

Subverting Sexual Symmetry: Reading Power and Gender in the Didactic Patterns
of *Callirhoe* and the *Ephesiaca*

As *Chaereas and Callirhoe* draws to a close, Callirhoe writes letters to her second husband which she intentionally conceals from her first and last husband. In the ending of the *Ephesiaca*, Anthia enacts similar subversive behaviors, conducting an Odyssean test of her spouse and expressing verbal and physical dominance over him. Publically, both women return to conventional marriages, but privately, these unconventional expressions of gender and inverted power dynamics remain even in the very last sentences of both novels. While much *Callirhoe* attention, especially in feminist readings, has been paid to elements of its ending which subvert convention, similar aspects of the *Ephesiaca* have received little comment, likely due to its (presumed) lesser literary quality. In this paper, by comparing passages in *Callirhoe* and the *Ephesiaca* which highlight their similar structures and manipulation of the reader's expectations, I argue that the *Ephesiaca*, rather than providing a pale imitation of *Callirhoe*, offers an equally nuanced commentary on gender and power which teaches its readers that subversive behaviors function in conventional society.

Despite a rapid increase in appreciation for most ancient Greek novels, recent discussions of the *Ephesiaca* continue lean on previous assumptions about its simple structure, happy ending, and reinforcement of conventional gender roles. Tim Whitmarsh (2011), for example, argues that the hero and heroine progress toward "adult identity in the *polis*," thereby upholding the conventional social framework established at the beginning of the novel (16). Aldo Tagliabue (2017) also reads the *Ephesiaca* as moving toward a happy ending where the protagonists achieve a mature and mutual love (120-21). Although some scholars such as Steve Nimis (1999) note the lack of resolution, the "open-endedness" of the *Ephesiaca*, readings like this focus

on the structure itself as open-ended, not the structures of gender and power in the protagonists' relationship (223). But as David Konstan (2002) rightly notes, the *Ephesiaca*, of all the novels, strays the furthest from an ending where "the traditional structures of male authority are typically reasserted" (9). So far, discussions of the *Ephesiaca* seem split between considering its structure and its portrayal of gender and power, but the two work together to subvert convention and readers' expectations. As Katharine Haynes (2003) observes, the liminal and dangerous space at the center of the ancient Greek novels, including the *Ephesiaca*, creates a setting ideal for exercising female authority (37). I suggest that such a setting is not limited to the middle of the novel; readers never see the protagonists fully return to traditional gendered power dynamics, even in the conventional societies at the end of the novel. Therefore, the differences between the novel's expected ending – its closure – and the actual ending – its close – function didactically. They teach the reader that subversive expressions of gender function not only in the lawless space of adventure but also within conventional society.

To demonstrate the didactic and subversive structure of the *Ephesiaca*, I conduct a comparative close reading of the beginning and end of both the *Ephesiaca* and *Callirhoe*. I identify patterns of repeated words and themes at the private level – sight and vision in the *Ephesiaca*, breath and voice in *Callirhoe* – and public level – rituals such as worship, marriage, and festival. While the patterns at the private level remain subversive to the very end of both novels (e.g. Callirhoe's voice commanding armies and Anthia taking ownership of Habrocomes' eyes), patterns of correct rituals create the appearance of convention at the public level. These disconnects between beginning and end, public and private in both novels prompt the observant reader to make meaning from their thwarted expectations. Through this

comparative reading, I demonstrate that the *Ephesiaca*, like *Callirhoe* and the other novels, offers a sophisticated, complex commentary on gendered power dynamics.

Bibliography

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