

## Speech Acts and Genre Games in the *Protagoras Romance*

In a brilliant article almost twenty years ago, Klaus Alpers demonstrated that citations surviving only in the 9<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine *Etymologicum Genuinum* likely had a single source, a work of prose fiction then still extant still (Alpers 1996). Alpers surmised the work stemmed from the second century AD and represented the style and Atticistic interests of the Second Sophistic. He also reconstructed a very bare-bones plot involving the travels and loves of a central figure, probably the Protagoras addressed in his fragment 1 (hence dubbing the source the *Protagoras Romance*). Where Kock, Meinecke, and others had tried to discern fragments of Greek comedy beneath these unmetrical passages dealing with matters of erotic as well as daily life, Alpers saw affinities between this work and Petronius rather than the typical Greek romances. Alpers promised a fuller edition, but none has appeared.

Close analysis of speech acts and dramatic settings in these fragments demonstrates more games with their generic connections than Alpers noted. While themes of travel and erotic adventure do connect this lost work to the standard Greek novels, other elements suggest a deliberately playful reworking of material from the comic stage (engaging with a somewhat more elevated literary level than Petronius's games with mime).

Three geographic citations allow us to "triangulate" the action (per Alpers' title) between "Athens, Abdera and Samos." Fragments 14 and 1 show that the action played itself out in the eastern Mediterranean, on a smaller scale than the wide-ranging journeys of *Chaireas and Callirhoe* or *The Ephesian Story*, yet significantly larger than the Lesbian adventures of Longus's *Daphis and Chloe*. The dating by the Athenian month of Skirophorion anchors the story in Athens, in the days of the democracy (and note a direct reference to τὴν δημοκρατίαν in fr. 20).

Alpers suggested these passages came from letters embedded within the whole of the romance text. One certainly does, but another could be a first person narrator's introduction of his story, such as we find at the beginning of the *Ephesian Story*. Fr. 15 may also be from a letter, but the form suggests a missive travelling a much shorter distance, in a short span of time. Is this a lover reproaching a beloved for repeated assignations, repeatedly unkept?

Fr. 18, the one clear passage of dialogue, lacks obvious novelistic parallels, yet plays variations on comic dialogue. It suggests, not a returning traveler such as is familiar on the stage of New Comedy, but a traveler abroad reporting to another events back home. The situation is thus both more exotic than the world of comedy, yet more domesticated than the standard novel, Greek or Roman.

Several other fragments list items and incidents that at first sound comic, but do not fit easily into the story patterns of stage comedy, and thus suggest new novelistic variations. A list of comestibles in fr. 5 sounds less like party provisions in comedy (which tend toward meat and fish) than perhaps a cargo manifest of luxury sweets for trade---closer to the world of comedy than the novel, but with a twist. Father-son tensions (fr. 25) and country-city contrasts (fr. 32) appear, but the latter fragment also lists numbers of horse transport ships, triremes, and triaconters, clear historical and heroic elements. References to facial make-up and kottabos (fr. 24) suggest a symposiastic and perhaps erotic context for some of the story as well. Yet love is certainly treated in a more comic fashion than in the ideal romances. A first-person speaker in fr. 33 tells us, "My heart sizzled like in a frying pan and my body melted and the tears ran down my cheeks of their own accord." The culinary image of the frying heart would indeed be worthy of Petronius. Re melting flesh---specific reminisce of either Heracles or Creon's daughter?

While the promise of plot reconstruction remains limited, a careful reading of the surviving fragments of the *Protagoras Romance* suggests it offered new possibilities for comic style and tone previously unattested by surviving ancient Greek prose fiction.

#### Reference

Klaus Alpers, "Zwischen Athen, Abdera und Samos. Fragmente eines unbekanntes Romans aus der Zeit der Zweiten Sophistik," in Margarethe Billerbeck and Jacques Schamp [eds.], *Kainotomia: die Erneuerung der griechischen Tradition / Le renouvellement de la tradition hellénique*. Colloquium Pavlos Tsermias (4. XI. 1995) [Freiburg: Universitätsverlag Freiburg Schweiz, 1996].