AN ANCIENT "PASSING" NOVEL: HELIODORUS' *AITHIOPIKA*

JUDITH PERKINS

In the third century, the figure of the Ethiopian appears to have held a privileged position in discussions of identity. Lucian employs the proverb "to wash an Ethiopian white," Αἰθίοπα σμήχειν (*adversus Indoctum* 28, quoted by Snowden 1970.5), to indicate the futility of trying to change a person's nature, and Origen, quoting Jeremiah, draws upon this same cultural trope to signal the radical consequences of Christian conversion when, through the power of the Word, the Ethiopian will change his skin and the leopard his spots (Jeremiah 13.23). This imagery continued in Christian discourse on conversion; Jerome's words in fact suggest that he may really have thought that blacks turned white upon baptism: "though it is against nature, the Ethiopian does change his skin . . ." (*Epistulae* 69.6.7–8). In the discourse of the period, the blackness of the Ethiopian stood for the intransigent condition of human identity.

In this context, Heliodorus' decision to focus his romance, the *Aithiopika*, on his white heroine's rediscovery and recovery of her Ethiopian identity takes on added significance. Through this choice of topic, the *Aithiopika* explicitly locates its narrative focus on identity and authenticity, on place and displacement within a wider cultural dialogue.[1] The linear plot of Heliodorus' romance (much complicated in the telling) narrates the birth of a white daughter to the black king and queen of Ethiopia. The queen,

1 Heliodorus' novel very much fits into contemporary criticism's post-colonial paradigm: "Beyond their historical and cultural differences, place and displacement and a pervasive concern with myths of identity and authenticity are a feature common to all post-colonial literatures in English" (Ashcroft 1989.9). Recent works on Greek self-identity in the period of the novel include Swain 1996 and Gleason 1995.

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fearful that the legitimacy of her baby will be questioned, exposes the child. An Ethiopian gymnosophist rescues and raises the baby until he hands her over to a certain Charikles from Delphi who adopts her as his own and names her Charikleia. Years pass and the girl, although a priestess of Artemis pledged to chastity, falls in love at a festival with a handsome Thessalian, Theagenes, a descendant of Achilles. An Egyptian priest, Kalasiris, helps bring them together; the three flee Delphi and undergo various adventures until they finally arrive in Ethiopia. Here more tests take place before Charikleia is recognized, accepted, and is able to reclaim her rightful place and "real" identity. At the conclusion of the romance narrative, Charikleia and Theagenes are inducted into the royal priesthood and marry. There is even a hint that they turn black (Doody 1996.121, Morgan 1989.318).

Critics have identified the plot of the *Aithiopika* as another example of the genre of "returns": a *nostos*, like the *Odyssey*, depicting a hero's (or in this case a heroine's) return home and recovery of rightful identity (Konstan 1994.90). I will suggest that Heliodorus' narrative of the white Ethiopian functions rather to interrogate the whole notion of "identity" as a given either/or dichotomy, a given ontological condition. This story of the white Ethiopian passing as the quintessential Greek maiden appears to define identity as more the assumption of a role, a performance dictated by changing circumstances, than as a fixed essence (Robinson 1994.715–16). The reader's discovery of Charikleia's multiple identities in the *Aithiopika* works to destabilize any easy understanding of identity as a unitary state.

My reading of the *Aithiopika* benefits from the contemporary critical work on "passing" novels—those that depict blacks "passing" as whites in American society. These novels have been shown to pose an implicit challenge to those definitions of identity that suggest that identities are stable, unchanging presences.[2] Fundamental to such essentialist definitions of identity is the concept of difference. To be white in the U.S. is above all not to be black. The categories of "black" and "white" are posited as separate and fixed, and understood to signify some basic difference of being. "Passing" narratives expose the weakness of this understanding. Their focus on characters that assume a white identity and "pass" for

2 Nella Larsen, *Passing* (New Brunswick 1986) and Jessie Redmont Fauset, *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* (London 1985) are examples of "passing" novels.

white raises questions about what it means to be "really" black or "really" white, if there is no way through appearance "to tell the difference." "Passing" narratives challenge the fixity of the categories "black" and "white" and are therefore inherently disruptive of any construction of "otherness" based on race (Holmes 1990.6). The function of any such constructions of "otherness" in a culture, commentators suggest, is to legitimate claims to social privilege and power. The fixed categories of black/white, female/male, foreign/citizen not only establish an inherent identity, they institute a hierarchy where one half of the opposed pair is more deserving of society's benefits than the other. For cultural hierarchies to remain in place, it is essential for societies to maintain their operating fictions of difference. The passer's ability to pass poses a problem to such systems of difference. For if you cannot tell the difference and can not locate the "other," how can you locate yourself as inherently different and more deserving (Minh-ha 1995.217)?

I believe that the *Aithiopika* manifests some of the same concerns as these contemporary "passing" novels. First, through its characterization of Charikleia, it destabilizes the reader's sense of the "fixity" of cultural otherness, the primary element in establishing any cultural hierarchy (Bhabha 1994.66). The discourse of fixity functions through the stereotypic classifications circulating in a culture. And, in his narrative, Heliodorus explicitly invokes the prevailing stereotypes of his culture; the *Aithiopika* is full of stereotypes supporting Hellenic notions of superiority (Kuch 1996.217–19). Thermouthis, an Egyptian, for example, is described as having the temper of all barbarians (βαρβαρικ∝ ὀργ∝, 2.12.5) and the quarrelsome character of a bandit (δύσεριν τὸ ∑θος, 2.17.5). Women are characterized as naturally weak (4.21.3) and as suffering from the congenital sickness of jealousy (7.21.5). Eunuchs share the latter trait; Arsake's chief eunuch is described as "temperamentally afflicted with jealousy (as eunuchs are)" (8.6.2). Persians and merchants are stereotyped by their passion for money (φιλοπλούσιον, 5.12.2). The narrative even includes a Persian stereotype of Greeks, one that alludes to their innate sense of cultural superiority. Arsake, the Persian princess, explains why Theagenes will not bow to her—"He is completely Greek and afflicted with the contempt (ὑπεροψίαν) that all Greeks feel toward us" (7.19.2). It is through such language of stereotype that totalizing concepts of identity are constructed and essentialist definitions offered—all women are weak, all barbarians quick tempered.

Heliodorus, however, in the very first scene of his romance,

challenges the basis of such stereotypical understandings of identity. Critics have often noted the careful crafting of this almost cinematic scene presented through the perspective of a band of Egyptian brigands observing from the hills above. The narrator describes the scene as a show for the Egyptians (θ°ατρον, 1.1.6). They are like an audience (θεωρούς, 1.1.7) unable to understand the drama (τὴν σκηνήν, 1.1.7) that they are viewing.[3] What the brigands see is a scene of carnage, dead bodies and booty everywhere. The only humans left alive are a girl as beautiful as a goddess, wearing a laurel crown and a quiver, and a grievously wounded young man. The whole scene points up the contrast between the two beautiful young people and the brigands. The latter are marked by their dark skin and unkempt faces (1.3.1), Charikleia by her courage (φρονήματος) and good breeding (εὐγενοῦς, 1.2.1). Even more pointedly, the brigands do not understand Greek (1.3.2). Charikleia offers a plaintive plea to the bandits to kill both Theagenes and herself and free them from the painful drama of their life, and the reader, who has been moved by this tragic speech, is surprised when the narrator announces that the brigands did not understand a word (Winkler 1982.105). They are true barbarians, and the narrator marks their inherent "otherness" by their lack of Greek.

The narrative continues to offer Charikleia and Theagenes as the archetypes of Greek culture. The first Greek they meet, Knemon, recognizes them as Greek (1.3.6). Charikleia explicitly allies herself with a Greek perspective. She is shocked, for example, that Theagenes would believe that she could consider marrying the bandit chief: "How absurd if you would believe that I would prefer a barbarian to a Greek" (1.25.5). Charikleia, in fact, is represented as so thoroughly Greek that even her own mother and father identify her as such when they first see her (still unrecognized) in Ethiopia. Her mother comments: "The poor child she might even be Greek." Her father answers: "She is a Greek" (Ἑλληνὶς μὲν, 10.7.5). But of course Charikleia is not Greek, but an Ethiopian princess. In retrospect, the reader comes to recognize that this first scene, seemingly constructed between two poles, Hellene and other, has set up a false dichotomy. One of the apparent Greeks, in fact, was not a Greek at all. Charikleia's successful "passing" challenges the notion of identity as an essential element of a person and reveals it to be more like a performance.

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3 See Walden 1894 and Marino 1990 for discussions of theatrical imagery and themes in Heliodorus.

Charikleia, having assumed the role of a Greek, acts it perfectly. Such an understanding of identity is antithetical to any solid construction of cultural "otherness," for it opens the possibility of the "other" passing for the same, just as Charikleia does.[4]

The narrative stresses this notion of identity as a performance not just through its constant usage of theatrical diction in its delineation of character, but also by showing, later in the narrative, how easy it is for Charikleia to put on yet another identity very different from that of the well-born Hellenic priestess. In Book 6, to make their traveling easier, Charikleia and Kalasiris decide to disguise themselves as beggars. The ruse works so well that when Charikleia, in their wanderings, meets up with Theagenes and runs and embraces him, he does not recognize her. The perceived reality of her assumed identity controls his reaction to her: "But of course the sight of her face hideously disguised with filth and of her tattered and ragged garments led him to suppose that she truly was some mendicant vagabond, and he tried to push her away and elbow her aside. But she refused to let him go . . . eventually he cuffed her soundly" (7.7.6).[5] This scene makes little sense in realistic terms; could a change of clothes and a dirty face actually cause a young lover not to recognize his beloved who is clinging to his breast? But the scene works rhetorically to demonstrate the fragility of any identity. Charikleia is only able to establish her identity through passwords the couple had agreed to earlier in the story. Heliodorus' narrative explicitly displays the slippery nature of "identity" and shows how easy it is to move from one into another, even suggesting that such central cultural categories as Hellenic and barbarian, elite and lowly are mutable. His composition subverts an understanding of identity as some unchanging presence, as an impermeable, static state, and such subversion works to undercut the foundations for definitions of cultural "otherness."

Cultural critics have noted that cultural expressions of difference, of gender, class, race, or ethnicity, often function in a homologous relationship to each other. That is, gender can stand in for class or race for gender. The basis for the association is analogy (Blackmer 1993.239). I see

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4 Charikleia, unlike the passers in "passing" novels, has no intention of deceiving; she believes herself to be Greek. That she is, however, so often and so explicitly identified as Greek in this novel that focuses on ethnic stereotypes suggests that one function of her identification is to call into question the solidity of ethnic/racial categories in a way similar to the function of passing characters in "passing" novels.

5 I am using J. R. Morgan's translation in Reardon 1989.

such an analogous structure operating in the *Aithiopika*. At the end of the romance, Heliodorus identifies himself as "a Phoenician from Emesa and a descendant of the Sun" (10.41.3). Charikleia is also a descendant of the sun, as her mother claims: "the sun is the founder of our race," ὁ γενεάρχης ≤μῶν ΄Ηλιος (4.8.2). By alluding to their shared descent, Heliodorus posits an analogy between himself and Charikleia and her race. I suggest that Heliodorus, in his narrative, is using the figure of the white maiden who is "really" black as a trope to figure the permeability of a category even more constitutive of his Hellenic culture than white/black, that is the categorical opposition of Hellenic/other (Lonis 1992.227). His identification of himself as a "Phoenician from Emesa" opens many questions about his origins (is he Arab or Phoenician?), but suggests one irrefutable conclusion—he explicitly presents himself as other than Greek (Millar 1993.306).[6] Yet his literary production gives little evidence for this. At the end of his Greek narrative, it is as shocking to discover that Heliodorus is not Greek as it is to discover that Charikleia is not.

It is shocking because Heliodorus' romance gives as little indication of its author's eastern background as Charikleia's white body does of her Ethiopian origins. Moreover, his practice is normative for the period. For a fundamental premise of Greco-Roman culture in the Roman empire was that an individual's embrace of Hellenic culture transformed his or her identity. A person trained in the rhetorical and philosophical schools of the empire, no matter from what locality or what race originally, embraced the homogeneity of the Hellenic tradition—as the uniform literary productions of the second and third century testify. Modern commentators seem to agree with their ancient counterparts in viewing such transformations as unproblematic. As Fergus Millar notes: "we cannot in fact expect that a sophisticated Greek writer . . . would ever offer us an analysis of the local culture of his home region" (1993.455). Texts from all across the Greek East erase local and ethnic difference and display the same vocabulary, the same register of allusions, the same schemes of development, all reflecting the Classical Greek heritage. Indeed, it was through such conformity to the

6 Millar notes how such terms of identity overlap: "It is no use our asserting that the Emesenes, or their leading families, were really 'Arabs' or 'Phoenicians' or 'Greeks.' All three descriptions are possible" (1993.306). Swain believes that Heliodorus "was probably an Arab (albeit thoroughly Hellenized)" (1996.118). My point is that, in any event, Heliodorus explicitly marks his non-Greek identity.

Hellenic ideal that individuals throughout the empire gave evidence of their *paideia* and their right to privileges.[7]

Heliodorus, in his identification of himself with the white Ethiopian, I suggest, projects an alternative model for our understanding of the Hellenized ethnic of the period—not "either/or" but "both/and"; not a transformed identity, but a dual identity. Through his topic and its development, Heliodorus challenges the understanding of those who believe, as Heinrich Kuch's words, for example, suggest, that the embrace of Greek culture was truly transformative and essentially unproblematic: "Likewise authors who wrote in Greek but were born in the Near East or Egypt cannot be called Hellenized 'barbarians.' As a result of their work, they were doubtless part of the cultural elite that has nothing to do with 'barbarians'" (1996.211). Contemporary cultural studies have made us wary of such claims for cultural homogeneity. They teach us to see in the homogeneous cultural practices of the Greek East not evidence for the reality of a universalized Greek subject (one that had "nothing to do with barbarians"), but rather the signs of the cultural supremacy of one social block over another (Ashcroft 1989.149). The Hellenized subject is more about opportunities for privilege than identity.

For it was only by embracing Hellenic culture that authors could achieve a cultural presence. The case of language provides a model. Millar, in his *The Roman Near East*, notes the lack of epigraphical evidence for local languages in the east during this period. But as Brent Shaw points out, this absence may not imply that the languages were not spoken, but merely that users of a local language "simply had no political or public sphere that could serve as a medium in which it could find expression" (Shaw 1995.291). Greco-Roman culture functioned to erase signs of the "other." As Immanuel Wallerstein has commented: "universalism is a gift of the powerful to the weak which confronts the latter with a double bind: to refuse the gift is to lose, to accept the gift is to lose" (1991.217, quoted by

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7 Although it has been denied, racial prejudice was present in antiquity, against Arabs, in fact. As Glen Bowersock comments: "The much touted absence of racial prejudice in the Roman Empire is a myth of modern times, and distinguished writers from Cicero to Zosimus can be seen indulging in the most irresponsible slander of Arab people" (1983.124). In his footnote on the same page, Bowersock calls the notion that the Roman empire knew cultural, but not racial, prejudice absurd and gives examples. If Heliodorus considered himself an Arab, as his self-identification may suggest, he may have experienced this prejudice.

Fowler 1993.133). It is not difficult to imagine that an author who identifies himself as a "Phoenician from Emesa" may have been concerned that his conformity to Hellenic conventions had a cost in a loss of authenticity, an effacement of his difference, in the pull of the universal standard (cf. Swain 1996.289–308). I suggest that the emphases in the *Aithiopika* on the possibility of a multiplicity of identities, on the multiple languages circulating in the culture, and on cultural appropriation and legitimacy give evidence that Heliodorus had such a concern and that his narrative proposes an alternative model for understanding identity.

Critics have often noted the unusual focus on the use of diverse languages in the *Aithiopika*; the narrative is thick with careful references to who spoke what languages and how members of this polyglot society managed or did not manage to communicate with each other. The narrator's use of language in the opening scene to mark the difference between Charikleia and Theagenes and the Egyptian bandits has already been examined, but throughout the text this attention to language continues. A sampling of examples can display this emphasis on language.[8] The narrative suggests, for example, the drastic results of not knowing a language. Thyamis, the brigand chief, kills the wrong woman in a dark cave because of a failure in communication. The narrative emphasizes language: "He went into the cave as fast as he could run and jumped down into it, shouting long and loud in the Egyptian tongue (ἐμβοῶν . . . αἰγυπτιάζων). Just by the entrance he came upon a woman who spoke to him in Greek. Guided by her voice, he seized her head in his left hand and drove his sword through her breast" (1.30.7). Thyamis intended to kill Charikleia, his beloved, but in fact kills Thisbe, another Greek woman, because he does not understand her words, but only recognizes that he hears Greek.

Most references to language are more casual. Charikles notes, for example, that the Ethiopian gymnosophist who gave Charikleia to him spoke Greek hesitantly (2.30.1). When Kalasiris and Charikleia run into an Egyptian witch, the text notes that Kalasiris "had to speak to her in the Egyptian tongue" (6.12.3) and had to translate her words for Charikleia (6.14.1). The evil Persian princess, Arsake, it is noted, must use an interpreter in her attempts to seduce Theagenes; the narrator explains "for although she understood Greek, she could not speak it" (7.19.3). The

8 Morgan 1982.258–60 gives a complete list of references to the *Aithiopika*'s attention to language. Also see Saïd 1992.

narrative also notes that her eunuchs similarly have only limited knowledge of Greek (8.13.5). In their war efforts, the Ethiopians make use of an Egyptian who speaks Persian (8.17.2). When Hydaspes, the king of Ethiopia, speaks Greek, the narrator explains "for this language is cultivated among the gymnosophists and rulers of Ethiopia" (9.25.3). Later in Ethiopia, the Ethiopian crowd's lack of Greek becomes a focus; the text notes that they can not understand much of the action surrounding Charikleia's recognition as it is enacted in front of them (10.15.1, 10.38.3). In the culminating moments of the romance, however, Sisimithres, the chief gymnosophist, turns to the crowd, "speaking Greek no longer," according to the narrator, "but Ethiopian for the whole assembly to understand" (10.39.1). In reply, Hydaspes also speaks to the crowd "in their native tongue" (1.40.1).

Different explanations have been given for this emphasis on language. John Morgan has explained it as part of Heliodorus' effort to provide realistic detail in his romance narrative (Morgan 1982.257–59). John Winkler sees this attention to language as part of the romance's emphasis on the difficulties associated with correct cognition (1982.112–13). I would add another interpretation to these explanations. Heliodorus' frequent references to languages other than Greek and to the people speaking these languages serve to force his readers to recognize and acknowledge that these languages are literally silenced in the flow of his Greek narrative. Heliodorus says that Sisimithres and Hydaspes speak in Ethiopian, but all the reader has is the Greek. When Heliodorus notes the use of an interpreter, readers are forced to recognize that they have not had the experience of the native language, only of the interpretation. The effect of these accumulating references to languages spoken, but unheard, is to compel the reader to hear and acknowledge the silence of all those "others" left out of Greco-Roman culture. As Shaw's remark above suggests, this silence should not be interpreted to mean necessarily that native languages were not spoken, but instead to highlight how completely Greco-Roman control was exerted over the media of cultural communication.[9] Heliodorus' repeated attention to language allows the reader to experience the poignant truth that in the Greco-Roman world the "other" never gets to speak for

9 Ashcroft 1989.78 defines the importance of such control: "a key feature of colonial oppression is the control over the means of communication rather than control over life or property or even language itself."

itself as "other," but instead is erased within the dominant discourse (During 1995.125). We can never know if Heliodorus himself spoke a Semitic language whose silencing he had experienced in this cultural milieu, but it is not completely implausible that he may have been bilingual. Iamblichus, another novelist and perhaps also another Emesene, attests to his own bilingualism (Swain 1996.304 and Gawlikowski 1994.244).

In this context of diverse languages, I suggest, Heliodorus' description of Charikleia's language ability gives some evidence for his attitude toward a dominant culture's appropriation of the "other." When, at seven years old, she was handed over to Charikles, the narrative explicitly notes that Charikleia did not know any Greek (2.33.1). Ten years later, when she finally returns home to her native place, she is depicted as no longer knowing any Ethiopian and needs an interpreter to speak her native language to her own country people (9.24.2). Heliodorus characterizes Charikleia's assumption of her Hellenic identity as, in a certain respect, a loss—a loss of the ability to communicate with her own people, to speak any longer as "the other," or to the "other." In this characterization, Heliodorus displays the power of the dominant culture to appropriate and overwhelm the "other's" difference and identity.

The narrative's explanation for Charikleia's white skin also seems to hint at the violation inherent in such cultural appropriation. In Book 4, Kalasiris reads in the message included among Charikleia's birth tokens Persinna's explanation for her daughter's whiteness: "But you, the child I bore, had a skin of gleaming white, something quite foreign to Ethiopians. I knew the reason: during your father's intimacy with me the painting had presented me with the image of Andromeda, who was depicted completely naked, for Perseus was in the very act of releasing her from the rocks, and had unfortunately shaped the seed to her exact likeness" (4.8.5). Charikleia is finally recognized by her father in Ethiopia when this same picture of Andromeda is produced and the startling resemblance between the girl and the portrait affirms her mother's statement.

This painted image of Andromeda, one of the few Ethiopians to feature prominently in Greek myth, can almost serve as an emblem for cultural appropriation.[10] Here the girl stands entirely exposed and helpless

10 The rescue of Andromeda is one of the most frequently depicted myths in antiquity (Bartsch 1989.71 and references). In some versions, Andromeda is not depicted as an Ethiopian.

before her Greek rescuer, completely naked (πανταχόθεν . . . γυμνήν, 4.8.5). Heliodorus portrays her rescue, in some sense, as a rape—as his explicitly eroticized image of Andromeda suggests. Perseus does marry Andromeda and take her back to Greece, but, in the process, she loses her color and identity. In Greek representations, Andromeda is often depicted as white (Snowden 1970.154). In this representation of the white Andromeda, Heliodorus conveys the inherently binary nature of the cultural appropriation of the "other" by the dominant culture. Only through such appropriation can the "other" have any place or role in the dominant discourse, yet in the very act of entering that discourse, the "other" loses its defining difference. Andromeda enters Greek culture, but the cost is her black identity. Heliodorus, by representing the Ethiopian Andromeda as already white in the Ethiopian king's bedroom, may also be suggesting the impact of such universal Hellenization on the upper classes of nations that embraced Hellenic culture, as so many of the elite of the period did. Andromeda's Hellenized representation has a "shocking effect (quite literally) upon the cultural identity of this class (i.e., it is made white)."[11]

This conflict over losing and/or denying one's origins has been a perennial problem for writers from the periphery who enter into a dominant imported culture. As commentators have pointed out about the educated Indian upper class writing English prose in the nineteenth century: "The producers signify by the very fact of writing in the language of the dominant culture that they have temporarily or permanently entered a specific and privileged class endowed with the language, education and leisure necessary to produce such works" (Ashcroft 1989.5). Greek prose writers from the periphery such as Heliodorus or Lucian may have felt the loss associated with such a passage into the dominant culture, a loss of connection to origins, of connection to the difference that marked their genesis. Lucian says of himself at one point that he was "still barbarous in speech and almost wearing a jacket in the Assyrian style" (*Bis Accus*. 27, Millar 1993.454, Swain 1996.289–311).[12] Every passage into Greek culture by necessity included a "passage from" as well as a "passage to."

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11 I owe this latter point to one of *Arethusa*'s anonymous readers.

12 As Fergus Millar notes, Lucian's comment does not allow us to tell whether by "barbarous in speech," "he is referring to a still unpolished style of Greek or to his having, in youth, spoken a dialect of Aramaic" (1993.457). Swain 1996.312–21 discusses Lucian's cultural identity.

What happens to the individuals who make such passages? In what sense is the passer, the one who has passed unrecognizably into another culture or group, still a legitimate member of his or her own original group? That Heliodorus was concerned with such questions may be surmised from the emphasis on legitimacy in the romance. The impetus of the whole plot, for example, results from Persinna's fear that her husband will be able to supply only one reading for her giving birth to a white Ethiopian. The baby must be illegitimate (ὀνόματος νόθου, 4.8.6). An Ethiopian who is not black must, by definition, not be an Ethiopian; she is a counterfeit. To prove this latter statement false is the goal of the whole narrative; a goal finally realized at the narrative's denouement when Charikleia is proved to be both white and a true Ethiopian, the royal daughter and the future high priestess and queen. Identity is proven to be not necessarily an either/or category—either real or counterfeit—but a both/and category—both different *and* legitimate, white *and* Ethiopian, and, one perhaps ought to add, Phoenician *and* Hellenic. By focusing on the white Ethiopian, the narrative insists on the possibility of a multitude of identities for an individual in the course of a life and demonstrates that ostensible difference does not necessarily entail a loss of legitimate connection with one's origins.

Heliodorus makes this latter point clear in Charikleia's recognition scene in Ethiopia. Sisimithres, invoking the need to demonstrate legitimate succession (γνησίας διαδοχ∞ς), orders Charikleia to expose herself: "Bare your arm, girl: she had a black birthmark on her upper arm. There is nothing indecent in laying bare that which will confirm your parentage and descent" (10.15.2). Charikleia's white body retains some mark of her birth from black origins, and the dictum that it is never "unseemly" (ἀπρεπ°ς) to show the proof of your parentage and race (τὸ τῶν φύντων καὶ γ°νους μαρτύριον) may resonate for all those "passing" in Greco-Roman culture. On entering the dominant culture, passers need sacrifice neither their own ethnic legitimacy nor their heritage. They, like Charikleia, also can be (metaphorically) both white and Ethiopian.

Heliodorus employs a standard narrative technique to underline his point that identity is not an either/or category. He tells another story emphasizing the same themes of passing and legitimacy. In Book 3, Kalasiris tells Knemon a strange tale about Homer's origins. He insists that Homer was by birth an Egyptian from Thebes. As the narrative relates: "ostensibly he was the son of a high priest, but in actual fact his father was Hermes: for once when his wife was sleeping in the temple . . . the god

coupled with her and sired Homer, who bore on his person the token of this union of human and divine, for, from the moment of his birth, one of his thighs was covered with a shaggy growth of hair (3.14.2–3). Homer was exiled from Thebes when his body, marked by the strange growth of hair, indicated to his father that he was illegitimate (νόθος, 3.14.4). There are obvious similarities between Kalasiris' story and the case of Charikleia. In both, a child is born and because of a physical difference forced into exile; both pass as Greeks. Homer's story is particularly instructive in undermining the concept of fixed identity. For the reader learns that the very fountainhead of Greek culture and *paideia* is in fact a counterfeit and not Greek at all. And if not even Homer is Greek, what can it possibly mean to be Greek? The answer is obvious—to be Greek simply means to pass as a Greek. As Homer did. The narrative depicts him wandering among the Greeks and "singing his poetry." Again the narrative affirms that identity is not an essence but a cultural performance. It depicts the most successful performer in Greek culture, Homer, as an outsider. This story, like that of Charikleia, challenges the whole concept of essential difference and the structures relying on it.

The ending of the *Aithiopika* explicitly abolishes the antitheses of difference and concludes with a celebration of the unity of disparate elements brought about, as the narrative, explains "by the same divine force that had staged this whole drama and that had now produced a perfect harmony of diametric opposites: joy and sorrow combined; tears mingled with laughter; the most hideous horror transformed into celebration . . . they found those whom they had not sought and lost those whom they thought to have found" (10.38.4). The words "found those whom they had not sought" refer to Charikleia and Theagenes, who were almost sacrificed in Ethiopia as aliens until Charikleia proved to her father that she was, in her words "your countryman, a native of this land" (10.11.3). The white stranger proves herself to be the black king's daughter. The message implicit in the romance is manifest—difference is not a signifying presence but simply a deferral of recognition, a refusal to close off possibilities of understanding differently. As the example of Charikleia demonstrates, the "other" needs only to be recognized to be received.

According to Northrop Frye, romance is the genre of wish fulfillment. The fate of another "Phoenician from Emesa,"[13] the emperor

13 Herodian calls Elagabalus' grandmother, Julia Maesa, "a Phoenician from Emesa."

M. Aurelius Antoninus, "Elagabalus," suggests that it was only in such a genre that the dream of a Greco-Roman subject holding a multiplicity of cultural identities without conflict could be entertained, at least in the third century.[14] Antoninus came from a family that, as Fergus Millar has noted, achieved an "exceptionally high level of integration into the wider imperial service of the Roman Empire" (1993.304). Elagabalus' grandmother, Julia Maesa, was the sister of Julia Domna, the wife of the emperor Septimius Severus. Her husband was adlected out of the equestrian order into the senate and reached the consulate (Bowersock 1983.117). Her two daughters' husbands, from Syrian Apamea and Arca-Caesarea respectively, both had important imperial careers and reached the senate, and both daughters gave birth to future emperors, Elagabalus and Alexander Severus. In this family, as G. W. Bowersock has commented: "in an astonishingly short time Arabs reached the pinnacle of Roman government" (1983.118). This was a family obviously adept at passing.

Yet if Elagabalus' career suggests anything, it is that, at least during his period, there was no acceptance yet for a both/and identity in the Greco-Roman empire. In antiquity and still today, Elagabalus is notorious for his particularly nefarious reputation. The basis for this reputation seems to have been his attempt to retain elements of the "other" as he performed the role of Roman emperor. Elagabalus entered Greek culture, but did not repudiate the marks of his eastern origins. Instead he made ostentatious display of his foreignness. Herodian describes his appearance even before he became emperor: "He used to appear in public in barbarian clothes, wearing a long sleeved chiton that hung to his feet and was gold and purple.

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14 The date of the novel is contested; the debate centers around whether Heliodorus' description of the siege of Syene (9.3–11) is dependent on Julian's account of the real siege of Nisibis (*Orations* 1 and 3). Bowersock 1994 believes that such dependence is established and dates the novel to after the mid-fourth century. Swain disagrees and holds that the novel belongs to the second sophistic period. I also prefer the earlier date. Bowersock 1994.46 sees the novel as endorsing a new tolerance for diverse cultures within the Hellenism that is coming into being during this period after the mid-fourth century. He suggests that fiction, in particular, embodied this new tolerance: "Fiction, and perhaps fiction alone, signals the disappearance of barbarism as a conceptual means of asserting the superiority of Graeco-Roman culture. The old standard of Hellenism broke down in the second and third centuries, and in doing so it made way for a new kind of Hellenism, an ecumenical Hellenism that could actually embrace much that was formerly barbaric" (1994.53). Heliodorus' novel does focus on the relationship between Hellenism and the "other," but rather than evoking a more ecumenical Hellenism, I suggest, it proposes more fluidity within the categories.

His legs from the waist down to the tips of his toes were completely covered similarly with garments ornamented with gold and purple. On his head he wore a crown of precious stones glowing with different colors" (5.3.6–7). Herodian explains that the soldiers who were to proclaim him emperor were first attracted by his beauty when they saw him dancing in barbarian fashion as part of priestly duties to his god Elagabalus (5.3.8). Dio notes that he earned the nickname "Assyrian" (8.11) by wearing barbarian dress similar to that of Syrian priests. This term obviously stands for the "other" here. Dio also refers to the "barbarian" songs Elagabalus addressed to his god and to his circumcising himself and abstaining from swine's flesh (80.11). Even before he reached Rome, his grandmother had tried to persuade him to abandon his eastern attire lest he offend the Romans, but in vain (Herodian 5.5.5).

What all the sources seem to find most reprehensible in Elagabalus is his flaunting of his eastern origin, his unrepressed "otherness." And as contemporary cultural studies have taught us, in Gina Marchetti's words: "ethnicity is never neutral; rather images of ethnicity always conjure up images of masculinity and femininity. Racial and ethnic hierarchies, for example, are often maintained through fantasies which reinforce those differences through reference to gender" (1991.288). And while sexual smearing was a staple of imperial biography as early as Suetonius' depiction of the Julio-Claudians, the emphasis in the historical sources on Elagabalus' aberrant sexuality suggests that this condemnation of his notorious femininity and sexual proclivities may well have had a racial and/or ethnic sub-text. As Timothy Barnes points out, the unrelenting hammering of Elagabalus in the sources earned him a particularly widespread notoriety (1972.53–54). His supposed femininity provides a target. Herodian describes how the soldiers were disgusted to see the emperor with made up face, dressed effeminately in golden necklaces and soft clothes, dancing for all to see (5.8). The *Historia Augusta* not only reports how he made up his face to look like a painting of Venus and depilated his whole body (5.5), but explicitly refers to his lewd behavior. He is reported to have had agents whose only task was to search out men with large organs and to bring them to Rome for him (5.3). Enacting a marriage ceremony with a male favorite, he employed a matron of honor to attend him at his "wedding" (10.5). Dio's portrayal attacks Elagabalus' sexual transgressions. He describes the emperor's actions after a male favorite had greeted him with the words, "My Lord Emperor, Hail." He bent his neck so as to assume a ravishing feminine pose . . . answered: "Call me not Lord, for I am a Lady" (80.16). According to Dio, this false Antoninus even solicited

physicians to contrive a woman's vagina for him (80.16). Both Herodian and Dio testify that it was this perverse behavior that turned the soldiers against him (Herodian 5.8.8, Dio 80.17). Finally they killed him and his mother and the two, in Herodian's words, "were handed over to those who wished to drag them around and desecrate them. After being dragged though the city for a long time and mutilated they were thrown into the sewers which run down to the river Tiber" (5.8.9). I suggest that latent within the sources' vilification of Elagabalus' gender identity is a condemnation of his ethnicity. His cousin, Alexander Severus, who did not insist so blatantly on exhibiting his ethnicity, fares much better in the sources. The example of Elagabalus' failure to make workable a both/and identity as emperor, both Roman and eastern, displays how little space there was in the "real" Greco-Roman world at this point for the position affirmed in his ideal romance by another Phoenician from Emesa, Heliodorus.

Saint Joseph College

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