

# Women and Gender in Ancient Religions

Edited by  
STEPHEN P. AHEARNE-KROLL,  
PAUL A. HOLLOWAY  
and JAMES A. KELHOFFER

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zum Neuen Testament*  
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Interdisciplinary Approaches

Edited by

Stephen P. Ahearne-Kroll,  
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## Foreword

The past twenty years or so has seen a healthy blossoming of work on ancient Mediterranean religions – and I especially wish to draw attention to the plural noun with which I ended that phrase: one important advance has been an enhanced appreciation of the fact that ancient Mediterranean religions must be studied in the same way as they were often practiced: in concert with one another. As Carin Green reminds us in her essay in this volume, to do otherwise is to institute a “divide that is utterly false to the subjects themselves.” Several new Program Units at the American Academy of Religion and the Society for Biblical Literature have explicitly set out to address ancient religions from a comparative perspective or to question traditionally acceptable divisions between Judaism and Christianity, Christianity and various paganisms, or within the paganisms (or Christianities and Judaisms for that matter) themselves. Established graduate programs have added comparative requirements to their curricula; newer graduate programs have been founded on the premise that no ancient Mediterranean religion can be studied in isolation from the others.

At about the same time (although, notably, nowhere near as visibly at the AAR and SBL) the importance of understanding *women's* religious experiences, in the ancient world and elsewhere, began to be more keenly appreciated. This brought a new awareness, however, of the difficulties of recreating female experience for any time prior to about the twentieth century. How can we properly dissect the comments of male writers and the artistic creations of male painters and sculptors in order to arrive at some approximation of what it was like to be a female participating in a religious system? How do we read the second-hand cues our texts and artifacts provide, and how do we expunge from ourselves the accumulation of androcentric impressions that we accrue from reading the scholarship of the past few centuries? Although the challenges inherent in these questions have not yet been fully met, certainly there has been progress in recent years, especially in conceptualizing the issues (as Patricia Ahearne-Kroll particularly demonstrates, in this volume, throughout her discussion of *Joseph and Aseneth*).

Interestingly, however, there have been very few attempts to build on these developments by bringing these two areas of inquiry together: few scholars have set out to study the religious lives of ancient Mediterranean women within a comparative context. Thus, the present volume is all the more welcome. Classicists rub elbows with scholars of Judaism and Chris-

tianity; the words of Greek curse tablets, Alexandrian grave epigrams and Roman philosophers are brought cheek to jowl with those of the apostles and church fathers. Many of the essays are comparative in their own right: Loveday Alexander, for instance, shows how in both the Greek novel and the New Testament, religious sites and festivals are the scenes for significant encounters between men and women – but also that the narrative of Acts begins to redefine sacred space so as to include the household, a predominantly female sphere in almost every society. Mary Rose D’Angelo studies the divorce dialogues in Mark 10:2–12 in the context of Julian divorce laws and, more generally, first century Roman political and moral discourse. In addition to this emphasis on *cultural* comparativism, we find attention to comparison amongst genres: Clare Rothschild, for instance, looks at the question of whether medical texts concerning the generation of embryos influenced the Fourth Gospel; in addition to analyzing that issue itself, she offers the important reminder that we must not privilege ancient scientific theories over theories provided by myth, theology or over narrative discourses – all are equally embedded in their cultures. Also welcome is the long overdue attention paid to several topics that engage issues that are vital to both the study of religion and the study of gender construction: Can we identify females in antiquity that can properly be called ‘witches’? asks Radcliffe Edmonds, and if we can, for what sorts of disasters are they blamed? On the same topic, Fritz Graf emphasizes that, whatever the ancient literary portraits of the witch may imply, seldom were such creatures actually identified and charged with crimes.

The brief scope of a Foreword does not allow me to more fully praise the contributions that the authors included here have made to our understanding of ancient religions, ancient women, and the interface between them. But as a final note I must stress how appropriate it is that such a volume found its origin in a conference honoring Adela Yarbro Collins, a scholar who has contributed so much not only to these topics, but to the spirit of comparativism that I have sketched here. In my years of knowing Adela, I have become just as accustomed to meeting her at symposia sponsored by classics programs or ancient history departments, for example, as at conferences on Christianity. Her eagerness to learn more about ancient Mediterranean cultures that span from Bactria to Gibraltar (and for I know, beyond) is an admirable model for her many friends, colleagues, and students, as are her scholarly publications.

*Sarah Iles Johnston, August 2010*

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## List of Abbreviations

All abbreviations follow the abbreviation lists in chapter 8 and the appendices of *SBL Handbook of Style* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999). Any abbreviations not found in this resource are listed in the particular essay where they are used.



## Introduction

The present volume stems from “Women in the Religious and Intellectual Activity of the Ancient Mediterranean World: An Interdisciplinary and International Conference in Honor of Adela Yarbro Collins,” held March 15–17, 2009 at the Methodist Theological School in Ohio and The Ohio State University. The conference featured nineteen papers and eighteen responses from experts in Greek and Roman religion, ancient Judaism, the New Testament, and ancient Christianity from nine countries in North America and Europe, reflecting the laudable, interdisciplinary research program of the honoree. The essays in this volume are, by and large, revised versions of the papers given at the conference, plus a few additional invited essays.<sup>1</sup>

The study of women in the ancient world has made tremendous strides in recent decades. What was at first groundbreaking work in the (male-dominated) world of scholarship has now become integral to a proper understanding of the social, political, economic, religious, and family life of ancient cultures. The study of women in the ancient world was initiated by feminist scholars; now it is embraced by scholars from a wide variety of methodological and hermeneutical perspectives. Thanks to much fine work in this area, we now understand much more thoroughly than in previous generations past the roles that gender constructions, more generally, and women, in particular, played in ancient religion. Earlier scholars passed over these issues for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was a biased view of the (un)importance of women in ancient (and modern) cultures. Taken as a whole, the present collection of essays makes a significant contribution to both expanding and focusing the scholarly community’s understanding of not only ancient women’s religious lives but also ancient religion as a whole.

The book falls into three major sections: Part I: Narrative; Part II: Ritual; Part III: Logos. This delineation should in no way be understood to imply sharp boundaries between the sections. Indeed, the overlapping of certain topics reflects the interconnectedness of the evidence on women and gender in ancient religion. Although the book offers a snapshot of only certain themes and problems on women and gender in antiquity, it illustrates how fascinating and intertwined in-depth studies on the topic can be.

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<sup>1</sup> The original conference program can be found at [www.mtso.edu/collinsconference](http://www.mtso.edu/collinsconference) (on 10 September 2010).

Part I, "Narrative," includes a collection of essays on various narratives that may or may not have women as their central focus but in some way concern issues of gender and women. Loveday Alexander and Patricia D. Ahearne-Kroll look at ancient Greek novels. Alexander's essay, "The Virgin and the Goddess: Women and Religion in the Greek Romance," examines Chariton's *Chareas and Callirhoe*, offering a wide-ranging treatment of the ways that women and religion feature in Greek romances. After plumbing the depths of likely the earliest of the Greek and Roman novels, Alexander studies Luke-Acts, highlighting avenues for further inquiry into early Christian writings in parallel with ancient romances (for example, the way festivals and religious sites offer places of significant encounter between men and women, as well as opportunities for Luke's redefinition of sacred space to include domestic space and the space around the person of Jesus). Patricia Ahearne-Kroll's essay, "The Portrayal of Aseneth in *Joseph and Aseneth*: Women's Religious Experience in Antiquity and the Limitations of Ancient Narratives," also utilizes Chariton to examine the characterization tendencies of this genre. In particular, Ahearne-Kroll studies the characterization of the main protagonist, Aseneth, arguing that because Aseneth is an elite Egyptian convert to Judaism, she does not reflect "real" ancient Jewish women. Aseneth functions similarly to the way that Callirhoe functions in Chariton's aforementioned novel, and the way that characters, in general, function in ancient fiction, namely to communicate the author's favored cultural values and social structures. Aseneth's conversion to worship God the Most High and her royal marriage to Joseph uphold the value of marriage between nobility, communicate that partners in a legitimate marriage must only worship God the Most High, and assert that devotion to God the Most High is the only context in which passion between these partners can flourish. These are not just individual values, but rather form the basis for the success of the civilization.

Mary Rose D'Angelo and James A. Kelhoffer examine the Gospel of Mark. D'Angelo ("Roman Imperial Family Values and the Gospel of Mark: The Divorce Sayings [Mark 10:2–12]") shows how Roman divorce laws and 'family values' illuminate Mark 10:2–12. She argues that Roman social legislation created an ideal of "original, indissoluble marriage comparable to the vision of origins articulated in Mark 10:2–9." As a result, Mark 10:2–9 and 10:13–16 should be understood as "a defense against too radical an understanding of the call to discipleship in 10:17–31," perhaps made even more unusual by the participation of women in the early Jesus movement. Kelhoffer ("A Tale of Two Markan Characterizations: The Exemplary Woman Who Anointed Jesus' Body for Burial (14:3–9) and the Silent Trio Who Fled the Empty Tomb [16:1–8]") examines two contrasting characterizations of women in Mark. First, he argues that the

woman who anoints Jesus' body for burial in 14:3–9 is an exemplary character in Mark, one to be emulated. Yet contrary to many feminist scholars, he argues that the three women at the empty tomb in 16:1–8 offer a negative example of discipleship not unlike that of the hapless Markan disciples.

Turid Karlsen Seim and Clare K. Rothschild examine the birthing metaphor and fatherhood in the Gospel of John. Seim ("Motherhood and the Making of Fathers in Antiquity: Contextualizing Genetics in the Gospel of John") argues that John, following ancient ideas of paternity, sees Jesus' "only-begotten" (μονογενής) status as representing the birth of a child in the absence of a mother through the process of "epigenesis." This process includes the notions that only the male is able generate seed and that this seed provides the active principle of movement and life, whereas the female role is to provide the passive material. In contrast to Seim, Rothschild ("Embryology, Plant Biology, and Divine Generation in the Fourth Gospel") argues that "parthenogenesis" (à la ancient theories of plant generation) is more fitting than epigenesis as a model for John's depiction of the origin and status of Jesus as μονογενής. Parthenogenesis holds that "a female gamete is activated spontaneously on its own without fusion with a male reproductive element or sperm." Rothschild picks up on the language of the mechanisms of parthenogenesis in plants (seed blown by the wind as a possible step) to argue for a similarity of the way πνεῦμα works to generate rebirth in John. From this she extends her argument to other passages in John to make her case for parthenogenesis over epigenesis as the most fitting theory of the generation of the μονογενής Jesus.

Four more essays round out Part I. Using a careful narratological approach to Josephus's *Antiquities*, Jan Willem van Henten ("Blaming the Women: Women at Herod's Court in Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities* 15.23–231") argues that Josephus depicts negatively Alexandra and Salome, in order to portray Herod more favorably, even tragically, for Herod's loss of Mariamme at the hands of Salome. Robert Doran ("To Bear or Not to Bear: The Argument for Abstinence in the Greek *Gospel of the Egyptians*") presents the four sayings in the *Greek Gospel of the Egyptians* as Christian testimonia used by Julius Cassianus and reinterpreted by Clement of Alexandria. The sayings originate from an encratite group that advocates sexual continence but does not completely reject marriage. Doran goes on to argue for the way that the sayings present the status of women in contrast to prevailing cultural mores: "What is interesting is that the argument in the *Greek Gospel of the Egyptians* completely overturns the sense of subordination of women, and rather places them on an equal footing with men. . . . Such a . . . stance in the second century would thus be an argument for the equal status and function of women in early Christianity."



Candida R. Moss (“Blood Ties: Martyrdom, Motherhood, and Family in the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*”) examines the presentation of family rejection in the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*. She argues (a) that when placed in their larger martyrological context, Perpetua’s actions are quite commensurate with attitudes towards the family in martyrologies focusing on men; and (b) the martyrs’ acts do not “promote the rejection of the idea of family so much as they promote its reconfiguration.” Finally, Jeremy F. Hultin (“A New Web for Arachne and a New Veil for the Temple: Women and Weaving from Athena to the Virgin Mary”) notes the insights on weaving in ancient Greece as articulated in Sarah Iles Johnston’s analysis of the myth of Arachne, and he highlights narratives in early Christianity where weaving functions similarly. Hultin demonstrates that the presence of the main concerns of weaving in ancient Greece (“weaving as an activity connected to the transition from girlhood to womanhood; a skill showing female readiness for marriage and childbirth; a craft representing the joining together of disparate bodies so as to produce something new”) are also present in the depiction of Mary in the *Protevangelium of James*, symbolizing the new life built in weaving the chaste person asexually to Christ.

Part II, “Ritual,” contains four essays on ancient magic and one on a little known Roman festival that involved women and goddesses in the protection of the city. Fritz Graf’s essay, “Victimology: Or, How to Blame Someone for an Untimely Death,” examines grave inscriptions that attribute untimely death to sorcery, which is a neglected category of evidence regarding magical practices in the ancient Mediterranean world. He finds that relatively few (about 1000) grave inscriptions describe the death of the deceased, but of these under 5% attribute the death to some sort of *pharmakeia*. Because the accusations “remained always on the level of suspicion, rumor, and gossip,” formal accusations of sorcery and witchcraft were actually quite rare. Also, the one accused of *pharmakeia* usually is not named and has no more frequent association with women than with men: “Compared to the stereotype of the female witch that we find in Greek and Roman literature, the reality ‘on the ground’ is much more complex.” Graf’s essay offers a point of departure for Radcliffe Edmonds’s contribution, “Blaming the Witch: Some Reflections on Unexpected Death.” Edmonds discusses the social dimensions of witchcraft in ancient Greek and Roman cultures and concludes that “within the range of possible causes [of untimely death], either the specification of one – a witch or a poison – or the emphasis on the uncertainty itself can serve as a strategy for dealing with the social situation.” In other words, the accusation of specific or general witchcraft is one way that ancient Greek and Roman societies coped with the tragedy and shock of untimely death.

Stephen J. Davis (“Forget Me Not: Memory and the Female Subject in Ancient Binding Spells”) finds in the *Greek Magical Papyri* a group of spells related to memory and the manipulation of memory. He argues for the connection between memory and the spells’ ritual manipulations of the female body. Responding to Davis, Matt Jackson-McCabe questions the posited connection between memory and the female body. Instead, he suggests that “Greek love spells’ interest in the anatomy of their victims may be better understood in connection with their eroticism than with their references to memory.” He goes on to examine the common charge of magic in early Christian devotion and suggests a connection with the eroticism of magic as a possible reason for the accusation.

This section’s final essay deals with an ancient Roman ritual designed to guard and secure the boundaries of the city. Carin M. C. Green (“Holding the Line: Women, Ritual, and the Protection of Rome”) investigates the Roman goddesses Sessia, Messia, and Tutilina, highlighting their role in protecting the sacred boundary (*pomerium*) of the city. She also looks at the link between Tutilina and the Festival of the Handmaidens, arguing that the festival, in part, honors the three goddesses who protect the boundaries of the city. She further argues that the festival can be characterized as a Roman combat myth, thus connecting the study of this ritual with Adela Yarbro Collins’s work on Revelation 12.<sup>2</sup> If one thinks of the festival as a combat myth, “the women are warriors for the city. It is about enemies and possible disaster, and women as the champions who save Rome.”

Part III, “Logos,” contains discursive presentations on a variety of issues around gender and women in ancient thinkers with respect to religion. Paul A. Holloway considers two of Seneca’s consolatory essays to women, *Ad Marciam* and *Ad Helviam matrem*, where Seneca “is forced to work out in practice the Stoic theory that woman are by nature equal to men in their capacity for virtue, although by training they are much their inferiors.” Despite the philosopher’s best efforts to present women as by nature equal to men in their capacity for virtue, “Seneca powerfully attests to elite Roman gender prejudice.”

Next are two essays dealing with Paul and his legacy. First, Christopher N. Mount (“Religious Experience, the Religion of Paul, and Women in Pauline Churches”) discusses Paul’s letters with respect to the slippery category of religious experience. He argues that the criterion for ecclesial authority in the undisputed writings of Paul is based upon a person’s possession by the spirit of the crucified Jesus. Ecclesial authority is thus not based upon gender but upon one’s status as possessed by Christ crucified.

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<sup>2</sup> See Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation* (HDR 9; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976).

Focusing on the social dimensions of this phenomenon, he argues, “‘Religious experience’ is an apologetic category for the essence of religion, a category that depends entirely on the mythology of those who believe.” Instead of focusing on religious experience, scholars of ancient religion should examine the discourses constructed about how deities interact with humans, including women. Second, Outi Lehtipuu (“The Example of Thecla and the Example(s) of Paul: Disputing Women’s Roles in Early Christianity”) examines the “competing views of how the legacy of Paul was understood and used in the second Christian century to justify the role and place of women.” In particular, Lehtipuu argues for a multiplicity of second-century perspectives regarding how Paul’s views of women are tied to arguments about marriage, opportunities for teaching and leadership, celibacy, and submission to male church leaders.

In an essay entitled, “*Sōphrosynē* for Women in Pythagorean Texts,” Annette B. Huizenga builds on the work of Abraham Malherbe and Helen North with regard to how women were to embody *sōphrosynē* in the ancient world. She analyzes two neo-Pythagorean texts, *On the Sōphrosynē of a Woman* and a short letter written by a certain Melissa to another woman named Kleareta. The most essential way women can embody *sōphrosynē* is through sexual fidelity to her husband, but this is not just one quality among many that characterize a woman’s *sōphrosynē*. Instead, “all other prescribed female displays of the virtue (in adornment, speech and silence, child-bearing and child-rearing, household management, and activities outside the house itself) manifest this one primary achievement: a woman’s uninterrupted practice of marital fidelity.” Judith L. Kovacs (“Becoming the Perfect Man: Clement of Alexandria on the Philosophical Life of Women”) studies in detail the fourth book of the *Stromateis*, particularly chapters 8 and 19–21, to flesh out precisely what he means when he advocates, “Women should philosophize the same as men” (*Strom.* 4.8.62.4). At first glance, this statement may seem straightforward enough, but in the context of the *Stromateis*, in dialogue with other philosophical writings, and as an integral part of *Stromateis* 4 as a piece of biblical interpretation, the statement shows Clement to be an even more complex thinker on the subject of women than previously acknowledged. Finally, Susan E. Myers (“The Spirit as Mother in Early Syriac-Speaking Christianity”) surveys the textual evidence for early Christian mother imagery in northern Mesopotamia. After reviewing the current state of scholarship, Myers focuses on the use of feminine imagery for the Spirit in the *Acts of Thomas*. In particular, she looks at how the *Acts* develops certain elements from its regional heritage and how Ephrem and Aphrahat develop this imagery further, even while some elements of the tradition simultaneously are condemned.

The editors and contributors hope that this collection of essays adequately reflects the type of scholarship most valued and emulated by Adela Yarbro Collins, Buckingham Professor of New Testament Criticism and Interpretation at Yale Divinity School and one of only three women presidents of the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas. Inasmuch as Collins's intellectual impact has reached far beyond that of her original training in New Testament studies, she offers an admirable model of interdisciplinary scholarship to this volume's editors, who are all her *Doktorkinder*, and, indeed, to all its contributors. May this book honor her as an expression of what is possible with careful attention to detail and reasonable examination of the evidence – two qualities particularly valued by Prof. Collins.

*Stephen P. Ahearne-Kroll, on behalf of the editors, August 2010*



## Part I: Narrative



# The Virgin and the Goddess

## Women and Religion in Greek Romance

LOVEDAY ALEXANDER

Callirhoe wished to speak to Aphrodite herself. So first she took her son in her arms, and thus afforded a beautiful sight, the like of which no painter has yet portrayed, nor sculptor fashioned, nor poet described before now; for none of them has represented Artemis or Athena with a baby in her arms. On seeing her, Dionysius wept for very joy and quietly paid homage to Nemesis. Callirhoe then asked only Plangon to remain with her and sent the others on ahead to the house. When they had gone, she stood close to Aphrodite and, holding up the child in her arms, she prayed: "I beg you, Lady, from now on be reconciled to me, for I have suffered enough. I have died, and been resurrected; I have been kidnapped and taken into exile; I have been sold and made a slave. I add also my second marriage, even harder to bear. To make up for all this I ask one favour from you, and through you from the other gods: save my orphan child!"<sup>1</sup>

This scene comes from a Greek novel, probably written about the same time as most of our New Testament texts.<sup>2</sup> It tells a story, essentially a simple story, of the kind that has retained its popularity down the centuries: boy meets girl; boy and girl (both improbably young and beautiful) fall in love; parents oppose the marriage; boy and girl fall into a decline; parents relent. (The Romeo and Juliet echoes are no coincidence: Shakespeare's plots owe quite a lot to the Greek romance tradition.) But in Greek romance the wedding bells signal the beginning of the couple's troubles, not the end. Jealousy rears its ugly head. Chaereas, the hero, kicks his pregnant wife Callirhoe in a rage. She falls down in a swoon, is taken up for dead, and is buried with much pomp and lamentation in a splendid tomb overlooking the sea – only to be rescued and abducted by a gang of pirates. And that's just Book 1! The rest of the novel traces the journeys of the hapless couple, chasing each other around the Mediterranean, before the final reunion and triumphant homecoming in Book 8. En route, Callirhoe captures the heart of Dionysius, the Ionian nobleman to

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<sup>1</sup> *Chaer.* 3.8.6. All citations (unless otherwise stated) are from Goold, LCL.

<sup>2</sup> On the dating of the novels, see Goold, *Callirhoe*, pp. 1–2; E. L. Bowie, "The Greek Novel," in *Cambridge History of Classical Literature: The Hellenistic Period and the Empire* (vol. 1; ed. P. E. Easterling and B. M. W. Knox; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 123–39.



whom she is sold as a slave, and agrees to marry him when she discovers that she is pregnant by her first husband Chaereas. There is thus a poignant irony in this apparently idyllic 'Madonna and child' scene. This Madonna has been betrayed and abandoned by her first love, and her marriage is a smoke-screen accepted only to provide security and an honourable name for her child.

At one level, the religious dimensions of this scene are obvious. It takes place in a temple: it shows us the heroine at prayer, addressing her patron goddess Aphrodite. It shows an intimate and close personal relationship between the female subject and the divine – though Callirhoe is not afraid to argue with the goddess. So it allows us to explore the role of women within the accepted parameters of ancient religion: sacred space, public cult, private prayer. Probe a little further, however, and something odd is happening. As Callirhoe poses for the cameras with her infant son in her arms, the narrator deliberately and explicitly invokes the visual representation of divinity in the religious artwork of antiquity: Callirhoe is compared (to their disadvantage) with the virgin goddesses Artemis and Athena as depicted by painters, sculptors, and poets. There is an apparent elision here of the boundaries between divine and human that makes us wonder what is going on here, theologically speaking, in terms of the self-understanding of ancient Greek religion. The irony of this scene deepens when we set it against the representational world of early Christian narrative. Despite her beauty and status, Callirhoe defines her own identity in terms of suffering. Here is a heroine who has endured a series of dramatic status reversals – including death and resurrection. Is there (as Glen Bowersock has argued) a deliberate parody of the Gospel narrative here?<sup>3</sup> Is Callirhoe being set up as a kind of female Christ-figure? And the irony intensifies when we consider that this scene was being written (and read) probably around the last quarter of the first century CE, around the same time that Luke was painting in words what was to become one of the dominant visual images of Christianity – the virgin Madonna holding her divine child.

Chariton, the novel's otherwise unknown author, describes himself as clerk to the rhetor Athenagoras in Aphrodisias, just up the Lycus valley in Asia Minor, not far from Colossae (*Chaer.* 1.1.1). His work is widely accepted as the first complete extant example of Greek romance, a genre that was to continue to flourish, with increasing sophistication and complexity, right through late antiquity until it (apparently) lost out to its nearest market rival with the growth of the Christian martyr-acts and apocryphal ta-

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<sup>3</sup> G. W. Bowersock, *Fiction As History: Nero to Julian* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

les.<sup>4</sup> Most scholars would agree that Chariton's novel is not primarily a religious text; it is a romantic fiction.<sup>5</sup> But that does not mean (as van den Heever suggests) that we should not take it seriously. Even (perhaps especially) escapist fiction can reveal a society's shabbiest secrets, or open windows into its profoundest hopes and dreams: as a reviewer of Stephen Spielberg's work has said, "It is a truism that the movies that are most enlightening about a society's values and aspirations are those which have been gigantic successes in that society, rather than those purporting to address one or other of the major problems besetting it."<sup>6</sup> As Judith Perkins observes,<sup>7</sup>

The power of discourse inheres precisely in this remarkable ability it has to set its agenda and mask the fact that its representation both has an agenda and that there could be other representations and other agendas. Every representation is by its very nature partial and incomplete. A representation of "reality" must leave something out, even as it puts something in. A culture's discourse represents not the "real" world, but rather a world mediated through the social categories, relations, and institutions operating in the specific culture. Another way of saying this is that every representation reflects some cultural "interest," and, therefore, discourses in a society never just float free. They are informed by, and they help to constitute, the society's particular preoccupations and intentions.

Whatever its original audience and purpose, Chariton's romance merits our serious attention. It offers a significant first-century representation of women and religion in Hellenic culture and society: and as such, it pro-

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<sup>4</sup> For translated texts of the Greek novels, see B. P. Reardon, ed., *Collected Ancient Greek Novels* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: Univ. of California Press, 1989). Tomas Hägg, *The Novel in Antiquity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983) is still a good introduction: cf. ch.6 (pp. 154–65) on the Christianization of the genre. Definitive collections of essays include J. R. Morgan and Richard Stoneman, eds., *Greek Fiction: The Greek Novel in Context* (London: Routledge 1994); Gareth Schmeling, ed., *The Novel in the Ancient World* (Leiden: Brill 1996); James Tatum, ed., *The Search for the Ancient Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1994); Simon Swain, ed., *Oxford Readings in the Greek Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). For the fragments, cf. Susan Stephens and John J. Winkler eds., *Ancient Greek Novels: The Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Merkelbach's thesis that the Greek novels were "mystery texts" (R. Merkelbach, *Roman und Mysterium in der Antike* [Munich: Beck, 1962]) has not won wide acceptance. For an illuminating discussion, see Gerhard van den Heever, "Novel and Mystery: Discourse, Myth, and Society," in *Ancient Fiction: The Matrix of Early Christian and Jewish Narrative* (ed. JoAnn Brant, Charles W. Hedrick, and Chris Shea; SBL Symposium 32; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 89–114.

<sup>6</sup> Gilbert Adair, *Illustrated London News* 276 (1988), 74. Adair goes on: "While the earnest didacticism of the latter often tends to alienate the very section of the public for which they were designed, the former, by virtue of their broad-based appeal, are clearly far more in tune with the way their audiences view (or idealize) themselves at that particular phase of their social and cultural evolution."

<sup>7</sup> Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self* (London: Routledge, 1995), 3.

vides a valuable foil for reading the representation of women and religion in early Christian narrative.

### A. Callirhoe as Reader and Heroine

Hermocrates, ruler of Syracuse, victor over the Athenians, had a daughter named Callirhoe, a marvel of a girl and the idol of all Sicily. In fact her beauty was not so much human as divine, not that of a Nereid or mountain nymph, either, but of Aphrodite herself. (*Chaer.* 1.1.1–2)

In his opening sentence, Chariton simultaneously evokes the serious world of the classical Greek historians and blows it away. He begins with Hermocrates, an historical character from Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War*. But by the end of his first paragraph it is clear that Chariton's interest focuses not on the famous Syracusan general but on his daughter, Callirhoe (whom Thucydides never mentions). Chariton's subject is love, not war, and we do not need to label the novels as women's magazine literature in order to recognize that women and "women's business," *ta gunaikeia*, are foregrounded to an unusual extent in Greek romance.<sup>8</sup> This is evident right away in the "sexual symmetry" (to use David Konstan's felicitous phrase) that underlies the whole narrative structure of the novel.<sup>9</sup> In plot terms, the heroine is just as important as the hero, if not more so; there are good reasons for thinking that Chariton's original title for the novel was simply *Callirhoe*.<sup>10</sup> And quite apart from the title, the equal billing accorded to hero and heroine in the plot of the Greek novel is enough to highlight the foregrounding of women in romance: it marks a subtle but effective subversion of the narrative patterns of primary myth. In romance, the erotic satisfaction of two young people becomes the central motive power of the plot. Judith Perkins points out that the elite status of the protagonists means that their erotic business is also the city's business, but she misses the Swiftian irony in Chariton's making this the sole business of the civic assemblies in which (improbably) women and men have an equal voice.<sup>11</sup> This signals a profound reversal of epic values. In

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<sup>8</sup> Brigitte Egger, "The Role of Women in the Greek Novel: Woman as Heroine and Reader," in Swain, *Oxford Readings in the Greek Novel*, 108–36.

<sup>9</sup> David Konstan, *Sexual Symmetry: Love in the Ancient Novel and Related Genres* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> Goold, *Chaer.*, 3–4.

<sup>11</sup> Perkins, *Suffering Self*, 47–49. Cf. *Chaer.* 1.1.12: "Who could describe that assembly, at which Love was the spokesman?" The symbiosis of the erotic motif with the life of the city is underlined by the romantic fiction of the equal participation of women and men in civic assemblies (*Chaer.* 3.4.4; 8.7.1): Konstan, *Sexual Symmetry*, 77.

Vergil's *Aeneid*, Dido's attempted seduction of Aeneas is a diversionary tactic on Aphrodite's part, designed to deflect Aeneas from his proper business of founding Rome: only Aeneas's *pietas* thwarts the goddess. In romance, Aphrodite gets her revenge: the love affair is the real business, war a poor diversion, and Aphrodite herself the unquestioned (indeed the unchallenged) recipient of *pietas*.<sup>12</sup>

There are of course limitations to the heroine's capacity for independent adventure: Callirhoe is no liberated twentieth-century Miss. Travel itself is but the first of a series of *pathe* imposed on the couple by the goddess of love (8.1.3). In the process, Callirhoe loses her elite status – even her freedom – and is pushed over the edge of everything that defines her personal identity. In fact she begins her adventures by dying and being entombed, thus becoming a non-person, then a captive, then a slave – and always a potential object of predatory male lust. Even though her beauty ensures her a relatively cushioned time, Callirhoe conforms to an archaizing ideal of passive womanhood, with no control over her journeys or her own body.<sup>13</sup> The heroines of other novels are not so lucky: they end up having to defend their chastity against a succession of pirates, robber bands, pimps, lustful Indian princes, and oriental eunuchs. In the represented world of romance, as Chariton himself sums it up, the sexual options for women are reduced to two: “honest love and lawful marriage” versus the unregulated perils of becoming a sexual object in conditions of “piracy or slavery or trials or fighting or suicide or war or captivity” (*Chaer.* 8.1.4). This stark duality is reflected in what Brigitte Egger calls the “splitting up of womanhood into two designs, the white and the scarlet woman”: “on the one side there is the erotically passive, chaste, faithful, ‘good’ protagonist, the Greek – and on the other side there is the erotically active, scheming, unrestrainedly raving antagonist, the Barbarian.”<sup>14</sup>

Is this representation of the heroine simply a projection of male fantasies? Chariton does at times allow us to see Callirhoe through the lens of a male gaze, as when the Great King is distracted from his hunting by a vision of Callirhoe as Artemis: “How wonderful it would be to see Callirhoe here, with her dress tucked up to her knees and her arms bared, with flushed face and heaving bosom!” (6.4.5–6). But (as Brigitte Egger rightly observes) the novel gives equal space to the admiring female gaze: not only servants and crowds, but high status women like Rhodogune and Statira fall prey to Callirhoe's charms and embrace her as a sister.<sup>15</sup> It is perhaps

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. the description of Eros as φιλόνηκος, “keen on winning”: *Chaer.* 1.1.4, 6, 12; cf. Xenophon of Ephesus, *Ephesiaca* 1.2.1; 1.2.9; 1.4.5.

<sup>13</sup> Egger, “Woman as Heroine and Reader,” 130–34.

<sup>14</sup> Egger, “Woman as Heroine and Reader,” 128.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Chaer.* 7.5.5; 8.4.7–10.

this – with the continual stress on the heroine’s chastity – that gives the depiction of Callirhoe in this novel its curiously asexual character.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Callirhoe is depicted – much more strongly than her male counterparts – as an “athlete of virtue,” victorious in the fight against *pathos*; and one of her chief weapons is her *paideia*. Far from being a dumb blonde, she is represented as an educated Greek woman, defeating oriental courtiers (and even the Great King) by her superior *philosophia*.<sup>17</sup>

Callirhoe is also depicted as a writer of letters and an initiator of clandestine correspondence. There is a wonderful scene late in the story where Callirhoe, now reunited with her first husband Chaereas, writes a very private letter to her abandoned second husband Dionysius and enlists the aid of the captured Persian queen Statira to deliver it:

Callirhoe felt that it was proper to show her gratitude by writing to Dionysius. This was the only thing she did without telling Chaereas, for she was aware of his innate jealousy, and so took pains to keep it from him. Taking a writing tablet, she wrote the following:

“Callirhoe greets Dionysius her benefactor (for you are the one who freed me from pirates and slavery). Please, do not be angry. Indeed, I am with you in spirit through the son we share, and I entrust him to you to bring up and to educate in a way worthy of us. Let him have no experience of a stepmother. You have not only a son, but a daughter as well: two children are enough. Marry them to each other when he becomes a man, and send him to Syracuse so that he may also see his grandfather. My greetings to you, Plangon. This I have written with my own hand. Farewell, good Dionysius, and remember your Callirhoe.”

Sealing the letter, she hid it away in her bosom. . . . As she was about to leave the ship, she leaned unobtrusively towards Statira and, blushing, handed her the letter, saying, “Give this letter to poor Dionysius; I trust him to your care and the king’s. You must both comfort him. I fear that he may kill himself now that he has been parted from me.” The women might have gone on talking and weeping and embracing, had not the pilots given the signal for putting to sea. (*Chaer.* 8.4.4–9)

This novel tacitly presupposes a network of elite literate women, writing and exchanging their own letters – and letters of a sort they would most definitely not want their husbands to read.<sup>18</sup> I am reminded of Claudia Severa, the wife of the Roman governor on Hadrian’s Wall, whose letter inviting a friend to her birthday party (and signed in her own hand) survives as a lone voice of femininity among the residue of military official-

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<sup>16</sup> Brigitte Egger, “Looking at Chariton’s Callirhoe,” in Morgan and Stoneman, *Greek Fiction*, 31–48. Konstan notes the duality of Chariton’s implied audience: *Sexual Symmetry*, 78–79. Other novels are more ambivalent: cf. David Konstan again on the hero as voyeur in Achilles Tatius (*Sexual Symmetry*, 60–63).

<sup>17</sup> Loveday Alexander, “The Passions in Galen and the novels of Chariton and Xenophon,” in *Passions and Moral Progress in Greco-Roman Thought* (ed., John T. Fitzgerald; London: Routledge, 2008), 175–97.

<sup>18</sup> Konstan, *Sexual Symmetry*, 78–79.

dom dug up in the Vindolanda tablets from 111 C.E.<sup>19</sup> In Chariton's novel, women's literacy is an unsensational assumption, and not simply at the pragmatic level of letter-writing: Callirhoe is explicitly described (more than once) as *πεπαιδευμένη*, "educated."<sup>20</sup> She is depicted as a woman marked at a quite profound level by the cultural formation of Greek *paideia*, giving her the rhetorical resources to wrestle with her ethical dilemmas, and the philosophical *σωφροσύνη* to resist (with aristocratic contumely) the rather ham-fisted advances of the Persian eunuch Artaxates soliciting sexual favours for the king.<sup>21</sup> Callirhoe is not the only fictional heroine to be represented as deploying the resources of a philosophical education. The fragmentary *Parthenope* (another early novel) depicts its heroine as taking part in a discussion on love with the philosopher Anaximenes.<sup>22</sup> At the other end of the genre, Heliodorus's Charicleia is presented as "a self-confident and, to a certain extent, emancipated intellectual" who "studies and discusses with the philosophers and theologians."<sup>23</sup>

How does this fictional representation correspond to the realities of Chariton's world? We could cite *Callirhoe* as an additional datum in the small but growing body of evidence for women's literacy in Hellenistic Egypt and the Greek East.<sup>24</sup> We might also ask whether the novel was a genre expressly aimed at a female readership. Greek prose romance has been a neglected feature of Greek literature until comparatively recently, and its earlier 20th-century scholars hailed it as a rare glimpse into late Greek 'popular' literature, evidence of a newly-prosperous middle-class

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<sup>19</sup> *Tab. Vindol.* II 291–292. Full text and translation (with photograph) in A. K. Bowman, *Life and Letters on the Roman Frontier* (London: British Museum, 1994), 127–28; 153. Cited in Hans-Josef Klauck, *Ancient Letters and the New Testament: A Guide to Context and Exegesis* (trans. Daniel P. Bailey; Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), 107.

<sup>20</sup> Ronald Hock, "The Educational Curriculum in Chariton's *Callirhoe*," in Brant, Hedrick, and Shea, *Ancient Fiction*, 15–36.

<sup>21</sup> Note esp. 6.4.10 "As a eunuch, slave, and oriental (βάρβαρος), [Artaxates] reckoned the task would be easy, having no idea of the pride and nobility of a Greek, and especially of the chaste (σώφρων) and faithful Callirhoe"; 6.5.8 "Callirhoe's first impulse was to puck out [his] eyes; but, as a polite (Gk. "educated," πεπαιδευμένη) and intelligent woman, she quickly remembered where she was, who she was, and who was talking to her."

<sup>22</sup> For *Parthenope*, see Tomas Hägg, "Parthenope Decapitated?" in idem, *Parthenope: Studies in Ancient Greek Fiction* (ed. Lars B. Mortensen and Tormod Eide; Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2004), 233–61: 251–52; 239 n. 22.

<sup>23</sup> See the nuanced discussion by Brigitte Egger, "The Role of Women in the Greek Novel," 118; 135. Egger does not discuss *Parthenope*.

<sup>24</sup> Raffaella Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), chapter 3 notes significant advances in women's literacy in Hellenistic Egypt and the Greek East: see esp. 51; 74–101. The detailed evidence is set out in R. S. Bagnall and R. Cribiore, *Women's Letters from Ancient Egypt, 300 BC–AD 800* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006).