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MOTIVES AND SUBJECTS IN FICTITIOUS COLLECTIONS

OF EROTIC AND MIMETIC LETTERS

WRITTEN IN IMPERIAL GREECE

I. Objective of the thesis and delimitation of the subject

In my thesis I have examined a restricted group of fictitious letters. These letters are included in the group of mimetic and erotic letters by J. SYKUTRIS (*Epistolographie, in: RE Suppl. 5, 1931, 185-220*). Though such collections can be ascribed to the names of several authors, collections of five authors in all have come down to us (Aelian's Rustic Letters, Alciphron, Philostratus, Aristainetos, Theophylaktus).

The reason for my including all the five surviving collections in the investigation is that, although papers or even monographs have already been published on the collections of individual authors, the relationship between these writings is so close that I found it convenient to perform a comparative analysis of these collections, trying to find both the common and the divergent features. In choosing this method I have found confirmation in the fact that the investigation of NÉMETH A. (*Császárkori fiktív levelek, Kísérlet az uralkodók és filozófus-gyógyítók fiktív leveleinek újszerű vizsgálatára, Budapest, 2005, ELTE*) has yielded new results. The author of the thesis examined a set of letters written by unknown authors disguised as famous historical personages (in most cases also in the first centuries of the imperial age).

The thesis is composed of eight chapters:

- I. Introduction
- II. Review of the history of fictitious letters in Greek literature
- III. Alciphron
 - III.1 Alciphron: an unknown author
 - III.2 Alciphron's letters and the motives occurring in them
 - III.2.A Book one
 - III.2.B Book two
 - III.2.C Book three
 - III.2.D Book four

III.3 Alciphron's sources

III.4 Appreciating Alciphron's work

IV Aelian

IV.1 Aelian's life and works

IV.2 Subjects of Aelian's rural letters

V Philostratos

V.1 Philostratos' life and works

V.2 Philostratos' collection of letters and the motives occurring in them

VI Aristainetos and the rose motive in his erotic letters

VII Theophylaktos Simokatta

VII.1 Theophylaktos Simokatta's life and works

VII.2 Subjects and motives in the rural letters

VII.3 Subjects and motives in the erotic letters

VII.4 Subjects and motives in the philosophical letters

VIII Summary

II. Outline of the methods applied

Starting from the paper E. SUÁREZ De La TORRE (*Motivos y temas en las cartas de amor de Filóstrato y Aristéneto*, *Fortunatae* 1, 1991, 113-132) I have examined the subjects and motives occurring in the five collections, extending the investigation - besides the erotic letters - to rustic, fishing and philosophical letters as well. I have tried to find out the differences that can be revealed besides the shared features, even though the writings belong to a single genre (fictitious letters), that is, to establish the innovations introduced by the authors.

III. Listing the results in the form of propositions

1. Alciphron

Alciphron tries to use linguistic means (vocabulary, speaking names, gods named in the letters, etc.) to individuate the four strata in his collection and the other persons occurring in the letters (soldier, grammarian, doctor, philosopher, etc.), thereby transforming several letters in the books of farmers and fishermen into a real encyclopedia of the technical terms of the given profession, which I have collected and listed in my thesis. An interesting feature of the courtesans' letters is that, similarly to the letters written under the names of famous persons occurring in progymnasmata, Alciphron tries to make use of biographical elements, real or accepted as real by the reading public, in order to present the characters true to life (eg. IV.3, 4, 5 Phryne's lawsuit and Hypereides' role in the lawsuit, letters by Praxiteles and Leontion), which might be regarded later as real letters because of the farewell pattern~~applied~~ in them. Although we come across exchanges of letters or interrelated letters in Alciphron's collection, independent letters constitute the majority, which are connected to the individual books by the persons of the sender and the addressee. As for interrelated letters, an interesting feature of numbers 3, 4 and 5 in Book Four, dealing with Phryne's impiety action and Hypereides' role in it, is that each of the three letters contains one element of the story so that one has to read all the three letters in order to reconstruct the story in full, therefore they can be regarded as representing a miniature epistolary novel. Of the two best known letters, generally held to be the most beautiful (IV. 18, 19), the one written by Menander to Glycera (IV.18) includes the emperor's invitation and its refusal as a recurring motive in letters by emperors and philosophers-healers. As a frequent motive in fictitious letters written in the name of famous persons, the emperor invites a contemporary philosopher or a healer, poets (eg. Euripides) being more rarely invited. This observation shows that though Alciphron's letter belongs to the group of mimetic letters, this particular letter of his is related to pseudonym letters by means of the writer's and addressee's persons as well as the motive occurring in it.

The 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. The closing piece of the collection thus gives a praise of farmers and farming, summarising the subject-matter of the preceding three letters, and at the same time of the entire work. Thus in his collection of letters Aelian, similarly to Alciphron, created his work by raising it to the level of literary production, in which the letter merely serves as a framework for the pieces that are not short stories but monologues describing the writer's character and the way he behaves or the things he says in a given situation. These personifications written in the form of letters all serve the purpose of reinforcing the superiority of the farmers' life as contrasted with the immorality of city life. Aelian's work proves that, in contrast with Alciphron, who provides a glimpse of rustic life in the classical age in 39 letters, he is able to give a comprehensive picture of the farmers' life in as few as twenty short letters. Aelian's collection of twenty letters thus represents a well-edited epistolary fiction with varied contents.

3. Philostratos

The investigation of Philostratus' erotic letters has confirmed B.P. Reardon's opinion in B. P. REARDON (*Courants littéraires grecs des IIe et IIIe siècles après J.-C.*, Paris, 1971, 187) saying that " *ce sont des poèmes lyriques en prose, en somme*". The relationship between Philostratus' and Aristainetos' erotic letters and the elegy of Alexandria was examined by M. HEINEMANN (*Epistulae amatoriae quomodo cohaerent cum elegiis Alexandrinis*, Argentorati, 1910), and our investigation has confirmed this relationship: *militia amoris* (3. 11, 12) and the motive of hunting appears in several letters. 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, have a significant influence (eg. the motive of rose, whose entire former symbolism appears in the collection, enriched by new motives by Philostratus¹). My investigation shows that, in addition to the subjects collected by

¹ As an example I refer to letter 3: "The Lacedaemonians used to attire themselves in crimson-colored corselets, either to shock their enemies by the fearsome hue, or, by having the colour the same as that of blood, to prevent their noticing blood stains; and you handsome boys must equip yourselves with naught but roses—this the panoply that you accept from your lovers. Now a larkspur suits a boy who has a light complexion, a narcissus a boy who is dark; but a rose suits all, inasmuch as it has long since existed both as a boy and as a flower, as a drug and as a perfume. 'Twas roses that won the heart of Anchises, 'twas they that stripped Ares of his armour, they that prompted Adonis to come; they are spring's tresses, they earth's lightning flashes, they the torches of love." This letter calls up several senses of rose: the spartans' blood-red breast-plate represents a double reference to the rose. On the one hand the blood evokes the rose on account of the birth myth of the plant, on the other hand the breast-plate anticipates the motive *militia amoris*. Thus in this letter Philostratus connects the

SUÁREZ DE LA TORRE (*Motivos y temas en las cartas de amor de Filóstrato y Aristóneto*, Fortunatae 1, 1991, 113-132) (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 one'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. In addition we come across the apple, an important symbol in Greek and Roman literature (the apple of Eris and Eros).

Similarly to the technique applied by Alciphron, Philostratus can also sketch an interesting situation by means of a few strokes. The descriptive character is almost entirely absent, we only get to know the characters' state of mind, external or internal properties, without any attempt at individuation. His letters are miniature masterpieces in which the author tries to seduce us, his readers, in as many versions as possible, rather than having a specified fictitious person turn the head of another specified fictitious person.

4. Aristainetos

This chapter of the thesis summarises the results of research carried out so far, without going into detailed analysis. For up to now two researchers A. LESKY (*Aristainetos: Erotische Briefe*, Zürich, 1951) and R. J. GALLÉ CEJUDO (*Aristóneto, Cartas eróticas*, Madrid, 1999) have provided exhaustive investigations of the author's erotic letters. 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 is motivated 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). This flower suits handsome boys, as Philostratus tells us (II.1). In the last letter the rose serves to enhance the woman's beauty (II.21).

motive *militia amoris* frequently occurring in Greek and Roman love elegies with the rose motive. The lyrical nature of the letter is reinforced by the fact that he makes the motive of *militia amoris* even more effective by presenting it in the form of *figura etimologica*: :
 in this letter the rose also appears as Aphrodite's rose, evoking the three loves of the goddess (Anchises, Ares, Adonis).

5. Theophylaktos Simokatta

The principle Theophylaktos used in editing his collection - varying the types of letters - makes the work an enjoyable literary delicacy. This is why Copernicus was interested in it. The first two types (letters of farmers and courtesans) can be found in his predecessors too, but the third type - the philosophical letter - is his own exclusive feature, which justifies his being regarded as an innovator. According to K. KRUMBACHER, A. EHRHARD, H. GELZER, (*Geschichte der byzantinischen Literatur*, München, 1897) these are the more successful pieces of the collection. He thinks that the author fails to provide a lifelike representation of the characters' emotions and experiences while conditions of life are described in a schematic manner. I myself cannot fully accept this view. 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 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 letters 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 „.....“ 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*".

6. Summary

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.

IV. Publications

Journals

A new prose genre of Imperial Greece: erotic and mimetic fictitious letters (A császárkori görög próza új műfaja: az erotikus és mimétikus fiktívlevél), Könyv és Könyvtár 26, 2004, 165-188

Volumes of essays

A late representative of second sophistry: Theophylaktos Simokatta (A második szofisztika kései képviselője: Theophylaktos Simokat(t)és) (accepted for publication)

Translations

A selection of letters by Aelian, Alciphron and Theophylaktos, to appear in the volume *Uralkodó és polgár antik tükrében* (accepted for publication)

Conferences

Klaudios Aelian's innovations in the genre of fictitious mimetic and erotic letters, Conference of Young Researchers, Veszprém, November 2005 (Klaudios Ailianos újításai a fiktív mimétikus és erotikus levél műfajában, Fiatal Kutatók Konferenciája, Veszprém, 2005. november)

Painters and paintings in fictitious collections of Greek mimetic and erotic letters VIIth Hungarian Conference on Classical Studies, Debrecen, May 2006 (Festők és festmények a görög erotikus és mimétikus fiktív levélgyűjteményekben, VII. Magyar Ókortudományi Konferencia, Debrecen, 2006. május)