

Andrea Binsfeld

Slavery and its Narratives in Ancient Novels – Stories of ‘Decline and Fall’?

1 Introduction

The late antique philosopher and grammarian Macrobius reflects in his *Commentary on Scipio’s Dream* on the reason for including fiction and dream in books dealing with governmental problems. In this context, he characterises novels – or fables – as follows:

[7] Fables – the very word acknowledges their falsity – serve two purposes: either merely to gratify the ear or to encourage the reader to good works. [8] They delight the ear as do the comedies of Menander and his imitators, or the narratives replete with imaginary doings of lovers in which Petronius Arbiter so freely indulged and with which Apuleius, astonishingly, sometimes amused himself. This whole category of fables that promise only to gratify the ear a philosophical treatise avoids and relegates to children’s nurseries.¹

According to Macrobius, novels are fictitious love stories, written to please the reader, and not more valuable than children’s tales. He compares them with the ancient comedies, and indeed there are many intertextual relations between novels and comedies. In the following, I will refer to four ancient novels which date from the first to the fourth centuries AD and analyse which kind of information about slavery and dependency we can draw from these fictional texts and which problems of interpretation we face. Furthermore, I would like to show which role asymmetrical dependency is playing for the narration of these texts. That means that I do not share Macrobius’ opinion that the ancient novels are simply entertaining, with no literary or historical value. On the one hand, Macrobius is right in stating that ancient novels are entertaining to read. The stories are tales of love and adventure, they take us to exotic countries, the main characters belong to the elite of society. These novels follow a recurrent pattern. They have in common the separation of the lovers, the mutual search and finally the reunification of the two protagonists. Certain motifs run through the plot of the novels: Both protagonists initially swear love and loyalty. This loyalty is then put to the test in the further course of action. A central theme of the ancient novels is the abduction, captivity and enslavement of free young men and women by pirates or robbers.² Asymmetrical dependency in the form of slavery and captivity is thus omnipresent in the novels. But

¹ Macrobius, *Commentary on Scipio’s Dream* 1,2,7–8 (*Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, trans. William Harris Stahl [New York: Columbia University Press, 1959, 1990]).

² Thomas Paulsen and Stefan Tilg, “Roman,” in *Handwörterbuch der antiken Sklaverei*, vol. 2, ed. Heinz Heinen (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2017): 2440–46; Niklas Holzberg, *Der antike Roman: Eine Einführung*, 2nd ed. (Düsseldorf: Artemis&Winkler, 2001).

slaves are not only used to create a realistic setting for the plot, they are also key actors. This distinguishes the ancient novel from other genres, such as epics, tragedy and comedy, where we also find enslaved noble characters, but these characters are not featured as protagonists.³ Keeping in mind that in Greek and Roman society it was not only shameful to be a slave, but also to have been a slave, the question of the significance of the degradation of the protagonists arises. We are dealing with fictional texts, but facts and realistic experiences of dependency often form the basis of these texts and are elaborately intertwined in them.⁴

Tomas Hägg was one of the first authors who dedicated a comprehensive study to the much neglected aspect of the novels' narrative technique.⁵ He is focussing on three novels: Chariton's *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, Xenophon of Ephesos' *Ephesian Tale of Anthia and Habrocomes*, and Achilles Tatius' *Leucippe and Clitophon*. These three novels will also be discussed in the present article. Hägg investigates the time scheme of the romance, i.e., the fictional or narrated time in comparison to the narrating time, the different types of narrative, such as scene and summary, description and commentary, the perspective from which the reader follows the story, and the internal structure of the plot. The motif of slavery does not play a role in his study. William Owens, by contrast, gives in his book on the representation of slavery in the Greek novel many examples which show that slavery is an integral part of works of literature.⁶ He shows how authors use slavery motifs to structure the story, and he is revealing the public and hidden scripts of the relation between slave and master. This means that he does not only focus on the perspective of the master on the slaves, but he tries also to grasp the more hidden perspective of the slave. The sympathetic attitude towards the experiences of slaves on the one hand and the critique on the way masters think about their slaves on the other hand lead him to the assumption that

3 See, for example, Peter P. Spranger, *Historische Untersuchungen zu den Sklavenfiguren des Plautus und Terenz* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1984).

4 For the 'many shades of grey' between factual and fictional narrative see Monika Fludernik and Marie-Laure Ryan, "Factual Narrative: An Introduction," in *Narrative Factuality: A Handbook*, ed. Monika Fludernik and Marie-Laure Ryan (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020): 1–26. On the discussion about facts and fiction in ancient novels, see for example Keith Hopkins, "Novel Evidence for Roman Slavery," in *Studies in Ancient Greek and Roman Society*, ed. Robin Osborne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 206–25; John R. Morgan, "Make-Believe and Make Believe: The Fictionality of the Greek Novel," in *Lies and Fiction in the Ancient World*, ed. Christopher Gill and Timothy Peter Wiseman (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1993): 175–229, esp. 193–215; Kurt Treu, "Der Realitätsgehalt des antiken Romans," in *Der antike Roman: Untersuchungen zur literarischen Kommunikation und Gattungsgeschichte*, ed. Heinrich Kuch (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1989): 107–25.

5 Tomas Hägg, *Narrative Technique in Ancient Greek Romances. Studies of Chariton, Xenophon Ephesus, and Achilles Tatius* (Stockholm: Svenska Institutet i Athen, 1971).

6 William M. Owens, *The Representation of Slavery in the Greek Novel: Resistance and Appropriation* (London: Routledge, 2020).

the novels, especially the works of Xenophon and Chariton, might have been produced by slaves.⁷

In the following, I will take up Owens’ ideas and elaborate them further. I will show that the authors refer to different forms of dependency not only to structure the text, but also to underline the ‘decline and fall’ of the protagonists. In this context, not only the question of what is told (the story) is relevant, but also how it is told (the discourse).⁸ Furthermore, I will refer to the experiences of slavery and dependency, for example to justifications and criticism of slavery and dependency. When I am referring to narratives of slavery, escape, and freedom in the following, I am well aware that this may be confusing, because slave narratives are usually understood as autobiographical narratives written by fugitives or former slaves, particularly in the Americas, in the eighteenth/nineteenth centuries.⁹ These texts were written for a special purpose: the abolition of slavery and the end of the slave trade.¹⁰ But even these narratives are not purely autobiographical. As an analysis of the famous book *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* shows, Equiano based his narrative only partially on facts as far as his personal experience is concerned.¹¹ Not all of the experiences he is describing, as for example the Middle Passage to the West Indies, were his own. He invented and constructed a story to give Africans who were forcibly brought to the Americas, and the abolitionist movement, a presumably authentic African voice. In the context of this article, it is interesting to note that the modern slave narratives share the mixture of facts and fiction with the ancient novel. Furthermore, even some motifs which we know from the ancient novels reappear, especially in the early slave narratives, such as tales of shipwreck and captivity, before they concentrate more on descriptions of the hardships of Southern plantation slavery. The mod-

7 William Fitzgerald, *Slavery and the Roman Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) deals more generally with the master-slave relationship in Latin and Greek literature by adopting the perspective of the slave owners.

8 Marie-Laure Ryan, “Toward a Definition of Narrative,” in *Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. David Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 22–35; H. Porter Abbott, “Story, Plot, and Narration,” in *Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. David Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 39–51; Matías Martínez and Michael Scheffel, *Einführung in die Erzähltheorie* (Munich: Beck, 2012): 22–28; Monika Fludernik and Marie-Laure Ryan, “Factual Narrative: An Introduction,” in *Narrative Factuality: A Handbook*, ed. Monika Fludernik and Marie-Laure Ryan (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020): 7–10.

9 See, for example, *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*, ed. Audrey Fisch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), esp. Philip Gould, “The Rise, Development, and Circulation of the Slave Narrative,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*, ed. Audrey Fisch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 11–27.

10 Audrey A. Fisch, “Introduction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*, ed. Audrey Fisch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 2.

11 Vincent Carretta, “Olaudah Equiano: African British Abolitionist and Founder of the African American Slave Narrative,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*, ed. Audrey Fisch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 44–60.

ern slave narratives are thus not only biographies, but also captivity narratives, travel books, adventure tales, economic treatises, testimonies and historical fiction – *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* is one of the best examples for the variety as well as the continuity of the genre.

2 Slavery and Dependency as Structuring Principles

In my introductory remarks, I already outlined the basic pattern of the stories and their recurrent motifs. Xenophon of Ephesos goes a step further and structures his story by the enslavement and liberation of the protagonists. The *Ephesian Tale of Anthia and Habrocomes* was written in the late first or early second century AD.¹² It is the love and adventure story of two young people of noble birth from the city of Ephesos. In book 1, young and beautiful Habrocomes desperately falls in love with the girl Anthia – he becomes a ‘slave of love’: “What catastrophe has befallen me, Habrocomes, till now a man, despising Eros and slandering the god? I have been captured and conquered and am forced to be the slave of a girl.”¹³ This metaphorical slavery is soon transformed into literal slavery. After the wedding, the two protagonists leave their hometown for Egypt. On their way, their ship is attacked by pirates, and the two young people are taken captive. Two of the pirates fall in love with Habrocomes and Anthia, but the two young people would rather die than betray each other and surrender to the pirates. They are saved by the arrival of the chief of the pirates, who takes the two captives to Tyre. In the second book, both protagonists experience the hardships of slavery and a deep fall before they are both freed, but also separated. When Habrocomes rejects the sexual advances of his master’s daughter, he is falsely accused of attempted rape and is tortured and incarcerated. Anthia, by contrast, is sold to Cilician merchants, shipwrecked, taken captive by bandits, and finally rescued. At the end of the book, both protagonists are freed. In the following book, Habrocomes and Anthia are again taken captive and enslaved. Anthia avoids marriage by means of pretending to be dead, she falls into the hands of tomb robbers and is sold into slavery, whereas Habrocomes is shipwrecked, taken captive and accused of murdering his master. Finally, in books 4 and 5, both protagonists are rescued and freed under dramatic circumstances before they are reunited – with the help of two of their former slaves. The whole story of Habrocomes and Anthia is driven forward by extreme ups and downs, by alternations of

¹² Stephen M. Trzaskoma, “Slavery and Structure in Xenophon of Ephesos,” in *Slaves and Masters in the Ancient Novel*, ed. Stelios Panayotakis and Michael Paschalis (Groningen: Barkhuis & Groningen University Library, 2019): 55–73.

¹³ Xenophon of Ephesos 1,4 (*An Ephesian Tale*, trans. Graham Anderson, in *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, ed. B.P. Reardon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989)); see William M. Owens, *The Representation of Slavery in the Greek Novel: Resistance and Appropriation* (London: Routledge, 2021): 28–30.

dependency – in the form of captivity and enslavement – and liberation. The motif of love is closely intertwined with the motif of dependency: The opposition of dependency and freedom corresponds with the juxtaposition of true love and devotion on the one hand and sexual desire on the other.¹⁴ Furthermore, the author plays with the juxtaposition of good and bad. He uses the moral attributes flexibly, however, and he does not necessarily stick to the dichotomy good master vs. bad slave: A good example are the slaves Leucon and Rhode, who accompany Habrocomes and Anthia. They exemplify the good and loyal slave characters, whereas many of the masters are cruel and unjust. Xenophon’s story is also structured by the repetition of motifs such as the “Potiphar’s Wife” tale in connection with Habrocomes, who, as a slave, rejects the advances of free women. A recurrent theme is also the “Escape from an Undesired Suitor”, when Anthia has to employ guile, craft, or violence to fend off her admirers.¹⁵ The repetitions illustrate the desperate situation of the protagonists, their increasing submission, powerlessness and vulnerability. When Habrocomes rejects Manto’s advances, he is falsely accused by her and tortured.¹⁶ When Kyno falls in love with him and promises to kill her husband, Habrocomes finally gives in to avoid being tortured.¹⁷ According to Owen, this episode illustrates on the one hand the effects of torture on slaves, but on a narrative level it shows how Habrocomes slides step by step into slavery and is finally forced to react like a typical slave. The last aspect illustrates that novelists use experiences of dependency and freedom not only to structure the story. They mix facts and fiction; they use metaphors of slavery as well as topoi and stereotypes to increase the story’s suspense and to underline the fall and the subsequent rise of the protagonists.

Xenophon of Ephesos’ *Tale of Anthia and Habrocomes* is especially rich in examples of dependency: Habrocomes’ partner Anthia must learn what it means to be a slave. In the course of the tale, Anthia repeatedly falls into the hands of robbers who sell her to slave traders. On one occasion, the beautiful slave not only arouses the love of her master, but also the jealousy of his wife, so that the latter sells her to a brothel keeper.¹⁸ To some extent, information on social, societal and cultural issues can indeed be derived from the novels, e.g., on the slave trade and on activities of slaves. In the present case study, a mixture of fictional and historically credible elements can be traced in the descriptions of prostitution. It is historically correct that many prostitutes were slaves who were abandoned or sold when they were children, or who ended up in prostitution through kidnapping and captivity. The brothel keeper provides accommodation and clothing for the prostitutes. This is reflected when Anthia is dressed up with gold and splendid robes by her pimp and has to offer herself to the

¹⁴ Chaste and unchaste love are also central subjects in Heliodorus’ *Aethiopica*; see Owens, *The Representation of Slavery in the Greek Novel*: 185–213.

¹⁵ Owens, *The Representation of Slavery in the Greek Novel*: 29–40.

¹⁶ Xenophon of Ephesos 2,3–6.

¹⁷ Xenophon of Ephesos 3,12; see also Owens, *The Representation of Slavery in the Greek Novel*: 30–35.

¹⁸ Xenophon of Ephesos 5,7,1–3.

suitors on the street in front of the brothel. This is where the fictional part of the novel begins. Undoubtedly, the horrendous sum paid for the beautiful slave and the price asked from the clients is fictional. The sums correspond to the beauty of the woman and not to the real prices for prostitutes and their services we know from other sources.¹⁹ With their descent into slavery and prostitution, women reached the sediment of Roman society – a deeper descent is hardly imaginable. The protagonists undergo these experiences before they can regain their freedom. The suspense in the novels is based precisely on the sharp contrast between freedom and slavery. This contrast is also intertwined with aspects of gender and sexuality. The female slave is made a prostitute who is available to everyone for money – in contrast to the free woman, whose sexual integrity and honour must be upheld under any circumstances. The discrepancy between the free woman and the female slave is not only underlined by the fact that the slave is sexually available; the discrepancy is also visualised by their different appearance.

The tale of Leucippe and Clitophon, written by Achilleus Tatios in the early second century AD, provides a good example. The plot is as follows: An unnamed narrator is approached by Clitophon, who is talking about his love for his cousin Leucippe and his adventures. Clitophon is promised in marriage to another woman when he falls in love with Leucippe. They both elope from Tyre. In the following, the lovers experience shipwreck, captivity, two faked deaths of Leucippe (sacrifice, decapitation), being charged with murder and finally being rescued and married. When the protagonist Leucippe is kidnapped by robbers, she is sold to a merchant who sells her as a slave to an estate manager in Ephesus. There, she has to work in the fields. Since she rejects the man's advances, she is mistreated and put in chains. On this estate, she meets her lover Clitophon again, who, accompanied by her mistress, is visiting the estates:

When we got there, we were strolling through the orchards, and suddenly a woman threw herself at our feet! She had heavy irons around her ankles, a workman's hoe in her hands, her head was shaved, her body was all grimy, her miserable clothing was hitched up for work, and she cried out: 'have mercy on me, m'lady, as one woman to another. I am free by birth, though now a slave, as Fortune chooses.'²⁰

Using female slaves to do hard work in agriculture, chained, shaved and clad in rags – what is described here in the novel in all probability does not reflect the real

¹⁹ Andrea Binsfeld, "Menschenhandel – Frauenhandel," in *Menschenhandel, Menschenraub und Sklaverei in antiker und moderner Perspektive*, ed. Heinz Heinen (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2008): 94–95; Bettina Eva Stumpp, *Prostitution in der römischen Antike* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1998): 214–29; Thomas McGinn, *The Economy of Prostitution in the Roman World: A Study of Social History & the Brothel* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004): 40–55; Carola Reinsberg, *Ehe, Hetärenum und Knabenliebe im antiken Griechenland* (Munich: Beck, 1989): 144–45.

²⁰ Achilleus Tatios 5,17,3. Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe and Clitophon*, trans. John J. Winkler, in *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, ed. B.P. Reardon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

living conditions of female slaves on farms.²¹ Women and slaves did indeed work in the house as well as in the fields, but the humiliating way Leucippe is presented in this excerpt and especially the combination of her slave status with every form of humiliation (hard work, shaved head, rags, chains) serves to illustrate the social decline of the formerly free protagonist. Like in the case of prostitution discussed above, the novel does not give us merely a description of the reality of a slave’s life. Slavery and the description of the hardships of slave activities are part of the narrative strategy of the novels, serving to dramatise the social decline and the subsequent liberation of the main characters and to underline the contrast between mistress and slave. In the excerpt above, the mistress is not only confronted with the physically hard-working slave, this slave is also deprived of all attributes of femininity: She is not only dirty and dressed in rags, she has also been shaved bald.²²

Furthermore, novelists do not only exaggerate conventional ideas of slavery and freedom, they at times also overturn these ideas. Heliodorus was a Phoenician from Emesus, today’s Homs, who presumably wrote the novel *Aethiopica* in the second half of the fourth century. It is the story of Chariclea, a priestess of the goddess Artemis in Delphi, and Theagenes, a noble young man from Thessaly. After many dangers and adventures, Chariclea discovers that she is the daughter of the king of Aethiopia. Her mother gave her away as a baby because she had white skin and her mother feared being accused of adultery. When the two protagonists are taken captive by brigands, Heliodorus describes that the chief of the bandits dismounts from his horse and puts the prisoners on a horse while he himself is running on foot beside them. The author comments on this extraordinary behaviour as follows: “There was something remarkable in the sight: the master appeared as a servant; the captor chose to minister to his captives. Thus may nobility of appearance and beauty of countenance vanquish even a brigand heart and triumph over the harshest of natures.”²³ The idea behind this description is that real nobility and beauty triumph over captivity and enslavement. The

21 Walter Scheidel, “Feldarbeit von Frauen in der antiken Landwirtschaft,” *Gymnasium* 97 (1990): 405–31; Walter Scheidel, “Frau und Landarbeit in der Alten Geschichte,” in *Nachrichten aus der Zeit: Ein Streifzug durch die Frauengeschichte des Altertums*, ed. Edith Specht, Reihe Frauenforschung 18 (Vienna: Wiener Frauenverlag, 1992): 195–235; for *vilica* see Ulrike Roth, “Inscribed Meaning: The *vilica* and the Villa Economy,” *Papers of the British School at Rome* 72 (2004): 101–24; see also Marcel Simonis, *Cum servis nullum est conubium: Untersuchungen zu den eheähnlichen Verbindungen von Sklaven im westlichen Mittelmeerraum des Römischen Reiches* (Hildesheim: Olms, 2017): 129–39, who critically analyses Roth’s theses.

22 This is also visualised by archaeological material: Andrea Binsfeld, “Lebenswirklichkeiten von Sklaven – Überlegungen zum Verhältnis von Gender, Macht und Status,” in *Sklaverei und Identitäten. Von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. Andrea Binsfeld and Marcello Ghetta (Hildesheim: Olms, 2021): 31–35.

23 Heliodorus, *Aethiopica* 1.4. Heliodorus, *An Ethiopian Story*, trans. J.R. Morgan, in *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, ed. B.P. Reardon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

brigand may be free, but he is nevertheless acting like a slave. I will come back to the idea of the slave by nature in the next chapter.

The situation of a slave and a mother is described with much empathy in the novel *Chaereas and Callirhoe* by Chariton of Aphrodisias. This novel is the oldest surviving complete novel, dating from the first century BC or first century AD. The story is set in Syracuse. A special feature of this story is Chariton's use of historical figures from the late fifth century BC to give his story more credibility. The protagonist Callirhoe, a woman of outstanding nobility and beauty, is the daughter of Hermocrates, a hero of the Peloponnesian War and an important political figure in Syracuse. Callirhoe is married to Chaereas. Due to a tragic misunderstanding, Chaereas attacks Callirhoe out of jealousy and believes she is dead. After the burial, Callirhoe awakes in her tomb and is kidnapped by tomb robbers. They sell her to a man called Dionysios, who falls in love with her and wants to marry her, but she is afraid of confessing that she is already married to Chaereas – and also pregnant by him. The following excerpt illustrates the constraints a slave mother experiences. When Callirhoe learns that she is pregnant she cries out:

'Fortune, you have added this as well to my misfortunes, that I should become a mother too – mother of a slave!' She struck her belly. 'Poor creature!' she cried. 'Even before birth you have been buried and handed over to pirates! What sort of life are you coming to? With what hopes shall I give birth to you – without father or country, a slave! Taste death – before you are born. [. . .] It is enough for me alone to suffer misfortune. It is not in your interest to come into a life of misery, my child – a life you should escape from even if you are born. Depart in freedom, while no hard has befallen you, without hearing what they say about your mother.'²⁴

Callirhoe is well aware that, as a slave, she risks being separated from her child at any time. She is torn between the love for her child and the loyalty towards her husband Chaereas. If she agrees to marry Dionysios, she may keep the child but betrays her husband. If she stays loyal, she may lose her child. In her despair, she even considers an abortion. Finally, with the help of a clever slave (an example of a stereotypical slave character), she develops a plan to betray Dionysios and to make it look as if the child was his child. Thus, the text does not only illustrate the constraints under which slaves, especially female ones, were living and the power the master had, but also the agency of slaves. To kill the child, to deprive the master of his property (given

24 Chariton, *Callirhoe*, 2,8,6–2,9,3. Chariton, *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, trans. B.P. Reardon, in *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, ed. B.P. Reardon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). See John Hilton, "The Role of Gender and Sexuality in the Enslavement and Liberation of Female Slaves in the Ancient Greek Romances," in *Slaves and Masters in the Ancient Novel*, ed. Stelios Panayotakis and Michael Paschalis (Groningen: Barkhuis & Groningen University Library, 2019): 7–8; Ingomar Weiler, "Die Sklavinnen und ihre Kinder. Überlegungen zur Mutter-Kind-Beziehung im Altertum," in *Kindersklaven – Sklavenkinder – Schicksale zwischen Zuneigung und Ausbeutung in der Antike und im interkulturellen Vergleich: Beiträge zur Tagung des Akademievorhabens Forschungen zur antiken Sklaverei (Mainz, 14. Oktober 2008)*, ed. Heinz Heinen (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2012): 141–70.

that the child of a slave belongs to the master) is also an act of – albeit desperate – resistance against a destiny worse than death. In betraying her master she fulfils the stereotype of the cunning slave. For a short time, she acts like a slave.²⁵

3 Experiences of Slavery and Dependency: Justifications and Criticism

Some common justifications of the institution of slavery are also present in the novels, for example the idea that some people are slaves ‘by nature’ – a concept developed by Aristotle. In Heliodorus’ novel, for example, the brigands’ leader Thyamis explains his treatment of the captives as follows:

As for prisoners, I have enrolled into our number those men whose physical strength was likely to be of use to us, and sold the weaker ones; I have never misused a woman, but I have set free the well-born, either for ransom or from simple pity at their misfortune, while those of humble extraction, for whom slavery was a normal way of life rather than a condition imposed on them by their capture, I have distributed among you all as servants.²⁶

When the Ethiopian king Hydaspes in Heliodorus’ *Aethiopica* returns from a military campaign against the Persians, he decides the fates of his prisoners as follows: “Those whom Fortune had marked as born to be slaves he gave away, while those who were well-born he allowed to go free.”²⁷

Another common feature is the convention that captives of war are slaves. Heliodorus refers to this justification, but simultaneously lets slip in some criticism: In a discussion between the bandit-priest Thyamis and the sister of the Persian king Arsake on the fate of Charikleia and Theagenes, Thyamis asks the queen how she owns these people. Arsake answers: “By the rules of war, [. . .], according to which captives taken in war become slaves.”²⁸ And Thyamis answers: “But Arsake, [. . .], this is a time not of war but of peace. And while it is in the nature of war to make slaves, it is in the nature of peace to set them free; the former act is a tyrant’s whim; the latter shows the judgement of a true king.”²⁹ This excerpt reflects not only the need to justify the enslavement of free persons; it is also exemplifies the popular opposition of Greeks

²⁵ Owens, *The Representation of Slavery in the Greek Novel*: 67–70.

²⁶ Heliodorus, *Aethiopica* 1,19,5 (translation J.R. Morgan). See Koen de Temmerman, “Noble Slaves: The Rhetoric of Social Status Reversal in the Ancient Greek Novel,” in *Slaves and Masters in the Ancient Novel*, ed. Stelios Panayotakis and Michael Paschalis (Groningen: Barkhuis & Groningen University Library, 2019): 22–24.

²⁷ Heliodorus, *Aethiopica* 9,26,1.

²⁸ Heliodorus, *Aethiopica* 8,3,8.

²⁹ Heliodorus, *Aethiopica* 8,4,1.

and Barbarians, especially Persians. By her treatment of the captives of war, the Persian Arsake is characterised negatively as a tyrant and a barbarian – a stereotype often used in novels.

The ancient novels were written at a time when slavery had already attracted philosophical criticism. Some passages from Xenophon of Ephesos reflect the philosophical discussions of slavery and freedom.³⁰ When one of the pirates falls in love with Habrocomes, another pirate gives him the following advice:

My boy, you must expect to come off badly in this catastrophe, now that you are a slave instead of a free man, and a poor man instead of a rich one. But you must put everything down to fortune, accept the fate that rules over you, and be friends with those who have become your masters. You must know that it is in your power to recover your happiness and freedom if you are willing to obey your master, Corymbus, for he is madly in love with you and is prepared to make you master of all he possesses.³¹

Habrocomes' reaction is desperate: "And what are my prospects in the future, reduced from a man to a prostitute [. . .]?"³² Habrocomes manages to get out of this situation, but, instead, Manto, the daughter of the pirates' leader, falls in love with him. Habrocomes rejects Manto with the following words:

I am a slave, but I know how to keep my vows! They have powers over my body, but my soul is still free. Now let Manto threaten me if she pleases – with swords, the noose, fire, and everything that the body of a slave can be made to bear, for she could never persuade me to do wrong against Anthia of my own free will.³³

As already mentioned, Manto takes revenge and accuses Habrocomes of attempted rape. Her father then has Habrocomes whipped, chained and thrown into a dungeon.

The two excerpts from the *Ephesiaka* of Xenophon of Ephesus show that male slaves could be the object of the desire of their male as well as their female owners. This puts the slave in a 'quasi-feminine' position: as a man, he is superior to the woman, but as a slave he shares the subordination and social inferiority of the female slave and is just as sexually available as she is.³⁴ Differences of gender no longer play

³⁰ John Hilton, "The Role of Gender and Sexuality in the Enslavement and Liberation of Female Slaves in the Ancient Greek Romances," in *Slaves and Masters in the Ancient Novel*, ed. Stelios Panayotakis and Michael Paschalis (Groningen: Barkhuis & Groningen University Library, 2019): 6.

³¹ Xenophon of Ephesos 1,16,3–5.

³² Xenophon of Ephesos 2,1,3.

³³ Xenophon of Ephesos 2,4,4; see for example William Fitzgerald, *Slavery and the Roman Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010): 89–92; Peter Garnsey, *Ideas of Slavery from Aristotle to Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 105–52.

³⁴ Sandra Rae Joshel and Sheila Murnaghan, "Introduction: Differential Equations," in *Women and Slaves in Greco-Roman Culture*, ed. Sandra Rae Joshel and Sheila Murnaghan, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge 2001): 9; Kelly L. Wrenhaven, *Reconstructing the Slave: The Image of the Slave in Ancient Greece* (London: Bristol Classical Press 2012): 71–74; Binsfeld, "Lebenswirklichkeiten' von Sklaven": 36–41.

a role for the slaves. The author plays with the tension between slavery and freedom. Habrokomes has lost his physical freedom, and he also risks losing his physical / sexual integrity, but he retains the freedom of his soul – in contrast to the pirate Corymbos or the robber’s daughter Manto, who are physically free but slaves to their lusts. The motif of the *servitium amoris* – as we have already seen – is a theme that pervades ancient literature and serves to reverse the power relations between masters and slaves – in this specific case in two ways, since the object of desire is a male slave.³⁵

4 Conclusion

Forms of asymmetrical dependency form an integral part of ancient novels. Slave characters are not only important for establishing the realistic background of the story; slaves and formerly free enslaved people are also the protagonists. Furthermore, the story itself is structured by the experiences of captivity and enslavement. With some caution, we can draw information on the situation of slaves in Roman imperial times from the novels. But facts and fiction are always intertwined for the purpose of the narration. The events described in the books can refer to real slave experiences (kidnapping, enslavement, being sold by slave traders, prostitution, captivity of war, sexual exploitation, philosophical criticism of slavery, justifications of slavery, etc.), but these experiences tend to be exaggerated and transformed into a narration of decline and fall, of rescue and liberation. The authors make use of sharp contrasts between slavery and freedom to create a suspense that leads finally to a happy ending.

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³⁵ See Kathleen McCarthy, “*Servitium amoris*: Amor servitii,” in *Women and Slaves in Greco-Roman Culture*, ed. Sandra Rae Joshel and Sheila Murnaghan, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2001): 174–92.

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