

**B. P. Reardon, *The Form of Greek Romance*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991. Pp. xiii + 194. \$29.95. ISBN 0-691-06838-0.**

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**Reviewed by Joseph Farrell, University of Pennsylvania.**

Professor Reardon's contribution to the study of ancient prose fiction in the form of many important articles and, more recently, of the distinguished collection of Greek novels in translation that he edited, is well known. The volume under discussion is entirely new, but presents a view of the Greek novel consistent with the author's previous work. Its aim is "to provide a framework for the understanding of the surviving examples of the Greek romance, or novel" by "analyz[ing] the genre in terms of ancient critical categories ... and also, in a limited degree, to offer general interpretation of the form and, in a final chapter, set it in the context of romance as a perennial form of literature" (p. xi).

The book contains little that will change the way specialists approach the ancient novel, but it will probably be useful to students seeking a clear, readable introduction to the genre -- although the first book that anyone interested in these texts should read is still Tomas Hägg's *The Novel in Antiquity*, now available in paperback. Reardon's aim is at once more limited than Hägg's, in that he focuses rather more narrowly on the properties of romance as a literary genre, and more ambitious, in view of his attempt to work out a two-tiered critical theory of what the novel was to ancient readers, and what the ancient novel is to modern readers. In making this attempt, the author has taken pains to remain accessible. In fact, chapters one and two are largely devoted to summarizing, in very plain and non-argumentative terms, what we know about ancient prose fiction, including the plots of the "canon" of surviving Greek romances. Reardon is, of course, an experienced and able guide to this material, and although readers who are familiar with it are liable to find the summaries otiose, those who are new to these texts will benefit from his observations. The same is true of his justified insistence on reading the romances as products of a Hellenistic and Imperial social milieu (see below) and in relation to particular trends and elements observable within other other genres, both antecedent and contemporary, including epic, history, comedy and mime, travel literature, and so forth. None of this is new, of course; in general terms Reardon actually aligns himself explicitly with B. E. Perry. But, especially for the beginner, this emphasis is entirely proper, and the reasons why it is proper are clearly presented.

As for the theoretical portion of the book, Reardon's first aim, to try to understand the ancient novel as its first readers did, is one shared by all who are interested in the genre; but it is extremely difficult to achieve. The novel was, of course, steadfastly ignored by critics and theorists of literature in antiquity, and its modern reader, in contrast with the student of, say, epic or tragedy, is left with virtually no gauge of ancient critical reaction apart from a few dismissive and derisory *obiter dicta*. Reardon therefore attempts to fashion an ancient intellectual context by analogy with Aristotle's observations on the nature of tragedy. I find this strategy open to several reservations. It would obviously have been interesting if Aristotle (who, of course, antedates all of the texts that Reardon discusses; see below) or indeed anyone had left us an articulate and appreciative ancient meditation on the novel. But is there really any point in trying to imagine what such an account would have been like? Certainly the decision to take Aristotle as a model is questionable on several grounds. In the first place, it is difficult

not to believe that behind the decision lies a thinly veiled argument for taking both the novel and its theorists more seriously than the ancient and modern literary establishments have been inclined to do. While I sympathize with this point of view, I do not think that we will grow to understand the importance of these texts by assimilating them in any way to the "higher" genres or by adopting the conceptual framework developed by high-minded critics to explain those genres. Rejection and marginalization are the typical modes by which ancient criticism addressed the novel, and it is from this reaction and within the intellectual context that produced it, not by any form of critical assimilation, that we must begin to account for the fact that the Greek novel came into being and survived in spite of the fact that it was held in low official esteem. In the second place, Aristotle, like all ancient literary critics and theorists, is hardly a definitive guide even to the material that he does discuss. He is more interesting for the unanswerable issues that he raises, sometimes inadvertently, such as the nature of the tragic catharsis, or the productively misinterpreted concept of *hamartia*. But when he gives specific judgments on the *OT* or the *Medea*, for instance, we are in a position to know that he is eccentric. Third, Aristotle belongs to a specific time and place; and, although he is to be credited with helping to create the episteme of the Hellenistic *oikoumene*, he belongs in large part to the decaying world of the classical polis. The ancient Greek romances, as Reardon himself correctly maintains, cannot be understood except as a part of the Hellenistic and Imperial world, which Aristotle never knew. For this reason above all, the attempt to get at an appreciative ancient view of the genre through Aristotle on tragedy -- the genre of the classical polis *par excellence* -- seems to me essentially misconceived and unpersuasive.

For his larger interpretation of romance as a archetypal category, Reardon relies heavily on Northrop Frye's *The Secular Scripture*. Here too one suspects a not unwelcome hidden agenda, namely, to suggest that students of the ancient novel could learn something from those who study its modern counterparts. Who can doubt it? But again, this particular line of approach shares certain problems with the quasi-Aristotelian analysis. Frye is not especially persuasive on his own terms -- his universalizing conception carries with it a strong element of reductivism -- nor do his theories travel well. But the basic point about attending to and participating in the larger discussion about what the novel is, and not simply what it was, is absolutely right. Classicists have a lot to learn from work on the novel in other disciplines, and could in fact make a significant contribution by exposing the teleological modernist bias that vitiates almost everything written on the genre.

In sum, this book is informative and clear as a practical reader's guide to the Greek romances, less successful as theory; but here too it must be said that Reardon has attempted to do things that are worth doing, even if the specific results that he achieves are open to question. Those new to the texts will benefit from his practical criticism, while more experienced students will, I hope, find in his theoretical efforts a challenge that will advance the state of critical discourse about the fascinating genre that Reardon has for so many years served so well.

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