Who Reads Ancient Novels? Reading Fiction in Antiquity

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Novels are easy to recognise, but hard to define.[1] For a modern audience, novels are perhaps the most familiar mode of literature, but one with many different possible forms. After all, novels can range from Jane Austen's marriage plots to the social commentary of Charles Dickens to the postmodern experiments of Nabokov to Margaret Atwood's speculative near-future dystopias to David Mitchell's dizzyingly complex games with genre and structure. One of the only things these diverse examples have in common is that they are all unquestionably fictional, and in the contemporary world the novel is essentially synonymous with fiction. This slippage between the two has allowed for a kind of universalism about the novel as a category, since for modern readers it is the most common expression of the impulse for fictional storytelling visible in all cultures and time periods. This is exemplified by Margaret Anne Doody's *The True Story of the Novel*, a history of the form which situates the origins of the modern novel in the ancient prose fictions commonly labelled as novels. As Doody puts it at the very start of her work, "this book is the revelation of a very well-kept secret: that the Novel as a form of literature in the west has a continuous history of about two thousand years" (Doody 1996: 1).

But is it really true to say that the novel has its origins in the fiction of classical antiquity, and that this forms a continuous history reaching into the modern era? This depends entirely on how we define a novel. Doody traces the origins of the genre back to the Roman imperial period, where a corpus primarily composed of five Greek texts, written between roughly the first and fourth centuries CE, have become known as the ancient novels.[2] Despite differences in their focus and scope, all of these narratives feature young protag-

[1] I wish to thank the organisers for the invitation to speak at *Griekenlandcentrum* and then to publish the lecture in *Tetradio*. This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 819459 – NovelEchoes).

[2] Chariton's *Callirhoe*, Xenophon of Ephesus' *Ephesiaka*, Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe*, Achilles Tatius' *Leucippe and Clitophon*, Heliodorus' *Aithiopika*. Convenient and accessible English translations of all five can be found in Reardon 1989. Two Latin texts (Petronius' *Satyrica* and Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*) are also often included under the umbrella of ancient novel, but the lack of other examples, the *Satyrica*'s fragmentary state, and the strong differences between

onists in love for the first time, travel and adventure, lovers' separation, reunion, marriage, and happy endings, more or less. Seen through this lens, it is not difficult to spot crossovers with the modern novel, since all of these texts are extended prose fictions which present a continuous narrative focusing on human experiences of love, loss, and adventure. But there are also important differences between the two. There is no term for novel in Greek or Latin, and no explicit theorisation of the novel in antiquity at all.[3] In fact, there is little evidence for widespread readership at all, and the snippets of information we do have about ancient readers are often fragmentary or contentious enough to undermine their value as evidence. If novels are an instantly recognisable type of reading material for modern audiences, therefore, we have no concrete evidence from antiquity to suggest that ancient audiences recognised novels as a coherent genre analogous to what we would call a novel.

This article aims to explore the implications of labelling these ancient texts as novels, and how this affects our assumptions about ancient novel readers. Rather than analysing these texts in terms of form and whether they correspond to modern definitions of novels, my goal here is to interrogate the assumptions about readership imported from the term and to offer a more nuanced way of understanding ancient readership. Given the breadth of this topic, this is not intended to be a comprehensive overview, but rather a methodological analysis which uses paradigmatic examples to investigate what is at stake in different approaches to reading fiction in antiquity. As such, this paper does not intend to present a definitive answer to the question of who read novels in antiquity, since the extant evidence is too thin to resolve the issue once and for all, but rather to invite us to think harder about the assumptions inherent in our approaches. While fiction may be a universal feature of narrative, responses to it are culturally inflected and reveal both the priorities of its original authors as well as generations of later readers. By exploring the value of understanding the ancient novels as a genre within both ancient and modern contexts, therefore, it becomes possible to attain a more holistic and nuanced perspective on the long-debated question of novelistic readership in antiquity and beyond.

What is a Novel?

How to define a novel is a deceptively complex question. The modern novel is such a broad-ranging phenomenon that there are very few objective markers which can be used to distinguish it from other kinds of narrative. The problems

them means that they have rarely been seen as a coherent genre to the extent that the Greek novels have been.

[3] The best overview of the genre and its problems remains Goldhill 2008.

of defining the novel, especially as the primary model for thinking about fiction, are well-summed up by Wayne C. Booth:

> *The* novel began, we are told, with Cervantes, with Defoe, with Fielding, with Richardson, with Jane Austen – or was it with Homer? It was killed by Joyce, by Proust, by the rise of symbolism, by the loss of respect for – or was it the excessive absorption with? – hard facts. No, no, it still lives, but only in the work of…Thus, on and on. (Booth 1983: 36)

Booth here neatly summarises the consequences of the "chaotic diversity among the things called novels" (*ibid.*). The breadth of texts to which the term novel is applied, ranging from modern instances to eighteenth-century examples to the ancient world in works replete with cultural and linguistic plurality, both necessitates a definition and makes any kind of standardised definition impossible. Moreover, any attempts to theorise the novel can only ever look back to texts already published, and cannot account for the ways in which future narratives will break these apparent rules. In other words, as Booth puts it pithily, "how can we apply to any one novel the standards appropriate to any one defined type without a divine decree authorizing us to consider *this* novel as of *this* type?" (*ibid.*: 37).

Despite the inherent slipperiness of the form, however, few would argue with defining the novel, at least in the most general and wide-ranging sense, as an extended work of prose fiction, often focusing on the human condition or the interior lives of its characters. This, however, raises a number of questions about the limitations of such a definition. For example, how long does a text have to be to count as an extended work? How poetic or unconventional can prose be before it no longer counts as a novel? For example, Lucy Ellmann's 2019 novel *Ducks, Newburyport* is written in a stream of consciousness narrative lasting over a thousand pages but made up primarily of a single sentence. *Ducks, Newburyport* won the 2019 Goldsmiths Prize, dedicated to innovative forms of fiction, and was shortlisted for the 2019 Booker Prize, for the best novel written in English in that year. According to the Anglophone literary establishment, therefore, *Ducks, Newburyport* is an undeniably inventive fiction, and just as undeniably a novel, despite its unconventional format.

Although clearly inadequate as a comprehensive definition, the ancient novels nonetheless can be accommodated within these most basic formalist characteristics. While only one ancient novel, Heliodorus' *Aithiopika*, is comparable in length to a modern novel, even the shortest examples of the genre are long by comparison to other ancient works. Despite some poetic interludes, they are written overwhelmingly in continuous prose, and their general theme of teenage romance gives an obvious insight into one of the most basic themes of novelistic narratives, namely love and marriage. Seen through this

lens, it is clear why scholars have posited a continuous generic connection between ancient and modern novels, despite the large chronological distance between them. The impossibility of a universal definition of a novel, after all, cuts both ways, since the form is fluid enough to accommodate a wide range of variety and cannot be defined strictly. If *Ducks, Newburyport* can still be a novel, in other words, there is no reason why the ancient novels cannot also be termed novels.

But such a formalist definition ignores the literary context of both ancient and modern novels. Genre is not a fixed set of characteristics, but a social construction which relies on collective recognition of a category.[4] Rather than looking at the novel simply as a narrative form, therefore, we also need to consider its contextual qualities, such as its intended and actual readership, cultural capital, and place within contemporary literary society. If we compare the contextual features of both ancient and modern novels, a very different picture emerges. Modern novels are automatically assumed to be accessible to the majority of the population, since a paperback novel is not a luxury item, nor is it difficult to find. Even if some novels are written in a higher register or more complex language, it is difficult to find examples of novels which are written at a level entirely inaccessible to most readers of the language in which it is published. Finally, in a modern literary context narratives focusing on teenage romance, love, and marriage would generally imply an audience primarily composed of women, since erotic fiction has been stereotyped as a traditionally female-orientated genre from the eighteenth-century into the modern world and its derogatory label of 'chick-lit'. Read through a modern lens, therefore, we might assume based on our contemporary assumptions about accessibility, availability, and intended audience, that the ancient novels were widely-available popular texts, likely aimed at women, possibly even low-brow pulp fiction.

But none of these assumptions correspond to the evidence we have about the ancient readers of the classical novels. Although the evidence for the ancient novel's early readership is patchy and it is difficult to form a definitive or wide-ranging picture from such paltry fragments, it is clear that their ancient audiences approached novels in ways which challenge our modern expectations.[5] Many of the ancient novels are written in or show at least some trace of Atticism, an artificial dialect which hearkens back to the language of classical Athens, between five hundred and a thousand years before the novels were written.[6] A contemporary equivalent would be a modern writer using the language of Shakespeare of Chaucer in order to sound educated. As such, the use of a more exclusive dialect in contrast to vernacular language restricts the potential readership of the novels by reducing their accessibility to a general

4 As explored thoughtfully by Goldhill 2008 and Morales 2009.

5 See the surveys of Stephens 1994, Bowie 1994, Bowie 2003, and Hunter 2008.

6 Kim 2017 offers the best overview of Atticism both as a linguistic and cultural construct.

public in favour of a highly educated, elite audience. Indeed, given the expensiveness of writing materials and the length of time needed to produce copies of texts in antiquity, it is likely that the novels were likely only accessible to elite readers, both in terms of their societal and financial status.[7] While reconstructions of ancient literacy are notoriously variable, it is fair to assume that a far lower proportion of the population in the first centuries of the common era were literate, and even fewer of these were female. As such, novelistic scholarship has repeatedly raised the question of female readership over the last thirty years without coming to any definitive conclusions, since while undoubtedly some educated and elite readers were female, these practical constraints make a predominantly male readership more plausible.[8] Whereas romance novels in the modern world, so-called 'chick lit', are framed as appealing primarily to a female audience, are cheap and low-brow, often stereotyped as escapist fantasy, in the ancient world these romance texts likely invoke entirely the opposite audience: elite, male, educated, exclusive.

But most importantly, if modern novels have made fiction a standard and recognisable form of narrative for contemporary audiences, the same cannot be said for the ancient novels. In addition to all of these restrictions on readership, the basic fact remains that there are only five extant examples of the Greek novel known to modern scholars, in addition to a handful of fragmentary texts.[9] Even if there were more texts which could be grouped under the novelistic umbrella, these isolated examples likely composed across a span of several hundreds of years cannot support the kind of universalised approach to novels seen in the twenty-first century. While modern novels are so ubiquitous as to naturalise fiction for their readers across a variety of cultural contexts, the limited reach and number of the ancient novels, combined with the restrictions outlined above, make it highly unlikely that novelistic fiction was similarly naturalised in antiquity. And yet, elite, educated readers of the Roman Empire were likely well versed in a variety of fictions, ranging from the heroic myths of epic poetry to the dramatic events of tragedy to the credibility-challenging heights of Herodotean historiography.[10] If indeed there is no wide-ranging genre of the novel in antiquity, this does not mean that ancient readers were not potentially sophisticated and experienced interpreters of fiction. Instead, what this suggests is that they did not come to the text with a fixed perspective shaped by constant, naturalised exposure to novelistic fiction.

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7 Johnson 2010 is the most comprehensive recent survey of readership in the imperial period.

8 For example, Elsom 1992, Eggers 1994, Haynes 2003. The limitations of the material evidence means that such arguments often risk relying on finding points of empathy or identification with the female protagonists of the novels, a reductive model which assume that women may only be interested in reading about women.

9 Collected and analysed in Stephens and Winkler 1995.

10 The essays in Gill & Wiseman 1993, with Morgan 1993 on the Greek novels, remains one of the few works to attempt to tackle this issue.

Novel Histories

So if there is no ancient term equivalent to novel and it was received in a totally different cultural context, why are the ancient novels called novels? This is in large part due to scholarly convenience, translation issues, and the need for some kind of categorisation as study of the field has grown in popularity. A more detailed look at the history of the term, however, illuminates just how pervasive and symbiotic the relationship between modern and ancient novels is.

The history of defining ancient novels by their relation to its contemporary counterpart goes back at least to sixteenth century France, when Jacques Amyot's 1547 translation of Heliodorus's *Aithiopika* becomes a literary sensation.[11] Amyot's edition, the first vernacular translation of an ancient novel in the early modern world, included a preface arguing for the value of Heliodorus' *roman* as both the paradigm of Horace's poetics of unity, and as an example of the best techniques of epic poetry such as beginning *in medias res*. Amyot explicitly frames Heliodorus's novel against contemporary literary fiction in order to demonstrate the *Aithiopika*'s moral superiority over the other stories popular at this time. While, as he argues, the stories most familiar to his audience lack any intellectual or moral value, the *Aithiopika* instead is a shining example of how fiction can benefit its readers due to its artistic and ethical merit (Plazenet 2002: 278-280). The impact of Amyot's preface is clear and immediate. Prior to the publication of Amyot's translation, the chivalric romance *Amadis* had been the most popular text in France; afterwards, the translator of the Spanish *Amadis* began including apologetic prefaces arguing that the *Amadis* was in fact working in the same tradition as the *Aithiopika* (Fumaroli 1985: 27-29). Amyot's translation, therefore, not only reintroduces the ancient novel to European literary society, but also places the ancient text in dialogue with the nascent modern form and creates a new vocabulary for appreciating the ancient novel through its relationship with modern fictional narratives.

The importance of the ancient novel for understanding its modern counterpart becomes explicit in 1670, when the French writer Pierre-Daniel Huet writes his *Traité de l'origine des Romans*, or *Treatise on the Origins of the Novel*.[12] Unlike Amyot, who asserts the importance of Heliodorus without directly connecting it to modern fictional narratives, Huet draws a continuous line of influence from the ancient novel to modern texts, including the *Amadis*. Although Huet admits that the development of the novel is far from linear, particularly a lull in the medieval period, he argues that the ancient novel rep-

[11] Surveys of the novel's reception histories include Doody 1996: 213-300, and Reeve 2008, with further bibliography. Amyot's edition has recently been edited with further commentary in Plazenet 2008.

[12] The most accessible modern edition of this text is Gegou 1971.

resents one peak of the form which is developed further by contemporary writers as a direct descendent of these ancient traditions. This connection is made all the more potent by the fact that this treatise was in fact appended to a novel ascribed to Marie de la Fayette, *Zayde*, which thematised the tensions between East and West in a way which parallels Huet's description of the novel's journey from the Greek East to contemporary Western Europe (Vasunia 2013). By describing the origins of the modern *roman* in its ancient counterpart, Huet traces a line of progress from the one to the other, but also legitimises the latter form by giving it an ancient pedigree.

As the modern novel begins to become more popular and respectable in the eighteenth century, however, we see theorists begin to distinguish the two from each other. The English writer Clara Reeve, for example, wrote not only influential Gothic novels, but also a treatise on novels, published in 1785, entitled *The Progress of Romance*.[13] Unlike Huet and Amyot, who both use the term *roman* for both modern and ancient novels, Reeve wrote in English and her arguments about the differences between the two are epitomised by her use of different terminology for them. Reeve's treatise takes the form of a conversation between fictional characters, the most prominent of whom, Euphrasia, appears to be a kind of surrogate for Reeve herself (Omdal 2013). Through the voice of Euphrasia, Reeve distinguishes the ancient 'romances', which she describes as old-fashioned and antiquated forms of narrative, from the contemporary 'novels', which represent a sophisticated reworking of this primitive model. While Reeve still sees a connection between the two, as her title suggests, the ancient novel is no longer a model to emulate, but one to surpass in order to progress the development of fiction. Whereas for Amyot and Huet proximity to the ancient novel legitimised its modern counterpart, as novels become a more widespread and well-known form of narrative, an archaic format against which the modern novel can demonstrate its superiority.

This trend becomes even more explicit as the modern novel's influence continues to expand and the ancient novel becomes a field of study within classical philology. The influence of Erwin Rohde's magnum opus *Der griechische Roman und seine Vorläufer* cannot be overestimated. Here, Rohde explicitly inverts the direction of influence seen up until this point, where rather than the ancient novel being judged by its relation to the ancient novel, Rohde insists upon its relation to classical models and looks instead for its predecessors (*Vorläufer*). This kind of teleological development has increasingly fallen out of favour in modern scholarship on the ancient novel, but Rohde's ideas have cast a long shadow over the novel, most notably in his view of the novel as the belated, degraded product of classical models (Whitmarsh 2013: 10-13). This leaves the novel in an ambiguous place: too late for classical antiquity,

[13] A facsimile edition is preserved in McGill 1930.

too early for modern prestige, and detached from its modern counterpart as a way of dismissing its importance.[14]

What this brief history shows is how closely intertwined the ancient novel has been with its modern counterpart. As Helen Morales puts it:

> We have injected, retrospectively, the novel's status *in summa* in the 19th century and beyond into these ancient texts and, in so doing, have afforded them a centrality in Western literary history. But this is a greatness that has been thrust upon them, not one that they were born with. (Morales 2009: 6)

While Morales does not discuss the nuances of the novel's reputation, particularly its disrepute in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, her essential point is correct. By not interrogating the overlap between ancient and modern novels, these ancient texts have been granted an importance which is not commensurate with the ancient evidence. Most importantly, surveying the history of the term makes it clear how the novel genre has been constructed by modern readers as a way of legitimising or denigrating the ancient texts as needed. Consequently, the continuity of the term novel tells us less about the actual connection between the two, and more about how modern readers have interpreted these ancient texts from their own cultural and literary standpoints.

Sex, Lies, and Fiction

These assumptions about the continuity of the novel genre are more insidious because of the paucity of evidence available to us about how ancient readers read novels. This is epitomised by one of our earliest testimonia to the novel, the late fourth or early fifth-century doctor Theodorus Priscianus, who in his collection of medical remedies recommends reading erotic texts as a cure for impotence (*Euporista* 2.11.34):[15]

> *uti sane lectionibus animum ad delicias pertrahentibus, ut sunt Amphipolitae Philippi aut Herodiani aut certe Syrii Iamblichi, vel ceteris suaviter amatorias fabulas describentibus.*
>
> It is good to make use of readings that draw the soul towards pleasure, like those of Philip of Amphipolis, or Herodian, or undoubtedly the Syrian Iamblichus, or others that pleasantly narrate erotic stories.

[14] For further analysis see Whitmarsh 2011a, which also looks at Rohde's influence within a historical and nationalistic framework.

[15] Text taken from Rose 1894, reprinted in Barbero 2015: 66-67. All translations in this article are my own.

This reference has often been cited in novelistic scholarship, but rarely analysed in depth. Since Priscianus is not a literary critic but a doctor, it has been used to suggest that the novels were too low-brow, cheap, and borderline pornographic to be of interest to literary critics, which would justify why a doctor would prescribe the novels as a cure for sexual dysfunction. As Simon Goldhill has put it, "this single remark has had to make do for the range of evidence brought to bear" in other comprehensive studies of romantic fiction, since it has been interpreted as evidence of the novel's cultural capital and readership in late antiquity (Goldhill 1995: 168n48). As such bears a disproportionate weight of scholarly expectation for not just how, but why ancient novels were and were not read by different groups of society.

But this brief reference cannot support all of these assumptions. Firstly, Priscianus does not even refer to novels as a group, or indeed to any extant novel. The only plausible reference to an ancient novel here comes in the mention of Iamblichus, who is attested as the writer of a novel entitled the *Babyloniaka.* This text, however, only exists in fragments and the plot summary of a much later writer, Photius, who claims that it has the same aims and intentions as Achilles Tatius and Heliodorus have for their own novels (*Bibl.* 73b27-29, codex 94). This suggests that Photius saw it as part of a genre akin to the novel, but Photius also does not mention other novels perceived as canonical in the modern world such as Chariton's *Callirhoe*, Xenophon of Ephesus' *Ephesiaka*, and Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe*. As such, it is difficult to know where this novel stands in relation to the novel as genre, but in any case there is little evidence to suggest that Iamblichus' novel was a well-known epitome of the novel as a collective genre in late antiquity. Moreover, the other two writers mentioned are entirely unknown and do not correspond to any potential novelists from antiquity. The tenth-century *Suda* does mention a Philip of Amphipolis who wrote an obscene history of Rhodes (φ 351 *s.v.* Φίλιππος), which does correspond to patterns of titles seen in other ancient novels, but about which there is no evidence to support a novelistic affiliation (Whitmarsh 2005: 595-596). The Herodian here seems unlikely to be the notoriously unerotic historian of the same name, although it has been ingeniously, albeit tenuously, proposed that it may be a corruption of the name of the novelist Heliodorus (Bowie 1994: 447). But given that Heliodorus depicts his protagonists continually rebelling against sexual desire and even going so far as to venerate virginity like a god (2.33.4-5), for Prisicanus to use Heliodorus as an incitement to erotic desire is unexpected, to say the least. To see Priscianus' prescription as a specific reference to novels is not only tenuous, therefore, but also highly convenient, since it would explain away all the gaps in our knowledge about this extract.

Is this even a reference to the novelist Iamblichus? All Priscianus says is that Iamblichus is a Syrian, and one version of the novelist Iamblichus' biography does describe him as a Syrian. This, however, is one of three different

biographies transmitted with the fragments of the now-lost novel, given by an anonymous scholiast to the primary manuscript of a ninth-century text, and it is unclear whether this information would have been available to Priscianus, writing maybe as much as half a millennium earlier.[16] Iamblichus is a name attested in Syria, but there are multiple references to this name in antiquity, most famously the fourth-century Neoplatonic philosopher of the same name from the Syrian city of Chalcis. Most importantly, regardless of the novelist's actual affiliation, the text of Priscianus' writing is extremely corrupt, and it is far from clear exactly what Priscianus was trying to say. The transmitted text includes a variety of different possibilities, all of which raise different problems of interpretation.[17] As such, Priscianus' description of Iamblichus as a Syrian might not be a reference to this specific novelist, but even an interpolation by a later writer conjecturing about the origins of a name such as Iamblichus, or attempting to reference an entirely different writer. After all, what we know of the fragmentary *Babyloniaka* suggests that while it does have some erotic elements, these were likely outrageous and shocking: some of the most explicit eroticism in the text may have involved necrophilia.[18] Paradoxically, if we want to see Priscianus' reference to Iamblichus as representative of how the novels as a genre were viewed in antiquity, we have to ignore the uncertainty of the evidence and make a number of generalising assumptions about the details of this citation.

So, can this be representative of how ancient readers used novels? Naturally the idea that ancient readers used ancient erotic fiction for personal pleasure is entirely possible, even if this is essentially the only evidence to corroborate it. But given everything else we know about the novels – their length, their expense, the fact that they are written in an educated dialect – it seems that stimulating their readers in this way cannot have been their primary purpose. By putting so much weight on Priscianus as an example of novelistic readers, we can force the ancient novels into the box of modern assumptions about erotic novels as cheap, lowbrow, and practically pornographic, but we end up downplaying their other facets in order to make them fit.

Novelistic Traditions

So how then do we take the novels on their own terms? Regardless of whether there is any generic term in antiquity for the novels and regardless of the modern assumptions about them, there is some evidence that the novels saw themselves as part of a coherent genre. This is clearest in the example of

16 On this see Stephens & Winkler 1995: 179-184.

17 Alternatives include *sirii aut amblii* (V B Gel.), *sirii. aut amplii* (r), or *Iambuli* Osann. Text and apparaticus criticus taken from Rose's 1894 edition, reprinted in Barbero 2015: 66-67.

18 Danek 2000: 114 n.6, referring to Photius *Bibl.* 76b13.

Heliodorus' *Aithiopika*, the latest novel from antiquity and likely a century later than any other ancient novel. The novel infamously opens with the enigmatic aftermath of an unknown battle on an Egyptian beach, and a group of confused bandits approaching what appear to be the only survivors of this conflict. This opening is shown near-exclusively through the perspective of these Egyptian bandits, whose confusion offers a parallel for the audience, who have no information about what has happened, who these unknown survivors are, or what relevance any of this has to a novel about *Ethiopian Matters* (a literal translation of the title *Aithiopika*).[19] Finally, in what seems like a moment of revelation, Charikleia, the novel's female protagonist, offers an explanation for how she and her male counterpart Theagenes came to Egypt which sounds remarkably similar to other novelistic plots, most closely resembling Xenophon of Ephesus' *Ephesiaka*: she and her brother Theagenes have left Ephesus on a religious mission, but shipwrecked along the way (1.22). It is only later that the novel reveals that this is a convenient fiction told by Charikleia, which matches the expectations of her internal audience, but which belies the intricate truth which the novel eventually reveals about her identity as the Greek-seeming white daughter of the king and queen of Ethiopia. As Jack Winkler puts it:

> Her account is not only a lie, it is nearly a parody of the Greek romance as a genre…the plot of her lie presents no thoughtful difference, no challenge of any kind to the reader who knows Xenophon, Chariton, or Achilles Tatius. It is a 'compliant story, one which matches pace with the expectations' of the reader... (Winkler 1982: 111, referring to Hld. 1.26.3)

This construction of a novelistic fiction aligns the novel within a tradition of comparable narrative, essentially constructing an implicit recognition of generic familiarity. The revelation that this story is not only untrue, but a bland and basic tale in contrast to the unprecedented complexity of the truth, however, frames this awareness competitively, with Heliodorus' novel surpassing its predecessors in ambition and scope. This pattern recurs throughout the novel: a flashback to events chronologically earlier than the novel's opening, although retold in the narrative later on, shows the protagonists meeting at a festival in Delphi in an uncanny reworking of Anthia and Habrocomes' first meeting in the *Ephesiaka*.[20] These examples show Heliodorus not just reusing the imagery and motifs of earlier novels, but recognising key features of their narratives, such as the lovers' first meeting and the beginning of their travels. As such, we seem to have explicit recognition of the novel as a literary tradition, even a genre, since for Heliodorus Xenophon's novel is clearly a paradig-

[19] On novelistic titles and genre see Whitmarsh 2005.

[20] This is explored in more detail in Whitmarsh 2011b: 117-119.

matic text which provides a foundation for him to innovate upon in his own *Aithiopika*.

But this cannot be the whole story. While it is clear that Heliodorus does engage with earlier novels, the *Aithiopika* is a highly allusive work which references many other texts across a variety of genres, ranging from Homer to Attic drama to rhetorical theory.[21] More importantly, this only makes sense for the *Aithiopika* as the latest novel, possibly composed as late as the fourth-century while Xenophon's novel dates from possibly as early as the first-century.[22] Even if we decouple the ancient novel from its modern counterpart and focus only on the ancient genre, the lack of ancient definitions of the genre mean we are always at risk of presupposing the existence of novelistic conventions, despite the lack of evidence for them. This risks generating a circular argument, where the need for these texts to become a coherent genre necessitates viewing them always and only through the perceived conventions and restrictions of such a genre. But such an argument also necessitates ignoring other evidence. The so-called fragmentary novels, for example, are often grouped with extant novels by later sources, but are also less romantic, more unusual, or more gruesome than the canonical novels. In addition, the plurality of fictional texts from the imperial period which do not show such easy affinities with the modern novel are often rendered as adjacent to the novels as a way of dealing with their inconvenient fictions. As Helen Morales has shown, these 'neat tales scholars tell about the ancient novel can only be held in place by marginalising works that would complicate these stories' (Morales 2009: 7). In other words, the desire to unify the genre as a cohesive whole depends on what scholars choose to include or exclude, and the context in which these examples are viewed. While a late novel such as Heliodorus' clearly shows awareness of earlier examples of what modern scholars term the ancient novel, this does mean that the novels were a coherent genre in antiquity, and does not account for how such categories are formed.

Theorising Readership

In the absence of fixed models or concrete evidence for ancient readership, what kinds of readers do the novels imagine their audiences being? Two examples out of many possibilities demonstrate just how consciously the novels themselves engage with this question, and the extent to which they avoid reliance on fixed or familiar generic conventions.

The first example comes from Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe*, likely composed in the second or third century CE. The prologue to the text describes an

[21] Morgan 2003a: 436-440 offers a brief but rich overview of the novel's literary texture.

[22] Whether Heliodorus should be dated to the 3rd or 4th century CE is long-debated: see the overview in Morgan 2003a: 417-421. See also Bowie 2002 on the chronology of earlier novels.

unnamed narrator's visit to the Greek island of Lesbos, finding a painting with a variety of beautiful rustic scenes, and his subsequent efforts to convert the artwork into a book. After this, the work moves from a first-person experience to a third-person narrative of how the eponymous Daphnis and Chloe grow up and fall in love. This novel is famous for its protagonists' naivete, since despite the fact that the narrator characterises the painting which inspires the story as depicting entirely erotic things (πάντα ἐρωτικά, *praef.* 2), they know so little about love and sex that when told euphemistically that the cure for love is to lie down naked together, they literally lie naked next to each other and wonder why nothing is happening (2.8.1-11.3). By contrast to the protagonists' ignorance, this prologue implies an elite narrator, since he appears to be a stranger visiting Lesbos on holiday, and the kind of pleasure-hunting he describes at the start of the prologue is an upper-class activity (Morgan 2003b: 175-176). From the outset of the novel, therefore, we see a dissonance between the narratorial voice and that of the novel's characters which draws attention to the question of where we as readers are positioned between these extremes.

This point is made most explicitly towards the end of the prologue, which describes the book which the narrator has created (*praef.* 3):[23]

> …κτῆμα δὲ τερπνὸν πᾶσιν ἀνθρώποις, ὃ καὶ νοσοῦντα ἰάσεται καὶ λυπούμενον παραμυθήσεται, τὸν ἐρασθέντα ἀναμνήσει, τὸν οὐκ ἐρασθέντα προπαιδεύσει.
>
> …a delightful possession for all humans, which will heal the sick and comfort the suffering, remind those who have been in love, and teach in advance those who have not.

The novel claims that reading it will be beneficial for all segments of society, since both those who have been in love and those who have not technically covers all possible kinds of readers. Yet, this is impossible, or at the very least not straightforward. Daphnis and Chloe's inexperience with love is so severe that they do not even know the word love, and a reader of comparable inexperience would be entirely unable to even read a novel that describes itself from the outset as πάντα ἐρωτικά. Moreover, the text is never totally explicit about the mechanics of sex, instead relying on euphemisms, as the prologue itself winks at by ending for a prayer for chastity (σωφροσύνη, *praef.* 4) in writing about the actions of others (Morgan 2003b: 177-178). A reader who does not understand the euphemistic nature of the novel's claim that the cure for love is lying down together naked would likely find Daphnis and Chloe's sexual failures to be tragic, as they do, rather than funny, as later readers have done (Goldhill 1995: 1-45). If, as many have claimed, Theodorus Priscianus pre-

[23] Text following Reeve 1982.

scribed novels as a pornographic cure for impotence, Longus teases the possibility of more or less knowing models of reading, and from the very outset invites audiences to consider how they are reading the fiction.

Another example comes from the near-contemporary novel *Leucippe and Clitophon*, where the writer Achilles Tatius tackles a similar issue from a different angle. This novel is unique amongst extant examples of the genre from antiquity for its first-person perspective, as nearly all of the novel is narrated by its male protagonist, Clitophon. The novel begins with another unknown narrator who meets Clitophon and then invites him to narrate his own story, a shift in perspective which immediately dramatises from the outset of the text the question of who is telling this story. Here, just hours after meeting his cousin Leucippe, Clitophon is already obsessed with her and after spending an entire evening staring at her, finds inspiration in a divine parallel (1.5.5-7):[24]

> τὸ δὲ ᾆσμα ἦν Ἀπόλλων μεμφόμενος φεύγουσαν τὴν Δάφνην καὶ διώκων ἅμα καὶ μέλλων καταλαμβάνειν, καὶ γινομένη φυτὸν ἡ κόρη, καὶ Ἀπόλλων τὸ φυτὸν στεφανούμενος. τοῦτό μου μᾶλλον ἀσθὲν τὴν ψυχὴν ἐξέκαυσεν· ὑπέκκαυμα γὰρ ἐπιθυμίας λόγος ἐρωτικός. κἂν εἰς σωφροσύνην τις ἑαυτὸν νουθετῇ, τῷ παραδείγματι πρὸς τὴν μίμησιν ἐρεθίζεται, μάλισθ' ὅταν ἐκ τοῦ κρείττονος ᾖ τὸ παράδειγμα· ἡ γὰρ ὧν ἁμαρτάνει τις αἰδὼς τῷ τοῦ βελτίονος ἀξιώματι παρρησία γίνεται. καὶ ταῦτα πρὸς ἐμαυτὸν ἔλεγον· "ἰδοὺ καὶ Ἀπόλλων ἐρᾷ, κἀκεῖνος παρθένου, καὶ ἐρῶν οὐκ αἰσχύνεται, ἀλλὰ διώκει τὴν παρθένον· σὺ δὲ ὀκνεῖς καὶ αἰδῇ καὶ ἀκαίρως σωφρονεῖς· μὴ κρείττων εἶ τοῦ θεοῦ;"
>
> The song was Apollo blaming the fleeing Daphne, and his pursuing her, and how he was just about to capture her when the girl became a tree, and Apollo making himself a garland from the tree's leaves. This song inflamed my soul even more, for erotic stories are the fuel of love. Even if you discipline yourself towards chastity, you are provoked by the example to imitate it, especially when the example comes from a divinity; in which case, any shame that you feel at your mortal errors becomes a licence through the approval of a higher being. This was how I counselled myself: "You see, Apollo loves as well, and he loves a maiden, and he is not ashamed of his love, but pursues the maiden. But you shrink and are embarrassed and practice an untimely chastity. Do you really think you're better than a god?"

Clitophon interprets the musician's performance of the myth of Apollo and Daphne as encouragement for his own amorous designs on Leucippe, since, as he rationalises, even if a mortal feels shame or guilt about an action the god's

[24] Text from Garnaud 1991.

example gives them permission to proceed. Clitophon's reading here, however, is not just egotistical, but wilfully perverse. The myth of Apollo and Daphne was seemingly well-known in antiquity and appears in many sources, but most notably Ovid's first-century epic *Metamorphoses* (1.452-567). That version follows the same basic narrative as the story given in Achilles Tatius' novel, where Apollo pursues Daphne and the nymph turns into a tree, but there Ovid is explicit that Apollo's advances are non-consensual, and is clear that Daphne wishes to remain a virgin. Even though in Ovid's version Apollo embraces the tree and interprets the bending of the branches as a response to his love (566-567), Apollo recognises the failure of his advances in his verbal acknowledgement that she cannot be his bride (*quoniam coniunx mea non potes esse*, 557). This is parodied in the second-century writer Lucian's satirical *Dialogues of the Gods*, where Apollo declares that he is unlucky in love, since Daphne decided that becoming a tree was more attractive to her than him (17.2). Here, however, Clitophon seemingly ignores the ending of the myth, where Daphne loses her life as a human and Apollo does not manage to fulfil his desires. As such, Clitophon's reinterpretation of the myth is unsuccessful on two levels, since it is not only a distortedly romantic reading of a decidedly unromantic attempted assault, but Clitophon interprets Apollo as a good erotic role model despite Apollo's lack of success in that department. Clitophon's selective reading of a well-known myth, therefore, invites readers to recognise the differences between his interpretation and the other well-known versions of the myth, and drives a wedge between Clitophon's perspective and that of his readers.[25]

These novels, therefore, actively invite us to theorise how we read them and how we approach them as fictional texts. When we look at how the novels themselves consider the question of reading, it becomes clear that they insist upon specific, unique approaches to their own fictions rather than a universal model of reading which can be applied to all novels across all cultures and time periods. Rather than seeing fiction as just a naturalised necessity of the novelistic genre, here we see a much more active engagement with fiction and a much more conscious exploration of fictional narrative.

Photius' *Bibliotheca*

But how do later readers respond to these cues? While the evidence for ancient readers, let alone readers who theorise their engagement with the novels, is thin, what exists is revealing. A key figure in the history of the novel is the ninth-century writer Photius, a patriarch of Constantinople who, in addition to theological and lexical works, is a key literary critic of the Byzantine era. In

[25] For further analysis see De Temmerman 2014: 171-173 with further bibliography.

his *Bibliotheca*, written supposedly as a kind of reading journal for his brother Tarasius who was left behind in Constantinople when Photius went on an embassy to the Assyrians, Photius mentions reading a number of novels, and in each codex, or individual entry devoted to a text, gives short descriptions of them along with stylistic criticism and occasionally biographical anecdotes.[26] In particular, Photius states that he read the novels of Achilles Tatius and Heliodorus, and also includes the now-lost novels of Antonius Diogenes' *The Wonders Beyond Thule* and Iamblichus' *Babyloniaka*, both of which exist only in a few fragments outside of Photius' lengthy summaries.[27] Photius provides perhaps the clearest evidence we have for the novel as a genre in antiquity, as he explicitly compares the different novels to each other in ways which suggest that he saw them in a tradition. For example, when discussing the now-lost novel of Iamblichus, Photius compares it explicitly to the novels of Heliodorus and Achilles Tatius, saying that they all have the same goals for their respective works, as discussed above. In addition, much has been made of the fact that Photius describes the *Babyloniaka* as a δραματικόν, because he also uses the same work to describe Achilles Tatius and Heliodorus' texts.[28] As such, it has been argued that this is the closest thing found in postclassical Greek to an equivalent for novel as a generic term.[29]

Yet, Photius' analysis is revealing as much for what it omits as for what it includes. Photius does not mention the work of Chariton, Longus, or Xenophon, which are cited in modern scholarship as canonical works of the genre, while the fragmentary novels of Iamblichus and Antonius Diogenes are rarely included in such analyses (Morales 2009). Moreover, while he does describe the novels he includes as δραματικά, he also uses this term elsewhere in the *Bibliotheca* to describe Christian polemics and rhetorical speeches.[30] There, it seems to refer to the theatrical or unexpected nature of their narratives, and thus might be more of an adjectival use rather than a collective term. Indeed, if Photius does recognise the novels as a genre, it is not an exclusive one, as his discussion of the now-lost novel *The Wonders Beyond Thule* shows (*Bibl.* 111b32-7, codex 166):[31]

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[26] The best introductions to the *Bibliotheca* remain Treadgold 1980 and Wilson 1994: 1-22.

[27] These are printed in Stephens & Winkler 1995 alongside the other fragments and testimonia to each respective novel.

[28] *Bibl.* 50a7 (codex 73, referring to Heliodorus' *Aithiopika*), 66a16 (codex 87 on Achilles Tatius), 73b24 (codex 94, Iamblichus' *Babyloniaka*), 109a7 (codex 166, Antonius Diogenes' *The Wonders Beyond Thule*).

[29] See the judicious and wide-ranging survey of terminology in Morgan 1993: 187-193.

[30] For example, *Bibl*. 78b22 (codex 95, John Scythopolita Against Schismatics): τὸ δὲ σύγγραμμα δραματικὸν ποιεῖται ("the work is dramatic in character"). See also *Bibl*. 367b34 (codex 243, Himerius, *Declamations*), which likely quotes directly from the original text.

[31] Text from Henry 1960.

> ἔστι δ', ὡς ἔοικεν, οὗτος χρόνῳ πρεσβύτερος τῶν τὰ τοιαῦτα ἐσπουδακότων διαπλάσαι, οἷον Λουκιανοῦ, Λουκίου, Ἰαμβλίχου, Ἀχιλλέως Τατίου, Ἡλιοδώρου τε καὶ Δαμασκίου. καὶ γὰρ τοῦ περὶ ἀληθῶν διηγημάτων Λουκιανοῦ καὶ τοῦ περὶ μεταμορφώσεων Λουκίου πηγὴ καὶ ῥίζα ἔοικεν εἶναι τοῦτο.
>
> [Antonius Diogenes] is seemingly chronologically senior to the others who devoted themselves to inventing such stories, for example Lucian, Lucius, Iamblichus, Achilles Tatius, Heliodorus, and Damascius, and this work also seems to be the source and root of Lucian's *True Stories* and of Lucius' *Metamorphoses*.

Photius goes on to describe how the protagonists of *The Wonders Beyond Thule* provide a template for the novels of Iamblichus, Achilles Tatius, and Heliodorus, in particular their travels, love-affairs, imprisonment, and perils (111b39-41). This could be seen as evidence of Photius' awareness of the ancient novels as a genre, since he links the canonical novels discussed in the *Bibliotheca* according to their themes, plots, and chronology (Bianchi 2018). Yet, in addition to the canonical novels discussed in the *Bibliotheca* Photius includes Lucius of Patrae's *Metamorphoses*, often believed to the source material for the Roman novel by Apuleius, Lucian's *True Histories*, sometimes called the first science fiction story, and Damascius, who Photius describes as the author of works like *On Unbelievable Things* (codex 130). The connection here seems to be credibility, or lack thereof, which would be particularly appropriate in a codex devoted to a work entitled *The Unbelievable Things Beyond Thule*. But Damascius' works have never been seriously entertained within the canon of the ancient novel, and seem from Photius' descriptions to have been a miscellany of tales rather than a continuous narrative, undermining one of the most basic precepts of modern understandings of the novel. If Photius understands the ancient novel as a genre, therefore, it is seemingly not the same as modern perceptions of the term.

Rather than seeing the novel as a fixed genre, therefore, Photius' descriptions suggest a much more fluid understanding of these texts as fictional narratives, broadly defined. But novels make up only a small part of the *Bibliotheca*, which includes entries for 280 books, covering a wide variety of genres, time periods, and topics, balancing Christian and pagan texts, theology and rhetoric, historiography and fiction, seemingly without clear ordering principles (Treadgold 1980: especially 80-110). If for modern readers novels are the primary mode through which they encounter written fictional narratives, Photius' refusal to segregate novels from a wider variety of texts implies that for him, novels cannot be seen simply through a simple dichotomy of fiction and non-fiction, and instead should be contextualised within a wider literary milieu. In other words, Photius' *Bibliotheca* constructs another way of under-

standing the novel as genre, much as Amyot, Huet, and modern readers have done, and reinterprets these ancient texts according to his own interests and priorities. Rather than reinforcing a continuous, teleological tradition of the novel, Photius, just like Amyot, Huet, and modern readers, constructs the novel according to his own context and priorities as a reader. In other words, rather than testifying to the coherence of the genre in antiquity or Byzantium, Photius' approach to the novel reveals more about him as a reader and his cultural context than it does about the novelistic texts themselves.

Conclusions

This article has aimed to explore some of the wider issues inherent in the definition of the ancient novels as a genre, and how this affects our understanding of their early readers. By acknowledging the limitations of this terminology and the assumptions it imports from modern contexts, it becomes possible to better see how later readers comprehend and even construct these fictional texts according to their own priorities and cultural frameworks. And yet, as the continued use of the term novel throughout this paper makes clear, the difficulties of terminology are not easily surmounted. While it is tempting to follow Clara Reeve and draw a distinction between modern novels and ancient romances, such attempts at definition raise more problems than they solve. As this survey of the novels and their reception history aimed to show, any attempt at understanding the ancient novel is always shaped by the contemporary perspective of the reader, and any attempt to draw a firm distinction between the two risks occluding the symbiotic and interconnected history between them. Rather than renaming the novel, therefore, this paper has aimed to show how a clear-eyed understanding of the history and methodological complexities of the novel's history allows for a more nuanced understanding of both ancient and modern readers of novelistic fiction.

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