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MOTIVES AND SUBJECTS IN FICTITIOUS COLLECTIONS

OF EROTIC AND MIMETIC LETTERS

WRITTEN IN IMPERIAL GREECE

In my thesis I have examined a restricted group of fictitious letters, in particular mimetic and erotic letters. Though such collections can be ascribed to the names of several authors, collections of five authors in all have come down to us (Klaudios Aelian, Alciphron, Philostratus, Aristainetos and Theophylaktus Simokatta).

### **1. ALCIPHRON**

His letters of fishermen do not show a great variety of subjects: we can read about the difficulties in the life of fishermen (1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 20), borrowing and lending (7, 17, 18, 19), and the town as contrasted with the port or coast (4, 6, 15). The letters of farmers can also be divided into three groups according to the subjects dealt with: difficulties in the life of farmers (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 10, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, 23, 24, 25, 26, 33, 36), borrowing and lending (3, 12, 20, 27, 29), and the town as contrasted with the village (8, 11, 13, 14, 17, 22, 28, 30, 31, 32, 34, 35, 37, 38). In the letters of parasites one reads about four different topics: the ups and downs in the life of parasites (1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 30, 31, 32, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42), the parasites' good deeds (5, 26, 27, 28, 33), the parasite thief (10, 11, 16, 17, 20), and finally the ideal master (29). According to the range of topics, the letters of courtesans seem to be the most varied: praise of the courtesan (11, 5 fragment), refusal or deception of the lover (7, 8, 9, 10, 15, 17), the power of love (2, 16, 18, 19), slandering the rival (5, 6, 12), love and nature (13, 14), trouble in the life of courtesans (3, 4), badinage between lovers (1).

### **2. AELIAN**

Investigating the collection I arrived at the conclusion that the author had edited the twenty letters in the manner of epistolary novels: several letters are connected, and the whole collection anticipates the subject-matter of the last letter, which is nothing else than a praise of the farmer's life.

### **3. PHILOSTRATUS**

Regarding Philostratus, in my thesis I arrive at the conclusion that, in connection with the homoerotic letters addressed to boys, Book XII of AP, and in particular Straton's epigrams, also have a significant influence (eg. the motive of rose, whose entire former symbolism appears in the collection, enriched by new motives by Philostratus). My investigation shows that, in addition to the well-known subjects (roses, hair, eyes and glance, hairs, "don't use footwear", "don't be angry because it makes you ugly", protecting the stranger, protecting the poor, "where are you from", "don't use make-up", description of female beauty, praise of prostitutes, male and female alike), the following also appear: unrequited love, declining somebody's advances, beauty flowering without care, adultery. While examining the letters that

belong together I found that some letters share a common subject (1-2, 3-54, 4-21, 7-23, 9-63, 14-35, 16-61, 19-38, 20-46) while in others the construction is also identical or very similar (5-47, 8-28, 17-55, 18-36, 22-27, 24-25, 26-64, 34-35, 45-49, 54-55, 56-57, 67-71). These investigations also reveal the fact that numbers 34 and 62 are not two independent but connected letters.

#### 4. ARISTAINETOS

In this chapter I was satisfied to follow a single motive used by this significant writer of the genre, in particular the rose motive. This can be explained by the fact that the motive appears in the collections of all the five authors. The rose is mentioned in eight letters (I,1, I,3, I,10, I,12, I,19, II, 1, II,19, II 21). To summarise, in four letters by Aristainetos the colour red of the rose provides a basis for comparisons (complexion, flowers in a wreath, apple), in one letter the girl's breath smells of rose and apple (I.12), while in another letter Hippothales, a handsome youth, visits his lover wearing a wreath of roses (II.19). In the last letter the rose serves to enhance the woman's beauty (II.21).

#### 5. THEOPHYLAKTOS

The principle Theophylaktos used in editing his collection - varying the types of letters - makes the work an enjoyable literary delicacy. The farmers' letters are indeed a little schematic, as shown in the analysis of the motives occurring in them. These can be divided into three groups. The most frequent motive is the fact that farming is difficult to live on and there are a lot of things that poison the farmer's life; borrowing and lending, mutual help is the subject of several letters; and finally one letter deals with the town as contrasted with the village. Courtesans' letters are not so well edited as Philostratus' masterpieces or Aristainetos' epistles evoking Milesian tales. Several letters deal with the power of love, giving examples from nature in two (passionate love between magnet and iron as an example of his own love, the date-palm which is capable of feeling an amorous desire like humans). Three letters (60, 63, 66) are related to philosophical letter by the fact that they deal with the relationship between love and philosophy: the lover is unable to deal with philosophy, and if one is able to do so, he or she is not in love. Several letters deal with declining one's advances or disappointment in love. The motive know is mentioned in Theophylaktos' work only (9, 33, 54, 72). Besides entertaining stories there are letters about serious moral problems (abortion in letter 30, the concept of genuine love in letter 42, etc.) Starting from a natural, historical or mythological image, the philosophical letters give us instructions on how to live a happy and morally correct life.

In the formal respect therefore he speaks in the same language and manner as his rhetor and sophist predecessors (Alciphron, Aelian and Philostratus), and even if he is not equal to the classical writers of Greek literature, I agree with opinion of J. F. BOISSONADE (*Theophylacti Simocattae Quaestiones Physicae et Epistulae*, Paris 1835), one of the modern publishers of Theophylaktos' corpus, saying that "*scriptor non iniucundus, nec ut in mala aetate malus*".

To sum up, what the French scholar states about Theophylaktos is true of the other representatives of the genre who experimented with the opportunities offered by the two genres: mimetic and erotic, each speaking in their own voice as a result. In his four volumes Alciphron makes the representatives of four different professions speak (adding a few well known characters from the comedy as the soldier), Aelian includes even more characters in a well-edited collection, Philostratus excels in amorous elegies written in prose, Aristainetos in erotic short stories, Theophylaktos Simokatta in philosophical letters inserted among erotic and farmers' letters, with philosophers being put on the stage in the latter by the Byzantine author.