

Opsis and *Eros*: Platonic Love in the Ancient Novel

Brief Summary:

This paper explores the erotic response to beauty and examines the *locus classicus* of Plato's *Phaedrus* as a basis for the scenes of love-at-first-sight in Greek novels with especial application to the narratives of Heliodorus and to Achilles Tatius.

Abstract Body:

The motif of love-at-first-sight is a standard feature of the ancient novel. The sight of and desire for the beloved is a phenomenon that evokes the language of sickness and madness and represents a total psychic disorientation manifested in physical symptoms. While the motif receives formulaic treatment at the hands of Chariton and Xenophon of Ephesus, Heliodorus in *Aethiopica* most explicitly makes clear the Platonic roots of the novel's conjoining of *opsis* and *eros*. In Book 3.5 where the two lovers in the same moment experience sight and love ("*heoron kai eron*") the author recalls also the philosopher's doctrine of the soul's pre-existent state as well as its recollection (*anamnesis*) of divine beauty. We have here what Nicholson calls "the primordial seeing of beauty in advance of our experience . . . [which] perseveres in the form of an unconscious memory." Present too are the physical manifestations in the face of the encounter with beauty as the two lovers, notably symmetrical in contrast to Plato's seeing subject (*erastes*) and seen object (*eromenos*), share simultaneously the vision of beauty and thus experience the total disorientation of their perceptions, speech, and bodily control—phenomena familiar to every reader of *Phaedrus* 251ff with its description of mystic awe and physical shock. Plato's notions of *opsis* and *eros* are employed by Heliodorus for spiritual theme, and indeed of all the novels *Aethiopica* may be read as a *Mysterientext* grounded in Plato's theory of the soul. In contrast to Heliodorus, Achilles Tatius, as H. Morales points out, shows clear awareness of Platonic *opsis* and *eros*, but this time in a work that suggests the cynical deconstruction of the Socratic ideal of *sophrosyne*.

Key Citations:

Ferrari, G.R.F. 1987. *Listening to the Cicadas. A Study of Plato's Phaedrus*.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Morales, H. 2004 *Vision and Narrative in Achilles Tatius' Leucippe and Clitophon*.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nicholson, G. 1999. *Plato's Phaedrus. The Philosophy of Love*. West Lafayette:

Purdue University Press.