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MIMICKING VIRGINS: COLONIAL AMBIVALENCE AND THE ANCIENT ROMANCE

VIRGINIA BURRUS

There is increasing awareness of the complexity of the processes of identity-construction at work in the literature of the Roman empire, processes reflecting diverse intertextual strategies of appropriation, fragmentation, recombination, and parody that subtly interrogate both the hegemony of Greek *paideia* and the imperial dominion of Rome.¹ Who is a “Greek”? Who is a “Roman”? (Who, for that matter, a “barbarian”?) Such questions, while answered with confidence by many ancient authors, raise particular challenges for the contemporary historian. From the perspective of a hindsight inevitably refracted through the lens of more recent experiences of empire and colonization, the ancient Mediterranean terrain unfurls as a scarred surface, layered with histories of conquest and traversed by passages between cultures only knowable as such retrospectively and problematically, in the moment of their mutual, agonistic differentiation—in the moment when purity is already “lost.” Some of us may want to pose the question: Are not *all* subjects unmasked—differently—as “mimic-men” in this “space of colonial encounters”?² (We recall, for example, that both Justin Martyr, a

1 I owe a special debt of gratitude to Tim Whitmarsh for being willing not only to read and comment on this article but also to argue with me about it.

2 The term “mimic-men” is borrowed from Bhabha’s essay, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” in Bhabha 1994.85–92; Bhabha is himself citing V. S. Naipaul’s novel *The Mimic Men*. Bhabha’s concept of “mimicry,” closely linked with his concepts of “ambivalence” and “hybridity,” deconstructs the binary of colonizer and colonized, suggesting not only that colonial discourse positions the colonized subject as a necessarily imperfect “imitation” but also that such imposed mimeticism easily becomes a

Semite hailing from the Roman colony of Flavia Neapolis in Syria-Palestine, and Antoninus Pius, the Roman emperor to whom he addresses his first *Apology*, liked to adopt the “retro” styling of Greek philosophers.³ As Simon Goldhill quips in a recent essay, “Post-colonial discourse is a bandwagon that is not always aware of the length of its history” (2001a.156–57). Goldhill goes on to note that negotiations of position “in and against what might be called the dominant culture of Rome and the Empire . . . take place not merely within a matrix of dominance and resistance (the imperial gaze, and the subaltern text), but with a more complex dynamic of local and central knowledge, practices of displacement and marginalization, imagined forces and unrecognized collusiveness” (2001a.180).⁴

The Greek romance provides a particularly rich site for investigating this “complex dynamic.” A quintessentially colonial literary product emanating from the geographical and cultural margins of what passed for “civilization,” the romance at the same time lays claim to the central texts and linguistic practices that constitute “Hellenism,” at once disputing and colluding with the universalizing aspirations of empire.⁵ A hybrid genre in

form of mockery that destabilizes the claims of the colonizer to an originary or essentialized subjectivity. Pratt 1992.6–7 proposes the concept of a “contact zone” as “the space of colonial encounters . . . in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.”

3 Justin depicts himself wearing the philosopher’s robe (*Dialogue* 1); on Justin as a “postcolonial” subject, see Lyman 2003. Antoninus Pius, whose philosophic bent is stressed by Justin (1 *Apology* 1), like other emperors of the period, is typically represented with a beard reminiscent of portraits of Greek philosophers (see Zanker 1995.217–33).

4 Cf. the comment of Young 1995.5 regarding the tendency of earlier postcolonial criticism to construct “two antithetical groups, the colonizer and the colonized, self and Other”: “it is only recently that cultural critics have begun to develop accounts of the commerce between cultures that map and shadow the complexities of its generative and destructive processes.”

5 Swain 1996.101–31 places the novel securely in the context of the cultural (re)construction of “Greekness” under Roman imperial domination. Emphasizing the sheer resilience and aristocratic conservatism of Hellenism, he perhaps still underplays the menace to Roman imperialism represented by the subversively mimetic act of cultural counter-colonization by which “Rome” was subjected to the terms of the “Greek”; he also suppresses the remarkable multiplication and diversity of hybrid positionalities mobilized by an ethnic “Greekness” not only denaturalized in the service of cultural transcendence but also itself internally subverted in rhetorical and literary performances that glory in (frequently highly ironic) acts of temporal and spatial displacement. I find more satisfying the nuanced analysis of the literary-cultural construction of the “Greek” and the “Roman” offered by Whitmarsh 2001.1–38.

several respects, eclectically allusive in its compositional strategies, straddling the boundaries between the “elite” and “popular” realms of discourse, the ancient novel actively engages “a multiracial, multilingual, mixed Mediterranean” (Doody 1996.18). Indeed, as Mikhail Bakhtin has argued, the chief defining feature of the novel may well be its distinctive relationship to the polyglossia of the ancient world, resulting in an irreducible literary “dialogism.”⁶ What emerges to the reader’s view is thus less a clear snapshot of cultural *diversity* than a subtly shifting field of cultural *difference*. “Diversity,” as post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha points out, assumes “the recognition of pre-given cultural contents and customs; held in a time-frame of relativism, it gives rise to liberal notions of multiculturalism, cultural exchange or the culture of humanity.” “Difference,” in contrast, calls attention to the process by which culture is enunciated in liminal moments of uncertainty and borderland spaces of contestation. “The theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation,” suggests Bhabha, “may open the way towards conceptualizing an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s *hybridity*” (1994.34–35,38; emphasis in original). Bakhtin’s notion of hybridity influences and thus partly anticipates Bhabha’s, while also locating novelistic literature precisely within Bhabha’s “split-space of enunciation”: “The novelistic hybrid is *an artistically organized system for bringing different languages in contact with one another*, a system having as its goal the illumination of one language by means of another, the carving out of a living image of another language” (Bakhtin 1981.361; emphasis in original).

Christians and Jews are no longer considered external to the polyglot Mediterranean mix that gave rise to the ancient novel: fewer and fewer scholars are willing to suggest that there is any “Judaism,” much less any “Christianity,” of the period that is not “Hellenistic,” despite the undeniable heterogeneity of both movements. (At the same time, and by a similar logic, fewer and fewer scholars are tempted to essentialize “Hellenism” itself.) Nonetheless, the literary artifacts of these “monotheistic religions” (each of

6 It must be acknowledged that Bakhtin, while faulting Erwin Rhode for not having “much to say on the role of polyglossia,” nonetheless opined that “the Greek novel only weakly embodied this new discourse that resulted from polyglot consciousness” (1981.64–65). Regarding the aptness of a “Bakhtinian” reading of the ancient novels as hybrid, heteroglossic texts, see the incisive comments of Whitmarsh 1998.94–96.

which was periodically subjected to overt political suppression) are commonly positioned at the extreme end of the spectrum of political resistance and thus remain privileged (or, alternatively, marginalized) in their cultural dissonance. Polytheists, in contrast, are more often placed nearer the pole of accommodation and collaboration. As Margaret Doody notes, “We tend, except in the case of Israel, to forget (the Romans certainly do not wish to remind us) that the Roman Empire was not felt everywhere as an unmixed benefit.” She goes on to point out, however, that even pagan novelists typically place their works in a distant historical setting in such a way as to emphasize “that there was a cultural tradition aside from and before the Romans, and thus cultural alternatives, stretching back to before the post-Alexander hegemony of the Greek-speaking world.” Nor are these novelists “Greeks” in any simple sense, she further reminds us: “They are not of Athens, and they belong to mainland Greece far less even than Americans do to Britain” (1996.28). Tim Whitmarsh sharpens the point: “There seems to have been an inherent tendency in the novelistic genre to erase dominant or Hellenocentric perspectives, and to review traditional material from an alien angle” (1998.97).

Without, of course, denying the validity of distinctions made between and among “Jewish,” “Christian,” and “pagan” romances, I want here to explore commonalities of colonial resistance enacted across the genre.⁷ In so doing, I am at the same time indirectly querying the gap that opens in current positionings of “liberationist” and “postcolonial” discourses, the one typically viewed as stridently oppositional in its relation to the politics of empire, the other occasionally suspected of a lack of political efficacy, if not also of a political agenda, the one tending to replicate all too faithfully the terms of imperial discourse via the flattering exactitude of inversion, the other tending to subvert those same terms via the perverse—but perhaps *merely* ludic—operations of irony, parody, and other favored tools of deconstruction. Bhabha frames the question (and thereby names the problematic gap) as follows: “Are we trapped in a politics of struggle where the representation of social antagonisms and historical contradictions can take

7 I am here using “genre” in a loose rather than a strict sense. As Selden 1994.43 notes, “There is no evidence that before the modern era the range of texts that we have come to call the ‘ancient novel’ were ever thought of together as constituting a coherent group.” As will become clearer below, the particular novelistic works that interest me are those that converge around concerns with eros, marriage, and virginity.

no other form than a binarism of theory vs politics?" (1994.19). Or in the case of the ancient romances: a binarism of the sophisticated literary-philosophical "play" of the pagan novels and the concerted liberative identity politics of their anonymously authored Jewish and Christian counterparts.

It is with the aim of evading such a trap that I will pursue juxtapositional (yet crucially not oppositional) readings of two sets of novelistic texts that cut across religious affiliations and the politics commonly associated therewith: the *Acts of Paul and Thekla* and Achilles Tatius's *Kleitophon and Leukippe*, on the one hand, and Heliodorus's *Ethiopian Story* and *Joseph and Aseneth*, on the other. Reading for resistance, I will also, as it happens, be reading for virginity, which functions, I suggest, as a site of articulated cultural ambivalence in each of these romances, Christian and pagan, pagan and Jewish, respectively. That virginity is a characteristic and historically innovative preoccupation of ancient romances is scarcely a novel proposition. Nonetheless, for readers burdened with a long history of Christianity's hegemonic claims on the virginal ideal, *interpreting* the virginity of romance has proved to be a tricky business. Already in late antiquity, novelistic texts were being appropriated by a church that found it easy to misrecognize all virgins as its own: *Joseph and Aseneth* was converted from Judaism to Christianity; Heliodorus was claimed as a bishop; and even the bawdily irreverent Achilles Tatius was eventually baptized by posterity.⁸ Needless to say, readerly contexts have changed, but have they changed enough? Has virginity yet been effectively decolonized, dislodged from its close association with post-Constantinian Christianity's particular imperial aspirations? Goldhill (1995.44–45, 93–94, 100–02, 110–11) raises a version of this question in addressing Michel Foucault's discussion of virginity, critiquing the suspiciously Christian (more specifically, ascetic) teleology that appears to govern the reading of the pagan romances in the third volume of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1986.228–32).⁹ Goldhill's own book—bearing the enticing title *Foucault's Virginity*—deliberately disrupts such a teleology and its concomitant "didacticism," performing a

8 The history of its textual transmission indicates that *Joseph and Aseneth* was already received in late antiquity as a "Christian" text. The church historian Socrates identifies Heliodorus as a Christian bishop, an identification also made on behalf of Achilles Tatius by the *Souda* (see the introductions to the translations of these texts by J. R. Morgan and J. J. Winkler, respectively, in Reardon 1989.170, 352).

9 Note that Goldhill's (friendly) critique is directed as well to Brown 1988.

reading of novelistic texts as teasingly elusive and erotically playful as are the ancient romances themselves. Lured by *Goldhill's* "virginity," as well as his more recent "postcoloniality," I will risk a somewhat more explicit (and, alas, thus also a somewhat more "didactic"?) theorizing of the virginity in romance.¹⁰ What interests me is not so much the difference between Christian and non-Christian "virginity" (though I would also not claim indifference) as the *impurity*—the *hybridity*—of virginity when read as an instance of colonial mimicry in novelistic literature. By placing the Christian virgin back into the intercultural mix, we may render her both less strange and less central to the story of the romance.

I. BORN-AGAIN VIRGINS: THEKLA AND LEUKIPPE

Recent interpretations of the canonical Greek romances and the Apocryphal Acts of Christian Apostles—contemporaneous textual corpora—have emphasized not only their striking literary affinities¹¹ but also their sharply conflicting ideologies. In the pagan novel, "the couple's love . . . was a romanticized emblem of the long tradition in antiquity of the individual's submission to, and embrace of, the social order," Judith Perkins suggests. Positing death—rather than marriage—as the narrative "happy ending," the Christian Acts, in contrast, "were rigorously anti-social, unremittingly opting for the dissolution of social categories and relationships" (1995.75, 26). "If the romances were about maintaining the stasis of the ancient city, the Apocryphal Acts were their antithesis, narratives designed to highlight the clash between the man of authority and his morally superior challenger," argues Kate Cooper in a similar vein. "The established man's passion for the heroine, instead of representing a renewal of the city, came to represent the social order's claims on those who found them intolerable."¹² What distinguishes the pagan romances, on this reading, is the idealizing celebration of

10 More "didactic" than Goldhill in relation not only to the theorizing of virginity but also to the theorizing of the "postcolonial."

11 Already acknowledged by Dobschütz 1902.

12 Cooper 1996.61. Aubin 1998 follows Perkins and Cooper closely in making a case for reading the Apocryphal Acts—in particular the *Acts of Thekla*—as resistant romances, highlighting ideological differences between pagan novels and the Christian texts. Note that my own earlier study, Burrus 1987, while pursuing a folkloristic approach to the Apocryphal Acts and thus resisting their identification as literary romances, likewise emphasizes the ideological differences between the Greek romances and the Christian Acts—positions I obviously modify in this present essay.

marriage in which the power of eros is not only decisively domesticated but also tightly harnessed to a divinely emplotted “providence” that underwrites the traditionalist political interests of local elites in a period of ongoing social transition within the life of Greek cities adapting to shifting contexts of imperial rule. In contrast, the Apocryphal Acts of Apostles may be seen to innovate reactively, citing and disrupting the conventions of romance in such a way as to replace patriarchal marriage and civic loyalty with allegiance to a new God and a novel vision of providence (a vision as ambitiously encompassing as empire itself) through the scripting of an erotic triangulation that mediates a shift in social identity by symbolically enacting the transferal of a woman’s desire from husband to celibate apostle.¹³

When thus contrasted with the apocalyptic radicalism of the Apocryphal Acts, the socio-political conservatism of the Greek romances is thrown into sharp relief. Such a reading of the pagan novels is indirectly supported, moreover, by a widespread consensus that prior scholarship has been too quick to project a suspiciously modern “individualism” onto Hellenistic culture and has thereby underestimated the resilience and continued vitality of the Greek cities, well into the Roman imperial era.¹⁴ Suppressed in this contrastative interpretation, however, is the subtly subversive treatment of marriage in the pagan romances, arguably reflective not of a rampant, romanticizing individualism but rather of what Goldhill describes as “the complex process of self-placement in Empire society” (2001b.14). Indeed, it may be that the less-than-subtle subversions of the Apocryphal Acts, when read comparatively, do not so much invert as simplify and intensify certain aspects of the pagan romances’ already ambivalent views of eros and *gamos*, city and empire—or, conversely, that the pagan romances complicate and render more ambiguous the strident social critique already conveyed by the Apocryphal Acts.¹⁵ Here I will explore such

13 On the function of the “apostolic love triangle,” see Cooper 1996.51–56.

14 Note that Perkins 1995.47–49 emphasizes the relative robustness of the Greek cities in the early Roman imperial period, while Cooper 1996.36–44 emphasizes their relative fragility. Both resist, however, the notion that the novels reflect (even embrace) “the erosion of the city as a discrete social space in the context of the increasingly international or transnational culture of the Roman Empire,” as suggested by Konstan 1994.226.

15 Haynes 2003.14 anticipates this suggestion, proposing that “the novel and works like the *Apocryphal Acts* might better be envisioned as different points on a continuum of criticism of the dominant social order,” without, however, offering a sustained development of this point. Cf. the complementary argument of Konstan 1998 that what is primary in the romance—i.e., themes of familial affection and integration—is also present as a subtextual

a possibility in relation to two particular second-century texts—Achilles Tatius’s *Kleitophon and Leukippe* (hereafter KL) and the anonymous *Acts of Paul and Thekla* (hereafter APT). Despite their many differences, each of these works is, in its own (subgeneric) context, notably sophisticated; the two are also intriguingly resonant, not least in their resort to virginity. In both the pagan and the Christian novel, I suggest, the representation of a virginalized eroticism reflects deep ambivalence about the violence of imperial rule. This violence is doubled in the novelistic texts, as it is displaced onto the disciplining institution of patriarchal marriage, on the one hand, and the disruptive power of bandits and illegitimate lovers, on the other. The resistant subject of romance is also thereby split and doubled—hybridized—through the exposure of the ambivalence of a virginity in which the forces of desire and discipline simultaneously collide and collude.

As John Winkler reminds us, “The coincidence of eros and *gamos* was not a privileged norm” in traditional Greek culture; on the contrary, “the typical literary treatment of love and the atypical practical advice about marriage noted that eros is a dangerous and upsetting experience, in principle an unstable passion, and that one is better off keeping eros to a minimum, certainly not letting it interfere with the important business of marriage” (1994.29). Winkler thereby underlines the radical innovativeness at work in the “invention of romance,” located in the attempt to make eros and marriage normatively coincide. This line of analysis is pursued at greater length (and with a celebratory romanticism absent from Winkler’s essay) by David Konstan, who likewise argues that the Greek romance “inaugurated a new moment in the representation of *eros*,” in a cultural context in which “*eros* was not normally perceived as the basis of a permanent conjugal bond” but rather treated “as a wayward passion, fastening upon an object outside the conjugal network such as a foreigner, a courtesan, a married woman, or a boy” (1994.57). Yet we should not ignore the imperfect success of this novel attempt to wed love to marriage.

or secondary interest in the Apocryphal Acts. Note that one cannot simply assume that influence flows in one direction, from the Greek romance to the Christian Acts: although there are surviving fragments of Greek novels that clearly predate the Christian texts, the so-called “ideal romances” may in some cases post-date the Apocryphal Acts of Apostles and “may well have drunk from the Christian spring for some of their inspiration,” as noted by Thomas 1998.277. Bowersock 1994.121–43, in my view, stretches this argument past the limits of plausibility by arguing for the Christian derivation of all novelistic literature.

The perdurance of a conflict of interest between eros and *gamos* is easy to spot in the case of the APT and, indeed, might at first glance be attributed solely to its *resistance* to the pagan scripting of romance. In this Christian counter-romance, erotic passion for a (man of) God dramatically disrupts a planned marriage between Thekla and Thamyris. In her first encounter with the itinerant apostle Paul, Thekla displays the familiar symptoms of one stricken with an infelicitous love. As so often, the darts of eros enter through the eyes—despite the fact that Thekla cannot, initially, actually *see* the apostle. The reader, however, *can*: as Jan Bremmer notes, it is surely not accidental that the physical description of Paul—short, bald, bandy-legged, with eyebrows meeting in the middle and an unusually prominent nose (3)—“is hardly wholly positive” according to the criteria of ancient aesthetics.¹⁶ “This description causes the reader to look into a different direction,” he suggests (1996.38–39). The direction of the reader’s gaze traces Thekla’s own angle of vision, it would seem. Sitting at a window, a place of *viewing*, Thekla remains fixated on the (to her eyes, as yet invisible) apostle for three days and sleepless nights, refusing both food and drink. As her alarmed mother describes the scene to Thamyris, “gazing steadily as if on some joyful spectacle, she so devotes herself to a strange man who teaches deceptive and subtle words that I wonder how a maiden of such modesty as she is can be so sorely troubled” (7). She continues: “Thamyris, this man is upsetting the city of the Iconians . . . And my daughter also, like a spider at the window bound by his words, is dominated by a new desire and a fearful passion; for the maiden hangs on the things he says, and is taken captive” (9). Later Thekla will be found in Paul’s jail cell, “bound with him in affection” (19). The doubled reference to “binding” evokes erotic magic, and Paul will subsequently be identified by an enraged Iconian mob as a “sorcerer” who “has corrupted all our wives” (15) (Bremmer 1996.42, 44). We have already been told that Paul is a shape-shifter: “for now he appeared like a man, and now he had the face of an angel” (3). One who appears to the Iconians as an ill-favored seducer and magician is seen by the readers in the angelic form of Thekla’s destined lover—not, however, her intended husband.

16 Note that the erotic lure of the “ugly” philosopher goes back at least as far as Alcibiades’ description of Socrates’ satyr-like appearance in Plato’s *Symposium* (215b); it is particularly well elaborated in the novelistic *Life of Aesop*.

No surprise, perhaps, in a Christian text, that a holy apostle acting on behalf of divine providence will overturn the dynastic plans of mere families. But, in fact, the pagan romance depends on a similar initiating plot device. In Achilles Tatius's novel, Fortune's "drama" begins (1.3) when the well-born Kleitophon, engaged to marry another, first glimpses his cousin Leukippe. "Her face flashed on my eyes like lightning . . . As soon as I had seen her, I was lost. For Beauty's wound is sharper than any weapon's, and it runs through the eyes to the soul" (1.4). After dinner, he reports, "The others gauged their pleasure's fullness by their stomachs, but my banquet had been in my eyes" (1.6). Kleitophon's cousin Kleinias, in whom he confides, authoritatively confirms the erotic power of vision: "Eyes are the ambassadors of love" (1.9). In KL, as in the APT, the plot is opened by the ocular violence of eros, intervening to thwart a properly planned marriage.

The romantic plot will sustain itself by the same device of erotic disruption with which it opens. In the APT, Paul's initial seduction of Thekla is repeated in such a way as to underline the violence of social transgression. A complicated chain of events has led both Thekla and Paul to flee Iconium (Thekla having, in the meantime, survived burning at the stake). Traveling together, they enter Antioch. There "a Syrian by the name of Alexander, one of the first of the Antiochenes, seeing Thekla fell in love with her, and sought to win over Paul with money and gifts." When Paul responds ambiguously—"I do not know the woman of whom you speak nor is she mine"—Alexander embraces Thekla publicly, an act that is, as Thekla protests vehemently, appropriate neither to her predicament as an exiled "stranger" seeking hospitality nor to her position as a "handmaid of God" nor to her status as a well-born woman ("among the Iconians I am one of the first"). Ripping Alexander's cloak and pulling the imperial crown from his head, Thekla meets violence with violence, shaming Alexander in order to restore her own compromised honor (26). But Alexander, like Thamyris, has the ear of a Roman governor, and Thekla is sentenced to a fight in the arena in games that Alexander is himself hosting—a spectacular ordeal that she once again miraculously survives. It is for the sake of her God's Son, she proclaims to the governor, that "not one of the beasts touched me. For he alone is the goal of salvation and the foundation of immortal life. To the storm-tossed he is a refuge, to the oppressed relief, to the despairing shelter" (27–37).

The structure of repetition that links the episode in Antioch with that in Iconium not only identifies Alexander with Thamyris as the persecutor of Thekla's virginity but also subtly aligns the noble Alexander with the

“sorcerer” Paul as the seducer of a virtuous maiden. It additionally associates Paul with Thamyris as the rightful lover of Thekla, a comparison that is scarcely flattering to Paul, who comes off all the more passive and ineffectual, even lukewarm, in his desire and loyalty. Already in Iconium he has effectively abandoned Thekla to death by fire, an abandonment exposed in its very cover-up: when Thekla “sought for Paul, as a lamb in the wilderness looks about for the shepherd,” the “Lord” took on the form of Paul (who had long since fled town, mourning Thekla as dead) to offer her strength in her endurance (21). Subsequently, as we have seen, Paul performs a distinctly Petrine act of denial when confronted with Alexander’s challenge (26). Moreover, in between these two events, he has refused to baptize Thekla, on the basis of her disturbingly unmanly beauty and the implied suspicion that her virtue will not endure the trials to come. Thekla, meanwhile, has already offered to masculinize her appearance by cutting her hair (25); later, having baptized herself in the course of surviving her trials (34), she dresses in a man’s clothing, but Paul, “pondering whether another temptation was upon her” (40), apparently does not know how to read the shifting signs of a woman’s appearance.

KL performs the same trick of repetition and, indeed, repeats the trick more than once, but now it is the virginal Leukippe, rather than Kleitophon, who takes center stage as the victim of eros. Leukippe’s mother, like Thekla’s, has accurately perceived the threat to the maiden. Even as Kleitophon makes his way toward her daughter’s chamber in the hope of consummating his desire, the mother is “disturbed by a dream, in which she saw a bandit with a naked sword seize her daughter, drag her away, throw her down on her back, and slice her in two all the way up from her stomach, making his first insertion at her modest spot” (2.23). Does the dream appropriately correct Kleitophon’s passive self-representation as one whom “Eros has attacked . . . with all his forces” (1.9), while at the same time putting Leukippe’s agency in question? “Once Aphrodite has initiated us into her mysteries, no other power can contravene her will,” Kleitophon has urged, and his rhetoric—like an erotic spell—has not been without effect on the girl: “By repeating this charm frequently enough, I persuaded her to admit me to her bedroom at night” (2.19). Or is the mother the one who gets it wrong, after all, by interpreting the dream as a sign that her daughter has been sexually violated? As Shadi Bartsch points out, the dream’s predictions *will* later be fulfilled, and in terms that much more precisely match its imagery, when Leukippe is (apparently) disemboweled by bandits in a sacrificial rite—thus suggesting, with hindsight, that the mother has not only

misread her own dream but also, ironically, that the misreading itself “has precipitated a whole series of events that indirectly will lead to its true fulfillment” (1989.88–89). Indeed, the mother *has* guessed wrong, for Kleitophon is forced to flee before fulfilling the dream’s dire script, and her own failure to be convinced by her daughter’s claims that she is still a virgin (claims that are simultaneously truthful and deliberately misleading) plays a major role in the young couple’s decision to elope (2.28–30). Misprision is intricately interlaced with insight, as Fortune unfurls her plot. A dream may indeed mean more than one thing, and may mean different things at different times. As one interpretive fulfillment—Kleitophon’s seduction of Leukippe—is interrupted, another—the bandits’ disembowelment of Leukippe—will take its place, where displacement also effects a layering of signification. With hindsight, we will see that Kleitophon both is and is not the “bandit.” With a little more hindsight, we will know that the bandits do not, in fact, disembowel Leukippe: that, too, is finally revealed to be a misinterpretation. The rape of Leukippe is a dream that will be repeatedly misread and never quite fulfilled.

Like Paul and Thekla, Leukippe and Kleitophon leave town abruptly. Initially symmetrically paired in their suffering of shipwreck and capture by a gang of bandits, the two subsequently part ways. Kleitophon is rescued from captivity when the Egyptian army arrives to do battle with the bandits, but Leukippe is not. It is at this point that the outlaws perform their apparent sacrificial disembowelment of the girl, feasting upon her very entrails. Kleitophon gazes upon this grotesque theater with a passivity reminiscent of Paul’s. “I, contrary to all reason, just sat there staring,” he relates (3.15). Again like Paul (though with considerably more feeling), he mourns the girl as dead. He is subsequently halted in his attempt to emulate Leukippe by seeking the “noble death” of self-sacrifice when he learns that Leukippe’s sacrifice—though truly intended—was, in fact, a salvific sham, her rescue accomplished by friends more resourceful than he (3.17–22). Accomplished, ultimately, by the goddess Artemis, who appears to Leukippe in a dream shortly before the pseudo-sacrifice offering stern words of reassurance: “Do not be sad, you shall not die, for I will stand by you and help you. You will remain a virgin until I myself give you away as a bride. No one but Kleitophon will marry you.” Leukippe later relates this dream by way of fending off Kleitophon’s proposal that they no longer “defer the rites of Aphrodite”—a proposal that she has previously entertained favorably, as we have seen. As Bartsch points out, the claims of Artemis have now displaced the claims of Aphrodite in relation to Leukippe. Not so for Kleitophon, who

has also had a dream—a dream about a temple of Aphrodite, in fact. When, to his considerable dismay, the doors to the temple slam shut in his face, he receives a comforting message from a woman “who looked just like the statue in the temple”: “If you wait a short while, I will not only open the doors for you but make you a high priest of the goddess of love.” Contemplating the two dreams, Kleitophon is “more than a little upset” (4.1). But why? Bartsch’s shrewd reading solves the mystery of Kleitophon’s disquiet: “Marriage by Artemis and induction into Aphrodite’s priesthood have very different implications” (1989.92). Eros and *gamos* will not, in this novel, easily coincide. Leukippe is not necessarily the woman with whom Kleitophon will finally celebrate the rites of Aphrodite—though we do not know yet what he already seemingly suspects.

In this novel, as in the APT, virginity must be put to the test. No sooner is Leukippe claimed by the virginal Artemis than she finds her chastity repeatedly assailed (4.6–8, 4.9–17, 5.3–7). Kleitophon does little more than stare and weep, suffering for the most part merely vicariously. Subsequently abducted by pirates and sold into slavery, Leukippe is once again (and not for the last time) mourned as dead by Kleitophon, who has—so he believes—buried her brutally beheaded body himself (5.7–8). When he later unexpectedly encounters his beloved shackled, grimy, and with shaven head, Kleitophon does not even recognize her (5.17). As another character describes it, she has, in being subjected to slavery, “become so much the young man”; “the mere cropping of her hair transformed her utterly” (5.19). Her trials, like Thekla’s, have honed her strength, rendered her virtually virile. Kleitophon, in the meantime, has grown soft, she herself insinuates, in a stunningly sarcastic letter to her apparently unfaithful lover, who has—by a bizarre twist of fate—arrived on the scene of her enslavement in the role of “husband” to her own mistress Melite. (Matching Leukippe’s transgendered appearance, the feminized Kleitophon will, in a later scene, appear in Melite’s clothing [6.1, 5.]) Leukippe rehearses all that she has suffered for his sake—an impressive list, by this point. She announces her own faithfulness, signified by a virginity preserved against all odds. “But while I have struggled through one disaster after another, here are you, unsold, unlashd, now married,” she accuses (5.18). Kleitophon responds by return post, begging not to be condemned “without a trial,” protesting: “I have imitated your virginity—if that word has any meaning for men as it does for women” (5.20). “A fascinating remark,” as Goldhill notes (1995.95), in light of the fact that Kleitophon has earlier referred to his experience with prostitutes (2.37).

Is a man indeed capable of imitating virginity, or does such cross-gendered mimesis inevitably become a mockery? Up to this point, Kleitophon has offered Melite a merely “sexless affair,” as the woman bitterly describes her disappointment (5.25). But now, so close to recovering Leukippe, he recklessly succumbs to Melite’s charms and thus submits to eros’s will, celebrating love’s “mystic liturgy” in unexpected fulfillment of his earlier dream (Bartsch 1989.91–93). Or in near-fulfillment: we should note that the rites celebrated are not those of Aphrodite but of Eros, detached from the nuptial interests partly shared by Aphrodite but now decisively claimed by Artemis (see Bouffartigue 2001.134). “The casual in sex,” Kleitophon concludes lightly, “is far more sweet than the carefully prepared: its pleasure springs up like an untended plant” (5.27). Later, when narrating his adventures publicly, he will “modify” those “chapters about Melite” in such a way as to emphasize his own chastity while avoiding positive lies, as he explains. He will also repeat, in further qualified form, his already ambiguous claim to virginity: “If one can speak of such a thing as male virginity, this is my relationship to Leukippe up to now” (8.5). (He has not, in other words, had sex with *Leukippe*.) Kleitophon’s slippery rhetoric here seems to reinstate, with a knowing wink, a traditional sexual double standard, thereby insinuating that the notion of male virginity is indeed no more than a joke. Yet the operation of repetition, evoking his prior, seemingly more “sincere” protest to Leukippe, also holds open another interpretive possibility, namely, that the discursive performance of male virginity is an ambivalent act of mimicry that effects a crisis of signification—“if the word has any meaning,” “if one can speak of such a thing.”

While Kleitophon dallies with Melite, Leukippe is pursued, and very nearly raped, by her master Thersandros—Melite’s husband, who had been thought, like Leukippe herself, to have died. In the midst of this heightened crisis, Leukippe calls upon Artemis: “Lady goddess, where are your arrows?” (6.21). Her response to her persecutors is as impressively defiant as Thekla’s: “My one weapon is my freedom, which cannot be shredded by lashes, dismembered by sharp blades, or burned away by fire. It is the one thing I shall never part with. If you try to set it on fire, you will not find the fire hot enough” (6.22). Surviving this private ordeal, Leukippe, not unlike Thekla, subsequently faces a final, public trial of her virginity and emerges triumphant (8.13–14). However, as Kathryn Chew argues, Achilles Tatius’s apparently innovative use of the explicit device of a “chastity test” effects a parody of conventional “romance” morality (2000.63–64). Unlike Thekla’s, Leukippe’s triumph is interjected with irony, not only because we

recall her earlier offer, made in the context of her mother's not unreasonable doubts ("If there is a virginity test, I'll take it," 2.28), but also because Melite herself passes a similar test of marital fidelity by an explicit trick of sophistry (8.11, 14). Melite (like Kleitophon) makes a mockery of chastity, but she thereby also imitates Leukippe's former, similarly subtly duplicitous gesture, and thus the fulfillment of Leukippe's (in hindsight, predictive) offer to be tested as a virgin—like the fulfillment of Leukippe's earlier, thwarted desire to be initiated into the rites of Aphrodite—is split and doubled in the narratives of these two women. (As Chew points out, 2000.60–61, "The figure of Melite . . . replaces Leucippe for nearly half the novel.") Artemis and Aphrodite (the latter also doubled and virtually displaced by Eros) mark the poles of ambivalence opened in the drama of Fortune.

In both KL and the APT, as I have tried to show, the violence of a subsequent sexual assault repeats the erotic disruption that initiates the romance—repeats, to be sure, with a difference, but how much difference? As the narratives layer themselves ("the more storied the better," Achilles Tatius's narrator quips [1.2]), Roman governors, civic notables, and prospective husbands turn out to be little different from rapists and seducers, soldiers not much better than bandits,¹⁷ apostles scarcely distinguishable from magicians. Konstan notes that "*eros* is uniform in the Greek novel, and it motivates the meanest villains, male or female, in the same way as it does the protagonists themselves." He goes on to propose, nonetheless, that distinctions can—and indeed, from the novelistic perspective, *must*—be made between the "aggressive and asymmetrical" passion to which both hero and heroine are repeatedly subjected and the mutual, reciprocal submission to *eros* that characterizes the love of the young couple (1994.41, 45). I am here suggesting something rather different—namely, that the romances, pagan as well as Christian, acknowledge the "uniformity" of *eros* to an even greater degree than Konstan allows. There is, in other words, no "sexual symmetry," in the blandly vanilla sense that Konstan seems to intend, in either KL or the APT.¹⁸ *Eros* is consistently (in all its infinite

17 Cf. Hopwood 1998, who explores the novelistic use of bandits to parody—and thereby reaffirm—the "proper" masculinity represented by the soldier. I think that Hopwood may miss the subversiveness of the parody by underestimating the degree to which many ancient novels (including both KL and Heliodorus's romance) sustain ambiguity regarding the distinction between "real men" and bandits.

18 As also argued by Bouffartigue 2001.133: "L'amour entre Leucippé et Clitophon est nettement asymétrique."

variations) violent and asymmetrical. Dominance and submission are, however, not only imminently reversible but also frequently coincident within one desired and desiring subject. Such complexities and fluidities of identity and relationality may be seen, in some cases, to add up to a kind of “reciprocity” or “mutuality,” but they produce no stable orders of “equality.” The girl’s defiance, in which spectacular passivity combines with unexpected strength of resistance, complicates her femininity, as “transvestite” passages in both texts highlight; the lover’s distinctly unheroic helplessness and unsteady loyalty likewise render his masculinity markedly ambivalent. The transvestite, as Marjorie Garber observes, is “the figure that disrupts.”¹⁹ Yet the result of such disruption is not a deliberate leveling of sexual difference, as Konstan argues, proposing that “the equivalence of the male and female amatory roles . . . is specific to the novel” and that “the passivity of the hero is best understood as a function or condition of this equivalence” (1994.26). “Symmetry,” as Goldhill notes, “is not equivalence (and certainly not equality)” (1995.160). “Symmetry,” *if the word has any meaning for the ancient romance*, is the erotic effect of tightly linked but fundamentally nonequivalent shifts within and between sexed subjectivities.

The hero, deconstructed within the complex play of power and resistance conducted on a precariously de-centered, hybridized field of culture, has become a pseudo-man. He is also a mimic-woman. Virginité (pace Konstan) is the privileged site of this strategically flawed mimetic circulation.²⁰ If a woman can lay “natural” claim to virginité’s resistant submission in perfecting the act by taking it to new extremes, she also becomes unnaturally virile. If a man would achieve virility he must now act like a woman. “I have imitated your virginité,” says the youth to the maid, “if that word has any meaning for men as it does for women.” Does it? If it “means,” it must mean differently. Indeed, the virginité of romance appears

19 Garber 1993.70. Regarding the way in which cross-dressing exposes the imitative structure and contingency of gender, see also Butler 1990.137–38.

20 Konstan 1994.52–55 resists Foucault’s emphasis on the significance of virginité for Achilles Tatius (Foucault 1986.262–63), on the grounds that the Greek novels betray no interest in sexual purity per se but rather focus on “constancy.” As noted above, Goldhill likewise resists Foucault’s suspiciously “Christian” reading of Achilles Tatius, who is thereby emplotted in a “purposeful trajectory from Plato to the Church”; unlike Konstan, he does not, however, dispute the significance of “virginité” so much as insist on its non-didactic and complexly ironic treatment in KL, an argument with which I am in full agreement (Goldhill 1995.100).

to be an instance of what Bhabha dubs “colonial specularity”: it “does not produce a mirror where the self apprehends itself; it is always the split screen of the self and its doubling, the hybrid” (1994.114). For a man to play the virgin is an unnatural—and thus a radically denaturalizing—act, because it is inevitably to imitate the woman (already marked as a mimic-man) and equally inevitably to fail in the attempt.²¹ In Kleitophon’s case, the failure is literalized; in Paul’s, it is the more subtle effect of his inability to recognize in Thekla’s virginity a model worthy of imitation. Thekla and Leukippe—or rather Thekla and Leukippe/Melite—likewise emerge as “split screens of the self and its doubling” through an imitation of traditional female chastity that is at once excessive (very nearly “heroic”) and deficient in its relation to marriage—“an extravagant and willful chastity,” as Doody puts it, that “cuts against *utilitas*, and questions *gravitas*.”²² In the romances, “masculinity” and “femininity” are not represented as the mirrored and mirroring effects of the social reproduction of naturalized genders but rather emerge in mimicry, occupying the gap between mimesis and mockery—conveying “at once resemblance and menace” (Bhabha 1994.86).

What then of marriage? This supposed climax of the romance is not merely anti-climactic but decidedly ambiguous. Eros comes to an end with *gamos*—or, in the case of the APT, with the mimicry of marriage enacted in the reunion of virgin and apostle. In the APT, Paul fades out of sight, while Thekla is released on her missionary journeys. In KL, it is our interest that fades as Achilles Tatius lets his text peter out, neglecting even to close the framing dialogue with which it began—neglecting, moreover, to describe the couple’s long-deferred lovemaking, “rites of Aphrodite” now narratively displaced by the celebration of their “long-awaited marriage,” where it is presumably not Aphrodite but Artemis who gives the bride away. (Is she thus still a “virgin”—if one can speak of such a thing as a married

21 I have elsewhere explored patterns of male appropriation of female virginity within Christian texts of the late Roman empire: e.g., Burrus 1995 and 2000.112–22, 131–33, 135–52, 179–83. For a comparative treatment of the male appropriation of female virginity in rabbinic texts, see Boyarin 1999.67–92.

22 Doody 1996.72. Haynes 2003.95–96 suggests that male passivity in the novels similarly represents “an extreme and somewhat subversive version of the ideal” of self-control, finding in this shift to locate aggression in the “other” (e.g., bandits and soldiers) a possible response to Roman domination. In her view, the relative assertiveness of the chaste heroine who resists violation, on the other hand, may reflect the assertion of “Greek cultural integrity” (155, 161).

virgin?) “We decided to spend the winter in Tyre and then make our way to Byzantium,” is Kleitophon’s rather irrelevant parting line (8.19).²³ Achilles Tatius, not unlike the author of the APT, has made “marriage” not only uninteresting but very nearly incomprehensible, by plotting it as the necessary endpoint of a journey that was always running away from it. And yet if eros was always running away from *gamos*, it was also always doubling back on it—doubling it, not least by doubling itself in the ambivalent figure of virginity. Artemis makes a mockery of Aphrodite’s distinctly non-virginal, not-quite-marital aspirations, and it is eros and virginity that alternately occupy the powerful interval of difference. Marriage, too, becomes visible as a split screen in these novels.

Both romances thus seem more complex and ambivalent than the oppositional contrast—politically conservative vs. politically subversive—allows. At the same time, it remains the case that the APT provides a clear script for “liberation,” while KL is more evasive in its clever ironies. Even Chew, who argues persuasively that KL constitutes a rather thoroughgoing parody of conventional sexual morality, acknowledges that the novelist’s ambiguous play with convention “makes the interpretation of his critique incumbent upon his reader” (2000.68). As Goldhill puts it, Achilles Tatius leaves us wondering at every turn “how seriously or how comically he challenges or supports the acknowledgement of secure communal values, the proprieties of intellectual discourse” (1995.93–94). He further cautions, “Humor here is not just a strategy of resistance to a dominant ideology” (1995.110–11).

Symptomatically, in the APT, an ascetic ideology conveys an overt and strident critique of marriage as such: “Blessed are the continent, for to them will God speak” (5). KL, on the other hand, makes space for an *explicit* questioning of the ideal of marriage only at the level of subtext—and an ambiguously positioned subtext at that. Two embedded speeches energetically rehearse—without clearly endorsing—traditional arguments for the superiority of pederasty over marriage (1.7–14, 2.34–38). In both cases, the speeches are framed by tales of male homoerotic relationships that are first challenged by threats of marriage and subsequently end tragically in the

23 The irrelevance opens a further gap in the text. “Sidon is a city beside the sea”: thus, the opening line of the novel, identifying the place of Kleitophon’s narrative recitation. The final line, leading to Tyre and Byzantium, notably fails to close the circle. See Bartsch 1989.168 and Fusillo 1997.219–20.

death of the beloved (“passive”) partner. Konstan infers from this that “homosexuality serves as a way of marking an unequal or asymmetrical relationship.” While there is no indication of “the author’s disapproval of such attachments per se,” pederasty is nonetheless “doomed” in advance, he argues, “because the novel as a genre favors the fully reciprocal passion of the protagonists”—passion that is, moreover, he emphasizes, “invariably heterosexual” (1994.29, 14). The modern distinction between “homosexuality” and “heterosexuality” is perhaps here too easily invoked. The element of tragic poignancy conveyed by the doubled narratives, despite their lightly parodic cast, may also be too tidily dismissed. Likewise overlooked is the ironic foreshadowing—the distinctly ambivalent doubling—of Kleitophon’s own role as an active lover subsequently rendered queerly passive in the face of his beloved’s repeated “deaths.” (Indeed, one might argue that the intruded tales of love between men retain a purity of asymmetrical reciprocity suspended in death that Kleitophon’s own narrative initially imitates but is “doomed” to lose through its ultimate consummation in marriage.²⁴) Such sustained ambiguities suggest that the restaging of the traditional philosophical debate about the relative merits of women and boys as objects of desire (replicated in the staged tension between erotic narratives, and further complicated by gaps between what is said and what is actually done) is not intended to produce a moral decision in favor of marriage so much as to introduce a question about “the difficulty of unmediated seriousness and didacticism with regard to erotics” and hence also the difficulty implicit in the practice of “philosophy” itself, as Goldhill argues (1995.111). In these two passages, philosophy attempts knowingly to frame the romance; ultimately, however, romance will encompass and overwhelm philosophy.

While lacking the cutting edge of eschatology’s utopianism and social critique, KL nonetheless provides a subtle interrogation of the violence of eros that both repeats and subverts, via mimicry, the violence at the heart of the city and its patriarchs and rulers—so many pirates and bandits. Indeed, Achilles Tatius’s novel hints at what the APT cannot quite allow: that the tyranny of divine Eros doubles the tyranny of men. The two

24 Konstan seems, strangely, to miss the rather obvious fact that asymmetry does not exclude reciprocity. Kleinias’s boyfriend Charikles is not only deeply gratified by his lover’s gift of the horse that will ultimately kill him, but is also actively dismayed by the prospect of marriage to a woman (1.7–8). Menelaos’s boyfriend, killed accidentally by Menelaos’s own javelin hurled in an attempt to protect him from an oncoming boar, “died in the embrace of the very arms that had killed him” (2.34).

romances, pagan and Christian, remain haunted—differently—by the apprehension that eros is not only always a threat to the political order but also the threat that lies at the heart of that very order. Love is an oppressive as well as a defiant or liberating God. And the God who is Love is, in the diasporic context of empire, at once nowhere and everywhere: to submit on one front is to resist on another; to resist is also to submit. To submit, to resist: to play the lover by playing the virgin—if the word has any meaning, if one can speak of such a thing. Eros and *gamos* fail to coincide normatively in romance, but something has shifted nonetheless. Virginity is the novel (the very nearly unspeakable) intervention—the unstable third term—that continues to unsettle the binary, both exposing and confounding the distinction between the violence of desire and the discipline of the city.

II. CONVERTED VIRGINS: ASENETH AND CHARIKLEIA

Joseph and Aseneth (hereafter JA) is an anonymously authored text of probable Jewish provenance that betrays strong affinities with both Christian and pagan romances.²⁵ In particular, it shares with Heliodorus's *Ethiopian Story* (hereafter ES) a lofty religiosity, at once already lightly allegorical and easily susceptible to heavier allegorical interpretation, resonant with both Neoplatonism and broader henotheistic trends of the later empire—which *may* suggest a fourth-century context of authorship for both of these notoriously difficult-to-date texts.²⁶ My interest here is not, how-

25 For a relatively recent exploration of the affinities with pagan romance, see Hezser 1997, as well as Pervo 1991, who likewise acknowledges resonances with Christian novels. The exclusively Christian history of its textual transmission, together with the marked affinities of JA with Christian romantic literature, has led to a recent revival of arguments in favor of possible Christian authorship by Kraemer 1998. Kraemer's painstakingly detailed study finally reminds us of all we do not know about the diversity and syncretism that likely characterized both Judaism and Christianity in late antiquity and that may, in some cases, mark the very posing of the question of "religious identity" as a subtle anachronism. My own choice to follow the earlier consensus in positioning JA tentatively as a "Jewish" text thus should not be read as a pointed rejection of Kraemer's position, which is finally productively agnostic.

26 JA is particularly difficult to place chronologically. Kraemer 1998.225–39 has recently challenged widespread assumptions that the text must have been composed prior to 100 C.E., arguing instead for the likelihood of a date of composition between the late third and late fourth centuries C.E. The dating of the ES has similarly been hotly debated, though, in this case, controversy has turned on rather more precise intertextual considerations. Bowersock 1994.49–60 argues that the text must have been composed after 350 C.E., yet many scholars continue to prefer a third-century date.

ever, in the complexly syncretistic piety of JA and ES but rather in the shared themes of virginity and “mixed marriage,”²⁷ closely interwoven with tropes of “transformation” or “conversion.”²⁸ ES has been read as a celebration of an “ecumenical Hellenism that could actually embrace much that was formerly barbaric” (Bowersock 1994.53). The transcendence of ethnic particularity is, on this account, vividly represented in the romance’s literal white-washing of the improbably fair-skinned Ethiopian Charikleia, who is converted from the false purity of her virginal separatism through the sacred rite of marriage to a blandly Greek Everyman. JA, on the other hand, is typically interpreted as a triumphal apologetic for Judaism, scripting the transformation of an idolatrous virgin into the model wife of no one less than the biblical patriarch Joseph; while Joseph—regally uncompromising in his own ethnic separatism—is made over as the king of Egypt, Aseneth is figured as a fortified “city” (no longer literally, but all the more symbolically, “virginal”) in which all may take refuge by becoming worshippers of the true God. Yet I would suggest that what appears at first a contrast—the imposition of a universalizing Hellenism versus the asserted claims of ethnic particularity—quickly dissolves. Once the ambiguities of both texts are recognized (a recognition that has, admittedly, been queerly absent from most scholarly studies), their resonant subversions of discourses of ethnicity likewise become evident. Here, as in KL and the APT, virginity conveys the hybridization of gendered—and now also explicitly racialized—subjects, enacted at the borderlines of cultural encounters pressured by the politics of empire. Marriage, however, becomes less the target of subversion than the subversive site of virginity’s hybridization.

Whereas both Thekla and Leukippe are converted *to virginity*, Aseneth and Charikleia must be converted *from virginity*. Indeed, it is upon this conversion that both plots initially turn (although the “beginning” of ES

27 Note that Hezser 1997.30 overlooks the significance of mixed marriage in Heliodorus’s novel: “*Joseph and Aseneth* differs from the pagan Greek novels in that the lovers are not compatriots . . . The protagonists [of pagan novels] remain steadfast in their rejection of both Greeks living in other parts of the Greek world and representatives of non-Greek, ‘barbarian’ cultures.” Cf. Doody’s, to my mind more persuasive, suggestion that the ancient novels favor the marriage of strangers (1996.103).

28 As will become clear, it is the conversion of virginity rather than “religious” conversion per se that I will pursue. As Gruen 1998.94–95 remarks in relation to JA, “The ‘conversion’ aspect has perhaps received undue emphasis” in studies of a text that betrays far more interest in the broader issue of “the relation between Jew and Gentile in the Diaspora.” (Jew and Gentile, however, are never named as such, as Gruen also notes.)

is buried in its middle), attracting parallel—almost, but not quite, “symmetrical”—conversions of the novels’ virginal heroes as well. The conversion of Aseneth is particularly violent, a chastisement marked by elaborate rituals of penitent self-abjection. Her chastisement begins rhetorically, with the author’s disapproving description of the notorious beauty as “despising and scorning every man . . . boastful and arrogant with everyone” (2). Aseneth’s arrogance, as well as her beauty, is immediately showcased. Descending from her virginal tower adorned “like a bride of God” to greet her parents on their return from the fields with the first fruits of the harvest, Aseneth’s joy turns swiftly to rage when her loving father Pentephres (the priest of Heliopolis) informs her that he hopes to wed her to their anticipated visitor, the powerful Joseph, “a man who worships God, self-controlled, and a virgin like you today.” Self-control fails Aseneth herself on that day: “Plenty of red sweat poured over her face, and she became furious with great anger, and looked askance at her father with her eyes.” She protests that she is being handed over “like a captive, to a man (who is) an alien, and a fugitive, and (was) sold (as a slave).” Continuing to insult Joseph, “the shepherd’s son from the land of Canaan” who was caught sleeping with his mistress, she announces that she intends to marry no one less than the king of Egypt’s first-born son. Pentephres is ashamed, “because she had answered him daringly and with boastfulness and anger” (4).

Soon, however, it is Aseneth’s turn to be ashamed when, gazing from the window of her tower, she beholds the dazzlingly handsome Joseph (5). “Strongly cut (to the heart),” she who once scorned the “slave” now wishes only to be given as a slave to Joseph (6). Joseph, meanwhile, enters the scene of the tale only, it seems, in order to match, and indeed outdo, Aseneth’s prior performance.²⁹ He refuses to eat with his honorable host (“Joseph never ate with Egyptians, for this was an abomination to him”) and becomes virtually hysterical when he perceives Aseneth watching him from the window, demanding that she leave the house and protesting anxiously, “This one must not molest me, too.” He recalls his father Jacob’s advice to “guard strongly against associating with a strange woman.” Pentephres

29 As we shall see, Aseneth will, however, stay one step ahead of Joseph in this narrative. One of the characteristically “romantic” features of JA is the tendency to focus attention on the “virginal” heroine rather than the hero, who here, as elsewhere, competes for the most part unsuccessfully, despite the fact that Joseph is a versatile and well-developed figure in the literature of the Hellenistic and early Roman periods (see Gruen 1998.73–109), whereas Aseneth is otherwise unknown.

expertly interrupts his tirade (faring better than he did with his own daughter) by offering an alternative reading of the situation. “This one . . . is not a strange woman, but she is our daughter, a virgin hating every man.” The simple reframing is surprisingly successful, and Joseph rejoices to have finally encountered a man-hating woman who will not, therefore “molest” his virginity. Reversing his demand that she leave, he now suddenly desires that she join them: “I love her from today as my sister” (7).

The initial encounter of the two xenophobic virgins hovers at the edge of parody: it is almost, but not quite, a scene of lovemaking. At her father’s suggestion, Aseneth approaches Joseph to give him a kiss. Jacob holds her off at arm’s length, yet the gesture of refusal is described in oddly erotic terms: he “stretched out his right hand and put it on her chest between her two breasts, and her breasts were already standing upright like handsome apples.” Kissing is not appropriate between strangers whose lips worship different gods and eat different foods, he notes sternly—adding, however, that a man can indeed kiss a sister or a wife. Has he not already pronounced Aseneth his “sister”? But Aseneth was not present to hear his words, and thus she misses the ambiguity. (Joseph, still too tightly wrapped in his own self-certainty, perhaps misses it too.) Once again, she is “cut” and her eyes fill with tears. At this, Joseph calls on his God to “bless this virgin” and “form her anew by your hidden hand, and make her alive again by your life” (8). Aseneth retires to her tower chamber to sort out her decidedly mixed emotions, and Joseph departs, promising to return in a week (9).

Now Aseneth begins her ritual of repentance in earnest. Donning garments of mourning and covering herself in ashes, she refuses food, water, and sleep, beats her breast and weeps extravagantly, “sighing and screaming until daybreak.” This histrionic performance continues for “the seven days of her humiliation” (10). With masochistic fervor, she welcomes the “Lord” who, if he strikes her, will also heal her: “And if he chastises me with his whips, he himself will look again on me in his mercy” (11). Aseneth bursts forth, despite her feebleness, in impassioned verbosity, with a climactic hymn of repentance for both her idolatry and her virginity, repeating her plea that she might be made Joseph’s slave (12–13). A subsequent hymn recapitulates and intensifies the theme of the “sin” of her arrogant virginity, reiterating her father’s designation of Joseph as the “Powerful One”—one powerful enough, in the event, to humble her arrogance through his erotic conquest (21).

Aseneth is answered with the rising of the morning star in the east, which ushers in the thrilling apparition of a man closely resembling Joseph

but for the unearthly dazzle of his body. The man orders her to discard her mourning garb and clothe herself in untouched linen, securely belted with “the twin girdle of her virginity” (14). Her virginity is, thus, not to be destroyed but merely revised, despite her own excessive repudiations. The man rebukes her for having veiled her head, explaining authoritatively that a virgin’s head “is like that of a young man.” He announces that he has given her to be not the slave but the bride of Joseph. (Or does this amount to the same thing? It is Aseneth who initially describes her proposed marriage to Joseph as “captivity,” 15.) The two dine together on a miraculous meal of honeycomb and, after performing a few more wondrous acts, the man—or is he a (sun) god?—disappears into the heavens in a fiery horse-drawn chariot (16–17).³⁰

Joseph returns on cue, and Aseneth quickly dresses herself in the finery appropriate to a bride. Despite the ravages of her week of self-mortification (resulting initially in an unhappily “fallen face”), her beauty now burns more intensely than ever (18). Dazzled by the sight of her, Joseph asks: “Who are you? Quickly tell me.” In response to this charged question, Aseneth briefly relates the events of the past week. It seems that Joseph, too, has had a visit from the heavenly matchmaker. The one who once held her at arm’s length now urges Aseneth to approach him: “Come to me, chaste virgin, and why do you stand far away from me?” Stretching out his hands, “he called Aseneth by a wink of his eyes.” They embrace, and the teasingly deferred kiss finally takes place; indeed, “they kissed each other for a long time and both came to life in their spirit” (19). More kisses follow, but Joseph, we are told, virtuously abstains from sleeping with “his wife” before the wedding (20–21)—an act of self-restraint that might have been presumed, thus raising the question of why it needs to be mentioned at all. Perhaps the intention is both to create and dispel ambiguity regarding the sufficiency of Pentephres’s authority to seal the marriage by giving away the bride. Joseph, too, must be given away, by none other than Pharaoh, who agrees to join Joseph and Aseneth in marriage. “And Pharaoh turned them around toward each other face to face and brought them mouth to mouth and joined them by their lips, and they kissed one another” (21).

30 I here deliberately leap over the much-discussed “wonder” involving bees and honeycomb. See, e.g., Bohak 1996.6–15 and Kraemer 1998.167–72. I might nonetheless note that Ambrose of Milan not only is associated with a prophetic bee incident in his own infancy (Paulinus *Vita Ambr.* 3), but also himself associates both bees and honey with virginity (*Virg.* 1.8.40; see also *Spir.* 2.prol.1–16).

The kiss is all the erotic consummation that this novel text yields. More than that, it is all that it requires. Indeed, Joseph's apparently superfluous assertion that "it does not befit a man who worships God to sleep with his wife before the wedding" may now be perceived as a subtle dismissal of the romance's conventional teleology. Virgins make the best lovers, where the teasing suspense of deferral is recognized as the key to erotic (as well as novelistic) art. While Achilles Tatius's protagonist repeatedly gives way to the impatience of a premature ejaculation—"How long will we stop at mere kisses, dearest?" (KL 2.19)—Joseph and Aseneth remember what Kleitophon once learned but then forgot, namely, that "a kiss is a premier pleasure." Indeed, "for sheer pleasure nothing can compete with a lover's kiss" (KL 2.8).

Turning to Heliodorus's similarly virginal romance, we find the female protagonist more sympathetically portrayed than the Aseneth of JA's initial representation. ES famously begins *in medias res*, opening suspensefully onto a striking scene that, strategically, defies easy interpretation—a shoreline of the Nile delta littered with dead bodies, near which "a creature of such indescribable beauty that one might have taken her for a goddess" sits perched mournfully on a rock. The girl—our heroine Charikleia—is not only beautiful but also good, exuding "genuine affection and wholehearted love" for the wounded man who lies at her feet (1.2). Yet the similarities between Aseneth and Charikleia are perhaps as telling as the contrasts: by the time Heliodorus has backtracked (repeatedly) to relate the beginnings of this romantic tale, we realize that the Charikleia whom we have first met on the shore has already undergone a conversion as dramatic as that of Joseph's bride.

In the course of Heliodorus's narrative, the Egyptian Kalasiris, formerly a priest of Isis, relates events that have taken place during his exile in the Greek city of Delphi. There he encountered one Charikles, a priest of Apollo and father of Charikleia, who, we learn from Charikles' own reported narrative, has dedicated herself to Artemis and "resolved to stay a virgin all her life." As the troubled father explains it to Kalasiris, "Virginity is her god, and she has elevated it to the level of the immortals . . . But Eros and Aphrodite and all nuptial revelry she curses to damnation." He begs Kalasiris to "cast an Egyptian spell on her" that will "make her realize that she is a woman now" (2.33). (As Kalasiris has already explained knowingly, "Greeks find all Egyptian lore and legend irresistibly attractive," 2.27.) But the story-within-a-story enfolds further complications. It seems that Charikles' daughter is (unbeknownst to her) not a natural but an adoptive child. During

a journey to Egypt some years earlier, the Greek had met an Ethiopian youth whose “skin was as black as it could be” and who, speaking “in faltering Greek” (2.30), entrusted to Charikles a beautiful (and beautifully “white”) child who had, as the Ethiopian related it, been exposed as an infant. In exchange for granting him the child to be raised as his own daughter, the Ethiopian asked only that Charikles see that the girl, clearly of impressive parentage, be married to a freeborn husband (2.31).

Even as Kalasiris hears this story from Charikles, a possible resolution to the Greek priest’s problem presents itself in the form of a striking young man who arrives as the leader of a noble delegation from Thessaly, the members of which are, according to Charikles, “Hellenes in the truest sense of the word, for they trace their descent from Hellen, the son of Deukalion.” The young man, one Theagenes, adds Charikles, “prides himself on being a descendant of Achilles.” Kalasiris, interestingly, finds the lineage purportedly claimed by Theagenes dubious, based on his own knowledge of “the works of the Egyptian poet Homer” (2.34)—and well he might, given the irony at work in what amounts to a virtual parody of genealogical inventiveness, an irony that is, however, as Whitmarsh notes (1998.101–06), subsequently doubled in Kalasiris’s own elaborated genealogy of Homer (3.14). In the midst of a dazzling ritual procession, the two young people, dedicated to the sibling gods Apollo and Artemis respectively (as committed to their virginity as they are ambiguous in their “Greekness”), behold each other for the first time. “At the moment when they set eyes on one another, the young pair fell in love” (3.5). Subsequently, Charikleia is found “tossing restlessly on her bed, her eyes moist with love” (3.7). Theagenes, too, has been hard hit, rocked by violent and quickly shifting emotions. As Kalasiris observes: “The mind of a person in love is rather like that of a drunkard: volatile and completely unstable, since in both cases the soul is riding on a tide of emotional fluidity” (3.10).

Kalasiris decides to take matters into his own hands, playing the role of a tricksterish providence in directing the fate of the two virginal lovers, a fate revealed through the ambiguous media of oracles and dreams. (Here he is not unlike the heavenly man of JA.) Declaring to Charikles that both Charikleia and Theagenes are the victims of an evil eye (3.7, 11), he at once reveals and disguises the truth. The sickness of love is indeed the effect of a tyranny—the work of an “Egyptian spell”?—that exploits the power and vulnerability of sight, as each of the lovers acknowledges. Theagenes protests that “he had never been intimate with a woman” and “had never felt anything but contempt for their whole sex . . . and even for married love”; “it

was only under compulsion that he admitted defeat at the hands of a girl” (3.17). Charikleia, for her part, “completely enslaved by her passion” (3.19), gives poignant voice to her distress: “I am caused even more pain by not having overcome that malady at the outset, but having instead succumbed to a passion whose temptations I had hitherto always resisted” (4.10). If Kalasiris promises her that she can transform her “malady” into “matrimony,” the process will be far from straightforward. For starters, it seems that she must, with Theagenes, return to her Ethiopian birthplace. Yet to accomplish this, her Greek foster-father will have to be misled by the tricky Egyptian. Under the cover of deception, the lovers will flee Delphi and travel to the royal court of Ethiopia in the company of their Egyptian guide and new father figure, who (it is now revealed) knows even more than Charikles about the girl’s origins: she is no less than the daughter of the Ethiopian king and queen (4.12, 13).

In neither JA nor ES, however, does the successful conversion of virgins to lovers constitute, in itself, the resolution of the plot. If the seven days of feasting in celebration of the marriage of Aseneth and Joseph conform temporally to Israelite custom (cf. Judg. 14:12, 17), one wonders how the pious newlyweds could have found the Pharaoh’s food to their taste. Aseneth has been “converted,” but so, too, has Joseph, it would seem. “Converted” from virginity but also converted within virginity (a virginity at once subverted by and subversive of “marriage”), this erotically ascetic, racially “mixed” couple bear the seeds not only of Manasseh and Ephraim but also of a slyly conceived ethnic syncretism (21). For the tale does not end with the marital kiss. The plot is thickened by two new narrative lines that quickly intersect: the meeting of Aseneth with Joseph’s father and brothers (22) and the emergent jealousy of Pharaoh’s son (23), who had long since desired to make Aseneth his bride (1). Rivalry between the sons of Jacob results in a splintering of political loyalties within the family, as the sons of Jacob’s slave consorts are drawn into the Pharaoh’s son’s plot to abduct Aseneth and slay both Joseph and the Pharaoh (24–25), while the sons of Leah and Rebecca faithfully—and successfully—defend Aseneth, despite being drastically outnumbered, to put it mildly (26–27). The final outcome, however, is scarcely a triumph of the house of Israel over the house of Pharaoh. Aseneth has indeed, as she professes, become a daughter to Jacob and sister to Joseph’s brothers (whose fragile reconciliation she effects). But Joseph has also been confirmed as the true son of Pharaoh—who has likewise become “like a father” to Joseph’s brothers. Imbricated into the royal succession, Joseph son of Israel rules the kingdom of Egypt

for forty-eight years, at once “like a son” to the Pharaoh and “like a father” to Pharaoh’s younger son, to whom he eventually passes the diadem of royal power (29).

The plot of *ES* undergoes still more elaborate complications, which tantalizingly defer the marriage of its virgins, as narrative lines repeatedly split, circle back, and interweave. (In this it outdoes even Achilles Tatius’s intricately-emplotted romance.) Adventures at sea, near-abduction by pirates, and fights between competing bands of outlaws (instigated, predictably, by desire to possess Charikleia’s beauty) have, we now learn, brought the couple to the scene at the Nile’s delta where the reader first encounters them. There they lose their paternal guide Kalasiris, and swiftly lose each other as well, as their paths intersect with the designs of local Egyptian strongmen and their armies of “brigands.” Some of these brigands turn out to be nobles, and temporary allies become enemies even as enemies turn out to be friends. In the play of shifting patterns of affiliation, ethnic identity is made the subject of both vulgar stereotyping and complex ironization.³¹ When captured for the second time, in quick succession, by an army of brigands, Charikleia and Theagenes make common cause with one Knemon, who is not only a fellow prisoner but also an Athenian. “A Greek! Heaven be praised! . . . Perhaps now there will be some respite from our suffering” they exclaim (1.8). Yet Knemon’s own related history scarcely serves to instill admiration for Athens (1.9–18), and his character “might even be considered as a satire on Athenian life and culture” (Doody 1996.93; see also Morgan 1999). Thyamis, the chieftain who desires to make Charikleia his bride, is described scornfully by Charikleia as a “savage” and a “robber.” This comment, however, occurs immediately after she has reminded her beloved “Greek” Theagenes of the “many times I have repelled your advances” (1.25), in a rhetorical context shaped by her own admirable deviousness, Theagenes’ astonishing cluelessness, and Thyamis’s relative gallantry. When Thyamis, facing defeat in a battle with another army of brigands, subsequently attempts to kill Charikleia but inadvertently slays the wrong Greek woman (1.30), Theagenes mimics his mistake but comes off as more foolish (if also less dangerous) when he embraces the corpse and laments the death of his beloved, even as Charikleia, alive and well, approaches his side (2.3–

31 A catalogue of ethnic stereotypes, along with instances of their subversion, is provided by Perkins 1999.199–200.

7). “Long hair makes lovers seem more alluring but robbers more alarming,” according to the Greek Knemon (2.20)—a contrast that also invites comparison. (Do both Theagenes and Thyamis wear their hair long? And if so, how can we be sure what it signifies?) Having nervously pared his own locks, Knemon, however, goes on immediately to identify the long hair of a stranger whom he meets—none other than Kalasiris—as the sign of priesthood. If he gets this right, he nonetheless mistakes Kalasiris for a Greek, even as Kalasiris initially takes him for an Egyptian (2.21). When Knemon subsequently learns that Kalasiris is not only the self-constructed “father” of Charikleia and Theagenes (2.22) but also the natural father of Thyamis the “brigand” (2.25), the series of reversals and ambivalent layerings of identity has come full circle. Knemon now listens eagerly (even naively) to Kalasiris’s explanation that Homer was, in fact, not a Greek but an Egyptian wise man (3.13–14), and the reader is well prepared to accept the fact that, when Kalasiris and Charikleia finally meet up with Theagenes again, the noble “Greek” Theagenes has become the “dear friend” of his one-time abductor, the “Egyptian robber” Thyamis (7.5). Thyamis recognizes his father (who is, like Charikleia, disguised as a beggar) a bit more quickly than Theagenes recognizes his beloved, whom he—in a characteristic fit of misperception—knocks on the head before she succeeds in making herself known (7.7).

Kalasiris, finally restored to his family and priestly dignity in Memphis, abruptly dies in his sleep. The young couple must now plot their own journey beyond Egypt into Ethiopia. They are propelled, as so often, not by their deliberate actions but by their improvised responses to a daunting series of challenges and trials. Now it is a woman’s desire for Theagenes that makes them prisoners in the exotically “oriental” Memphis household of the Persian satrap. Having been imprisoned, tortured, and—in Charikleia’s case—very nearly burnt at the stake through the manipulations of the satrap’s wife, the two are, through several further twists of the intricately knotted plot, conveyed to the battle front where the Persians and Egyptians engage Ethiopian forces. Scarcely have they reached the front than they are captured by the Ethiopians and led off ceremoniously: “The scene was like the preliminary appearance and introduction of the actors in the theater before the play begins” (8.17). The particular “play” that the reader has so long awaited will, however, be further deferred, as the text detours with a lengthy detailing of the siege of the contested border town of Syene, from which the Ethiopians emerge triumphant, their king having eroded the fortifications of the city through a clever diversion of the waters of the Nile (9.3–5)—a tactic that the novelist may, significantly, have

borrowed from the Roman siege of Nisibis in 350.³² The victorious king Hydaspes, repeatedly represented as refusing to play the tyrant, not only spares the life of the Persian satrap but also magnanimously refrains from pressing his military advantage: “I resist the all-too-human temptation to turn success to excess. I do not exploit my victory to extend my dominions indefinitely. I am content with the boundaries that nature drew when she first made the cataract to divide Egypt from Ethiopia” (9.26).

In the meantime, King Hydaspes has begun the inspection of his prisoners, and Charikleia and Theagenes are led forward. Theagenes anticipates that Charikleia will now disclose her true identity as the daughter of Hydaspes, but Charikleia perceives the need to play out the scene with rather more finesse than that: “A story whose beginnings heaven has made convoluted cannot be quickly resolved” (9.24). At stake is not merely the importance of avoiding a premature climax: Charikleia here acknowledges that “genealogy is a *narrative* event,” as Whitmarsh puts it, the effect of a persuasive performance (1998.115). When the king, having already determined that his noble and virginal prisoners will make an appropriate sacrifice for the gods, asks Charikleia (in Greek) about her parentage, she replies enigmatically that her mother and father “will be there at my sacrifice, have no doubt!” (9.25). The sacrifice is to take place in the Ethiopian capital of Meroe, whither the king and his entourage now hasten, to be met by the Queen Persinna, as well as the king’s advisory cabinet of gymnosophists, all of whom will prove crucial in the staging of Charikleia’s claims to parentage.

Prior to the sacrifice, however, the virginity of the prisoners is tested by means of an apparently magical golden gridiron. When Theagenes passes unscathed, the crowd murmurs both approval and surprise that such a virile youth has proved “ignorant of the joys of Aphrodite.” But it is Charikleia who steals the show, leaping onto the gridiron decked in her Delphic gown with hair free flowing, “her beauty blazing with a new and dazzling radiance as she stood conspicuous on her lofty pedestal,” so that she appears more goddess than woman. At this point, the gymnosophists, who are to preside over the ceremony, unexpectedly taking sides with the girl, declare “neither can we ourselves approve of anything as barbaric as human sacrifice nor do we believe that it is pleasing to the divinity” (10.9). Charikleia quickly presses her advantage, appealing to the chief gymnos-

32 On the relation between Heliodorus’s battle and the siege of Nisibis, see Bowersock 1994.151–55.

ophist. When the king responds that it is unlawful to grant the right of appeal to a foreigner, the gymnosophist both exposes and questions the merely skin-deep superficiality of the king's certainty: "For a wise man . . . a person's character is as important as the color of his face in reaching a judgment" (10.11). Now it is that Charikleia reveals joyfully that she is no "foreigner" but a "native" (10.12). She continues: "Not only am I an Ethiopian, but I am of the royal house and bound to you by the closest ties of kinship." In the face of the king's rising anger, Charikleia proceeds skillfully to build her own case, promising both "documentary proof and corroboration by witnesses" (10.12).

The documents consist in the tokens, including a letter from the queen herself, that were exposed with her at birth, conveyed to Charikles, and carried by Charikleia herself from Greece; the witnesses are the Queen Persinna and the chief gymnosophist, who turns out to be none other than the man who gave her into Charikles' care. Confronted with such momentous and dramatic revelations, the king nonetheless hesitates: "Apart from anything else, your skin has a radiant whiteness quite foreign to Ethiopian women." He warns that the gymnosophist is in danger of invoking an unspeakable accusation: "How could we, Ethiopians both, produce, contrary to all probability, a white daughter?" But the wise man has an answer that brings us back again to the power and vulnerability of the gaze. Charikleia is, he points out, an exact copy of a certain painting of Andromeda, an image that—as Persinna herself has acknowledged—was imprinted on the mother's eyes while having intercourse with her husband (10.14). Genealogical purity, the fruit of presumed marital fidelity, here intersects with the eroticized impurities of complexly layered cultural encounters. And it is at that point of intersection that the romance's repeated play with the contrast between "natural" and "artificial" parentage is very nearly deconstructed. In near parody of the cliché (close to the heart of the ekphrasis-loving novelists) that "nature imitates art," Charikleia is represented as a fleshly copy of a painting, and a work of artifice is introduced to undergird a barely plausible biological explanation.³³ Even Hydaspes is "possessed by a mixture of joy and amazement" at this final revelation, when the painting is

33 For a fascinating account of the history of the notion of the "Andromeda Effect," see Reeve 1989. Reeve notes that "what he [Heliodorus] thought of the Andromeda Effect itself is hard to judge," particularly since he "tells us that Persinna feared disbelief if she invoked it" (83).

produced for corroboration. (But corroboration of what? The reader surely notes that the painting does not exactly constitute a paternity test, though Charikleia's prodigious birth may well mark her with an ambiguous divinity.) The visual meeting of ethnic strangers that has led to Charikleia's queerly colored conception has also left its mark on Charikleia's skin—which is, crucially, not after all purely white. The gymnosophist recalls that “she had a black birthmark on her upper arm,” and, sure enough, the girl's limb is bared to reveal “a ring of ebony staining the ivory of her arm” (10.16). As Whitmarsh points out, the description of Charikleia's naked arm “is a dense weft of literary allusions” that increases the tension between truth and artifice at the very point where “nature” seems finally to triumph: “Charikleia's body could be said to emblemize this interpenetration of the natural and the artificial: mostly white, mostly ‘fathered’ by the artificial painting, but retaining a trace of her ‘natural,’ black ancestry, a trace which nevertheless resembles a stain on a statue, a resemblance which has a literary genealogy of its own” (1998.112–13).

The assembled Ethiopians now exclaim, “as with one voice, ‘Let the girl live! Let the blood royal live!’” (10.17). The more difficult matter of the fate of the Greek Theagenes still remains, however, to be addressed. Charikleia's attempts to forestall her lover's sacrificial death meet with incomprehension and the return of paternal irritation: is hers a “bastard virginity”? Hydaspes asks in exasperation. A telling question: for while Charikleia may or may not be a “bastard,” she is certainly a queer kind of virgin wife. Dismissing the girl to his own wife's care, he turns to the simpler business of receiving his victory gifts from provincial embassies (10.22). However, the bestowal of a most exotically hybrid creature—dubbed “cameleopard” (our giraffe)—unexpectedly introduces further disorder, as two of the horses and one of the bulls awaiting sacrifice panic and break loose. Motivated by an obscure impulse, Theagenes, who also waits at the sacrificial altar, leaps into action like the epic star of a Greek rodeo, concluding his act of bareback bull-riding by beaming and waving at the cheering crowd (10.28–30). This triumph in the impromptu arena carries him forth into another, as he takes on a hitherto unchallenged Ethiopian giant in a heroic wrestling contest (10.31–32). Hydaspes grants the athletic Greek a crown of victory, but still intends the foreigner for sacrifice. Theagenes asks that Charikleia, at least, be the one to perform the ritual act. Hydaspes demurs, on the grounds that only a married woman can serve as priestess. “But she does have a husband!” Theagenes protests. Again, Hydaspes is angered by these repeated contradictions: how can Charikleia be at once a

proven virgin and a married woman? (10.33). A question that echoes another: how can she be at once “white” and Ethiopian?

One last unexpected intrusion onto the already absurdly chaotic scene helps impel the novel to its desired conclusion, as Charikles arrives from Delphi, demanding his “daughter’s” return and berating Theagenes as her abductor (10.34–35). Now, finally, with all of the players in place on the stage, the tale of true love can be effectively communicated. The exposure of a “father’s” false claims translates the purported abductor into a promised husband, so that the Greek, already rendered exotically foreign in his very Greekness, can be married to the Ethiopian. Speaking now “in the native tongue,” Hydaspes accedes to the gymnosophist’s request to abolish human sacrifice and blesses the marriage of Charikleia and Theagenes, who are duly invested with the priesthood of Moon and Sun and process into the city “where the more mystic parts of the wedding ritual were to be performed with greater magnificence” (10.40–41). This scene echoes their initial meeting in a procession where they performed the roles of priestess and priest to Artemis and Apollo: marriage is thus overlaid on virginity, but displacement does not effect simple erasure. As in *JA*, marriage is celebrated as a sacrament in which the mystery of a virginal eroticism eclipses interest in a merely sexual consummation.

In concluding our reading, we should not miss, in the case of either *ES* or *JA*, the slyly humorous portrayals of the protagonists, the parodic casting of their very conversions. Neither Aseneth nor Joseph is quite likable initially, and, while Aseneth may grow on us, Joseph remains a remarkably flat character—or perhaps, more interestingly, a “flawed hero.”³⁴ Here, as in other novels, easy identification with the protagonists is thwarted by the complex layering of incommensurate narrative perspectives. Though Charikleia’s necessary humiliation by the forces of erotic passion produces not so much humility as sharpened wit, Theagenes frequently comes off as a caricature of a Greek hero—all brawn and beauty and little enough wit. In both romances, however, virginity, initially exposed as arrogance, remains paradoxically a defining feature of the heroine, as well as of her lover—a

34 This is the judgment of Gruen 1998.96–99, who notes that “Joseph’s fussiness bespeaks a cramped disposition, and his public display of abstinence borders on the offensive,” finding in this ambivalent portrayal of the biblical patriarch as both uncomfortably arrogant and dazzlingly powerful indications that the text “both celebrates Jewish pride and cautions against its excess.”

value not finally rejected so much as continually revised, rendered ever more ambivalent, but thereby perhaps all the more potent in its signification. Although the virtual fetishizing of virginity in both of these romances is frequently noted, it has not yet, it seems to me, been adequately interpreted: scholars have largely overlooked the ambivalence conveyed by virginity's "conversion," which is less a conversion to marriage than a conversion—a virginalizing—of marriage itself.³⁵

The revision of both virginity and marriage is, furthermore, intricately intertwined with the revision of ethnic identity in both texts. This is overt in *JA*, where the balanced logic of inversion is difficult to miss, even if often subtly misread. The Egyptian king's foreign slave becomes king over the Egyptians, the daughter of the Egyptian priest subjects herself to the slave's God. The foreigners, free in their own land, enter Egypt as nomadic suppliants under the leadership of their patriarch. Yet, in Egypt, Jacob's forces are split and thus doubled, even as Egypt itself has become a split screen when the son of Pharaoh turns on his own father, while Joseph is revealed—adopted—as the true son of Egypt even as Aseneth the Egyptian is represented as a true daughter of Jacob. Nowhere, moreover, is "Jewishness" named as such—any more than "Greece" or "Rome" are named. Egypt is the theater, the split screen of enunciation, the space of colonial encounters. It is the space of a novel that unfolds, as Daniel Selden puts it, "along the borders between two cultures and can be read divergently within each one," a doubleness that "reveals that any assumption about gender, mutability, or power here is culturally contingent" (1994.49–51). Mimic king and mimic queen, mixed marriage, queered gender, hybridized ethnicity—identity is visible only at the borderlines, nameable neither as unity nor as diversity but rather performed in the unspeakable play of differences as irreducible as virginity.

The revision of ethnicity in *ES* is no less overt—on the contrary—though its message is perhaps more subtly conveyed. Here, even more than in the case of *JA*, the novel's complex subversions have been stubbornly resisted by modern commentators seemingly fiercely intent on preserving precisely the distinctions that the romance arguably problematizes.³⁶ In *ES*,

35 Not, however, necessarily a "Christian" conversion. It seems to me important to resist the circularity of an argument that identifies the valorization of virginity and/or sacramentalization of marriage in advance as "Christian" and then attributes "Christian influence" to texts that include these features, but are not otherwise recognizably "Christian."

36 This resistance is noted by Doody 1996.89 and given detailed critical exposition by Selden 1998.

as in JA, Egypt is the meeting ground, the mediating ground, for a mimetic exchange—the borderline at which ethnicity is inevitably constructed and, in the same stroke, deconstructed. In Heliodorus’s novel, however, “Egypt” must also die with Kalasiris, as if signaling that every “contact zone”³⁷ is inherently unstable, a shifting (displacing and displaced) ground of cultural signification. Homer is an Egyptian, and Egypt is the home of true wisdom (as well as false),³⁸ but Ethiopia is the place where we meet both a truly civilized king and “naked sages” whose wisdom eclipses even that of Egypt. Yet, as Richard Hunter points out, if the Egyptian Kalasiris “gives way” ultimately to the Ethiopian gymnosophist, it is not clear that the gymnosophist has the final word either (1998b.56–59).

In ES, whiteness is exposed as a matter of shame (the shame, however, is of adultery rather than racial impurity per se), while Greekness is rendered a case of white-washing. Or perhaps rather of “passing”: Judith Perkins makes a telling comparison between Heliodorus’s romance and American novels in which blacks likewise “pass” as white, noting that such narratives effectively disrupt essentializing systems of racialized differentiation (1999.198–99). In ES, as in other “passing” novels, there is no racial *paradox* such as we encounter in works like the *Life of the Ethiopian Moses* and other late ancient Christian texts in which black skin is a mere mask for the essential whiteness of the soul. There is, however, *parody* aplenty. In acknowledging the element of parody, even Perkins’s excellent analysis may not go far enough. The proliferation of cultural “passages” and ethnic “passings” that constitute “Hellenism” are showcased in Heliodorus’s novel, I would suggest, less to “legitimate” layered identities—e.g., Ethiopian *and* Hellenic—than to make a mockery of the identity politics implicit in all such ploys of “legitimization” (cf. Perkins 1999.203, 208). Charikleia, after all, barely passes as Ethiopian, while Theagenes, the most overtly “Hellenized” character in the novel, is merely passingly Greek. The unsettling of ethnic identity is continued in the novel’s closure with a “signature” flourish in which Heliodorus makes a play of showing us his hand: this “Ethiopian Story,” we are told, is “the work of a Phoenician from the city of Emesa, one

37 The language and concept of a “contact zone” is taken from Pratt 1992.6. See note 2, above.

38 Kalasiris makes a sharp distinction between the true and false “wisdoms” of Egypt, noting also that foreigners frequently fail to take note of the distinction (3.16). Yet Kalasiris’s binary construction is not simply endorsed by the novel’s author, any more than is his inscription of Homer as an “Egyptian.”

of the race of the Sun" (10.41). With hindsight, we may perceive that a narrative that seems to lead fairly straightforwardly from Delphi via Egypt to Ethiopia was always being complicated by "Phoenician games" (Bowie 1998). "The most important point here is that the text has been written from the margins of the Greek world," notes Whitmarsh, arguing for an interpretation that resists a "Hellenocentric" as well as an inversionary "Ethiopianist" inscription (1998.97). From the complexly "marginal" perspective sustained in ES, racialized ethnicity is far from transcended or rendered irrelevant: significantly, Greekness itself is finally put in its place and thus effectively marginalized—even dismissively exoticized—in its particularity. Yet at the same time, race and ethnicity become impossibly difficult to read in the play of mimicry, the operation of hybridity, that renders all "essentialisms," including racial, merely "strategic," provisional constructs, at once indispensable and deeply suspect. In Seldon's succinct phrasing, "The Heliodoran paradigm . . . consists of a system of binary relations *and* its deconstruction" (1998.213). And what of the claims of empires? Imperial authority is likewise put into question when the distinctions between "native" Egyptian bands of rough brigands and the armies of a feminized eastern empire blur, even as Ethiopia—mimicking (and thus mocking) the military tactics of Rome while also resisting the temptation of territorial expansion—emerges as *not quite* an empire.

"Fiction is heartily in favor of union with the stranger," notes Doody (1996.103). In JA and ES, the union of alien virgins conveys a mixed message, effecting neither the false universalism of cultural transcendence nor the illusory purity of ethnic integrity, but rather slyly subverting both hegemonic claims. Virginity is the meeting place of strangers within the complex play of power, the impure site—pure borderline—at which culture "as a colonial space of intervention and agonism . . . can be transformed by the unpredictable and partial desire of hybridity" (Bhabha 1994.115). The end result of such "hybrid desire" is not a composite produced by the combination or layering of identities but rather the unsettling of identity itself. If culture is the space of passages, then *every* subject is always already "passing."

CONCLUDING IMPURE THOUGHTS

In the APT and KL, the conversion of the heroine to virginity does not finally harmonize the competing claims of eros and *gamos* but rather places the unruly forces of disruptive desire and the civic politics of patriar-

chal marriage in a relation of complex mimicry. In JA and ES, the purity of virginity (once again modeled by maids and mimicked by men) is converted through the marriage of strangers only to reveal the hybridity—the differential construction—of all ethnic subjectivities forged in the heat of competing hegemonic ambitions. The romance is thus revealed as a field of ambivalent play, a literary “contact zone” in which the interwoven discourses of empire and city, marriage and love, Greekness and nativity, are exposed as no more or less than the effects of mimicry—an exposure that calls into question any claims for “original” authority. The result, it should be emphasized, is not an unambiguous political “message.” As literary critic Nicholas Harrison notes, “Anyone can take a position on the political issues without making the detour via literature”; moreover, a certain indeterminacy “marks literature as such” and thus renders it (whether productively or simply frustratingly) finally resistant to ideological reduction (2003.150). This essay began by invoking a particular historical context of imperialism and colonialism, and more has been said by others about the relation of such fictions to the “real” world in which they were conceived and which they, in turn, helped construct (most recently, Swain 1996 and Whitmarsh 2001). My aim here has been to focus primarily on the “literariness” of the texts themselves. Ironically (perhaps), the virgin produced in such a reading continues to attract impure thoughts, as she is unveiled as a figure of the hybridity of discourse and culture that arguably characterizes all novelistic literature—and that may also situate novelistic writing itself, whether ancient or modern, as a distinctly “postcolonial” literary practice.

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