

Intersectionality of Female Sexuality, Desire, and Ethnicity in Heliodorus' *Aithiopika*

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines intersectionality as “the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.” The term intersectionality was coined in the late 1980s, but the central idea of the term has been discussed among marginalized people in the Civil Rights movement and the Chicano Movement of the 1960s. As the field of classical studies continues to detangle itself from systems of oppression which have historically centered white, Western men, intersectional analysis offers a provocative new methodology for the study of women, people of color, and queer culture of antiquity, all of which are prominent themes in Heliodorus' *Aithiopika*. Although the *Aithiopika* has lately attracted scholars seeking to study Heliodorus' treatment of women, race, and female sexuality independently from each other, this paper contends that using an intersectional approach to interrogate female characters of color and their different sexualities provides new insights into the societal subversion which Heliodorus was attempting in this novel. I contend this novel is a philosophical experiment for Heliodorus, an imagined world where systems of oppression are subverted through the empowerment of those who are marginalized in society, mainly female characters of color, some of whom are queer. I argue that Heliodorus does not intend to ignore the harsh realities of marginalized people through his creation of an idealized society exempt of systems of oppression, but rather attempts to make room for marginalized people in the literary canon.

The *Aithiopika* initially presents itself as a typical Greek traveller's novel, but soon unfolds into a examination of the hierarchical structure and systems of oppression in Greco-Roman imperial society. The novel is set during the Hellenistic period between the fourth or

third century BCE, but was written most likely in the third century CE. Heliodorus begins his critical examination of Greco-Roman society by subverting many of the traditional aspects of a Greek traveller's novel. Firstly, the novel centers a multi-ethnic African heroine, Charikleia, who journeys home to Ethiopia after a childhood spent in Delphi. In the course of her journey, Charikleia learns the story of her conception, which I argue speaks to the intersectional nature of the novel, recognizing queer women of color. Persinna, the queen of Ethiopia, conceives Charikleia while having intercourse with her husband, but she insists it is her queer fantasies with Andromeda, who has sprung from a painting on the bedroom wall, which ultimately impregnates Persinna. Andromeda's influence is attested in Charikleia herself, who is nearly identical to the mythological woman also of Ethiopian heritage. In this conception story, Persinna is not only allowed to diminish her unfruitful marriage in favor of a queer relationship, but she is in fact rewarded for this subversion with a child. The conception story is revealed in a letter written by Persinna to Charikleia. Through this characterization, Heliodorus crafts Persinna with ultimate agency, over her actions and over the delivery of her story. Heliodorus subverts the patriarchal, ethnocentric, and heteronormative literary traditions of his time, choosing instead to empower multi-ethnic, queer women. The conception story is just one of many examples that demonstrates how intersectional readings of Heliodorus' *Aithiopika* can render new meaning from the ancient novel.