

THISBE'S NOVEL: WRITING ROMANCE IN HELIODORUS' *AETHIOPICA*

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Lauren Groff's *Fates and Furies* thoroughly unravels its own 'marriage plot'.¹ Narrating the romance of the golden Lancelot ('Lotto') and the mysterious Mathilde from each protagonist's perspective in turn, Groff's novel exposes countless cracks in the decades-long relationship between a pair of twenty-first-century college sweethearts. The second half of the novel is particularly haunted by a sadomasochistic and dubiously consensual relationship between Mathilde and a wealthy older man upon whom she has become financially dependent, a subplot that includes vivid and erotic descriptions of sexual humiliation and subjugation. Groff is certainly not the only modern author to explicitly and self-consciously interrogate the terms of the romantic novel as such: Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Marriage Plot* announces its generic play in its title.²

Romantic novels often display a complex relationship to the norms and expectations of their own genre.³ Among the novels of the ancient Greek world, Achilles Tatius' *Leucippe and Cleitophon* is particularly notable for the ways in which it exposes, amplifies, and subverts the familiar tropes of the Greek romance.⁴ But Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*, the longest and latest of the extant Greek novels, is also an interesting case.⁵ Modern scholarship on Heliodorus emphasizes his distinctive investment in chastity, fidelity, and sexual self-control, observing how he endows not only his heroine but also his hero with a deep commitment to premarital virginity.⁶ Yet Heliodorus' novel is nevertheless undeniably erotic: the third-century CE medical writer Theodorus Priscianus may even have

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1. Groff (2015).

2. Eugenides (2011).

3. On the 'marriage plots' (both upheld and deconstructed) of British and American romantic novels from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, see Boone (1987). Queer theorists, whose insights I will discuss further below, offer particularly compelling analyses of such 'marriage plots' and their alternatives; see especially Sedgwick (1997) and Love (2007).

4. As Morgan (1995), 142, evocatively puts it, Achilles Tatius 'conducts a prolonged guerrilla war against the conventions of his own genre.' See further Morales (2004), 1f.

5. I have used the Budé edition of Lumb and Rattenbury (1960) for the text of the *Aethiopica* throughout. Translations are my own.

6. Konstan (1994), 90–8, Ramelli (2009), and Olsen (2012), 303–30. Foucault (1976), 262–6, saw this emphasis, across the Greek novels, as evidence of emerging Christian sexual ideology; on Foucault's engagement with the Greek novels, see further Goldhill (1995) and Morales (2008).

recommended the *Aethiopica* as a cure for male impotence.⁷ Speaking of the Greek novels in general, Jason König notes that ‘interpretation...has oscillated between praise of the novels’ moral exemplarity and of their eroticism, often without sufficient acknowledgement of the way in which these two qualities are inextricably and paradoxically combined with each other’.⁸

In the *Aethiopica*, there is a clear distinction between the ‘chastely erotic’ restraint of the protagonists, Theagenes and Charicleia, and the sexual deviance and excess of the various villains whom they encounter.⁹ Yet here I would like to resist the impulse to read the novel’s supporting characters, with their alternative sexualities, as mere foils, intended only to cast the purity and ideal romance of the protagonists into sharper relief. As Tim Whitmarsh argues, ‘identification with alternative desires is part of the experience of romance; and even if such identifications are ultimately repressed, they are not entirely neutralised’.¹⁰ Helen Morales likewise suggests that there is value to be found in readings that ‘enjoy the digressions [of the Greek novels] and resist the tyranny of teleology’.¹¹ Heliodorus drives his plot through the defense and valorization of his protagonists’ virginity and self-restraint, but he also offers his readers the experience of repeated digressions into other modes of erotic relations. Like the modern novelists mentioned above, he enables—even encourages—us to vividly imagine alternatives to the idealized ‘marriage plot’ of his protagonists.

In this article, I will focus on a moment near the beginning of the *Aethiopica*, when the adventures of the protagonists intersect with those of an Athenian man named Cnemon. Charicleia, Theagenes, and Cnemon meet when they are all imprisoned by a group of Egyptian bandits, led by a man named Thyamis. Cnemon’s first-person account of his own experiences forms a kind of internal novella that provides revealing points of continuity and contrast with the idealized romance of the hero and heroine.¹² While Cnemon’s role in the *Aethiopica*

7. I say ‘may’ because this requires reading Priscianus’ ‘Heriodianus’ as a corruption of ‘Heliodorus’, following the suggestion of Bowie (1994), 447 and 457 n.55. See also Morgan (2013), 237. For Late Antique and Byzantine attitudes toward the eroticism of the *Aethiopica*, cf. also Colonna (1938), 361 = Test. I (Socrates Scholasticus), 361 = Test. III (Photius), and 371 = Test. XVII (Nicephorus Callistus). I am highlighting how these authors implicitly interpret the *Aethiopica* and its literary aesthetics; for their value in establishing a biography for the historical Heliodorus, see Futre Pinheiro (2014), 76f.

8. König (2008), 138.

9. Morgan (2013), 236, describes how Heliodorus establishes a paradigm of reading as a ‘chastely erotic’ action. For the sense that Heliodorus’ depiction of sexual transgression (especially female sexual deviance) serves to further idealize and valorize the resolute chastity of his protagonists, see Morgan (1989) and Konstan (1994), 90–8. Note, however, that Bird (2017) and Capettini (2018) have recently and rightly emphasized the complexity of Theagenes’ and Charicleia’s respective performances of *σωφροσύνη* (‘self-control, discretion, chastity’).

10. Whitmarsh (2011), 176. Morgan (1989) reads both Cnemon’s embedded story and the protagonists’ later encounter with the depraved Arsace as evidence of Heliodorus’ narrative virtuosity—his ability to tell stories about love that diverge from his dominant mode.

11. Morales (2008), 43.

12. See especially Morgan (1989), who uses the term ‘novella’ for this inset story, as well as Konstan (1994), 97f., Kasprzyk (2017), Morgan and Repath (2019), and Morales (2022).

has been well studied, I am interested here in turning to his primary antagonist, Thisbe, and exploring how she offers an alternative model of novelistic composition and erotic engagement to readers of the *Aethiopica*.

Thisbe, an enslaved Athenian woman, plays a central role in Cnemon's story. As Cnemon explains to Charicleia and Theagenes, his troubles began when his stepmother, Demainete, fell in love with him. Upon being rebuffed, Demainete ordered her slave Thisbe to seduce Cnemon and lead him into a trap. After Thisbe did so, Demainete then accused Cnemon of attempting to rape her (Demainete) and convinced Cnemon's father to banish his son from Athens. Thisbe, however, then entangled Demainete in a set of sexual intrigues of her own, with the result that Demainete eventually committed suicide. Thisbe subsequently worked as a courtesan, then acquired a new lover with whom she traveled to Egypt. Cnemon learned of this and pursued her, hoping to bring her back to Athens to prove his own innocence and restore his social and familial standing. When Cnemon first recounts this story to Charicleia and Theagenes, the whereabouts of the villainess Thisbe remain unknown (*Aeth.* 1.8–2.13). Eventually, the bandits' stronghold is attacked, and Thyamis conceals Charicleia deep within a cavern. Thyamis is captured by rival bandits, but Cnemon and Theagenes manage to escape and return in search of Charicleia. They soon come across Thisbe's body (thus discovering that she, too, has been present among the bandits) and, after initially mistaking Thisbe's body for that of Charicleia, they are overjoyed to find Charicleia herself alive and well. Cnemon also realizes that Thyamis must have killed Thisbe, recognizing the sword that lies near her body.

Along with Thisbe's corpse, Cnemon and Theagenes discover a 'writing tablet' (δέλτον, 2.6.2), which turns out to be a letter from Thisbe to Cnemon, pleading with him to save her from the Egyptian bandits. Thisbe has been killed before she can arrange to have the letter delivered to Cnemon, but it nonetheless reaches its intended addressee, who reads it aloud in an attempt to understand what has transpired (2.6–11). While Heliodorus thus dispenses with Thisbe early on in his narrative, I would like to linger over her body and her words. Thisbe's δέλτος, I will argue, invokes key elements of the Greek novel as genre: by casting Cnemon as a heroic protagonist and herself as an imperiled heroine, Thisbe imagines, and even begins to compose, her own romance. Thisbe's letter thus provides us with a valuable opportunity to consider the literary aesthetics of Heliodorus' *Aethiopica* and its author's remarkable interest in offering erotic alternatives to the chaste symmetry of his protagonists.

Writing Romance

Before delving into the contents of Thisbe's letter, I would like to explain how it fits into the literary economy of the *Aethiopica* as a whole, with a particular focus on two important themes. First, among the many metaliterary aspects of

Heliodorus' narrative, we should pay special attention to the alignment of the novel itself with the person of the heroine Charicleia. If, as some scholars argue, to 'read' the *Aethiopica* is to 'read' (and 'love') Charicleia, what might it mean to encounter a text in which one 'reads' Thisbe instead?¹³ Second, the letter itself is a powerfully metaliterary form, and one which has a long history in earlier Greek literature. By situating Thisbe's δέλτος in relation to both its most immediate model (Phaedra's δέλτος in Euripides' *Hippolytus*) and the thematic significance of letters in the Greek novels more broadly, we can more precisely describe the expectations and associations that attend Thisbe's letter in Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*.¹⁴

Bodies and Texts

A longstanding model for reading and interpreting the *Aethiopica* emerges from the conflation of the heroine Charicleia herself with the text of 'her' novel. In the Byzantine period, at least, the *Aethiopica* circulated under the name *Charicleia*; even if that title was not used earlier, Heliodorus nonetheless foregrounds various ways in which 'reading Charicleia' (the character) is akin to reading the *Aethiopica*.¹⁵ John Morgan develops this connection between heroine and novel in order to illuminate how Heliodorus represents the experience of reading itself, arguing that he establishes 'a paradigm of reading as a chastely erotic action' by foregrounding Charicleia's allure and inviting the reader to linger over vivid descriptions of her physical beauty, yet also repeatedly deferring the sexual consummation of her relationship with Theagenes.¹⁶

For Morgan, a crucial letter from the Ethiopian queen Persinna to her daughter Charicleia provides a microcosm for the novel itself. When Persinna abandons the infant Charicleia, she wraps her in a band of cloth upon which she has embroidered the strange tale of her child's conception (4.8). In this 'letter' (τὸ γράμμα,

13. Further discussion of and bibliography on 'reading Charicleia' below but see especially Morgan (2013).

14. Any discussion of 'reading' in the ancient novels must acknowledge our limited understanding of the earliest audiences for these particular texts: see further Egger (1988), Wesseling (1988), Bowie (1994), Stephens (1994), and Haynes (2003), 1–10. Here, I am emphatically interested in the literary aesthetics and narrative strategies of the *Aethiopica* itself, and I will not speculate about the reception of the novel by any particular historical reader (e.g., a 'female reader' or a 'male reader'). Rather, I wish to place my emphasis on the possibilities encouraged, made available, and foreclosed by the text itself.

15. Cf. Colonna (1938), 371 = Test. XVII. See Whitmarsh (2005), 592f., 596f., for the argument that the use of the female protagonist's name as title is a Byzantine convention; he also offers further documentation of the variants attested in the manuscript tradition. On the conflation of heroine and text, König (2008), 138, observes that 'associations between body and text are deeply ingrained in both the structure of the Greek and Roman novels and in the detailed texture of the reading experiences they offer'; he adds that the 'unfathomability and cultural hybridity of Charicleia' are 'images for, and mirrored by', the literary character of the *Aethiopica* itself. Cf. also Bowie (1995), Whitmarsh (2001), Hunter (2005), and Elmer (2008).

16. Morgan (2013), 236.

4.8.1), Persinna describes how she gazed upon a painting of Andromeda during intercourse with her husband Hydaspes and, as a result, her child was born light-skinned and resembling Andromeda, despite having two darker-skinned parents (4.8.5).¹⁷ Fearing accusations of adultery and illegitimacy, Persinna decides to leave her daughter by the roadside, hoping that a set of valuable tokens and her own embroidered narrative will give Charicleia a chance of surviving and eventually learning the true story of her birth (4.8.6).

Readers of the *Aethiopica* encounter Persinna's letter a little less than halfway through the novel, in the course of an inset narrative describing Charicleia's early life, her first encounter with her beloved Theagenes, and the couple's subsequent travels and travails (3.24–5.1). The letter serves to explain how and why Charicleia and Theagenes are making their way to Ethiopia. But in addition to advancing the plot of the novel, Persinna's 'embroidered band' (τὴν ταϊνίαν... ἐστὶ γμῆνῃν, 4.8.1) offers the reader a compelling way to understand the *Aethiopica* itself. As Morgan notes, Charicleia 'is literally wrapped in her own narrative... In a metaliterary image of the novel as a whole, that story [i.e., Persinna's embroidered letter], as a physical object, holds the key to her identity'.¹⁸ Morgan draws a persuasive set of parallels between Persinna's letter and Heliodorus' novel, observing their shared interest in the transference of tradition, especially across artistic media, and the way that both the novel and its inset letter seek to explore and explain the complex identity of Charicleia herself.¹⁹ Karen ní Mheallaigh notes further points of continuity between ταϊνία and novel, as well as illuminating differences; she particularly highlights how the ταϊνία represents, in some respects, a 'failed text', distinguished from the *Aethiopica* itself in its fragility and singularity.²⁰

While Persinna's letter has reasonably received a far greater share of scholarly attention, a similar conflation of body and text emerges at an even earlier point in the novel through the representation of Thisbe's letter. When Cnemon and Theagenes discover Thisbe's 'writing tablet', they observe that it 'peeks out from her chest, under her armpit' (δέλτον τινὰ τῶν στέρνων ὑπὸ τῆ μασχάλη προκύπτουσαν, 2.6.2). This object is thus connected with Thisbe's physical body, tucked close under her arm so that it seems to 'peek out' from her chest itself. Heliodorus continues to emphasize this link between Thisbe and her letter: after Cnemon reads the text aloud, the narrator notes 'Thisbe and the tablet said such things' (τοιαῦτα μὲν ἡ Θίσβη καὶ ἡ δέλτος ἔφραζεν, 2.11.1). He thus figures both Thisbe and her text as speaking subjects, endowing Thisbe with a form of agency that transcends death and simultaneously imagining the inanimate

17. On Charicleia's conception, see further Reeve (1989), Hilton (1998), and Olsen (2012).

18. Morgan (2013), 230. Cf. also Rosenmeyer (2001), 166.

19. Morgan (2013), 229f. On the metaliterary qualities of epistolary fiction in general, see Altman (1982), 193–212, and Hodkinson, Rosenmeyer, and Bracke (2013), 18f.

20. ní Mheallaigh (2014), 196–200, quote at 196. Along with Morgan (2013), ní Mheallaigh showcases the value of Persinna's ταϊνία for understanding the literary aesthetics and narrative strategies of the *Aethiopica* itself.

object, the δέλτος, as capable of speech as well. This description elides the role of Cnemon, who has read the words out loud, and focuses attention instead upon the force of the words emanating directly from Thisbe and the δέλτος. Cnemon then adds ‘Thisbe, you have done well in dying and you have become yourself the messenger of your own misfortunes, for it was from your own wounds that you delivered your narrative to us!’ (ὦ Θίσβη...σὺ μὲν καλῶς ποιούσα τέθνηκας καὶ γέγονας ἡμῖν αὐτάγγελος τῶν ἑαυτῆς συμφορῶν ἐξ αὐτῶν ἐγχειρίσασα τῶν σῶν σφαγῶν τὴν διήγησιν, 2.11.1). Cnemon thereby creates a sense of continuity between Thisbe’s injured body, the writing tablet, and its contents. He imagines her written words as arising ‘from her very wounds’ (τῶν σῶν σφαγῶν), vividly merging Thisbe’s body and text.

By creating such powerful links between Thisbe’s body and her letter, Heliodorus opens up the possibility of ‘reading Thisbe’ as a model of erotic and literary aesthetics—perhaps even an alternative to ‘reading Charicleia’.²¹ I will discuss further below how the content of Thisbe’s δέλτος also encourages this interpretive mode. But first, I would like to discuss how the form of her text, a personal letter from a woman to a past and potentially future lover, intensifies the intimacy and metafictional significance of her missive.

Literary Letters

The most obvious literary antecedent for Thisbe’s δέλτος may well be Phaedra’s in Euripides’ *Hippolytus*. Indeed, *Hippolytus* provides an important intertext for this portion of Heliodorus’ *Aethiopica*, and the particular force and treachery of Phaedra’s letter would seem to make it a productive parallel for Thisbe’s letter.²² In Euripides’ play, Phaedra commits suicide and leaves behind a letter in which she falsely accuses her stepson Hippolytus of rape (*Hipp.* 856–982). Theseus, her husband, believes the accusation and curses his son; Phaedra’s δέλτος exploits an underlying spousal trust to bring about a series of devastating consequences, including (indirectly) the death of Hippolytus himself (1045–466). Phaedra’s letter is thus an important example of the awesome power embedded in a letter from the deceased—a letter ‘bound’ (ἡρτημένη, 858) both literally and figuratively to its author’s corpse.

21. On Thisbe and Charicleia, especially the sense that Thisbe acts as a foil for Charicleia, see Anderson (1982), 39, Sandy (1982), 33–7, Morgan (1989), 111, Haynes (2003), 68, 181 n.63, and Lefteratou (2018), 82f.

22. As Rosenmeyer (2001), 88, puts it, Phaedra’s letter ‘[embodies] all of Phaedra’s power and anger, yet [functions] even more effectively than the character could have while alive’. Morgan and Repath (2019) illuminate the significance of Phaedra as a model for relations between elite women and the women whom they enslave (Demainete and Thisbe, Arsace and Cybele) in the *Aethiopica*. On Heliodorus and Euripides’ *Hippolytus*, see further Feuillâtre (1966), 118, Paulsen (1992), 87, Cueva (2004), 87 and 133 nn.18 and 19, Lefteratou (2018), 155–62, and Bird (2019). On dramatic allusions in Heliodorus more broadly, see Feuillâtre (1966), 115–24, Bartsch (1989), 109–43, Paulsen (1992), and Reig Calpe (2010).

Yet while Cnemon's story obviously recalls Euripides' *Hippolytus* in outline (the accusations of the stepmother, the unjust persecution of the son), Thisbe is no 'Phaedra': she is a former agent of Cnemon's stepmother Demainete (not the stepmother herself), she is hardly a passive victim of divine cruelty, and she and Cnemon have a preexisting and somewhat-consensual sexual relationship.²³ Moreover, as Melissa Mueller points out, Phaedra's accusation against Hippolytus is ultimately an assumption that we must draw from the text of Euripides' play, for Phaedra's δέλτος itself is never read aloud.²⁴ Mueller persuasively argues that Phaedra's δέλτος, evoking the form of a Greek curse tablet, derives its particular power from its performative role within the play and ultimately aims, above all, to defend Phaedra's reputation.²⁵ Unlike Phaedra, Thisbe does not appear to have composed her letter to be read after her death—quite to the contrary, its contents aim at securing her salvation. And unlike Euripides, Heliodorus enables Cnemon to read the letter aloud, giving Thisbe one last chance to 'speak' in her own words. Phaedra's δέλτος is an important literary antecedent, and the memory of its devastating power could certainly haunt the reader's encounter with Thisbe's corpse and letter. But we should remember that Thisbe's letter is only incidentally linked with its author's death. She composes it with the clear intention of securing her freedom, and she aims to seduce Cnemon into acting on her behalf. Her δέλτος, therefore, also has much in common with the letters exchanged in other ancient Greek fictional narratives.

Indeed, Heliodorus' *Aethiopica* is a late entry to a long tradition of Greek literary and philosophical reflections on the erotics of reading and writing—especially, the reading and writing of letters.²⁶ Whether embedded within a longer text or standing alone, the letter as literary form invites the reader into a complex and intimate relationship with the text, its author(s), and its explicit or implicit addressee(s).²⁷ Yet this play of intimacy and distance also exists in the relationship between a letter's writer and its recipient, whether or not the text is ultimately made available to additional readers: a letter can be intensely personal, yet its existence is predicated upon a spatial gap between the writer and her intended audience.²⁸ This gap—meaning both the physical space

23. Thisbe is enslaved at the time of her relationship to Cnemon, which complicates the possibility of consensual sex between them, but she is also (under the orders of Demainete) the clear instigator of the relationship. Indeed, it might be said that Cnemon, lured into the relationship under false pretenses, is the one who cannot have given true consent. The meaning of 'consent' in this particular relationship is thus deeply fraught; my point here is that Thisbe's sexual ethics and practices are quite unlike those of Euripides' Phaedra, who struggles against the divine imposition of transgressive desire.

24. Mueller (2011), 154f.

25. Mueller (2011).

26. Discussions of this tradition often begin with Plato's *Phaedrus*, wherein Socrates highlights and critiques the seductive power of written texts, especially as contrasted with spoken dialogue; see, e.g., Steiner (1994), 212–16. On letters specifically, see especially Rosenmeyer (2001).

27. As Hodkinson, Rosenmeyer, and Bracke (2013), 3, observe, 'the *frisson* of external readers "eavesdropping" on a private conversation is the crucial ingredient of most epistolary literature'.

28. On the interplay of distance and proximity in epistolary communication and the distinct ways in which letters activate desire, see Altman (1982), Carson (1998), 91–107, Gunderson (1997),

between the writer and the reader and also the likely lapse in time between a letter's composition and its reception—contributes to the letter's special value as a literary device. A letter promises a kind of immediate access to its author's thoughts, yet it can also be misconstrued or become inaccurate during its time of transit, and it can even be composed with deliberate intent to deceive. In Archaic and Classical Greek literature, letters often exemplify the unreliable and even destructive potential of the written word.²⁹ Patricia Rosenmeyer further notes that 'it is not accidental that women are closely associated with dangerous or deceptive acts of writing', highlighting the connection between the treacherous qualities associated with women in Greek literature and the unsettling power of their compositions.³⁰

The Greek novels, which follow the dramatic separations and reunions of pairs of young lovers, exploit both the intimate and the treacherous qualities of embedded letters. In Achilles Tatius' *Leucippe and Cleitophon*, for example, the heroine Leucippe writes a letter to her beloved, Cleitophon, who, believing that she has died, has married another woman. Leucippe chastises Cleitophon and vividly describes the sufferings that she has endured since having run away with him (5.18f.). This letter thus constitutes both an important expression of the heroine's voice and a device for exposing the misunderstanding (Leucippe's false death) that will animate the next portion of the novel.³¹ While Achilles Tatius is not alone in using epistolary exchange to advance the plot of his novel, *Leucippe and Cleitophon* stands out for the importance that it accords to the distinctive kinds of communication (and miscommunication) effected by letters.³²

Ian Repath argues that in Achilles Tatius, Leucippe's letter functions as a *mise en abyme* for Cleitophon's own narration of the story and perhaps even the novel as a whole, retelling crucial events from Leucippe's perspective and employing rhetorical and affective strategies that mirror those evident elsewhere in Achilles Tatius' text.³³ This sense that an embedded letter may be read as a model of novelistic prose itself recalls, of course, Morgan's argument about the significance of Persinna's letter to Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*.³⁴ But this is also evident in

Rosenmeyer (2001), 1–12, 42–4, Wilcox (2012), 64–78, and Hodkinson, Rosenmeyer, and Bracke (2013), 11–17. For further details on the cultural history and social practice of letter-writing in the ancient Greek and Roman world, see Cribbiore (2001), Muir (2009), Ceccarelli (2013), and Ceccarelli, Doering, Fögen, and Gildenhard (2018). On fictional letters as a Greek literary genre, see Costa (2001) and Rosenmeyer (2006).

29. See Steiner (1994), Rosenmeyer (2001), 39–97, and Hodkinson, Rosenmeyer, and Bracke (2013), 16 and n.36.

30. Rosenmeyer (2001), 23.

31. Repath (2013). See also Rosenmeyer (2001), 147–54, Morales (2004), 202f., and Robiano (2007). Morales (2004), 77–95, reveals the depth and complexity of Achilles Tatius' engagement with divergent models of reading.

32. On letters in the Greek novels more generally, see Koskenniemi (1956), 180–6, and Rosenmeyer (2001), 133–254.

33. Repath (2013), 262.

34. Morgan (2013).

Heliodorus' representation of Thisbe's letter, which Theagenes and Cnemon find 'peeking out' from her corpse itself. As we will see, Thisbe's 'novel'—the text inscribed on her δέλτος—endeavors to rewrite her own role in Cnemon's story and reimagine their relationship as an adventurous romance. It draws upon the implicit intimacy of epistolary communication in its efforts to rekindle Cnemon's desire, yet for the external reader the sense that such a letter might be treacherous is only enhanced by the knowledge of Thisbe's deceitful past. As we move on to a close reading of Thisbe's letter, it will be worth keeping all of these associations in mind.

Thisbe's Novel

In her letter, Thisbe explains that she has been taken captive by Egyptian bandits and, through a stroke of luck, learned that her former lover (and enemy) Cnemon is imprisoned nearby. Begging Cnemon to rescue her, she promises that she will be his ally and offers him new details about the fate of Demainete (*Aeth.* 2.10). More than a mere cry for help, Thisbe's letter employs a strategy of seductive persuasion to convince Cnemon to come to her aid, encouraging him to recall his prior sexual attraction to her and inviting him to imagine the renewal of their relationship. Thisbe's rhetorical strategy also involves a striking generic move: as I mentioned above, she describes her situation in terms reminiscent of a typical Greek novel, calling upon Cnemon to play the dashing hero to her endangered heroine.³⁵ In this section, I will first explore the literary strategies of Thisbe's letter itself, then consider its potential appeal and interest for readers of the *Aethiopica*.

Dear Cnemon

Thisbe's letter begins with a simple address: 'to Cnemon, my master, from your enemy and ally—Thisbe' (Κνήμωνι τῷ δεσπότη ἢ πολεμία καὶ ἐπαμίνασα Θίσβη, 2.10.1). Thisbe's syntax highlights the distance between Cnemon and herself by placing their names as far apart as possible in the sentence.³⁶ But she also plays with distance and proximity, acknowledging that her relationship to Cnemon has been hostile: she is his 'enemy' (ἡ πολεμία), but also pointing forward to one of her primary arguments: that she is now his 'ally', actively

35. Despite the fact that we possess only five full examples of the 'Greek romance', there are some clear generic features that emerge across all or many of these texts, and I will highlight Thisbe's use of those familiar tropes in her letter.

36. Other letters in the *Aethiopica* exhibit different patterns of address: Persinna's letter (4.8.1) begins with her own name and embeds 'daughter' in the dative in the middle of the first sentence; a letter from the Persian satrap Oroondates to his wife Arsake (8.3) begins with a simple nominative-dative statement ('Oroondates, to Arsake').

‘coming to his aid’ (ἐπαμόνοσα). Epistolary convention dictates the basic form of this address, yet Thisbe’s words here also reflect themes and structures that will permeate her letter.³⁷

For example, she calls Cnemon her ‘master’ (τῷ δεσπότῃ), a relationship that she will emphasize throughout. This address reminds Cnemon of their preexisting relationship to one another: in Athens, he was her ‘master’ in the sense that she was enslaved in his father’s household. Thisbe previously seduced Cnemon as part of her role in Demainete’s plots, and Cnemon describes himself as a willing and enthusiastic participant in their multiple sexual encounters. Indeed, Thisbe’s gesture to the past reminds the reader that Cnemon has long been attracted to her: when Thisbe first begins to seduce him, he remarks that ‘although she had often spurned me, when I tried [to approach or proposition her], then she tempted me with looks, with nods, with tokens’ (ἢ πολλάκις πειρώντά με ἀπωσαμένη τότε παντοίως ἐφείλκετο βλέμμασι νεύμασι συνθήμασιν, 1.11.3). Cnemon tells this story after his life has been derailed, in part, by Thisbe’s deception, yet he does not attempt to conceal his own erotic interest in her. Thisbe’s letter thus represents a strategic attempt to reawaken Cnemon’s desire—a desire that she has successfully exploited in the past.³⁸

Thisbe proceeds to explain that ‘the death of Demainete has come about through me, for your sake, and I will tell you in person how this happened, if you will receive me’ (τὴν Δημαινέτης τελευτήν δι’ ἐμοῦ μὲν ὑπὲρ σοῦ γενομένην, τὸ δὲ ὅπως, εἴ με προσδέξαιο, παρούσα διηγῆσομαι, 2.10.1). Cnemon and Thisbe, so far apart in the prior sentence, are now drawn together in the phrase ‘through me, for you’ (δι’ ἐμοῦ μὲν ὑπὲρ σοῦ). In these opening lines, Thisbe’s syntax is simple but rhetorically powerful, acknowledging the distance between herself and Cnemon but also imagining that they could yet become close. She offers information in exchange for physical proximity, teasing Cnemon with her knowledge: ‘I will tell you in person how this happened, if you will receive me’. Here, we might recall the implicit intimacy of letters, and observe that Thisbe is exploiting the fact that—through the very act of reading her δέλτος—Cnemon is forced to draw closer to her and her words.

37. Rosenmeyer (2001), 158.

38. Indeed, the letter itself contains verbal echoes of Thisbe’s previous seduction of Cnemon. Thisbe will later refer to Cnemon as ‘handsome’ (καλῶ, 2.10.2), hearkening back to Cnemon’s own reported belief that, when Thisbe first began to seduce him in Athens, ‘he thought that he had suddenly become handsome’ (ἄθρόον καλὸς γεγενῆσθαι ἐπεπίσμην, 1.11.3). And Thisbe’s subsequent description of herself as ‘your [Cnemon’s] servant’ (τὴν σαινοῦ θεραπευαίνιδα, 2.10.3) recalls one of her deceptive exchanges with Demainete, wherein she likewise calls herself ‘your servant’ (θεραπευαίνιδα τὴν σὴν, 1.15.2). These echoes cannot, of course, be part of Thisbe’s rhetorical strategy, but they do allow Heliodorus to construct parallels between Thisbe’s first successful seduction of Cnemon and her efforts within this letter, encouraging us to read her words in light of her past allure. I am grateful to an anonymous reader of this article for pointing out these echoes and raising the question of their significance.

The letter continues:

ἔπειτα φράζω κατὰ τήνδε με νυνὶ εἶναι τὴν νῆσον δεκάτην ἤδη ταύτην ἡμέραν πρὸς τινος τῶν τῆδε ληστῶν ἀλοῦσαν, ὃς καὶ ὑπασπιστὴς εἶναι τοῦ ληστάρχου θρύπτεται κάμῃ κατακλείσας ἔχει μηδὲ ὅσον προκύψαι τῶν θυρῶν ἐπιτρέπων, ὡς μὲν αὐτὸς φησι, διὰ φιλίαν τὴν περὶ ἐμὲ ταύτην ἐπιθείς τὴν τιμωρίαν, ὡς δὲ ἔχω συμβάλλειν, ἀφαιρεθῆναί με πρὸς τινος δεδιώς.

(*Aeth.* 2.10.2)

Next, I tell you that this is the tenth day on which I have been on this island, captured by one of the bandits in this place, who boasts that he is the right-hand man of the brigands' leader and who has shut me away and does not even allow me to so much as peek my head out of the door! He says that he imposes this punishment on account of his love for me, but as far as I can figure out, he has done it because he is afraid I will be captured by someone else.

Thisbe now depicts herself as the protagonist of a story akin to a typical Greek novel. She laments that she has been imprisoned by bandits and begs Cnemon to rescue her. At this moment in the *Aethiopica*, Charicleia and Theagenes are in the midst of a very similar scenario, captured by bandits who pose a particularly sinister threat to the beautiful and virginal Charicleia. But the threat of pirates or bandits, who often seek to kidnap the heroine, is a frequent trope in the Greek romantic novel. Repeated capture by bandits drives the plot of Achilles Tatius' *Leucippe and Cleitophon*, while a brief incursion by pirates into the pastoral world of Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe* reads as a parody of the trope.³⁹

Thisbe also toys with concealment and revelation. She laments that she is not even allowed to 'peek out' (προκύψαι, 2.10.2) from the door, attempting to increase Cnemon's desire by representing herself as trapped behind a locked door, just out of reach. For the attentive (external) reader, this verb intensifies the link between Thisbe's own body and her letter: she now describes herself 'peeking out' from a door, just as the narrator previously described her δέλτος as 'peeking out' (προκύπτουσιν, 2.6.2) from under her arm. In addition, by explicitly mentioning Thyamis' fear that she will be 'stolen away' (ἀφαιρεθῆναι), Thisbe opens up the possibility of rescue. Unable to even 'peek out' from her cell, she longs for 'someone' (τινός), implicitly Cnemon, to come and take her away. By casting herself as a 'damsel in distress', Thisbe downplays her own agency and asks Cnemon to see her in a new and different light—no longer a deceitful instigator of malevolent plots but, rather, a vulnerable woman in need of rescue.

Thisbe's address to Cnemon is urgent and immediate: she tells him that *this* (τήνδε) is the tenth day that she has been on *this* (ταύτην) island, captured by

39. Reardon (1991), 97–126, and Létoublon (1993), 175–80.

bandits in *this* (τῆδε) place. For these references to make sense, Cnemon must imagine himself sharing time and space with Thisbe, able to understand what each deictic reference means. Cnemon has been entirely unaware of Thisbe's presence among the bandits yet, through her letter, he is encouraged to review his experiences with the knowledge that Thisbe has been close, similarly imprisoned in this place at this time. Again, Thisbe aims to both acknowledge and collapse the gap between herself and Cnemon, suggesting that even though he was unaware of it, she has been near to him for some time.

Thisbe now moves the action forward, writing:

ἀλλ' ἐγὼ σε θεῶν τινος ἐνδόντος καὶ εἶδον, ὃ δέσποτα, παριόντα καὶ ἐγνώρισα καὶ τήνδε σοι τὴν δέλτον διὰ τῆς συνοίκου πρεσβύτιδος λάθρα διεπεμψάμην, τῷ καλῷ καὶ Ἑλληνι καὶ φίλῳ τοῦ ἄρχοντος ἐγχειρίζειν φράσσασα. ἐξελοῦ δὴ με χειρῶν ληστρικῶν καὶ ὑπόδεξαι τὴν σαυτοῦ θεραπαινίδα· καὶ εἰ μὲν βούλει, σῶζε μαθὼν ὡς ἂ μὲν ἀδικεῖν ἔδοξα βιασθεῖσα, ἂ δὲ τετιμώρημαι τὴν σοὶ πολεμίαν ἐκούσα διεπραξάμην.

(*Aeth.* 2.10.3)

But, by the grace of some god, I saw you walking past, master, and I recognized you and I sent you this tablet in secret, through an old woman who dwells with me, telling her to put it in the hands of the handsome Greek friend of the leader of the bandits. Save me from the hands of the bandits and receive your servant! And if you want, save me knowing that the wrongs which I seem to have committed I did because I was compelled, but the vengeance I took upon your enemy I did willingly.

When Thisbe stresses that it was 'by the grace of some god' that she 'recognized' Cnemon as he passed by her prison cell, she suggests that a combination of divine intervention and timely recognition has granted her this chance for salvation. As Silvia Montiglio demonstrates, the combination of divine providence and recognition of the beloved are defining forces of the ancient novels.⁴⁰ In the *Aethiopica*, an aura of divine fortune presides over Charicleia and Theagenes' first encounter, which occurs during the performance of a ritual at Delphi, and Heliodorus' protagonists are distinguished in part by their religiosity—their deep commitment to a specific and reverent relationship with the divine.⁴¹ Here, Thisbe draws together those two elements (divine grace and recognition) to mark a potential turning point in her narrative—the arrival of a potential hero and lover. Thisbe also intends to recruit a friendly supporting character

40. Montiglio (2013). See also Sandy (1982), 50–6, on divine agency in Heliodorus.

41. See Zeitlin (2008), 103–7, with further bibliography. Chew (2007) shows how Heliodorus' engagement with reading, writing, and religion offers another important way in which the *Aethiopica* opens itself up to multiple modes of interpretation and analysis.

and rely upon a 'secret' (λάθρα) plan to convey her words to Cnemon; such subterfuge is also a standard part of the Greek romance.⁴²

Thisbe further resorts to flirtation and flattery, identifying Cnemon as the 'handsome Greek friend' (τῷ καλῷ καὶ Ἑλληνι) of Thyamis. By stressing that Cnemon is both attractive and 'Greek', she further interpellates him as the male protagonist of a typical Greek romantic novel, begging him to take up the role of hero to her heroine.⁴³ Her use of imperatives (ἐξελοῦ, ὑπόδεξαι) forges an immediate link between reading and action.

Thisbe also calls attention to the δέλτος itself, 'this tablet' (τήνδε σοι τὴν δέλτον). By embedding her address to Cnemon (σοι) within this reference, she highlights how, if Cnemon is reading the text, he now possesses the object upon which she has inscribed her fears, hopes, and longings. She further stresses the physical transfer of the δέλτος by saying that she told the old woman to 'put it in [Cnemon's] hands' (ἐγχειρίζειν)—the place where it now, finally, rests, even if the transfer did not occur as Thisbe intended. Her emphasis on the tablet's physical presence continues to underscore the connection between the text and the body of its author. Thisbe will later express her willingness to be slain 'by Cnemon's hands' (ὕπὸ χειρῶν, 2.10.4). Her desire for physical contact with him is encoded within the tablet itself, which eventually becomes an extension of her body itself in death.

Thisbe ends her letter with a command, a wish, and a claim:

εἰ δὲ ἔχει σέ τις ἀμετάβλητος ὀργή, κέχρησο ταύτη κατ' ἐμοῦ πρὸς ὁ
βούλει· μόνον ὑπὸ σέ γενοίμην εἰ καὶ τεθνάναι δεοί· βέλτιον γὰρ ὑπὸ
χειρῶν ἀνηρῆσθαι τῶν σῶν καὶ κηδείας μεταλαβεῖν Ἑλληνικῆς ἢ
θανάτου βαρύτεραν ζῶην καὶ φίλτρον βαρβαρικὸν ἔχθρας ἀνιαρό-
τερον τὴν Ἀττικὴν ἀνέχεσθαι.

(*Aeth.* 2.10.4)

But if some unalterable anger has come over you, use this anger against me for whatever you wish. I wish only to be possessed by you, even if I must die. For it is better to be slain by your hands and to receive Greek burial rites than to endure a life worse than death and the love of a barbarian—a thing more painful for me, an Attic woman, than hatred.

When Thisbe claims that a sexual relationship with an Egyptian bandit would be 'worse than death' and 'more painful than hatred', she echoes the sentiments expressed by Charicleia at the start of the novel. In the first book of the

42. Charicleia and Theagenes, for example, make use of code names (e.g., *Aeth.* 5.5.1f.) and repeatedly pretend to be brother and sister; see further Létoublon (1993), 151–3, and Wasdin (2019). On the particular role of old women in the Greek novels, see Haynes (2003), 135.

43. As Whitmarsh (2008b) shows, the expectation that hero and heroine be 'Greek' (as in the other Greek novels) is itself problematized by the *Aethiopia*.

Aethiopica, when she and Theagenes are themselves captured by the Egyptian bandits, Charicleia cries:

εἰ δέ με γνώσεται τις αἰσχρῶς, ἦν μηδέπω μηδὲ Θεαγένης, ἐγὼ μὲν
ἀγχόνῃ προλήψομαι τὴν ὕβριν, καθαρὰν ἑμαυτὴν ὡσπερ φυλάττω καὶ
μέχρι θανάτου φυλάξασα.

(*Aeth.* 1.8.3)

If someone is about to have his way with me—which not even Theagenes has done—I will prevent the insult by hanging myself, preserving myself as pure as I now preserve myself, even to the point of death.

Yet where Charicleia emphasizes the preservation of her virginity (καθαρὰν ἑμαυτὴν), Thisbe stresses her desire to avoid a relationship with a ‘barbarian’, a non-Greek man (βαρβαρικόν). Thisbe’s abhorrence of sexual violation writ large fits within the broader patterns governing the self-presentation of novelistic heroines, but she expresses a desire for ethnic, rather than specifically sexual, purity.⁴⁴ This makes sense insofar as Thisbe has no plausible claim to chastity as such: her prior relationship with Cnemon is only one part of her varied sexual past.⁴⁵ But by constructing herself as subject to sexual threat of a more specific kind, Thisbe is able to recast herself in the role of (sexually) imperiled heroine, and beg Cnemon to take up the role of valiant hero.⁴⁶

Thisbe concludes her letter with a striking erotic provocation. She tells Cnemon: ‘if some unalterable anger [or passion] has come over you, use this against me in whatever way you wish’ (εἰ δὲ ἔχει σέ τις ἀμετάβλητος ὀργή, κέχρησο ταύτῃ κατ’ ἐμοῦ πρὸς ὃ βούλει, 2.10.4). She chooses a word for anger, ὀργή, that evokes a strong sense of passion, including sexual passion. While it is primarily used to refer to feelings of anger or wrath, it can also describe a ‘mood’ more broadly, or a lustful or desirous impulse specifically.⁴⁷ Aristotle, discussing desire for vengeance, defines ὀργή as a ‘desire, accompanied by pain, for a perceived act of vengeance on account of a perceived slight’ (ἔστω δὲ ὀργή ὄρεξις μετὰ λύπης τιμωρίας φαινομένης διὰ φαινομένην ὀλιγωρίαν, *Rhet.* 1378a31–3). Danielle Allen situates Aristotle’s definition within a Greek literary tradition that exploits both the erotic and the wrathful aspects of ὀργή; Pindar, for

44. On chastity and the heroines of the Greek novels, see further Konstan (1994), Haynes (2003), 44–80, and Lefteratou (2018).

45. On Thisbe’s sexuality, see Morgan (1989), esp. 108: ‘the relationships actually mentioned in [the *Aethiopica*] are only the tip of Thisbe’s sexual iceberg’, and Haynes (2003), 128f.

46. It is striking that Thisbe (marginalized by gender, class, and occupation) mobilizes a kind of ethnic or racial hierarchy against the Egyptian bandits here. While further exploration of such hierarchies and intersections in the *Aethiopica* is beyond the scope of this article, they are clearly a central concern of the novel; see Whitmarsh (2011), esp. 157, wherein the author highlights links between sexual aggression and cultural identity that may well lurk behind Thisbe’s comments here.

47. LSJ s.v. ὀργή, cf. also LSJ s.v. ὀργάω II (to swell with lust, desire), and Beekes (2009), 1097.

example, uses it to describe Apollo's 'sweet passion' (μείλιχος ὄργα, *Pyth.* 9.43) for Cyrene, and it comes into modern English as the root of 'orgy' and 'orgasm'.⁴⁸ Thisbe imagines that Cnemon has strong feelings for her (positive, negative, or some combination thereof) and she invites him to vent his 'impulses' against her—in 'whatever way [he] wishes'. Aristotle's formulation of 'desire, accompanied by pain' (ὄρεξις μετὰ λύπης) effectively describes the relationship that Thisbe envisions here.

Thisbe further claims that she wishes only to be 'possessed by' or 'subject to' Cnemon (ὕπὸ σὲ γενοίμην), 'even if' it means she 'must die' (εἰ καὶ τεθνάναι δέοι, 2.10.4). She implies that Cnemon wants to harm, even murder, her, and she reframes this potential hostility as a fulfillment of her alleged desire for contact with him. Whether or not this desire is 'genuine' is beside the point; Thisbe has previously succeeded in convincing Cnemon that she is in love with him. When she expresses a longing for contact with Cnemon here, I am suggesting that we read it as part of her strategic attempt to seduce him once again for her own personal gain.

Thisbe adds that she is even willing to be 'slain by [Cnemon's] hands' (ὕπὸ χειρῶν ἀνηρῆσθαι τῶν σῶν). She nestles the verbal action here (ἀνηρῆσθαι) within an emphatic repetition of her reference to Cnemon's hands (ὕπὸ χειρῶν...τῶν σῶν); as I noted above, she previously stressed her desire to see her tablet 'reach [Cnemon's] hands' (ἐγγχειρίζειν, 2.10.3). In that earlier passage, Thisbe also commanded Cnemon to 'save her' or 'take her out of' the 'hands of the bandits' (ἔξελοῦ δὴ με χειρῶν ληστρικῶν), again employing the hands as an image of possession and control. On the one hand, the logic of Thisbe's final sentence is clear: better to be killed by a fellow Greek than to live as the slave of a foreign bandit. But beneath that ostensibly chaste claim (death before sexual violation) runs a current of implied longing for Cnemon himself, made manifest as a willingness, even a desire, to suffer eroticized violence. Charicleia is willing to live or die, so long as she remains 'pure' (καθαράν); Thisbe claims that she is willing to live or die, so long as she does so 'under' (ὑπό) Cnemon's power.

Thisbe strives to seduce Cnemon into rescuing her by teasing him: provoking his curiosity about Demainete's death and insisting that he must meet with her to find out the details. She also flatters him, calling him a 'handsome Greek man' (τῷ καλῷ καὶ Ἑλληνι, 2.10.3), and beseeches him to take up the role of valiant hero to her imperiled heroine. She concludes by offering her body to him for physical abuse, expressing a willingness to be possessed by him that suggestively blends the violent with the erotic. This striking combination of sexual

48. Allen (2000), 54. See also Konstan (2006), 41–8, who observes how Aristotle conceives of anger as an emotion that is both painful (because of the original slight) and pleasurable (because of the possibility of vengeance). The relationship between 'anger' (ὄργη) and 'vengeance' (τιμωρία, a concept that Thisbe also invokes at 2.10.3: τιμώρημα) is also an important theme in Attic forensic oratory, cf. Allen (2004) and Konstan (2006), 66–8.

allure and physical violence also emerges, across the extant Greek novels, in vivid descriptions of heroines suffering peril and pain.⁴⁹ As Kathryn Chew observes, Thyamis' murder of Thisbe, whom he believes to be Charicleia, is constructed as a 'vicarious rape', wherein the 'brigand substitutes intercourse with his sword for the real thing'.⁵⁰ These descriptions invite their readers to take perverse pleasure in the vulnerability of the beautiful heroine.⁵¹ Thisbe's letter goes one step further and urges Cnemon to inflict violence upon her (κέχρησο, 'use', 2.10.4).

Thisbe's letter, therefore, both recalls and subverts the expectations of the Greek novel as genre. On one hand, she narrates a situation in which an attractive woman in peril calls upon an also-attractive man for aid, setting up the conditions for a rescue that may involve helpful supporting characters, subterfuge, and divine providence. These would certainly seem to be the raw ingredients for a Greek romance plot. On the other hand, Thisbe lacks the noble birth and sexual restraint that define the heroines of the Greek novels (especially Charicleia), and her relationship with Cnemon, while deeply erotic, is not 'romantic' in any sense of the word.

Given that Cnemon receives Thisbe's letter in the presence of her corpse, it is impossible to know how he (as a character) might have reacted to its seductive rhetoric had it been transmitted as intended. He is clearly wary of the message: after reading it, he says 'I am afraid that...you [Thisbe] have come across the sea to stage another Attic tragedy, even in Egypt, against me' (δέδοικα μή... σὺ δὲ καὶ διαπόντιος ἦκεις ἐτέραν καθ' ἡμῶν σκηνὴν Ἀττικὴν καὶ ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ τραγωδῆσουσα, 2.11.2). While he is thus mindful of Thisbe's history of treachery and harm, he also voices this fear as a direct second-person address to Thisbe (σέ, σὺ), 'lying dead' before him (σε καὶ κεμένην, 2.11.2). He responds to and mirrors the immediacy and direct address of her letter itself, even as he remains suspicious of its content.

But what might Thisbe's letter offer to the reader of the *Aethiopica*? Such a reader, mindful of literary models that stress the potential dangers of women's letters in general and attuned to the likelihood of treachery from Thisbe specifically, would surely have every reason to interpret this letter critically. Like Cnemon himself, a reader might well wonder what Thisbe is up to now. At the same time, the circumstances of the letter's reception render such readings rather beside the point. Elizabeth Freeman observes that epistolary fiction creates space for 'a plot element to be obsolete (that is, already undone by

49. On the erotics of violence in the Greek novels, see further Chew (2003), Morales (2004), 156–220, Scippacercola (2010), and Briand (2018).

50. Chew (2003), 138, discussing *Aeth.* 1.30f..

51. As Chew (2003), 137f., puts it, 'heroines and martyrs endure all sorts of titillating tortures that function as foreplay for the ultimate consummation, which torturers are never able to perform. This act is reserved for heroes or God, and always occurs modestly "off-camera". Thus virtuous readers can allow themselves the thrill of enjoying these tales without guilt because all's well that ends well, does it not?'

another event) even as it is revealed...many letters are dead on arrival'.⁵² In this case, it is not only Thisbe's letter but Thisbe herself who is 'dead on arrival'; the intentions behind her letter are materially irrelevant to internal and external readers alike. Her letter, therefore, might also serve a more interesting and imaginative role as a fragment of a novel that might have been—an invitation to the reader to reflect upon the allure of Thisbe and the stories to which she gestures. Her δέλτος, by outlining a 'novel' featuring herself and Cnemon, creates space for us to consider what such a narrative might have to offer. Our understanding of the value of this letter, therefore, should come not from its limited import as a plot device, but from its significance as a model of romantic fiction itself.

Reading Thisbe

As a potential model of novelistic composition, Thisbe's letter has several striking qualities. In its brevity, it is utterly unlike the long and complicated *Aethiopica* itself. Deidre Lynch, in a discussion of eighteenth-century English novels, suggests that 'voluminous' texts (long, involved novels) create a distinctive intimacy between authors and readers, a familiarity born of 'protracted unfolding'.⁵³ That image resonates with the experience of reading a book roll as well, and perhaps especially a book roll of the *Aethiopica*: a novel whose plot the Byzantine scholar Michael Psellos described as akin to a coiled snake.⁵⁴ Thisbe's δέλτος, however, requires no such unfolding. It can be grasped easily in its reader's hands, and the events that it narrates, while reminiscent of the generic features of the Greek novel (separated lovers, bandits, deception, divine providence, recognition, and rescue), are presented in a straightforward and linear fashion. Morgan argues that the *Aethiopica* in general invites slow reading and offers prolonged pleasure, as the mysteries of the text are revealed to the reader gradually, taking as long to unfold as it takes for Charicleia and Theagenes to finally marry.⁵⁵ Thisbe's 'novel', by contrast, does not rely upon the deferral of pleasure: she moves quickly through a summary of relevant events and then calls upon her reader to act immediately and decisively (ἐξέλοῦ, ὑπόδεξαι, σῶζε, 2.10.3). She makes herself available to Cnemon without any conditions or complications beyond her need for rescue. Thisbe and Cnemon have already had sex—she is not offering him an unknown or hitherto unavailable pleasure. Rather, she imagines a rapid progression towards the renewal of their erotic relationship.

52. Freeman (2010), 97, speaking specifically of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

53. Lynch (2015), 179.

54. Wilson (1996), 175. Cf. also Colonna (1938), 363–5 = Test. XII. On the question of whether the *Aethiopica* originally circulated in the form of a book roll or codex, see ní Mheallaigh (2014), 198f.

55. Morgan (2013).

Thisbe also hints at a violently passionate sexual relationship when she invites Cnemon to ‘use his ὀργή against [her] in whatever way [he wishes]’ (ὀργή, κέχρησο ταύτη κατ’ ἐμοῦ πρὸς ὃ βούλει, 2.10.4). As I mentioned above, the thrill of eroticized violence lurks throughout the Greek novels, though it is generally enacted by villains, not heroes. By imagining Cnemon as both rescuing hero and tormenting villain, Thisbe’s ‘novel’ collapses the distinctions between the two and imagines a narrative in which a distinct kind of erotic relationship might emerge. Indeed, Whitmarsh observes that the threat of sexual violence posed by pirates and bandits in the ancient novel represents an erotic model opposed, in both romantic and literary-aesthetic terms, to the normative framework of the protagonists’ romance: such figures threaten a sexual act that is ‘a violation, in every sense, of the principles of deferral and intricate plot management upon which the romance rests’.⁵⁶ Yet here, Thisbe volunteers herself as the object of angry, potentially violent sexual action, creating imaginative space for the consensual fulfillment of rape-fantasy.⁵⁷ Thisbe’s provocative offer to Cnemon—‘take me, in whatever way you wish!’—could thus be the prologue to a very different kind of novel.

Thisbe’s ‘novel’, like the *Aethiopica* itself, gives its a reader a glimpse into the intimate relationship between a man and woman, inviting the reader to share in the experience of desire for a beautiful heroine and imagine—but only imagine—its consummation. Yet unlike the *Aethiopica*, which offers a winding exploration of deferred pleasure and suspended consummation, Thisbe casts Cnemon and herself as hero and heroine who are already intimately known to one another. The loss of Charicleia’s virginity is shrouded in secrecy and placed under a series of crucial conditions, but Thisbe is clearly not a virgin, and her availability and sexual experience generate at least part of her distinctive appeal.⁵⁸ When she calls upon Cnemon to do ‘whatever he wishes’ (ὃ βούλει, 2.10.4) to her, she opens up the possibility of a novel in which the heroine is not tantalizingly elusive, but eagerly available. If Charicleia represents the allure of a woman who is always saying ‘not yet’, Thisbe is a woman who says ‘yes, now’.

Dimitri Kasprzyk explores how Cnemon functions as a complex and not entirely reliable narrator, whose ‘*Aegyptiaca*’, embedded within Heliodorus’ *Aethiopica*, reveals his failure as a romantic hero in the model of Theagenes.⁵⁹ Identifying an allusive link between Cnemon and Habrocomes, the hero of Xenophon of Ephesus’ novel, Kasprzyk asks whether Cnemon and his story represent,

56. Whitmarsh (2011), 158.

57. In addition to the notes on erotic violence above, see Morales (2008), 52–4, and Whitmarsh (2011), 157–9, on rape-fantasy in the ancient novel. On the modern appeal of such narratives, see Illouz (2014).

58. On the narrative interest of Charicleia’s virginity and its unknowability, see Ormand (2010), 179–92.

59. Kasprzyk (2017).

implicitly, a 'bad novel'.⁶⁰ This intriguing question might also be applied to Thisbe: is one of the 'bad girls' of the *Aethiopica* also the author of a 'bad novel'? It is worth recalling, here, the links that I discussed above between Thisbe's text and her own body. Heliodorus, by combining Thisbe and her δέλτος into a collective that can 'say such things' (τοιαῦτα μὲν ἡ Θίσβη καὶ ἡ δέλτος ἔφραζεν, 2.11.1), invites us to see continuity between the allure of Thisbe herself and the persuasive potential of her words. Thisbe's brutal death could certainly be read as an authorial message about the wages of a promiscuous and devious life.⁶¹ By extension, we might see the divergences between the convoluted *Aethiopica* and her brief missive as a programmatic statement linking sexual ethics with literary aesthetics: just as Charicleia's chastity is glorified by contrast with the promiscuity of women like Thisbe, so too might the prolonged and deferred pleasures of the *Aethiopica* itself be promoted over and above the simple narration and immediate gratification offered by Thisbe's δέλτος. Yet I believe that Heliodorus' *Aethiopica* is too complicated and too playful to submit to such a simplistic reading. Rather, I would suggest that Thisbe's letter is a revealing example of the indulgence in deviance and digression that animates this novel in a particularly striking way.

Thisbe's Remains

At this juncture, it is helpful to return once more to Whitmarsh's claim that 'identification with alternative desires is part of the experience of romance'.⁶² In setting up this argument, Whitmarsh observes that:

The [Greek] romances dramatise not only the dominance of the marriage plot but also *the processes* whereby that dominance is achieved; they show us the losers in love, the narrative roads not taken, the possible alternatives. They view the centrality of normative ideology both, as Althusser would have it, from the inside and without.⁶³

Thisbe is undoubtedly one of the 'losers' of the *Aethiopica*, and the novelistic qualities of her letter gesture to a 'narrative [road] not taken'. The sense of personal and literary failure embodied by Thisbe also resonates deeply with the work of an influential set of twentieth- and twenty-first-century queer theorists, who

60. Kasprzyk (2017), 172: 'Au moment où il prend congé de l'aventure, Cnémon devient le double d'Habrocomès, le héros d'un roman auquel *les Ethiopiques* font plusieurs fois écho sous un mode ironique: peut-être, au yeux d'Héliodore, un mauvais roman.'

61. See Morgan (1989), Anderson (1997), 316, and Montiglio (2013), 109f. and n.13. Hunter (1998b), 42–4, however, suggests that Heliodorus leaves the ultimate judgment of Thisbe and her character somewhat more open to interpretation.

62. Whitmarsh (2011), 176.

63. Whitmarsh (2011), 141, emphasis in original.

interrogate both social and literary ‘marriage plots’ to expose the cracks and the alternatives embedded within them. Heather Love, for example, calls upon critics to refuse ‘to write off the most vulnerable, the least presentable, and all the dead’, modeling a mode of literary interpretation that finds meaning and value in shameful, melancholic, and backward-looking representations of same-sex desire.⁶⁴ Proposing that ‘the art of losing [is] a particularly queer art’, Love invites us to pay careful attention to characters, plots, and texts that are broken, interrupted, and lost.⁶⁵

Thisbe, to be sure, is not ‘queer’ in the strictest sense. Yet she nonetheless represents a woman who deviates from the normative model of sexual relations embodied by Charicleia and Theagenes, a figure whose erotic impulses tend to generate alternative (and unhappy) stories. By situating Thisbe in relation to theoretical work that locates ‘queerness’ along a spectrum of practices and identities that run counter to dominant models of erotic and kin relations, we can better illuminate her importance to the *Aethiopica*.⁶⁶ Thisbe gives us a valuable opportunity to pause, to set aside the ‘straight’ narratives with their happy endings, and to ponder the discarded stories instead.⁶⁷

Through her violent death, Thisbe is certainly discarded, ‘repressed’: the future that she rhetorically constructs for herself and Cnemon, wherein he takes up the role of hero to her heroine, is not to be. Yet her letter also asks us to imagine, however briefly, what a novel starring Thisbe, an enslaved sex worker rather than a noble maiden, might look like. Thisbe’s δέλτος suggests that its heroine would seek not to delay and defer the possession of her body, but instead invite the hero (and imaginatively, the reader) to proceed rapidly from desire to passionate, even violent, possession and consummation. This story, it appears, would offer sexual immediacy and dispense with lofty professions of true love and enduring expectations of fidelity. Thisbe’s novel, in other words, would be quite unlike the *Aethiopica* itself.

But perhaps we, as modern readers, can better imagine the possibilities of Thisbe through the work of comparison. Thisbe’s ‘novel’, I would suggest, might look something like Groff’s *Fates and Furies*, which I described at the outset. In the second half of her novel, Groff exposes her protagonist Mathilde’s unsettling history of violence and deception, but also describes the financial and emotional anxieties that shape her decisions to use sex as means of gaining

64. Love (2007), quote at 30.

65. Love (2007), 24. On the queerness of failure and loss, see also Halberstam (2011).

66. See, e.g., Cohen (1997), Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz (2005), and Goldhill (2016).

67. For the sense that ‘straight’ lives and relationships possess a ‘plot’ denied to ‘queer’ ones, see further Sedgwick (1997), 26f., Berlant (1998), Halberstam (2005), 1–21, and Ahmed (2006), 65–107. Cohen (1997) considers how the heterosexual relationships of poor (often Black and Latinx) people might, within the context of modern American political hierarchies, be understood as ‘queer’, insofar as they differ from privileged models of marital and familial structure; see esp. Cohen (1997), 455–7. It might be useful to think about Thisbe’s status, as an enslaved woman and later sex worker, as comparably ‘queer’ relative to the heroines idealized in the Greek novels.

security and control. She further explores the complex feelings of need, shame, and arousal that accompany Mathilde's experiences of sexual humiliation.⁶⁸ Groff's work thus gives us one possible vision of what Thisbe's text, transformed into a novel, might look like.⁶⁹ Such a novel, of course, could hardly be reconciled to the hierarchies of class, gender, and sexual relations that define the surviving Greek romances. Yet it is worth stressing that Heliodorus' *Aethiopica* is capacious enough to contain at least a hint of Thisbe's unrealized novel.

In an analysis of the first scene of the *Aethiopica*, Mario Telò argues that Heliodorus 'depicts his novel as emerging from the ruins of the Homeric past', tracing how the dead bodies and discarded objects of the novel's opening tableau represent the preexisting literary elements from which Heliodorus constructs his own narrative.⁷⁰ In this light, I wonder if we might not see Heliodorus as equally attuned to the potential of his own ruins and remains—the imaginative fodder supplied by the unrealized stories and dead-ends of the *Aethiopica* itself. If we refuse to 'write off' Thisbe, we gain an opportunity to consider the possibilities and pleasures of a different kind of novel.

Conclusion: Persinna's Novel

Thisbe is not the only female author embedded in this novel. As I discussed above, Morgan stresses the value of Persinna's letter to Charicleia as a model for the literary aesthetics of the *Aethiopica*.⁷¹ While this maternal letter is obviously central to the *Aethiopica* as a whole, Thisbe's letter to Cnemon is the first example of epistolary communication in this novel. Its provocations thus prepare us to approach Persinna's embroidered *ταινία* with an eye toward the possibility that an embedded letter might be a site for the exploration of sexual desires and pleasures otherwise excluded from Heliodorus' narrative. Of course, the Ethiopian queen who urges her daughter to 'honor σωφοσύνη' (τιμῶσα σωφοσύνην, 4.8.7) would seem to have little in common with a treacherous Athenian courtesan. While Thisbe addresses her *δέλτος* to a man whom she would like to seduce, Persinna writes to and for her daughter, expecting no personal gain beyond the faint solace of knowing that Charicleia might one day be able to better understand her origins.

68. Cf., e.g., Groff (2015), 357.

69. This is not to suggest that Groff (2015) is the only possible parallel. The generic gestures in Thisbe's *δέλτος* (especially her construction of Cnemon as a 'master' who might want to both rescue and violently possess her) are also akin to the tropes of gothic romance, on which see further Illouz (2014), 33. My larger point is that paying attention to the erotic and metaliterary strategies of romantic novels from other times and cultures can, despite the obvious differences in audience and context, enhance our appreciation of Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*.

70. Telò (2011), quote at 601.

71. Morgan (2013).

Yet Persinna's letter also contains an account of the triangulated sexual act that led to Charicleia's conception. As Persinna explains, Charicleia was born light-skinned because, while Persinna 'was having sex with her husband [Hydaspes]' (παρὰ τὴν ὀμιλίαν τὴν πρὸς τὸν ἄνδρα, 4.8.5), a 'wall painting' in their bed-chamber 'presented' her with 'Andromeda, naked on all sides, for she was just being led down from the rock by Perseus' (τὴν Ἀνδρομέδαν ἢ γραφὴ παρασχούσα καὶ πανταχόθεν ἐπιδείξασα γυμνὴν, ἄρτι γὰρ αὐτὴν ἀπὸ τῶν πετρῶν ὁ Περσεὺς κατήγευ, 4.8.5), and thus Charicleia acquired a striking resemblance to Andromeda.

I have argued elsewhere that the tripartite nature of this erotic moment, from which Charicleia emerges as the child of Persinna, Hydaspes, and Andromeda, complicates the idealized symmetry embodied by Charicleia and Theagenes; while the *Aethiopica* as a whole valorizes the inviolability of the male–female pair, Charicleia's very conception opens up the possibility of more complex, yet also generative, forms of desire, sexual action, and creation.⁷² The multiplication of sexual roles that occurs at the moment of Charicleia's conception corresponds with the 'multiplication of perspectives' evident across the *Aethiopica*.⁷³ Thisbe's letter, with its alternative narration of erotic consummation, offers another valuable example of Heliodorus' interest in writing romance through a multiplicity of perspectives and positions. Like the modern novels described at the outset, Heliodorus' romance playfully and provocatively exposes the fissures in its own idealized narrative. Moreover, while Thisbe's potential as author and heroine is foreclosed by her early and violent death, Persinna's account of the triangulated, even 'queer', erotics of Charicleia's conception is central to the construction of the *Aethiopica* itself. Persinna's letter, like Thisbe's, invites the reader to imagine an alternative erotic and creative order—but in that case, one that generates the *Aethiopica* itself.

In addition, the significance of Persinna's letter might also prompt us to reflect further on the generative potential of Thisbe and her δέλος—to appreciate the fertility of Thisbe's literary 'remains'. Morales, drawing upon Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, suggests that we read Charicleia herself as a 'visualizing assemblage', a character composed of the varying and even conflicting female roles (prostitute, priestess, martyr, actress) represented by other women in the novel.⁷⁴ As Morales points out, Cybele refers to Charicleia as a 'little prostitute' (ἐταπίδιον, 7.10.5), an epithet that calls attention to the ways in which Charicleia occasionally resembles Thisbe, the alluring and wily courtesan.⁷⁵ Working in a slightly different vein, Virginia Burrus observes that Charicleia is 'a queer kind

72. Olsen (2012). Cf. also Anderson (1997), 318, on Persinna's letter as 'at once a collage of erotic themes and a chaste narration of chaste activity'.

73. Cf. Olsen (2012), 320. On the 'multiplication of perspectives' as a narrative strategy of Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*, see Whitmarsh and Bartsch (2008), 244f.

74. Morales (2022).

75. Morales (2022), 33f.

of virgin wife', a heroine whose ethnic hybridity and ambiguous sexuality serve to undermine colonial cultural ideology.⁷⁶ As these readings demonstrate, Charicleia is a multifaceted figure: her successful navigation of her own 'marriage plot' is generically inevitable, yet also complex enough to include repeated gestures towards alternative routes. Just as Charicleia embodies the triangulated sexual dynamics of her conception, so too does she incorporate elements (or remnants) of erotic 'alter egos' like Thisbe.

Over the course of his novel, Heliodorus provides his readers with the descriptive tools to envision the daring rescue and passionate possession of the willing Thisbe, the surreal threesome of Persinna, Hydaspes, and Andromeda, and the long-awaited enjoyment of the elusive Charicleia. While there is a tendency to understand the *Aethiopica* as either problematically erotic or ideologically chaste, Thisbe's letter is far better understood as part of a remarkably complex and capacious novel, one that toys with the tension between erotic indulgence and sexual restraint. The windings, digressions, and embedded plots of the *Aethiopica* are not only a distinctive feature of Heliodorus' narrative style. They also expand upon the forms of desire and satisfaction made imaginatively available to its generations of readers.

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76. Burrus (2005), 80.

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