This summer, I investigated the ancient Greek and Latin novel. Today, the novel is a popular form of literature and entertainment that is typically considered an invention of the seventeenth century. However, novels existed in ancient Greece and Rome. The ancient novel developed mostly during the second century C.E., and was influenced by several earlier genres, including epic, tragedy, and history. However, instead of stories about divine and heroic figures or important historical events which are the focus of earlier genres, ancient novels consist of stories about normal human beings. With their somewhat ridiculous plots, including accidental burials, kidnappings, and extensive travel, ancient novels are more akin to modern soap operas than to the works of Thucydides or Homer.

My goal for the summer was to develop my own definition of the ancient novel as a genre. In order to do this, I read several Greek and Latin novels, including Callihrhoe by Chariton, An Ephesian Tale by Xenophon of Ephesus, Leucippe and Clitophon by Achilles Tatius, Daphnis and Chloe by Longus, The Aithiopika by Heliodorus, The Satyricon by Petronius, and The Golden Ass by Apuleius, as well as scholarship on each individual novel and the genre as a whole.

Defining the ancient novel as a genre turned out to be more complicated than I thought it would. The ancient Greeks and Romans were very concerned with genre and exactly what kind of literature they were writing, but modern scholars do not have any perfect or ideal examples of any genre of ancient literature, including the ancient novel. With the ancient novel, each author seems to be claiming his own space in the genre, so what is typical of one author may be completely absent in another author’s work. I found that it is very hard to define the ancient novel beyond a work of prose literature in which the hero and/or heroine travels, but even that definition does not quite fit every extant ancient novel. Also, I found that the Latin and Greek novels are distinct from each other, and almost opposite. The Greek novels tend to involve a hero and heroine falling in love, then being separated and reunited, often multiple times. The Greek novels are concerned with marriage and good morals. Latin novels, on the other hand, contain amoral characters who wander around almost aimlessly. They do not focus on marriage or morals. While it was beneficial to read Greek and Latin novels together, I would not lump them together as one type of literature. However, we have so few examples, particularly of the Latin novel, that it is impossible to know for certain if the qualities we observe in extant ancient novels would hold for all ancient novels ever written. In addition, it is difficult to ascertain the context of the novels and how the novels relate to each other because we know so little about the authors, the intended audience, and even the dates of the novels.

Despite my difficulty defining the ancient novel as a genre, I learned a lot about the genre just from the invaluable opportunity I had over the summer to read as much about the ancient novel as possible. I now have several questions to delve into as I continue my research in a senior thesis this year.

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