By the Elite, for the Elite?
The Audience of the Ancient Greek Novel
A brief analysis of major theories and evidence for the genre’s intended and unintended ancient readership

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Until fairly recently the Greek novel was of little to no interest to historians of antiquity. Within the previous few decades however academic opinion on the genre has steadily grown more favourable to the point where study of the Greek novel has experienced something of a revival, consequentially resulting in the rehabilitation of the genre into the internationally recognized wider corpus of canonical ancient literature. As a result of this invigorated engagement scholars have, quite naturally, deliberated over sociological aspects of the Greek novel within the historical context of its conception. Of paramount importance within this discussion has been the question of the novel’s intended and unintended ancient readership, as it is known that most, if not all, of the Greek novels were circulated widely throughout the Roman Empire, especially within the Greek-speaking Eastern Mediterranean, from the mid 1st century CE to the late 4th century. In other-words, who amongst the ancients actually read the Greek novels? Within this essay this question will be explored through an examination of what this paper will term the major “external” and “internal” sources of evidence commonly cited by academics, most of which appear to support the dominant hypothesis that the genre was intended for a Greek, educated, male, elite Eastern-Roman audience. Divergent perspectives, which consider the possibility of non-elite, middle-class, and female audiences to the Greek novel will also be explored in an attempt to weigh up possibilities outside of the mainstream theory. In doing so, it is the objective of this essay to provide a brief and multi-faceted analysis which highlights the controversial nature of the topic to those both familiar and unfamiliar with this field of historical study.

In attempting to pinpoint what kind of ancient audience, both intended and unintended, may have likely read the Greek novel it must be first noted that for the greater part of history the genre’s importance as a sphere of study, specifically within the European classics, was largely
discredited.¹ This was in large part because the earliest approaches taken by early-modern scholars to the ancient novel considered its literary style, and intended readership, to be parallel to its modern European counterpart. In other words, if the ancient novel was anything like the contemporary genre of the novel, scholars assumed, it must have been cheap and unrefined “literature for the masses.”² In the words of Trazaskoma, study of the Greek novels “never attained a wide literary respectability or visibility in the marketplace of ancient artistic forms.”³ As a result, hardly any critical commentary or reference to the Greek novels, from their conception in antiquity to the early modern period, have survived to the present day, leading to the prevailing impression in academia that the genre was largely ignored by contemporary readers.⁴ The Greek novels, in comparison to the major Greek prose and philosophical treatises, were considered “artificial, silly, and childishly repetitive.”⁵ In the words of B.E. Perry, the Greek novels were famously considered to be “melodrama for the edification of children and the poor-in-spirit… adapted to the taste and understanding of uncultivated or frivolous-minded people.”⁶ This correlation, between the alleged value of study into the ancient novel, and current (rather anachronistic) notions of the social standing of the novel’s intended audience, cannot be overstated.

Since the middle of the 20th century academic opinion and interest in the Greek novels has improved dramatically as result of renewed, fresh, and unprejudiced research into the genre’s place in mainstream studies into the literature and culture of classical antiquity. This transformation was neatly summed by J.R. Morgan: “in 1989 [the Greek novels] were still

¹ Reardon (2008) ix.
² Trazaskoma (2010), xv.
³ Trazaskoma (2010), xv.
⁴ Perry (1967) 4.
⁵ Reardon (2008) ix.
⁶ Perry (1967) 5.
regarded as marginal and ever so slightly unrespectable; in 2007 they have almost become part
of the canon of classical literature.” The high esteem the ancient Greek novel now holds in
academia is principally due to a reinvigorated appreciation and awareness of the genre’s textual
sophistication and the socio-cultural context of its origins. The current consensus amongst
ancient historians is that the ancient novel was written by, and intended for, an elite Greek male
readership with an education in the classical (mainly Athenian-based) Greek curriculum. This
theory based upon several crucial “external” (or “contextual”) and “internal” (or “textual”)
features to the genre. In terms of external features that indicate this elite audience, scholars have
noted two in particular which stand out. The first is, quite simply, the material upon which the
novels were written: high-quality papyri. Papyri was a fibrous plant-based writing material
fashioned by the ancients from reeds growing along the banks of the Nile river in Egypt. The
surviving papyri from antiquity upon which the romances were written, ranging in quantity from
complete texts to fragmentary scraps, are almost exclusively made of high-quality processed
material, “essentially the same as other papyri of classical literary authors.” This fact, coupled
with the relative rarity of such papyri samples, strongly indicates that the novels were bought,
owned, and read only by those who could afford such goods, namely the Greek elite of the
Roman Eastern Mediterranean.

The second external, or contextual, evidence most often cited in discussions on the
ancient novel’s readership is the socio-cultural timeframe within which most of the genre was
formulated. The Greek novels were written amidst a literary and cultural revival amongst those
Greeks living in the Hellenic sphere of the Roman Empire, the aim of which was largely a re-
affirmation the Greek elites’ cultural heritage. The authors of the Greek novels were active

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7 B.P. Reardon, ix.
8 Trzaskoma, xvi.
roughly from the mid 1st century CE to the late 4th century CE, a timeframe encompassing the historical epoch of the High-Roman Empire and its remarkably long-lasting peace (often titled “Pax Romana”) and prosperity. Corresponding with this period was the emergence and flourishing of a cultural movement which re-emphasized the rhetorical, literary, and philosophical traditions of Classical Greece (especially that of Athens). This re-emphasis on the Greek Classical past and written legacy, later dubbed the “Second Sophistic” by the late 2nd/mid-3rd century rhetorician Philostratus, was a renaissance of sorts that the elites of the high-empire heavily engaged with, in part, to bolster their social status and connection to the great Greek past through a heightened sense of their own “Greekness.” A gruelling and expensive education necessitated participation in this cultural movement, most prominently symbolized by the need to master the Attic Greek dialect which was a necessary step if one wished to properly read, and write, in the language of the great classical Athenian writers, playwrights, poets, and philosophers. Literacy in this archaic tongue consequentially distinguished a high class Greek from a Hellenic commoner in much the same way that literacy in Latin separated a member of the “Republic of Letters” from regular lay folk during the early modern period. All of the authors of the ancient Greek novel are presumed to be members of this educated elite community because almost all of them wrote in an Atticized Greek script. It is thus understood by most scholars that the novel flourished amidst the Second Sophistic because it represented “[an] outlet for the cultural ideals and formulas of the [Greek male] elite, as another expression of their cultural hegemony” above common Koine Greek speakers and the Romans themselves.

In terms of internal, or textual, evidence which indicate an elite readership to the novel there are three that need be noted in particular. The first is the social standing and skill of the

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10 Swain (1996) 104.
genre’s authorship. That all of the authors of the Greek novels are of an educated elite background is evident in both their writing capability and, occasionally, what autobiographical information they do provide of themselves. Scholars such as Swain have noted “[that] the language and the literary structure and range of allusions in the surviving novels leaves no doubt that their authors – even the less sophisticated Chariton and Xenophon – were highly educated products of the schools, fully able to call on the rhetorical techniques of their training.”12 That the authors of the novels were all men of paideia, or of the Attic school of classical Athens, suggests that the reader audience they had in mind was likely akin to their own social standing.

A second major internal criterion that points to the elite audience of the novels is the dialect of Greek that most of the texts are written in. All of the authors of the Greek novel, besides Chariton, wrote in the then archaic script of Attic Greek, the predominant tongue of Classical Athens and its literary legacy, including that of the great Athenian poets, playwrights, and philosophers such as Aeschylus, Aristotle, and Euripides. As discussed earlier, the vogue of the 2nd Sophistic was to be literate in Attic Greek, the language of the Greek golden age before Roman hegemony. By atticizing the script of their works, the ancient authors of the Greek novels restricted their audience to the contemporary Hellenic and Eastern-Mediterranean elite who could afford an education in this archaic and relatively unwieldy Greek tongue.13

A third criterion that indicates the novel’s elite audience is their literary sophistication. All of the novels share common structural themes, an emphasis on Classical motifs, and a frequent use of allusion to influential Greek literature. Swain neatly summarizes some of these features in terms of Classical narrative structure,

A strikingly similar ethical and political discourse runs through the novels… First, that the Greek world of the past - a world without Rome – is the only possible setting; second, that the city is the

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centre of Hellenic civilization, the place from which the heroes leave to face the dangers of the country and to which they return… and third, that the heroes should be two young people from the urban elite who are constantly obsessed with the values of faithfulness and marriage (and thus with the continuation of their own kind).14

The absence of Rome within the Greek novels reflects the literary fashion of the 2nd Sophistic. In considering Rome a cultural inferior, the novelists tended to abstain mention of it entirely by situating the setting of the plot in the distant past when Greece was an independent political force in the Mediterranean.15 For example, a strong emphasis on the individual and politically independent urban polis (or Greek “city-state”) as the home stage of politics within the world of the Greek novel, was immediately relatable to the elites of the 2nd Sophistic who, under the hegemony of Rome, only really wielded power and influence within their local polis.16 In other words, the Greek novel’s focus on the polis, with characters who are themselves Greek nobles themselves involved in the inner workings of local government within the polis, strongly indicates an audience of the same background. Finally, the idealized romance and marriages within the Greek novels are indicative of an elite audience who would have taken pleasure in the novels celebration of perpetuated and preserved ancient noble blood-lines.17

In addition to its thematic traits and plot structure the Greek novels are heavily intertextual, making frequent use of allusions and motifs found in classical Greek literature, philosophy, and drama. Only those schooled in a Attic Greek education would likely be pick able to pick up on most of these literary features. For instance, motifs from Greek Epic poetry abound in the Greek novels, such as within the Greek novel Chaereas and Callirhoe by Chariton. The story is set in the 4th c. BCE in the then independent Greek polis of Syracuse, and is based upon the romance of two Greek nobles who, after being happily wedded in their home, get tragically

separated soon afterwards and spend most of the novel trying to reunite, and return home to Syracuse, within the confines of the Greek East and the Persian Empire. In addition to regularly inserting lines of poetry from Homer’s epic poems, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, into the text, many of the characters in Chariton’s work embody traits of Homeric figures (the best example being the heroine Callirhoe who is in many ways analogous to both the *Iliad’s* Helen of Sparta in her beauty and the *Odyssey’s* Penelope in her steadfast loyalty to her lover Chaereas).\(^\text{18}\) There is evidence of imitation in the Greek novels to the writing style of Archaic and Classical historians, such as Herodotus and Thucydides (the famous and massively influential 5th c. BCE author of the *History of the Peloponnesian War*), which further indicates their intended audience. For example, in Chariton’s *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, “the novel opens with a statement of identity and theme closely modelled on the openings of Hecataeus, Herodotus and Thucydides, and his narrative stance and mannerisms are based on those of the historian Xenophon.”\(^\text{19}\) Other examples of intertextuality with classical literature come from Athenian New Comedy, such as the use of stock-figures like the urban parasite Gnathon in Longus’ *Daphnis and Chloe* and that of the clever slave Satryus in Achilles Tatius’ *Leucippe and Clitophon*.\(^\text{20}\)

Allusions to Classical and Hellenistic poetry also abound in the novels. The 2nd c. CE Greek novelist Longus, for example, relies heavily on both the 3rd c. BCE poet Theocritus’ pastoral motifs and from the 8th-7th c. Greek poet Sappho’s wedding-songs (i.e. Daphnis plucking the apple for Chloe, symbolic of a bride’s virginity referenced by Sappho).\(^\text{21}\) Even classical Athenian tragedy is invoked in the Greek novel, such as within the novelist Heliodorus’ work *Aethiopica*, where the subplot of Knemon and his unfortunate and unjust banishment from his

\(^{19}\) Morgan (2008) 220.  
\(^{20}\) Morgan (2008) 221.  
home polis of Athens parallels quite distinctively the fate of major figures within the plot of the 5th c. BCE Athenian playwright Euripides’ work Hippolytus. As these examples suggest, the degree to which the Greek novel’s are in conversation with classical literature suggests that the genre’s authors had in mind an elite audience who could understand and appreciate such intertextuality.

Despite the considerable evidence for the ancient novel’s aristocratic audience there are divergent hypothesis which have considered the possibilities of a non-elite ancient readership. A great deal of the evidence utilized to back such theories is based within the Greek novel Chaereas and Callirhoe; the oldest, most conventional, and arguably most “egalitarian” of the ancient Greek novels. There are several unique qualities to this text which cause it to stand in contrast to the latter additions to the genre. Chariton, the author of Chaereas and Callirhoe, has been considered to be likely the only author of a Greek novel whose economic background, both personal and that of his intended audience, was not exclusively aristocratic. Evidence for this begins with an autobiographical note at the beginning of Chaereas and Callirhoe, which states that the author was a “clerk to attorney Athenagoras,” making him that of a middleclass background. Moreover, Chariton’s Chaereas and Callirhoe is the only extant complete novel written not in Attic Greek but Koine Greek. The vast majority of the High Roman Empire’s population who were literate in the Hellenistic Mediterranean (or Eastern half of the Roman Empire) spoke and wrote in the Koine, or “common,” Greek dialect. Koine was effectively the lingua-franca of the region and the language which many major texts of the period, notably including the Christian gospels, were transcribed. The fact that Chariton chose to write his work in Koine, the language that most of his contemporaries could understand, indicates that Chariton

23 Reardon, 21.
may have been appealing to a wider audience than just simply the contemporary Greek elite. Put eloquently by historian Starner,

Both the coined style and the prose format diminished the appeal of Chariton’s novel for the literati… [but] had Chariton intended that his work appeal to an upper-class readership, the classical style would have been a wiser selection. If, however, his intent was not to impress but rather to challenge the establishment, his choice was well made… In any case his novel surely found acceptance among those in the middle echelons of Hellenistic society.24

Thus within both Chariton’s text, and within his autobiographically-indicated socio-economic background, the case for a larger sphere of contemporary ancient readership of the Greek novel, outside of the elite, appears possible (if not highly probable).

In terms of narrative and style Chariton’s work possesses arguably the most conventional characteristics of the Greek novel. Chariton’s novel, as B.E. Perry declares, embodies “Greek Romance as it should be written,” and is a model representation of common literary motifs in Hellenistic literature during the first, second, and third centuries CE.25 Chariton’s novel often alludes to passages and motifs from Homer, a trait traditionally cited in the defence of the ancient novels aristocratic audience. On the contrary however, more recent scholarship has noted that knowledge of Homeric verse was widespread in the Mediterranean, even amongst the non-elite.26 Understandably then, ancient readers of Chariton “need not have submitted to the rigors of sophisticated academic training to be able to recognize the citations from Homer; a basic education – one that brought the ability to read – would be sufficient.”27 Furthermore the chronological plot structure of Chariton’s text is quite easy to follow and there are few instances of digression or retrogression where the focus is not on the protagonists and their journey.28 In addition to this there is no instance in the novel where the reader is subjected to share in the

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27 Starner, 125.
ignorance of the characters, but instead all things are revealed to them as the plot unfolds (except, of course, whether the hero and heroine will reunite happily in the end, until the final closing passages). It has often been noted as well that even if rhetorical allusions to classic literature were missed by a non-aristocratic readership the novel’s more central components such as its narrative, suspense, and escapist function, would still have been appealing to the uninformed reader. Thus, excluding the lower order of folk who would have found little appeal in the novel’s aristocratic characters and settings, the scope of readership for Chariton’s work is quite possibly broad: encompassing not only the elite but also a middling class audience.

The question of an ancient female readership to the Greek novel has been another noteworthy point of contention amongst scholars that will now be touched on briefly. Several scholars, in the face of the majority viewpoint which stresses a male-dominated ancient readership, have argued that the Greek novels, especially the earliest texts like Chariton, were read both privately and aloud publicly, by female readers. Some have even gone as far as to suggest that the central role that female characters and virtues play in the ancient novels indicate that many of the more pseudonymous authors were really secretly women writing under a male name. Chariton’s text has been especially prominent within this debate as it’s often cited for its unique central focus on the female heroine, Callirhoe, to the extent that she largely eclipses her male counter-part, Chaereas, in influence, speech, presence, and importance within the plot. Particular classical scholars like Brigitte Egger have emphasizes that the central role of the female protagonist in Chariton’s text reveals a sense of innovation that sets its apart from the other Greek novels, and have argued out that Chariton was very much “a gynophile author who

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29 Hägg (1971) 295.
30 Pervo (1987) 84.
31 Hägg (1991) 95.
33 Egger (1990) 175.
[had] not a single harsh word at all for any of his female characters.”\textsuperscript{34} For Egger, Chariton’s novel represents the strongest candidate amongst the novels of a work of “women’s fiction” in the ancient world.\textsuperscript{35} In her own words, within Chariton’s work,

> The ideal woman is beautiful, chaste, and faithful unto death. Even where women play a negative role in the narrative, they are not denigrated because they are women. Further, women wield considerable power in Chariton’s novel, though in subtle ways. When males in high political positions make decisions that have been influenced by female characters, the result is at times comical. Finally, most of the deities in the novel are female.\textsuperscript{36}

Based on this evidence feminist historians have argued, relying on a textual analysis of Chariton’s narrative and style, the possibility of a female audience to the ancient novel.

Other voices have contributed to the hypothesis of a likely female readership to the Greek novel using sociological approaches. A good example is historian Stephanie West, who builds upon Thomas Hägg’s notion that the novels could have just as likely been intended to be read aloud by, and for, women who worked in the home as seamstresses than as a recreational pastime for elite men of paideia.\textsuperscript{37} Both Hägg and West point to the predictability of the novel’s simple narrative, and its use of stereotyped motifs and settings, as indicative of its possible consumption by a less than fully literate audience. West, though “aware of the dangers of arguing from modern conditions,” relates the possibility of the ancient novel’s female ancient to more modern conventions, specifically when,

> The reading aloud of lighter literature… [formed both a] part of [19\textsuperscript{th} century] women's meetings for sewing outside the home…[, and] manifested in many middle-class homes in which some it was customary in some milliners' and tailors' shops for one employee to read aloud to the others… [as] novels were obviously better suited to this purpose than other types of literature.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{34} Egger (1990) 170.  
\textsuperscript{35} Egger (1990) 401.  
\textsuperscript{36} Starner (2011) 126.  
\textsuperscript{37} West (2003) 66.  
\textsuperscript{38} West (2003) 67.
Upon this claim, and the supposition that the novel was read aloud by men like Chariton, as “artisans of the written word,” West’s theory effectively expands the possibilities of the ancient novel’s readership beyond the confines of the Greek male elite.

Despite a persistent outflow of enterprising study which asserts divergent claims for the ancient novel’s non-elite audiences, the current consensus amongst concerned historians will likely remain that “there is little positive evidence in favour of the 'female readership' hypothesis, and at best the question remains open.”39 As case in point, the same material referred to by feminist historians have been used to counter their arguments. For example, it has been pointed out that the virtues epitomized by Chariton’s female characters (beauty, chastity, and loyalty) may simply reflect common male idealizations.40 Moreover the power wielded by females in Chariton may simply be attributed to divine figures (Eros and Aphrodite), who would have appealed to the fantasies of men as much as they would to women. Moreover, largely contrary to Chariton’s progressive characterization of his female figures is his characterization of males, whose views on women are portrayed in a rather stereotypical fashion. There are several prominent examples of this in the text: Callirhoe is often treated as merely a prize to be obtained by her suitors (1.2.1.), she is objectified as a sex-object (5.5.9.), and even her lover, the hero Chaereas, seemingly espouses an air of chauvinism when he gives advice to an Egyptian man on how to flatter and woo women (7.6.10.).41

Other important factors complicate the case for female readership of the ancient novel and indicate a stronger probability for an intended male audience. Perhaps some of the most obvious indications of male-orientation is the degree to which male figures outnumber female characters, roughly measured at 2:1 in Chariton (in other texts, 5:1) and the extent to which male

actors exert a more conspicuous sense of agency than that of females. Additionally the narrative voice of the novel often exhibits male sentiment. This can be clearly seen in Chariton when the narrator, addressing the reader, exclaims “…a women is easy prey when she thinks she is loved” (1.4.2.). Finally, from a sociological perspective, it far likelier that the authors had in mind a male audience, as generally ancient women were educated to a limited extent while male literacy accounted for the bulk of ancient readership within every historical period of antiquity. Nevertheless, despite obvious weakness in these alternative theories, the inherent possibility of a non-elite ancient audience to the Greek novel continues to spur further research and debate on the topic.

What this paper has intended to impress upon the reader is that investigation into the question of the ancient Greek novel’s audience, both intended and unintended, encompasses a lively academic correspondence which, at this point, has witnessed a complete turn-around in modern impressions of the genre. No longer considered a base-form of pleasure read only by the lower orders, the ancient novel is now praised as an educated and edifying art form tailored for, and consumed by, the Greek elite of the Hellenic world. An ample degree of evidence, both external and internal, has been commonly cited in support of this postulation and will now be summarized briefly. External evidence includes the expensive papyri the novel’s were written upon and that the novel’s emergence corresponded with the “second sophistic” literary-cultural movement, while internal qualities include many of the Greek novelists’ elite autobiographic backgrounds, the chosen use of the Attic Greek dialect as the language of the novels, and their literary complexity, sophistication, intertextuality, and allusion to the great Classical and Epic

literature of the Greek past, all of which point to an elite Greek male audience to the ancient novel.

Divergent scholarship, which have argued for a non-aristocratic and even female intended audience, often rely on Chariton’s work, Chaereas and Callirhoe, which possesses several qualities that set it apart from the other Greek novels, including a likely non-aristocratic authorship, use of the common contemporary tongue of Koine Greek, its relatively conventional literary style, plot, and use of well-known Classical and Homeric motifs, all of which would be readily acceptable to a non-aristocratic (likely middleclass) readership. Scholarly advocates of the Greek novel’s intended consumption by a female audience point to Chariton’s use of prominent, admirable, and influential main female roles, as well as the author’s relative lack of male chauvinism. Nonetheless, as made clear earlier in this paper, many of these arguments have been complicated by contradictions to their claims in the texts, such as the higher ratio of male to female characters in the novels, the stereotypical behaviour and bawdiness of many of the male characters, and the contextual socio-economic factors faced by women in the contemporary world of the ancient novel. Thus, while arguments advocating for the genre’s consumption by contemporary non-elites, petty-bourgeoisie, and female-readers, are by no-means dismissible, there is a much greater weight of evidence supporting the contrary: that the primary intended audience of the Greek novel was the male Greek aristocracy of the Eastern Roman Mediterranean. As academic interest continues to gain momentum, and as evidence from antiquity continues to be unsurfaced, these theories will likely remain open to stimulated discussion amongst historians concerned with the topic of the ancient Greek novel.
Bibliography


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