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Theatrical Background in Xenophon's *Ephesiaca*

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Abstract

Xenophon of Ephesus is normally considered a less cultivated writer in comparison to other authors of Greek love novels. Nevertheless, in *Ephesiaca* many references to Ancient tragedy are to be found, as well as to other theatrical performances. This paper studies the dramatic background of the novel and the literary context in which it was written.

Keywords: Greek Novel, Tragedy, Mime, Xenophon of Ephesus

Scholars usually point out the quotations of Greek tragic authors in Chariton and Heliodorus, and even in Achilles Tatius, whereas Xenophon of Ephesus is normally overlooked, because he is considered a less cultivated writer, and even called more popular. Intertextuality is not a significant matter in the *Ephesiaca*, if we look for literal quotations of previous writers or *ars allusiva*, and if there are any to be found, they refer mainly to Chariton's *Chaereas and Callirrhoe*, a much more complex and intricate piece of narrative. Xenophon's *Ephesiaca* is sometimes considered a low and cheap imitation of his model[1].

But was the author of *Ephesiaca* really a less educated writer than his colleagues? Does the stylistic gap which separates Xenophon's novel from previous and later Greek love novels mean that he paid no attention to literary tradition? It has been asserted that this romance has an oral background and that folklore motifs are more obvious here than in other authors, where eru-

1. Discussion in Hägg 1966 and Brioso 2000. Although the date of these novels are controversial, I assume that Xenophon's text is written after Chariton's, see Bowie 2003, 10.

dite quotations are far more evident[2]. This is quite obvious at first reading, but what should we understand by oral background and folklore motifs, and are they truly separate from written tradition? Has the Greek tradition of drama nothing to do with this background? The aim of this paper is to propose an answer to these questions.

The great number of folklore motifs not only in the *Ephesiaca* but in almost all novels has already been thoroughly and convincingly discussed, especially in C. Ruiz Montero's works, where she suggests both a rhetorical and a popular or folkloric aspect in the same texts[3]. But where does the folkloric material mainly come from? If an oral background is to be seen in this novel in particular, because of its style, formulaic sentences, episodic construction and lack of complex syntax, does it mean that the source for this material is not connected to a literary tradition?

Folklore motifs have very usefully been classified by Stith-Thompson *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, reduced to minimal units and conveniently stored for scholars to make use of whenever the need arises to interpret a text. Nevertheless, a certain popular approach, which not all scholars are able to resist, tends to identify folkloric motifs only with illiteracy or storytelling among uncultivated population, as if the literary tradition of a society and the oral tales transmitted in the closed circles of family and child rising (*Haus- und Ammesmärchen*, to put it in the well-known words of the most famous storytellers, the brothers Grimm) had nothing to do with each other or, in a more academic way, as if folklore only belonged to orality. This is not exactly true. The interaction between literary texts and fairy tales has already been established, as has the reception of Latin texts on medieval and modern tales[4]. A folkloric motif, however useful it may be for structuralism, never exists as such, in a pure or isolated form, but in a context and a definite performance, either oral inside a story which, once told, disappears for posterity, or in a written account which may reach our times.

There are certainly many folkloric motifs in Xenophon's *Ephesiaca*, starting with the quest for the beloved. But many of them can also be found in drama and especially in tragedy, which constitutes one of the pillars of literary cultivated transmission of knowledge, what we call *paideia*. Among all tragic writers, Euripides was the most read and the most quoted in the Imperial period and later. Quotations of his work are to be found in almost all Greek novels, in a more or less faithful way. In the *Ephesiaca*, the memory of Euripidean plays is widespread[5]. Greek tragedy deals with myths, that is, with traditional material concerning heroes and gods, whereas novels do not treat

2. Ruiz Montero 2006, 52.
3. Ruiz Montero 2006, 37.
4. Zipes 2006a 2-11; Zipes 2006b, 3; Hogstad 2011, 2; Kemptner 2009, 35-50; Bottigheimer 2010, 480-482.
5. Unfortunately, when writing this paper for publication, I had not been able to get full access to the recently published book of A. Tagliabue 2017. His approach from "thematic intertextuality", pp 6-7. applied to this novel, sounds highly promising.

myth, but create narratives of ordinary men and women, and love and travels, in what has sometimes been called a "bourgeois" narrative or an escape from ordinary life[6]. Tragedy, some centuries after its creation, becomes a part of Greek *paideia* and may belong to the literary background of authors writing in a very different context[7].

As for Euripides, there are three tragedies in particular which deserve mentioning on behalf of Xenophon, *Hippolytus*, *Electra* and *Helen*, and some others which may also be considered, *Medea* and the fragmentary *Andromeda*[8]. At the beginning of the book, Habrocomes refuses all kinds of love, which is embodied in a very particular divinity, Eros. His reported words against the god[9] are full of strength and decision, and certainly of young imprudence. He swears never to fall in Eros' traps, at least μὴ θέλων. It is possible to think of Hippolytus' beginning and the rejection of Aphrodite in favour of the chaste Artemis[10].

But Habrocomes, who predictably falls desperately in love some pages later, keeps nevertheless a faithful attachment to Anthia, who has a strong likeness to Artemis. Habrocomes once abhorred any kind of relationship with any other woman, and in the course of the novel he says that he won't cause any harm to Anthia ἔκων[11]. The similarity of this statement to stoic philosophy has been pointed out[12], but certainly this ἔκων echoes the μὴ θέλων of his first speech.

It has been rightly stressed[13] that the proper subject of this novel is faithfulness and chastity, more than the pursuit of love. Lovers are married at the very beginning of the novel and the plot deals mainly with their capability of sustaining a faithful union even when they are separated by destiny[14]. They are reunited at the end, as should happen in any happy end, and Greek novels certainly do have a happy end, but the plot of the novel puts a higher stress on the assaults against the chastity and faithfulness of both characters rather than on their separation. Habrocomes is consecrated to Anthia at the beginning of the story, and this consecration will last for the rest of the tale, just as Hippolytus consecrates his worship to Artemis at the beginning of the tragedy and remains faithful to her until the end — a very

6. Ruiz Montero 1996, 52; 2006, 30; Holzberg 2005, 35. See a broad discussion on approaches to the novel in Whitmarsh 2011, 7-12.
7. Létoublon 2014, 353; Ruiz Montero 1996, 52-3. As for the literary tradition, see Fusillo 1996, 278.
8. On the relationship between Euripides and the Greek novel, see the very useful chapter «Matrici, modelli, riscritture» in Fusillo 1989 especially pp. 40-42.
9. Xen. Eph. 1.1.4-6.
10. Eur. *Hipp.* 73-113. See the mythological tradition in Cueva 2004, 35-43.
11. Xen. Eph. 2.4.4.
12. Miralles 1967, 55.
13. Schmeling 1980, 116; Ruiz Montero 2006, 102; and for a comparison between Anthia and Penelope, as faithful wives confronted by dangerous suitors, see Zanetto 2014, 403-404.
14. On Love in this work, see the very useful papers of Bierl 2006, 85-92, Tagliabue 2012, 37-38 and Konstan 1994.

different end, however. But Anthia is not an ordinary woman. After introducing Habrocomes, Xenophon describes Anthia with the features that myth attributes normally to Artemis: a short chiton, a fur cape around her shoulders, a bow and arrows, and to stress the point, the author explains that the Ephesians had many times adored her as if she was the goddess herself or at least a work of the divinity (1.2.6-7). A reader of the novel might think of Hippolytus faithfulness to Artemis when reading of Habrocomes love for the Artemis-like Anthia, causing him to be chaste and devoted to her through the novel.

One of her misfortunes brings Anthia to Egypt, where she asks for the favour of the goddess Isis and her protection. In the Imperial period, Isis was often identified with Artemis, and she was worshipped in Ephesus some centuries before the writing of the novel[15]. At a certain moment of the plot, Anthia pretends to be consecrated to Isis, a trick which allows her to delay an unwanted marriage, and in fact she could easily have been a servant of the goddess, if she had led a normal life in Ephesus. The divine protection of Isis and Anthia's devotion to her are real divine intervention in the plot[16], allowing the lovers to meet again at the end, when Eros is no longer *philoneikos*, a curious adjective for such a god. As in every Greek novel, Eros is supposed to play an important role, but he acts as an avenger of Habrocomes' contempt towards him, playing the part of Aphrodite with Hippolytus, and being the cause of all misfortunes for the young lovers.

The first vengeance of Eros is love-sickness, suffered by both main characters at the very beginning of the text. The sickness caused by love is a recurrent theme in literature, very obvious in Greek tradition, where we can find it as early as Sappho, but if the first discourse of the hero reminded us strongly of the religious statements of Hippolytus, the description of the sickness of the lovers-to-be reminds us strongly of Phaedra's illness.

Through the entire novel there is a tension between Greek and barbarian: as in other novels, the names of most characters are *nomina parlantia*, but one name deserves a closer look. One of the pirates is called Apsyrtos, who, in Greek myth, is the brother of the most famous barbarian woman, Medea, whose shadow as a powerful and dreadful avenger will loom over the barbarians of Xenophon's story. There are no other textual references to Medea except the brother's name, but the opposition between different barbarian women and Greek, therefore chaste and civilised, Anthia, is a constant in the story[17]. Foreign and barbarian countries, obviously hostile, are opposed to the Greek homeland, whether it is Syracuse or Ephesus or any other civilised polis, and the novel has also been approached by scholarship from the point of view of studies on identity[18].

15. Ruiz Montero 2003, 58.
16. Whitmarsh 2011, 49.
17. Xen. Eph. 1.16.3; 2.4.2; 2.11; 6.5.
18. Whitmarsh 2011, 45-48.

But barbarians can also act appropriately: Anthia is respected by her Syrian husband Perilaos, in a similar way to Euripides' Electra[19], and by her two other suitors, the Indian Psammis and the Egyptian Polyidos. Nevertheless, the reasons are not as noble as in tragedy: Perilaos accepts only a delay of the wedding, artfully machinated by the young girl, and both he and Psammis fear the fury of the divinity, Isis (assimilated to Artemis, therefore the closest divinity to Anthia). It is quite significant of the ambiguity of Anthia's speech during her adventures that barbarians are supposed to be superstitious (the Greek word is *deisidaimonia*), in a case which, if Anthia's consecration to Isis were true, would certainly summon the revenge of the divinity in Greek religion. Barbarians are supposed to be superstitious from the novelist's point of view, but, if they were Greek, maybe Anthia's falsehood would not rely on the same pretext.

Anthia's character retains a lot of the features of Euripides' heroines, although there is no verbal quotation from Euripides. In her struggle to maintain her fidelity to Habrocomes, Anthia decides to kill herself on the day of her wedding to Perilaos, which she has artfully delayed for a certain time. The poisonous philtre is not a mortal one, but simply a sleeping drug provided by the Ephesian doctor[20], a trick conveniently used in Greek narrative to allow misunderstandings, further adventures and final *anagnorisis*. Nevertheless, her *Scheintod* takes her to the tomb, as splendid and luxurious as Callirhoe's in Chariton's novel, and the funeral procession is compared to a bridal procession, where the tomb becomes the bridal chamber[21]. As a woman in danger, Anthia has Electra's initiative and resolution, and intelligence to avoid hostile situations, but she can be also compared to Helen, the most beautiful of women. Not the Homeric Helen, cause of enormous suffering to mankind, but the pious and loyal Euripides' *Helen*, truly faithful to Menelaus although courted by all kinds of suitors, as is Anthia[22]. Special attention should be paid to the Euripidean play *Helen*, since it is not only the main character who is recalled in the faithful Anthia, but also some other minor characters. In line 730, the herald expresses his lowly birth but his free heart (ἐλεύθερος)[23], as does Habrocomes in 2.4.4. He and Anthia, although belonging to the best Ephesian families, are sold as slaves and live an impoverished life till the end. The moral noble condition of slaves, opposed to the ignoble deeds of (barbarian) masters, is to be found everywhere in this novel[24], and Anthia owes a great deal of her success to loyal and clever servants. The similarity to

19. Eur. *El.* 43-44.
20. Xen. Eph. 3.5.11.
21. It may recall Antigone's confinament in a cave, Soph. *Ant.* 891-894. Although there are no real textual affinities with Sophocles, Anthia beholds some of Antigone's bold initiative. For women in Xenophon's novel, see Ruiz Montero 2011.
22. It is especially interesting to point out the character of Theoclymenus the barbarian, in Euripides' *Helen*, from whom the couple has to escape.
23. Eur. *Hel.* 728-731.
24. Xen. Eph. 2.9.2 and 11.8. On the role of slaves in the novel, see Scarcella 1996, 242.

Helen's husband is striking, and almost literal. If the preserved text of Euripides' Andromeda was longer, more similarities could probably be drawn between Perseus' love story and Anthia's own escape trials and faithful attachment to the hero. Both Anthia and Andromeda lament their misfortune in the isolation of their imprisonment[25]. In fact, Andromeda was a very popular play in Hellenistic times[26], and such a love story was not far from the plot of the *Ephesiaca*[27]. It is even possible that Xenophon knew other lost Euripidean plays, such as Alexandros, a part of the Trojan trilogy, where the extant fragments allow us to assume a certain opposition between virtuous slaves or shepherds and base conquerors or masters[28].

However, for the ordinary modern reader, perhaps the most striking similarity to Euripides' Hippolytus are the two episodes of the barbarian women who pursue Habrocomes' love, Manto (2.3-7) and Cyno (4.12). There is a difference between the two. Manto, Apsyrtos' daughter, is a young girl, almost the same age as Anthia (but not as beautiful as she is), deeply in love with Habrocomes, but since she is a barbarian, she acts with lust, violent passion and a jealous avenging drive. The audience can perhaps feel certain sympathy for her, at the very beginning, due to her youth and apparently innocent love (there are no appealing female characters in the story except for Anthia), but she soon reveals herself as what she is supposed to be, a barbarian, an experienced and machinating adult, like Phaedra, or an avenging outsider, like Medea.

The episode works in a somewhat different way from Euripides: Manto, like Phaedra, is not able to restrain her passion for Habrocomes, who at the time is a slave at her home. She does not dare to tell anybody, for fear her father should find out about it. Love-sick like Phaedra, she tells her friend Rhode about it, but swears her to secrecy, as Phaedra does with the nurse. How can Rhode help her? Can we assume that Rhode's help will be similar to Phaedra's nurse's? Is a magical help requested, or a direct intervention? Does the secrecy oath only apply to her duties towards Apsyrtos, her mistress' father? The way Xenophon deals with the question is rather different from Euripides. Rhode breaks it when she tells her partner Leucon everything and confesses that she does not want to speak to Habrocomes because of her friendship towards Anthia. Leucon takes the initiative of telling Habrocomes everything, and therefore Manto's request reaches him through the oral word of a male servant and through two intermediaries, Rhode and Leucon, and in

25. Eur. fr. 115 and 115a Kn. Xen. Eph. 4.5.3 and 6.6; 5.7.2.
26. Wright 2005, 1. The papyrological tradition attest the popularity of Euripides in the Imperial period, cf. Garcia Gual 1983, p. 15.
27. *Helen* and *Andromeda* were probably performed as parts of the same trilogy, in 412. For *Andromeda* among Euripides' plays, see Wright 2005, 43-55. The idea of "escape-tragedies" is particularly interesting in the novel, where the heroin and the hero have to escape from unwanted and often dangerous suitors. For a very useful comparison of Euripides' *Helen* and *Andromeda*, see Bañuls; Morenilla 2008.
28. Eur. *Alex.* fr. 32, fr. 40 and fr. 41 Snell. I would like to thank Dr. Lucía Romero for drawing my attention towards Euripides fragmentary plays.

front of a third person, Anthia. Habrocomes, as expected, rejects it (who would not, in front of one's own wife?), but Manto, who seems not to know about Leucon's initiative and may not trust her friend Rhode, writes a letter to Habrocomes and sends it to him through a slave. The hero keeps the letter in his pocket, which will be crucial for the plot. Everything that in Euripides is expressed orally is here written. A letter, that is, written words, can both transmit truth and untruth, and epistles play an important role in novels[29]. Manto declares her love directly to Habrocomes, even if it is in a written form, which allows her not to be actually in his presence. The author of *Ephesiaca* probably knew the first version of Euripides' Hippolytus, where Phaedra addressed her stepson directly on stage, but he arranged the elements of the story in a different way.

What in Euripides is oral is here written, and the other way around. Phaedra's calumny is written on a tablet and her suicide gives it a semblance of truth. In Xenophon, the accusation is oral, both in Manto's and in Cyno's episode, without any questioning from Apsyrtos or the local authorities in the second case, but the written text of the carefully kept tablet will prove Habrocomes' innocence.

This tale is commonly called the motif of Potiphar's wife[30], in allusion to the passage of Genesis 46. There are some points in common between the two: in Genesis, the innocence of Joseph is not actually proved by any evidence of her calumny, but he is considered to be extremely wise because of his veridical interpretation of dreams while he is in prison. This wisdom earns him the praise of the Pharaoh and the highest honours in court, without any further mentioning of any false accusation. In the *Ephesiaca*, there is the acquittal of Habrocomes due to the discovery by Apsyrtos of the truth (thanks to the well-kept letter) and of Manto's deceit, Habrocomes is not only declared innocent, he also receives many honours and dignities, he who was formerly a slave.

The biblical story owes as much to folklore as Euripides does, and the tale may have been a familiar one at the time[31], but the fact that Hellenistic Judaism might have had an influence on non-Jewish writers cannot easily be disregarded. The Greek translation of the *Septuaginta* was probably known at the time, and there is another Greek narrative which develops in full the continuation of Joseph's fate, as husband of Aseneth. *Joseph and Aseneth*'s novel, written in Greek, is considered to be more or less contemporary with the *Ephesiaca* (although the dates of both works are quite controversial)[32]. Dalmeyda has suggested possible similarities between Aseneth's conversion trials and Anthia's sufferings[33], and, although they don't seem convincing,

29. Hägg 2009.
30. Motif K2111 in Stith-Thompson 1958. See Ruiz Montero 2003, 45.
31. On folktales and ancient greek narrative, see the useful paper of Kim 2013, especially 311-320.
32. Kraemer 1998, 225-244; Humphrey 2000, 28-31; Kytzler 1996, 346.
33. Dalmeyda 1926, 6-37. See also Whitmarsh 2013, 16.

certainly an influence of the biblical tradition or even the Christian one cannot be totally dismissed, especially in the city of Ephesus, with its Jewish and Christian communities at the time the novel was written.

Apart from tragedy, other theatrical references are to be found in Xenophon's novel. As has been noted[34], Greek novel has a lot in common with contemporary performances such as mime. In fact, tragedy was a part of *paideia*, of literary education which we are sure that the author of *Ephesiaca* was well acquainted with, but popular contemporary theatre preferred the vigorous performances of mime, from which some proof has survived. Many features of the *Ephesiaca* may be better understood if we keep mime in sight, as a part of ordinary entertainment and public life.

In the episodes of Manto and Cyno, both barbarian women suggest that the inconvenient partners, Anthia and Cyno's husband, be disposed of, the first one in a milder way (getting rid of Anthia by selling her or sending her away), the second in a harsher way, by killing him. Neither Euripides' Hippolytus nor Biblical Genesis considered how to get rid of the inopportune partner. If the subject already belonged to the folkloric tradition, it did not suit the literary aim of Euripides nor the exemplar story of Genesis, and was consequently left aside. But an Oxyrrinchus papyrus, POxy 413 (Page 77)[35] gives, in a fragmentary way, the evidence of a mime with the same motif of a married woman who makes advances to an unwilling young slave and tries to get rid of her old husband[36]. The woman declares her love to Aesopus the slave, who is in love with Apollonia and consequently rejects his mistress' advances. The lady orders the death of both, and other servants take them away, apparently to fulfil the sentence, but they escape, perhaps with divine help and certainly with the servants' acquiescence or complicity. Apollonia comes back and is sentenced to death; Aesopus is brought on scene, apparently dead. Together with another servant, the woman, grieving for Aesopus, plans her husband's murder. Apollonia is said to be dead (but it is a second *Scheintod*). The old husband, having drunk a non-mortal drug, is also supposed to be dead, which is an obvious falsehood to everybody except his wife. The text, written mostly in prose, is fragmentary and incomplete, but the similarities to the *Ephesiaca* are striking. Not only the treacherous woman reminds us of the character of Cyno, but also the compassion of the servants who do not kill the condemned slaves or the *Scheintod* due to an inoffensive drug appear in Xenophon's novel. Both are undoubtedly folklore motifs, to be found in many tales around the world[37], but nevertheless, together with the theme of the inconvenient love of the mar-

34. Ruiz Montero 2006, 61,70.
35. Page 1970, 350-361. Page edited it with the title "The Adulteress".
36. On mime in the novel, see Webb 2013.
37. Every time has its own *paideia*: reading the passage of Anthia's being spared by the slave who was supposed to kill her, a student of mine exclaimed "it is like in Snow White!" referring not only to Disney's movie but to the more recent film *Snow White and the Huntsman*.

ried woman, they belong to a theatrical context contemporary to the novel, and very familiar to its audience. The rude character of Cyno is closer to the vulgar features of mime than to the delicacy of Phaedra or even the beautiful maid Manto.

Leonardo Lugaresi, in his exhaustive study of spectacle in the first centuries of Christianism[38], points out the interest in tormenting sufferings, fights against beasts or bloody scenes in Roman spectacles. Some of this interest is also to be found in the Ephesiaca, especially in the episode of Anthia and the hounds[39], but also in the tortures endured by Habrocomes.

The novel itself has a strong flavour of theatrical performance. There has been a long thread of scholarship focusing on orality in Xenophon's work, but perhaps some of its supposed inconsistencies or incoherencies could be related to a dramatic point of view rather than to an oral background[40]. A number of monologues, especially by Anthia, have no obvious listener. It is possible to understand them as inner monologues, although the Greek text does not use common words such as ἐννόησας or a similar term for inner thinking, but an expressive ἔφη, as in dialogues. It is true that Xenophon is not very subtle linguistically and sometimes uses terms inconsistently, but there are many unexpected monologues embedded in the narrative in a not very logical way. On the other hand, such sudden expressions of fear or grief would be common on stage, alone in front of an audience, either in a tragic performance or in mime. As Tim Whitmarsh puts it, there is no evidence which allows us to think that romances were actually performed[41], but in our opinion, in the *Ephesiaca* there is a lot of thinking in theatrical terms, as if the author was more concerned with the conditions of a performance, where the audience learns things in advance through the actors' play and direct words, than with the conventions of narrative writing, which demand a finer accuracy to bring the different threads of the plot tightly together.

The rhetorical evidence in the Greek novel has been already stressed[42]. Xenophon was no illiterate author, nor was his audience an uneducated one. There are many possible levels of education in the readers or even listeners of a novel, and Xenophon's *paideia* allows him to entertain educated people who would appreciate his subtle allusions to ancient authors[43] and his more obvious references to contemporary spectacles, as well as people who are not aware of tragedy or educated in classical authors, but can easily think of tales similar to these adventures and are familiar with some of the charac-

38. Lugaresi 2008, 327.
39. This particular passage does not only recall contemporary theatrical performances of blood and beasts, but also other narratives showing a young person facing beasts and escaping them, as in some lives of Saints or martyrdom narratives, especially the story of Thecla.
40. Ruiz Montero 2003.
41. Whitmarsh 2011, 12.
42. Ruiz Montero 2006, 17-38.
43. Bowie 2008, 18.

ters[44]. The author elaborates oral material and folklore motifs, but incorporates an enormous knowledge of Greek authors, not only tragic writers, but also of his contemporaries. Drama, and Euripidean tragedy in particular, is one of the literary sources of this material, available in other forms, which he assembles in an intricate way. Not writing like a sophist would do, he certainly writes as an educated author, developing a narrative full of images and vivid scenes that become almost immediate to the listening or reading audience.

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44. Whitmarsh 2008, 82.

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