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THE GREEK ROMANCE AND WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

by Martha Latimer Adams

Between the Greek romances and the plays of William Shakespeare stand the barriers of time and the requirements of the disparate gêne, as well as the admixtures of the Italian novella, the courtly-love literature, the travel literature, and countless other tributaries which arose in the springs of entertainment and flowed into the broad river of English literature. Despite the presence of these intervening, powerful elements, the confluence of Elizabethan drama contains—in a pure state—certain surviving qualities of the Greek romance, germ ideas which appear in disentangled clarity in Shakespeare’s dramas: the depiction of romantic love in Romeo and Juliet and Antony and Cleopatra is essentially a refinement of the same concept which appears in Aethiopica, Clitophon and Leucippe, and Daphnis and Chloe; and the circumstances and the tone of the relationships between Helena and Bertram in All’s Well that Ends Well, Hero and Claudio in Much Ado About Nothing, and Mariana and Angelo in Measure for Measure adumbrate a dominant factor in the Greek romance—the superior character of the heroine.

The matter of Shakespeare’s sources has been meticulously investigated and does not fall within the limits of this study; what is involved here is the reappearance in Shakespeare’s work of two of the significant characteristics of the Greek romance, notably the revival—after an hiatus of more than one thousand years (during which there were only occasional flashes of the theme)—of the concept of romantic love as it is established within the Greek romance.

Alfred Croiset’s definition of the Greek romance as a “sketch of a developing love sentiment”¹ properly emphasizes the definitive

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element of a loosely tied heap of glittering novelties; the quality which rescues the Greek romance from mediocrity, according to E. H. Haight, is “its great central theme: that there is such a thing as true love; that weighed in the balance against it all the world is nothing; and that it outlives time and even death.” This comment is equally apropos of Shakespeare’s portrait of the love between Romeo and Juliet and—even more powerfully painted—between Antony and Cleopatra.

The three Greek romances which are central to this study (Aethiopica, Daphnis and Chloe, and Clitophon and Leucippe) were written in the second or third centuries after Christ, known in England before 1590, and exhibit the imprimatur of Alexandria as well as the symptoms of the decadent civilization of Greece. Although the tone of the Greek romance is salacious, the love in the Greek romance is a true love: constant, faithful, sacrificial, and enduring.

S. L. Wolff points out that the hero of the Callisthenes-and-Calligone novella (which is embedded in Clitophon and Leucippe) is ennobled in character by love and suggests that this is the “first occurrence in literature of the motif of transformation of character by love.” Such transformations contribute inestimable richness to Shakespeare’s dramas: Romeo, who sheds the gay embroidery of a Chaucerian squire and becomes purposive; Benedict (Much Ado About Nothing), who swings his position on courtship and marriage through one hundred and eighty degrees; King Ferdinand, Biron, Longaville, and Dumain (Love’s Labour’s Lost), who drastically reverse their attitudes toward women; Florizel (The Winter’s Tale), who deserts the court for a shepherd’s cottage; and Ferdinand (The Tempest), who becomes a “patient logman” for Miranda’s sake.

Shakespeare’s intensified portraits of romantic love, however, appear in Romeo and Juliet and Antony and Cleopatra. The love which surmounts massive obstacles of birth and politics and defies

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3 Ibid., p. 12.
death is the concept which vitalizes the Greek romance; this concept soars to an apogee in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Although the Greek romances end "happily," such endings are produced through violent wrenchings of probability, and near-tragic episodes (in *Aethiopica* and *Clitophon and Leucippe*) foreshadow dramatic climaxes in Shakespeare's tragedies. In *Aethiopica*, when Theagenes discovers a body which he believes to be that of his beloved Chariclea, he throws himself upon the body and holds it in his arms. Then Theagenes, in a lamentation which parallels a later one by Romeo, solemnly vows: "O Chariclea, hear me; thou hast a faithful lover and shalt erelong recover me again, for I will out of hand with my own death perform a deadly sacrifice to thee, with mine own blood will I offer a friendly offering to thee, and this den shall be a hasty sepulchre for us both." ⁵ And Theagenes is only prevented from suicide by Cnemon's revelation that the body belongs to Thisbe, not Chariclea. Later Chariclea, herself, pleads guilty to a false charge of murder in the hope that she and her imprisoned lover might die together. Both are saved through a miracle, but their determination to die for love never falters.

In *Clitophon and Leucippe*, Clitophon watches helplessly as kidnappers disembowel Leucippe and crosses—as soon as possible—to her coffin where he intends to kill himself. But just as Clitophon, weapon poised, cries, "Now receive from me thy fitting libation," ⁶ friends open the coffin and Leucippe emerges unharmed; she had deceived the kidnappers by use of a sheepskin full of animal entrails which happened to be handy. Underneath the melodramatic excesses, however, the clear intent of Clitophon shines through; he prefers death to life without Leucippe.

Both Theagenes and Clitophon could have spoken Antony’s lines: "I will o’re-take thee Cleopatra, and/Weepe for my pardon"

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⁶ Wolff, *Elizabethan Prose Fiction*, p. 61, citing *Clitophon and Leucippe*.
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(IV.14.55-56). Antony's subsequent death-bed/lover's-bed metaphor is one of Shakespeare's most powerful compressions of Greek romance material:

But I will bee
A Bride-groome in my death, and run into't
As to a Lover's bed.

(IV.14.119-121)

Cleopatra's lament, furthermore, collects the poignant echoes of her counterparts (Chariclea and Leucippe):

Noblest of men, woo't dye?
Hast thou no care of me? shall I abide
In this dull world, which in thy absence is
No better then a Stye? Oh see my women:
The Crowne o'th'earth doth melt. . .

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The oddes is gone,
And there is nothing left remarkeable
Beneath the visiting Moone.

(IV.15.76-85)

In Daphnis and Chloe, a true pastoral romance, the lover's vicissitudes are obstacles of birth and powerful, but unrecognized, sexual drives. The young lovers grow up together in the forests of Lesbos, where both are raised by humble, loving "parents." The obstacle of birth is introduced with the revelation that Daphnis is actually the son of a noble lord and lady, who—because they were young, heedless, and had more children than they felt that they needed—exposed the infant, who was rescued by a goatherd and raised as his son. This obstacle is removed later through the revelation that Chloe, too, is the child of noble parents, has also been

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exposed, rescued by a shepherd, etc. The harrowing circumstance of the incomprehensible (to Daphnis and Chloe) demands of physical love is conquered in successive stages: through the instruction of a praecceptor amoris to both, through a demonstration by a city woman to Daphnis, and finally through a rustic wedding. In their youth, their strong, mutual physical attraction, and their artless, open expressions of love, Daphnis and Chloe foreshadow Romeo and Juliet.

After Chloe and Daphnis make their first vows of eternal love, Chloe requires of Daphnis a second oath, for she comments that “Pan, . . . by whom you swore, is a fickle lover, on whom one can place no reliance. . . . He who breaks his own vows will but laugh if you betray your faith to me. . . . Come, my dear Daphnis, you must swear . . . that, whilst Chloe is faithful to you, you will never desert her.”

Chloe is no longer considered to be a suitable choice for a wife after Daphnis’ true parentage is revealed, and—although the circumstances are not precisely analogous—their expressions of grief, loss, and faithful love are congers of later expressions by Romeo and Juliet. Chloe weeps and speculates: “Daphnis has forgotten me. . . . he has never come to see his Chloe. . . . Farewell Daphnis! May you be happy; as for myself I cannot survive it.”

Daphnis’ plaint is no less desolate: “What a source of sorrow has the discovery of my parents become to me! how much better would it have been for me had I continued tending my herds! How much happier I was a slave, for then I could behold my Chloe!” These outpourings ring with the pure tone of romantic love which Shakespeare apotheosizes in Romeo and Juliet.

When Juliet asks by whose direction Romeo found her garden, he replies:

By love, that first did prompt me to inquire;
He lent me counsel, and I lent him eyes.

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9 Ibid., pp. 143-144.
10 Ibid., p. 144.
I am no pilot; yet, wert thou as far
As that vast shore wash'd with the farthest sea,
I would adventure for such merchandise.

(II.2.80-84)

Juliet, in almost exact parallel to Chloe, articulates her fear and her love:

Dost thou love me? I know thou wilt say 'Ay,'
And I will take thy word; yet, if thou swear'st,
Thou mayst prove false; at lovers' perjuries,
They say, Jove laughs. O gentle Romeo,
If thou dost love, pronounce it faithfully;
Or if thou think'st I am too quickly won,
I'll frown, and be perverse, and say thee nay,
So thou wilt woo; but else, not for the world.

(II.2.90-97)

The tragic conclusion of Romeo and Juliet, also, vibrates sympathetically with the near-tragic episodes in Aethiopica and Clitophon and Leucippe. The shades of Theagenes and Clitophon stand as silent chorus for Romeo's dying speech:

Ah, dear Juliet,
Why art thou yet so fair? shall I believe
That unsubstantial Death is amorous,
And that the lean abhorred monster keeps
Thee here in dark to be his paramour?
For fear of that, I still will stay with thee,
And never from this palace of dim night
Depart again. . .

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Come, bitter conduct, come, unsavoury guide!
Thou desperate pilot, now at once run on
The dashing rocks thy sea-sick weary bark.

(V.3.101-118)

There is a strong resemblance between the concepts of romantic love in the Greek romances and Romeo and Juliet and Antony and Cleopatra; there is, also, an interesting similarity between the

31 See reference in Chloe's speech to a false god, p. 47.
heroines of the Greek romance and those of All's Well that Ends Well, Measure for Measure (subplot), and Much Ado About Nothing. The heroines of the Greek romance are superior to the men: they are more faithful, more intelligent, and more purposive than are the heroes. In both of Shakespeare’s comedies of the third period, the same situation prevails, as does it also in the slightly earlier Much Ado About Nothing.

Helena (All's Well that Ends Well) displays constancy, courage, initiative, and daring—qualities of a heroine in a Greek romance—in her successful campaign to compel Bertram to accept her as his wife. Although Helena is of lower birth than Bertram, her intrinsic worth—which is far greater than Bertram’s—is recognized by Bertram’s mother, the king of France, and finally—apparently in exhaustion—by Bertram himself. The quality of Helena's love for Bertram is established in the first scene by her soliloquy:

My imagination
Carries no favour in't but Bertrams.
I am undone, there is no living, none,
If Bertram be away. 'Twere all one,
That I should love a bright particular starre,
And think to wed it, he is so above me
In his bright radiance and collateral light,
Must I be comforted, not in his sphere;
(I.i.93-100)

And in the soliloquy which closes this scene, Helena’s self-reliance and new resolution are delineated.

Our remedies oft in our selves do lye,
Which we ascribe to heaven: the fated skye
Gives us free scope, onely doth backward pull
Our slow designes, when we our selves are dull.
What power is it, which mounts my love so hye,
That makes me see, and cannot feede mine eye?
The mightiest space in fortune, Nature brings
To joyne like, likes; and kisse like native things.
Impossible be strange attempts to those
That weigh their paines in sense, and do suppose
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What hath beene, cannot be. Who ever strove
To show her merit, that did misse her love?
(I.1.230-242)

Helena not only determines, she acts. When the king of France
asks her what reward she desires if her cure is successful, she
wastes not a word, but replies:

Then shalt thou give me with thy kingly hand
What husband in thy power I will command:
Exempted be from me the arrogance
To choose from forth the royall bloud of France,
My low and humble name to propagate
With any branch or image of thy state:
But such a one thy vassall, whom I know
Is free for me to aske, thee to bestow.
(II.i.196-203)

As Bertram struggles to escape from the net, Helena relinquishes
her claim, but the King, whose honor is at stake, compels Bertram
to accept Helena. Bertram's determination to observe nothing more
than the letter of the ceremony motivates his stipulating of "im-
possible" conditions to Helena: he sends her un kissed and "un-
bed ded" home and informs her in a letter that until she can get
the ring from his finger and show him a child begotten by him
upon her body, she is never to call him husband. Significantly,
Helena is later able to fulfill these conditions only because Bertram
is scheming to seduce a young Florentine girl, Diana.

At the unraveling, Helena enters, confronts Bertram, and says,
forthrightly:

there is your Ring,

And looke you, heeres your letter: this it sayes,
When from my finger you can get this Ring,
And is by me with childe, &c. This is done,
Will you be mine now you are doubly wonne?
there is your Ring,

Helena, in her decisiveness, epitomizes the heroine of the Greek
romance.
The superiority of a heroine is demonstrated in Measure for Measure within the subplot of Mariana and Angelo. Shakespeare employs the device from All’s Well that Ends Well of the substitution of one woman for another at a rendezvous: Angelo is tricked into Mariana’s bed instead of Isabella’s. Angelo’s lust for Isabella, like Bertram’s for Diana, is the avenue through which the trick succeeds. When Angelo is spared—because Claudio still lives—the Duke’s speech establishes the official opinion of Mariana: “Joy to you Mariana, love her Angelo:/ I have confes’d her, and I know her vertue” (V.i.532-533).

Beatrice and Benedict or Dogberry and Verges come first to mind when Much Ado About Nothing is mentioned. The main plot of the play, however, is the Hero-Claudio plot, and in this plot, the superiority of Hero is glaringly evident. Claudio is far too readily convinced of Hero’s guilt. When Don Juan persuades Claudio to spy on Hero, Claudio declares: “If I see anything to night, why I should not marry her tomorrow in the congregation, where I should wedde, there will I shame her” (III.ii.113-115).

And he does. In the church, before the assembled guests, after Leonato has given Hero away, Claudio contemptuously says:

There Leonato, take her backe again,
Give not this rotten Orenge to your friend,
Shee’s but the signe and semblance of her honour:
(IV.i.33-35)

Later, when the evil plot has been foiled through a sequence of compensating errors by Dogberry and Verges, Claudio makes expiation by reading a flaccid poem and song over what he supposes to be Hero’s tomb and then goes forward to a wedding with Leonato’s “niece,” who unmasks and reveals herself to be Hero. Although Shakespeare gives only a shadowy portrait of Hero, most readers will agree that enough of Claudio is revealed to establish Hero’s superiority.

If one considers lovely Viola (Twelfth Night), who would make a willow cabin at her lover’s gate; Julia (The Two Gentlemen of Verona), who cries, “Be calm, good wind, blow not a word away/Till I have found each letter in the letter”; faithful, long-suffering Her-
mione (*The Winter's Tale*); or tender Imogen (*Cymbeline*), who graciously forgives the husband who tried to have her murdered; then Shakespeare's reverence for the noblest qualities in loving women becomes unmistakably clear.

Tokens, letters, prophecies, omens, shipwrecks, abandoned babies, disguises—all elements of the Greek romance—appear in Shakespeare's work, but Shakespeare uses these elements in an entirely different fashion. In the Greek romances such qualities serve *instead* of a solid plot structure; in Shakespeare the undergirding of cause-and-effect supports every play; these qualities of the Greek romance are used only as any good dramatist would elect to use them.

It must, also, be emphasized that the love in the Greek romance is sensual love, the impelling desire for physical gratification. The romances are salacious; there is no suggestion of "the marriage of true minds"; there is, nevertheless, a certain dignity inherent in any emotion for which lovers are prepared to die.

The evolution is both demonstrable and measurable. Two of Shakespeare's noblest themes are magnificently refined and clarified restatements of inchoate elements from the Greek romance: the concept of romantic love and the depiction of a superior, lovely, faithful, feminine woman. And these two vibrant threads—commingled in their crude prototypes from the Greek romance—are sharply separated by Shakespeare: the romantic love concept is focused only around equal lovers; the superiority of a heroine is emphasized only in plays wherein there is no vestige of the romantic love concept.