

Narrative and Social Space in Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*

Heliodorus' *Aethiopica* is a novel steeped in theater. The famous opening scene at the mouth of the Nile, the mini-Iliad that unfolds around the walls of Memphis, and the recognition scene at the conclusion of the novel showcase Heliodorus' penchant for scenes arranged and described as if staged. While Heliodorus' fondness for spectacle and theater has received much scholarly attention,¹ the implications of Heliodorus' theatrical language for the construction of narrative and social space in the novel have not been addressed. This paper investigates (a) how Heliodorus imagines the narrative space of the novel and delineates boundaries between stories, and (b) how Heliodorus employs descriptions of space in constructing social categories or in depicting the transgression of social categories.

I argue that Heliodorus imagines narrative in spatio-temporal terms as space that can be protected or violated, bounded or open. Knemon prefaces his story about Athens in Book I with language of spatial violation borrowed from Euripides' *Medea* (1.8.7). Later, when Thisbe appears dead in the same cave in which Charikleia is hiding, Charikleia exclaims, 'How can someone suddenly be spirited away by a sort of theatrical special effect (καθάπερ ἐκ μηχανῆς), out of the heart of Greece to the remotest parts of Egypt?' (2.8.3). Thisbe's story is imagined as a stray scene from another play that intrudes upon the stage space of the main narrative. Theagenes describes the need for distinguishing the boundaries between stories after he laments over the dead body of the wrong woman and threatens suicide; he tells Knemon, 'You cannot say that Thisbe has cast a spell on me and my power of sight, for I have no part in your tragedy' (2.11.3). In

¹ Walden (1894), Feuillâtre (1966) 15, Morgan (1991) 85ff., Bartsch (1989) 109ff.

the *Aethiopica*, narrative becomes a play in rehearsal. Both strictly bounded and wildly fluid, subject to the interpolations of readers and readers' digressions, the novel builds and dismantles its own dependence upon the distinction between legitimate and deviant stories.

What are the implications of this imaginative construing of narrative for the representation of social space in the novel? How does Heliodorus employ descriptions of space to construct social categories or to depict the transgression of social categories? Drawing on the theoretical work of Henri Lefebvre and Judith Perkin's application of his work to the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, I argue that the same concerns revealed in the construction of narrative space in the novel bear upon Heliodorus' construction of social space. The novel's primary concern is the preservation of female chastity, which is dramatized in spatial terms by constant, imminent threats of boundary transgression. Since the majority of the action takes place in the borderland of Egypt, where spatial control over the heroine's body is not feasible, theater similes (the beach like a stage) replace unbounded space with literal and imaginary bounded space. Natural elements of Charikleia's environment form walls and towers to contain and protect her, like the water and reeds that surround the home of the Boukoloi, which are compared to a 'palisade,' and a 'secure stronghold' (1.6.1). The *topos* of nature mirroring artifice and artifice mirroring nature recurs in descriptions of caves (1.28-9), cities (Delphi, Memphis, Meroe), and the landscape alongside the Nile (8.14). All of these spaces are described in terms of their *natural* potential for enclosure, seclusion, and preservation. With this strategy, Heliodorus creates the illusion that societal systems of enclosure of the female body are *natural*, and spaces in the novel appear to confirm social law even as they veil

these laws. This paper offers an analysis of discourses of theatrical space and narrative transgression that provide a vantage point from which to view the novel's knotted divagations of geographical and social territory.

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