

# Fluidity and Verifiability of Identities in Achilles Tatius' and Heliodorus' novels

'I hold a headless relic; I've lost the *real* you'

(AT, 5.7 – my emphasis)

'The young pair fell in love, as if the soul recognized  
its kind at the very first encounter and sped to meet  
that which was worthily its own'

(Heliodorus, 3.5)

The genre of the novel has long fascinated scholars for its uniquely evasive form that appears to defy any attempt at mapping out its boundaries. However, what scholars of various disciplines appear to be in agreement about, is the unique mode of knowledge construction this form of literary production offers through its narratological qualities. In other words, questions of narratorial presence and narrativity offer unique material to explore a variety of socio-cultural questions as represented and explored within and through the genre of the novel. Simultaneously, with the flourishing field of feminist studies, classical scholars of the ancient novel have been keen to explore gender dynamics and relations of the novels' protagonists. Naturally, Judith Butler's seminal approach to gender as inherently performative/performed has proven highly relevant to understandings of codifications of gender in the ancient novel. Drawing from these lines of enquiry, this paper is located at the intersection of critical enquiries into configurations of gender and the narratological construction of identity in the ancient novel. Leaning on Butler's understanding of gender, I approach identity as a coherent narrative of performed acts which may align with or depart from pre-existing societal scripts. I will use this approach to refine Tim Whitmarsh's reading of the 'return narrative' in the ancient novel by focusing on a continuous shaping of the characters' identities. Heliodorus' *Aithiopika* and

Achilles Tatius' *Leukippe & Clitophon* will serve as case studies for this endeavour. I will first outline my theoretical approach, elaborating on Butler's and Whitmarsh's texts. I will then analyse character development in the two respective novels with a particular focus on shame (*aidos*) and chastity (*sophrosyne*) as relevant factors that affect character development. Finally, I will explore moments of recognition in each narrative that I will take as checkpoints against which identity changes are verified.

### **Constant versus Teleological Becoming**

Judith Butler draws from phenomenological understandings of social reality that reject Platonic approaches to reality as an objective landscape to which beings have limited access. Instead, reality is experienced and mediated through an interplay of consciousness and various forms of input (including dreams, sensory triggers, and subconsciousness). Accordingly, experiences of self are inherently embodied; selfhood is constituted 'through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic sign' (Butler, p.519). Not only gender but identity in the broadest sense is 'instituted through a stylized repetition of acts' (Butler, p.519). Butler thus takes identity as being in existence by virtue of consistently becoming; becoming proves its existence and vice versa. Accordingly, Butler departs from distinctions of sex, gender performance, and gender identity by understanding gender as configured in the process of performance; gender performance and identity are synonymous. Sex, often interpreted as referring to a person's gender assigned at birth, is, similarly to "gender," a linguistic category that, for this reason, connotes a set of cultural signifiers. Instead, Butler describes the body as a 'biological facticity,' through which acts of performance are mediated (Butler, p.522). Consequently, Butler does not deny the existence of sex, as they have often been criticised for, but holds that gender is not preceded by any biological "essence."<sup>1</sup> Kerby, applying this approach to identity configuration more broadly, writes: 'the self, or subject [is] a result of discursive praxis rather than a substantial entity having ontological priority over praxis or a self with epistemological priority,

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<sup>1</sup> Jones (2012) leans on Butler's theory for very fruitful insight into masculinities in the ancient Greek novel but uses a misleading understanding of gender as conditioned by some "natural" essence (p.7).

as originator of meaning' (Kerby, 1991, p.4). To refine Kerby's point: the meaning of identity is created *outside* the self.

Another fruitful direction of enquiry that Butler's formulation prompts is the role of time in identity configuration – or rather the temporal paradox that this approach poses for *reading* identity. Identity is not only stylised, but identity becomes through *repetition*. Accordingly, the performance of being (which also is being itself) is truthful, or authentic to its existence, at any given time; one could even argue that identity cannot be performed inauthentically, as its ontological condition is that of performance. If different acts appear contradictory, then that very contradiction is nevertheless part of an identity's neat narrative. And yet, Butler points out that identity is not performed in a historical vacuum. They write: 'the body is a historical situation... and is a manner of doing, dramatizing, and reproducing a historical situation' (Butler, p.520). In other words, the social agent alone is not the sole 'originator of meaning.' Practical means of knowledge production are restricted by pre-existing scripts that outline societal expectations of behavioural performance. Accordingly, 'gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences' (Butler, p.522).

Although Butler's theory is widely used in enquiries into literary representations of gender, strikingly little has reached understandings of narratives as following a circular trajectory. Tim Whitmarsh has convincingly argued for an understanding of the ancient novel as being defined by a 'return narrative' (Whitmarsh, 2011, p.14). Whitmarsh follows a popular understanding of narrativity as that which is prompted by lack.<sup>2</sup> He writes: 'the protagonists begin the narrative as yearning youths and end as fulfilled adults' (Whitmarsh, p.16). To Whitmarsh, the ancient romance plot is a classic *Bildungsroman*. He further concludes: 'one reason for the very persistence of the return narrative in general is that it responds to a deeply rooted human need to naturalise the human subject, with all his or her uncertainties and desires, within a community: to engender a powerful sense of home and homeland as the telos of existence' (Whitmarsh, p.16). The metaliterary dimension of this sentence ('*deeply rooted human need to naturalise*') of what is "natural" encourages questioning the

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<sup>2</sup> For example, the influence of this approach to narrative on reading disability in literature: Mitchell and Snyder (2000).

wholehearted seriousness of such a statement, but it certainly prompts interesting lines of inquiry into the narrative goal, the ‘telos of existence.’ While Butler refutes the essentialist tradition of understanding gender/identity as being rooted in a point of *departure*, Whitmarsh instead asks for the *destination* of identity construction. The return narrative could suggest that the answer to that question rests in the point of departure – hence, return to an (assumed) prior conceptual location as telos of existence. Yet, Whitmarsh takes return in a broader sense that allows for conceptions of returns to go beyond spatial circularity and may be better categorised as restoration or re-discovery. Most importantly, Butler’s and Whitmarsh’s approaches clash irreconcilably on the notion of what makes an identity (performance) truthful – and ultimately verifiable. If travel narratives aim at making identity whole, are the fractured identities on that journey then at any given time authentic, as Butler would argue? How can identity be verified, if the idea of a “true” identity is merely a ghost of an ontological category?

### **Shame and Punishment**

Anxiety surrounding the transformation of identity within a landscape of social proprieties permeates both Heliodorus’ and Achilles Tatius’ texts. The erotic structures of Achilles Tatius’ novel do not only encompass but are in fact governed by the characters’ affective experiences of shame. Upon their first encounter that also initiates the erotic narrative, Clitophon relates ‘ἔβλεπον ἀναιδῶς, ἠδούμην ἄλῶναι’ (Achilles Tatius, 1.4). The proximity of the motif of eyes, deeply embedded in relations of intimacy and literary traditions of representations of love, and the notion of shame weaves both into one narrative string. On the premise that ‘ἔβλεπον’ functions as the stand-in for the erotic component, shame however is not caused by love directly. Instead, it is the social environment, hinted at through the deponential ‘ἄλῶναι’ that gives rise to a sense of shame. In fact, if that social dimension was not part of the environment, Clitophon narrates, he would look at her ‘ἀναιδῶς’ – without shame, since there is no reason for it to arise.

In Heliodorus’ novel, shame appears to operate in the same mode. At the joy of their reunion, the protagonists faint and tumble into each other which is then witnessed by Knemon:

‘Οἱ δὲ, ἐτέρως μὲν ἀλλήλοις ἐντυχόντες, κειμένους δ’ αὐτοὺς καταλαβόντες, ὀρθωθέντες ἀθρόον, ἠρυσθρίων τὸν Κνήμωνα (καὶ πλέον ἢ Χαρίκλεια) θεωρὸν τῶνδε γεγενημένον καὶ νέμειν συγγνώμην ἰκέτενον.’ (Heliiodorus, 2.7).

Similarly to Clitophon’s experience, it is the presence of a third party, Knemon, that renders the situation shameful. Consequently, the novels’ protagonists are all aware of existing scripts of what constitutes appropriate behaviour in connection to the experience of romantic love and sexual desire. That this presence of a third party can extend to punitive consequences, as Butler states, shines through in Achilles Tatius’ novel when Leukippe and Theagenes are almost caught by Leukippe’s mother who assumes that her daughter has had sexual intercourse, an assumption that Leukippe and the reader know to be false:

‘ἤχθετο, ἠσχύνετο, ὠργίζετο. ἤχθετο μὲν πεφωραμένη, ἠσχύνετο δὲ ὄνειδιζομένη, ὠργίζετο δὲ ἀπιστουμένη. αἰδῶς δὲ καὶ λύπη καὶ ὀργὴ τρία τῆς ψυχῆς κύματα· ἡ μὲν γὰρ αἰδῶς διὰ τῶν ὀμμάτων εἰσρέουσα τὴν τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν ἐλευθερίαν καθαιρεῖ’ (Achilles Tatius, 2.28).

The affect of shame literally restricts the ‘freedom of movement’ (ἐλευθερίαν), as fittingly translated by John J. Winkler, and thus has an immediate punitive effect. What is odd about this instance of shame is that Leukippe factually does not trespass any protocols of propriety; she knows that her mother’s claim is factually wrong. Accordingly, shame also arises from the confrontation with the counterfactual scenario in which that identity *could* be true. The sense of vertigo in the face of those conflicting pieces of information about her identity is enough to evoke the same sensation that the counterfactual scenario if it was true, would cause. Accordingly, the presence of social protocols enforcing behavioural norms is ubiquitously, and spectrally present and leads to a continuous questioning of the social agents’ sense of identity. This greatly aligns with Douglas Cairns’ definition of *aidos* as an ‘inhibitory emotion based on sensitivity to and protectiveness of *one’s self-image*’ (Cairns, 1993, p.2 – my emphasis). Punishment thus necessarily prompts a reflection on one’s desired self-image and its relation to others’ perception of oneself.

To conclude these observations of shame, shame operates as an affect of punitive quality that brings into effect adherence to social proprieties. As shame tweaks behaviour, those behavioural

patterns ultimately change a person's identity, given that identity is housed in that repetition of acts. In other words, shame is caused by an external force that moulds a person's identity and is yet experienced affectively, a location that is distinctly non-external. In this sense, shame bridges the conceptual gap between self-perception (as an internal projection) and perception by others in describing the relationship between both and by influencing behavioural patterns. These patterns ultimately allow the characters to fit into what is deemed a fitting telos, namely marriage.

### **Chastity and Identity**

As has been argued convincingly by Whitmarsh, shame operates not only punitively due to its restrictive quality, but also effectively delays the augmentation of the protagonist's intimacy (Achilles Tatius, 5.22 and 4.8), thus delaying readerly pleasure (Whitmarsh, 2011). This sense of control also reverberates in notions of chastity and has yet distinctly different implications on identity formation. Chastity (*sophrosyne*) features more prominently in Heliodorus' than in Achilles Tatius' novel and provides an important node of self-definition for Theagenes and Chariclea. As such, *sophrosyne* stems from within the self and even transcends corporal integrity – or the violation thereof, as Theagenes' torture exemplifies. Unwilling to engage sexually with Arsake, he does not submit to her even under physical torture. The narrator describes that 'he was more of a man than ever and rebuffed her advances with redoubled firmness. Though his body was in torment, his spirit had the strength of virtue' (8.6), as translated by J.R. Morgan. Nevertheless, the reader is reminded earlier on in the narrative that Theagenes needs a reminder of his commitment when being with Chariclea:

‘ή γάρ Χαρίκλεια τὸν Θεαγένην, εἴ τι παρακινῶντα αἰσθοῖτο καὶ ἀνδριζόμενον, ὑπομνήσει τῶν ὄρκων ἀνέστελλεν· ὁ δὲ οὐ χαλεπῶς ἐπανήγετο καὶ σωφρονῶν ῥαδίως ἠνείχετο, ἔρωτος μὲν ἐλάττων ἡδονῆς δὲ κρείττων γινόμενος’ (5.4).

Theagenes' visible arousal ('ανδριζόμενον') functions as the framework for a demonstration of his *sophrosyne* which Goldhill observes 'implies a political, moral and sexual control over the destabilizing forces of desire (for sex, food, drink, power...)' (Goldhill, p.4). This is explicitly hinted at in his mastery over pleasure ('ἡδονης δε κρειττων γινόμενος'). As he later withstands Arsake under

torture, his *sophrosyne* is portrayed as more consolidated in its very core of masculine identity. In other words, Theagenes' character development can be traced along with his relation to *sophrosyne*. Heliodorus' engagement with *sophrosyne* greatly echoes the work of Methodius, a third-century Christian, who wrote the symposiastic text *On Virginity*. Methodius' Gregorion and Euboulion eventually conclude that 'it is better to maintain virginity without experiencing desire than to be able to control one's desire' (Epilogue 293, cited in Goldhill, p.4). Exhibiting stronger forms of *sophrosyne* is thus a point of reference not only for character growth but a symbol of flourishing within power structures as a body becoming to exert that same power. The relationship between *sophrosyne* and desire thus greatly differs from Achilles Tatius' narratological usage of desire.

Furthermore, Harper describes *sophrosyne* as implying 'both an objective fact and a subjective mode of being; it was a state of body and a state of mind' (Harper, p.41), which certainly rings true for my observations of Theagenes' relation to *sophrosyne*. Although Harper refers to women only in his study of *sophrosyne*, Heliodorus appears to extend this concept to both men and women. For Chariclea, *sophrosyne* is the most prominent marker of her identity and thus functions as a token of (self-)recognition. In the letter from her mother Persinna, she is instructed: 'τιμῶσα σωφροσύνην, ἣ δὴ μόνη γυναικείαν ἀρετὴν χαρακτηρίζει' (Heliodorus, 4.8). In light of the ambiguity surrounding her origins (Montiglio, p. 144), *sophrosyne* is portrayed as the entirety of her identity which shrouds her in an aura of untouchability even visible to those who do not know or understand her language (Heliodorus, 1.2). Furthermore, while shame, as argued above, is caused to arise by external factors, it takes mere visual access to offend chastity to an extent where she physically has to remove herself from the situation (Heliodorus, 2.13). Accordingly, her self-conception of her identity does not only align with others' perception of her but assumes an embodied nature; female *sophrosyne* is determined through her very corporal presence. In light of Butler's theory of performative acts, by consistently reminding herself of that being her primary identity, the very performance thereof *makes* it her identity.

Achilles Tatius' heroine too is keen on maintaining a sense of integrity by referring to herself as *eleutheria*, the same linguistic category that she finds herself robbed of by her mother's accusations earlier on in the narrative. Nevertheless, the context for that passage that depicts her as being under

great threat suggests that it is merely through a generic awareness of her narrative being one of a novelistic tradition that allows her to declare herself untouchable (Montiglio, p.20). Accordingly, it is not only a metaliterary awareness but through the declarative nature of linguistic expression that she consciously creates an identity as *eleutheria* for herself. Similarly to Chariclea, Leukippe thus clings to a concept as the main reference for her identity as an act of agency and volition.

### **Transformation and Verification of Identity**

So far, I have argued that *sophrosyne* allows tracing masculinisation for Theagenes and a consistent and static point of reference for Chariclea (and Leukippe) throughout the narrative. And yet, various recognition moments render Chariclea's identity increasingly unverifiable which strongly suggests that it is her character that undergoes the greatest change. Montiglio effectively highlights the novel's obsession with recognition patterns: not only is parental recognition the goal of the protagonists' long journey but also their very love is modelled on a Platonic conception of love as an act of re-discovery; love is a narrative of return, Whitmarsh would argue. This becomes apparent in Chariclea's and Theagenes' first encounter:

‘ὁμοῦ τε γὰρ ἀλλήλους ἐώρων οἱ νέοι καὶ ἥρων, ὥσπερ τῆς ψυχῆς ἐκ πρώτης ἐντεύξεως τὸ ὅμοιον ἐπιγνώσεως καὶ πρὸς τὸ κατ’ ἀξίαν οἰκεῖον προσδραμούσης’ (Heliodorus, 3.5).

This suggests that there is an ontological essence that precedes their visual encounter; love is synonymous with an act of recognition which further leads to assuming identity to be one stable identity that transcends corporal existence. Nevertheless, this narrative is later confounded on two accounts. Firstly, when the two meet again, Theagenes fails to recognise Chariclea (who is dressed up as a beggar) until she reminds him of their codeword of recognition (Heliodorus, 7.8). Secondly, the novel's concluding chapters continue to delay the final closure, as Chariclea's parents struggle to verify the information given to them about her identity. Not only her word is not enough, but even the tokens of recognition are met with suspicion. Ultimately, it is the birthmark on her body that serves as sufficient proof (10.15). The permanent anxiety of identity transformation is ultimately not resolved by her fixation on *sophrosyne* – ironically, it is her *sophrosyne* that keeps her from being granted her



wish to strike the sacrificial blow to Theagenes herself – but her *body*. Montiglio writes: ‘The natural mole in fact allies art with art, confirming, rather than correcting, Chariclea’s artificial identity’ (Montiglio, p.140). Montiglio’s description of Chariclea’s identity as ‘artificial’ points to the continuous self-stylisation as an act of creation regardless of any natural or preceding essence. Although the narrative does not deny any such identity epistemologies, what is prioritised is the phenomenological dimension of how Chariclea is *read* – which leads back to the existential anxiety of unrecognisability due to transformation. Even though this may present the body as the sole stable factor in the existential equation that makes identity, Theagenes’ torture demonstrates that corporal integrity exists separately from *sophrosyne*. Ultimately, Chariclea reaches what she sets out to achieve: recognition from her birth parents. Yet, the narratological *denouement* through the various modes of proving her identity leaves the ghostly imprint of a counterfactual scenario in which said birthmark – hitherto unknown to the reader and Theagenes – had not (miraculously) shown up. The narrative of return, or recognition, albeit fulfilled, is thus underpinned by the anxiety at realising the proximity between that hypothetical other ending to (the fictional) reality. However, that would be a different story.<sup>3</sup>

In sum, I have attempted to read character development in the two novels through a joint approach of Butler’s theory of identity formation and Whitmarsh’s reading of the return narrative. As the most prominent factors influencing motion and affect, I chose to focus on shame and *sophrosyne*. While shame, more prominent in Achilles Tatius’ novel operates as a response to social triggers that prompt characters to acquire knowledge of behavioural protocols of propriety, *sophrosyne* poses a conceptual identity according to which Heliodorus’ protagonists consciously create their identities. Narrative turns that hinge on recognition moments continuously test the character’s identities’ solidity against the inherent transformative power of the travel narrative and ultimately confound the assumed synonymy of ontological essence and the corporal condition. This brief study reveals only a glimpse

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<sup>3</sup> Due to reasons of brevity, I am unable to elaborate further on genre implications on the novel’s sense of closure, but similarly to my argument about Leukippe’s self-declaration as *eleutheria*, a study of genre traditions in performative identities would certainly prove a fruitful endeavor.

into the complex narratology of both novels and has hopefully demonstrated the rich potential for readings of identity configuration and character development in the ancient Greek novel.

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