

Philosophical Presences in the Ancient Novel

ANCIENT NARRATIVE

Supplementum 10

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Barkhuis Zuurstukken 37 9761 KP Eelde the Netherlands
Tel. +31 50 3080936 Fax +31 50 3080934
info@ancientnarrative.com www.ancientnarrative.com

Philosophical Presences
in the Ancient Novel

J.R. Morgan,
Meriel Jones (eds.)

BARKHUIS PUBLISHING &
GRONINGEN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY
GRONINGEN 2007

Book design: Barkhuis
Cover Design: Nynke Tiekstra, Noordwolde
Printed by: Drukkerij Giethoorn ten Brink

ISBN-13 978 90 77922 378

Image on cover: John William Waterhouse, *Diogenes*, 1882; Oil on canvas, 208.3 x 134.6 cm; Collection Art Gallery of New South Wales.

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Introduction

J.R. MORGAN
MERIEL JONES
www.kyknos.org.uk

Most of the papers in this volume derive from a panel organised by the KYKNOS Research Centre for Ancient Narrative Literature for the fourth Celtic Conference in Classics, held at the University of Wales, Lampeter, in the summer of 2006. Even at the earliest stages of planning, when we decided upon the theme of philosophy in ancient fiction, it was clear that with the shared interests of existing members of the group and some judiciously and temptingly worded invitations to other colleagues there was the potential for an exciting and tightly focused three days of discussion. Reality exceeded expectation. In our experience, the spirit of constructive collaboration that pervaded the three days of the conference has rarely been surpassed. Excellent papers were followed by exceptionally generous periods of animated discussion, in which ideas were shared and explored. Largely due to the structure of the Celtic Conference, with panels on different topics running in parallel over the duration of the conference, the personnel at each of our sessions remained pretty well constant, so that in effect the panel became a three-day seminar. John Morgan and Meriel Jones, who had been responsible for organising the panel, undertook to bring its papers – with a couple of additions – together into this present volume. Our thanks are due to all the contributors, and in particular to Anton Powell, the organiser of the whole conference, and to Stephen Harrison, who, although not a speaker in this panel, was a constant contributor to our discussions and later gave freely of his encouragement in the preparation of this book.

Next we must say something about KYKNOS, based in the Universities of Swansea, Lampeter, and Exeter. Even before the formal constitution of the group, we were aware that there was a unique regional concentration of research expertise on narrative, both among established academic staff

and among research students of high promise. Since the days of Bryan Reardon's *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, there has been a strong historical connection between Wales and the study of the ancient novel. In fact, four of the contributors to Reardon's volume were or had been members of what was still the federal University of Wales (Reardon himself, Gill, Dowden, and Morgan). Later staff movements took some of the original personnel to other universities, but in recent years a series of strategic appointments has been made in Wales to consolidate the research strength. Other members of staff, whose main focus of research may lie in other areas, are able to contribute additional dimensions to the collaborative work on narrative. Various conferences and seminars have been organised under the aegis of KYKNOS, including one on 'Lies and Metafiction', whose papers, edited by John Morgan and Ian Repath, will appear as another *Ancient Narrative Supplementum*. Exchanges with staff and students of other universities are envisaged – indeed researchers from Belgium and Switzerland have already spent some time working with the group – and the intention is to build a network of contacts and associations with researchers in the field of ancient narrative literature. Your ideas for possible collaborations will be warmly welcomed.

Our aim in this present volume is to open up an aspect of ancient fiction which is widely acknowledged, but still lacks a thorough-going investigation. Under the rubric of 'Philosophical Presences' we envisage a cluster of complementary and overlapping approaches to the wider issues. Writers of the Second Sophistic in general were steeped in the literature of the classical period, including the classic texts of philosophical writers, especially, of course, Plato. Intertextuality is equally a feature, to varying degrees, of all the ancient novels, but scholarship has tended to concentrate on the novelists' exploitation of intertexts from epic, tragedy, New Comedy, historiography, and (in the case of Longus) bucolic. The question of how to interpret allusion to an intertext becomes particularly acute when the intertext is a philosophical one. How far can we press the philosophical implications of any given allusion? Are the novelists simply decorating their works with Platonic tags and images, or are they seriously articulating and engaging with the Platonic ideas to which those tags and images are attached, as Karen Ní Mheallaigh argues in the case of Achilles Tatius' use of the *Phaedrus* to foreground issues of textuality and orality, and hence the nature of fiction itself? Larger scale patterns of allegory must also come

into play. Latin novelists, notably Apuleius, recognisably build their plots as allegorical embodiments – or perhaps problematisations – of philosophical doctrines, as Ahuvia Kahane reads the scene of the Judgement of Paris as an icon of Neoplatonic debates on meaning and truth. May we legitimately read the Greek novels too as works of coded philosophy? ‘Yes, in some sense’ would appear to be the answer, if the suggestive papers of, for example, Ken Dowden and Fritz-Gregor Herrmann are to be believed.

However, philosophical presences in the novels can be located at a number of different levels. Even where no specific intertext is involved, it is more or less inevitable that the novels – or any other form of discourse for that matter – should reflect concerns that were also being addressed in systematic philosophy. At the very least, any educated person of the period of the novels’ composition would have had as part of his mental furniture philosophical ideas that had entered the cultural mainstream. Representations of moral qualities in fiction, for example, must be contextualised within the philosophical discourses of antiquity, which in their turn will shed light on and help to explain the novelists’ tacit assumptions. This approach is exemplified in this volume by Meriel Jones’s discussion of *andreaia*, Ian Repath’s analysis of the novelists’ appropriation of Platonic psychology, Koen De Temmerman’s treatment of character types described by Aristotle and Theophrastus, and Konstantin Doulamis’ demonstration of the presence of Stoic ideas and recognisably Stoic stylistic tropes in the too often unregarded novel of Xenophon of Ephesus. At another level again, philosophers may be directly depicted as members of the cast-lists of fictional texts: in this volume, Daniel Ogden examines Lucian’s treatment of stock figures representative of the various philosophical schools in his dialogue *The Lover of Lies*, while John Morgan’s survey of philosophers in Greek novels identifies a persistent ambivalence in these texts’ handling of philosophers as individuals, an ambivalence which is also identified in Michael Trapp’s introductory, contextualising paper as characteristic of the position of philosophy within the society and culture of the early Imperial period.

This collection of papers makes no claim to be any more than a beginning, and it is our hope that before long KYKNOS will return to the question of philosophy in fiction. Ian Repath’s forthcoming monograph on Achilles Tatius’ exploitation of Plato will throw down a gauntlet for readers of the other novels;¹ Heliodorus in particular is a potentially rich seam for

¹ Repath (forthcoming).

mining significant Platonic allusion. The claim has often been made that the *Ethiopian Story* is characteristically Neoplatonic in its orientation, and that its plot embodies serious philosophical intentions.² Philosophically didactic readings of this and other novels need to be teased out in detail, and readers of ancient fiction must at some stage begin to get their heads round difficult and abstruse texts of Middle and Neo-Platonism. We also need to pay attention to other philosophical schools, perhaps less rich in their literary heritage. Konstantin Doulamis' paper is a salutary reminder of the centrality of Stoicism in what we might call the 'middle-brow' culture of the early Imperial period. Traces of this and other philosophical contexts need to be run to ground and correlated in order to locate the novels accurately in the moral and intellectual landscape of the period; Meriel Jones's dissertation on the representation of masculinities in the novels has begun the process for the so-called male virtues, but there is still much work to be done.³ Even at a philological level, the vocabulary of the novels needs to be scrutinised for philosophical resonances: a more or less random check of the TLG, for example, turned up an apparent echo of early Christian dialectic in Heliodorus, as noted in John Morgan's paper. Strategies of reading philosophy in the novels, of reading the novels as philosophy, and of reading them through philosophy are already exemplified in this collection of papers, and have the potential, if not exactly to transform, at least to enhance significantly our understanding and estimation of these works. If the papers in this volume are anything to go by, philosophical presences paradoxically simultaneously draw attention to the ontological status of fictional texts, promoting metaliterary readings, and offer the possibility of didactic instruction about the 'real' world and human life. As they say, watch this space.

Finally, in addition to the thanks already expressed, we are grateful to Roelf Barkhuis and the editorial team at *Ancient Narrative*, who have been enthusiastic and encouraging about this project from the beginning.

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