence and ultimately dominance over Clitophon. Owens acknowledges these complexities, but specifies that these are not thrown in by Achilles Tatius to make impactful comments on the actual slave–master relationship; rather, they serve to characterize Clitophon as an unreliable narrator, who is moreover depicted slavishly owing to his cowardice and lack of fidelity towards Leucippe. In particular, the ending of the novel, in which the adventures of hero and heroine are recounted is intertextually related to the ending of *Callirhoe*; however, while in the latter the more painful and degrading facets of slavery are passed over in silence, Clitophon does indeed stress them, albeit solely for the purpose of exciting storytelling.

In **Chapter 6**, on Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*, there is no ground to appreciate the subtleties of the slave–master dynamic mentioned above: they are nowhere to be found, as this novel traces an even fuller adoption of the normative elite opinions on slaves. Heliodorus elaborates the most intricately plotted and filters his ideas on slavery through a “complex arrangements of narrative perspectives” (p. 186), which, however, as Owens notes, are only ascribable to elite characters (Cnemon and Calasiris). Heliodorus also metaphorically exploits slavery to detail a theory of love of Platonic inspiration, which lies at the core of the novel. Not only Vulgar Love is assimilated to slavery but, as Owens states, it is also aided by servile characters, all of them degraded and immoral; the protagonists' Heavenly Love, on the other hand, has no substantial interactions with enslaved figures who, in their sporadic and brief cameos, are systematically pushed to the margins. Not surprisingly, the enslaved protagonists always manage to upkeep their elite values and behaviour, despite the numerous dangers and temptations they face; to cite Owens, the *Aethiopica* “offers the reader a *mythos* featuring two almost perfect protagonists who embody the transcendence of birth and nobility” (p. 208); this is in sharp contrast to the pair Habrocomes–Anthia with which Owens's book starts. For Heliodorus' hero and heroine, slavery is a purely temporary patina, and

the novel in general extensively exploits the theme only to make philosophical points.

A short **Conclusion** summarizes the book's key arguments, insisting again on the early novels' significance in the exploration of slavery, and especially the difference of the works of Xenophon and Chariton from those of the others. It also adds two "points of speculation" (p. 214): first, that the setting of *Ephesiaca* and *Callirhoe* in Magna Graecia may be a reference to the rebellions that took place in Sicily and Campania in the second and first centuries BCE, widely understood in ancient and modern thought as servile uprisings; and second, that the novels' heavy association with slavery might have been the main reason for the scarce esteem in which the genre was held in antiquity.

Altogether, the book is successful in illustrating that slavery cannot be dismissed or relegated to a purely ancillary function in any meaningful exploration of the Greek novel. Clearly, actual aspects of slavery play an often critical role in these novels, although it seems an overstatement to claim that such realia are portrayed from the point of view of the enslaved and with a sympathetic attitude—intriguing though this argument is. A chief issue, to my mind, with this argument lies in the fact that, ultimately, all the five Greek novels deal not with real slaves but with members of the elite who found themselves enslaved—even if Owens shows due caution in postulating his propositions; there are, indeed, a lot of conditionals in his text (even if, in turn, this gives his exposition a somewhat provisional feel). On the other hand, in its goal of showing that slavery was of interest in and of itself in the early novels, the discussion frequently takes recourse to non-novelistic sources, especially the juridical and agricultural literature of Rome, to back up the posited interest, yet without due evaluation and argument, falling short of the analytical sophistication which abounds in Chapters 5 and 6. I was also less sure about the application of Patterson's conceptualization of slavery to the novels. Thus, Owens assumes that Patterson's idea of slavery as domination, leading to the enslaved person's social death, applies to Greek and Roman societies alike, at least in the Roman Imperial period. Whether or not one should assume that Greek and Roman slaving operated along identical lines (creating, in the context of an exploration of the *Greek* novel, a sense of Romano-centrism), Patterson's take on slavery is, in fact, heavily disputed among scholars of slavery, ancient and modern.¹⁶ It would, therefore, have benefitted the book if the idea of slavery as domination (as opposed to, say, slavery as ownership) had been *explored* on the five novels under scrutiny, to ask if they configure slavery in the same way or in different ways. In short, it would have been intriguing to see

¹⁶ See the various contributions in Bodel, J. and Scheidel, W. (eds.) 2016. *On Human Bondage: After Slavery and Social Death*. Malden, MA and Oxford.

Owens explore, rather than presuppose, what slavery in the Greek novel *is*. But this does not take away from Owens's formidable achievement in engaging both with the literary and with the historical spheres to advance our understanding of ancient slavery through the medium of the Greek novel, and of course of the genre itself—an approach that *The Representation of Slavery in the Greek Novel* plainly commends as a path to follow.