

COMPARING STRUCTURES IN THE GREEK NOVEL AND DEMOTIC NARRATIVE

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Introduction

There has already been a long history of work that, in one way or another, has involved the study of Demotic Egyptian narrative fiction alongside the Greek Novel. In the past, the impetus for treating Greek and Demotic together has almost entirely stemmed from a wish to champion one or other of the two opposing sides in debates concerning the possible dependence of one tradition upon the other. One disagreement has been as to whether or not the Greek Novel, a late-comer in Greek literature, could to any degree have derived from Egyptian narrative². Of course, other « oriental » sources have been championed, instead, or in addition³. Another question has been as to whether or not Demotic literature as a whole emerged as an imitation of established Greek models⁴. The disputes have faded somewhat. From the Greek side, there perhaps is a realisation that, even if it were to become clearly documented that Greek writers had access to Egyptian fiction, and that they were demonstrably inspired by it, the consequences for our study of the Novel would be very limited⁵. The aim of this discussion is not to revisit these issues of « influence », but rather to consider what may be gained from a comparative approach.

Background

The « corpus » of the Greek Novel is a concept that has emerged only in modern times⁶. The familiar term « Greek Novel » is adhered to here, although there is much to be said for terms such as « Greek and Roman » ; and the later, Greek, « Byzantine Novel » would equally repay comparative study⁷. The core of the repertoire is formed by just five well-preserved novels, by (or ascribed to) the authors Achilles Tatius, Chariton, Heliodorus, Longus, and Xenophon (« of Ephesus »)⁸. They are long, complex, fictional prose narratives, following the adventures of a pair of sorely-tried but eventually reunited lovers, and generally deserving their frequent label as « Romances », because of a degree of similarity to the medieval and later tradition of the chivalric romance. Demotic narratives are « Demotic » in that they are written in the Demotic script : the cursive Egyptian script originally developed for documentary use in the seventh century BC⁹. Their language (also termed « Demotic ») is a formal prose style, a late stage of the native Egyptian language, preceding the emergence of the final stage of the language, Coptic¹⁰. They comprise fictional stories, but generally feature characters reminiscent, at least, of historical figures¹¹.

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² See Barns (1956) ; Rutherford (2000).

³ See Anderson (1984).

⁴ See Hoffmann (1995) 22–29 ; Thissen (1999) ; Volten (1956).

⁵ See Stephens / Winkler (1995) 11–18.

⁶ See Reeve (2008).

⁷ See Beaton (1996) ; Burton (2008).

⁸ Translations and information on editions are to be found in Reardon (1989). Note recent editions of Chariton in Reardon (2004) and of Xenophon in O'Sullivan (2005), and their recent translations by Trzaskoma (2010).

⁹ See Vleeming (1981).

¹⁰ See Depauw (1997) 33–39.

¹¹ See Ryholt (2005) 163.

Intuitive differences

At first sight, the differences between the two bodies of material are glaring, and might suggest that there could be little to be gained from studying them side by side. The Greek Novels survive via manuscript traditions, very varied, but analogous to those of the bulk of classical and late-antique literary works. In contrast, the Demotic narratives are preserved on papyrus rolls dating from the period of the works' original popularity. To set against the immediacy of our access to the actual copies of the Demotic handled by their ancient audience is the damaged and fragmentary form in which many of them survive.

Comparability

Yet a case can be made that the two corpora are not so dissimilar. The Greek works do not all come to us intact or (arguably) in anything like their original form, whereas a few of the Demotic rolls are complete and several are largely undamaged, or at least preserve a long sequence of undamaged pages, permitting a realistic appraisal of their structure.

As for the time-frames, the manuscripts of Demotic narratives come from a period from the late fourth century BC down to the third century AD. There is a general consensus that the third century saw the end of both their production and their circulation; if their tradition in any way lived on, it would be in oral form, in Greek, or eventually in Coptic, where views concerning the sources of the *Cambyses Romance* have been very varied¹². The date of the actual beginnings of written literature in Demotic is disputed, but most demoticists would conjecture a history going back before our earliest surviving manuscripts, perhaps back to the fifth or sixth centuries BC¹³. Nevertheless, the relationship with earlier Egyptian traditions of narratives, written in Hieratic and expressed in earlier forms of the language, is even more doubtful¹⁴. The forthcoming publication of a recently identified composition of strongly narrative character, P. Queen's College, dating from around 700 BC, and written in the highly cursive form of Hieratic of the Theban area known as « Abnormal Hieratic », may throw new light¹⁵. For the Greek material, there are disputes (some vexed) over dating, but perhaps a range from first to fourth centuries AD would be what is typically supposed¹⁶. Thus there is a considerable overlap in the date ranges of the two corpora. The Demotic papyri pretty certainly did not circulate outside Egypt, but the Greek texts definitely might be copied *in* Egypt (papyri preserve fragments of even a couple of the five core Novels). Thus examples of each could in theory have been read side by side – although received wisdom would be that they were actually current within different milieux in Egypt¹⁷.

Unified or diverse corpora

The five core Greek Novels have long been perceived and discussed as a kind of corpus. Depending upon their approach, scholars have emphasised either the similarities or the differences, but it is easy to list the common features: for example, their length, the complexity of their plots, their colourful settings, the handling of the characters, and their happy endings. Yet, the set of five can hardly be seen as a random sample: their transmission has depended upon audiences at particular times and places that have appreciated them¹⁸. Compared with, say, Homer or Virgil, they have been lucky to survive. In addition,

¹² See Behlmer (1996); Dillery (1999); Kákosy (1989); Richter (1997/1998); Thissen (1977); (1996).

¹³ See Hoffmann (2009).

¹⁴ See Jasnow (1999); Quirke (1996) 274–276; Ryholt (2005) 162; Vittmann (1998b).

¹⁵ See Baines / Donker van Heel / Fischer-Elfert (1998); photograph of one column in Baines (1999).

¹⁶ See Reardon (1989) 5–6.

¹⁷ See Hunter (2008); Ryholt (2005); Van Minnen (1998).

¹⁸ See Bowie (1994); Burton (2008); Stephens (1994).

it is now routine to take into account a far more extensive range of material, including significant (though fragmentary) finds on papyri, as instanced already by the scope of Reardon's collected volume¹⁹. Unsurprisingly, the expanded corpus has come to seem much more diverse.

In contrast to the five core Greek Novels, the Demotic narratives have depended for their survival on the situation and interests of the original users of the manuscripts, and the normal accidents of finds from ancient sites. The tendency among demoticists has been to welcome for analysis all narrative material that is not self-evidently to be classed as documentary²⁰. We lack any direct ancient comment upon how the narratives were viewed, and there are few hints as to how genres of stories might have been pigeonholed into categories (certainly, there was an ancient term for « to narrate », « narrative »)²¹. Demoticists have been anxious to leave no material out of account, having, alongside Egyptologists in general, awoken late to the value of considering what made a text literary in Egyptian society²². The most striking example is the lengthy sixth-century BC papyrus first published as the « Petition of Petiese », which has made the transition from perceived document to a text that is seen to meet some of the criteria for literariness, and is often now termed a « family chronicle »²³.

Thus it could be suggested that the Demotic corpus, like the Greek, has undergone a rapid expansion in recent years – to which also the identification of many new texts has contributed – and in both cases a degree of stocktaking and reappraisal is in progress. Views of the nature of the two ancient audiences have changed, and now most think in terms of highly literate readerships, well acquainted with their respective literary traditions and wider written cultures.

Structure and orality

In considering structure, there is one difference between the customary approaches to the two bodies of material. Students of the Greek Novel have no hesitation in writing of an « author » as deciding (*inter alia*) upon matters of structure²⁴. There are, of course, some difficulties as to the identity of some of the putative authors. However, for example, the recent *Cambridge Companion to the Greek and Roman Novel* has an « Index of Greek and Roman Novelists »²⁵.

In the case of the Demotic material, the usual approach has been very different. The works are, by the universal dynastic Egyptian tradition in the case of narratives, not ascribed to any author²⁶. Demoticists have repeatedly been fascinated by the idea of an oral origin for the stories, or at the least by the idea of a close relationship with oral traditions. In line with this, it has been common to regard aspects of structure as stemming from the nature of oral performance – at least as this is perceived by the particular modern scholar in question. However, it may be more appropriate to recognise the surviving material as plainly belonging in a written literary tradition, even if it may show similarities to the procedures of oral story-telling, and even if aspects of the ancient modes of performance are potentially of great significance. More generally, the usual approach to Demotic

¹⁹ See Reardon (1989) ; Stephens / Winkler (1995).

²⁰ See Hoffmann / Quack (2007) 13–20 ; Quack (2005) 1–6 and 162–170.

²¹ See Tait (2011) 399–400.

²² See Assmann (1974) ; Loprieno (1996b).

²³ See Chauveau (1996) ; Hoffmann / Quack (2007) 22–54 ; Ray (2001) 97–112 ; Vittmann (1998a) ; Wessetzky (1977).

²⁴ See Reardon (1989) 6, citing Perry (1967) 175.

²⁵ See Stephens / Winkler (1995) 378–384.

²⁶ See Derchain (1996) ; Fischer-Elfert (2003) 123–131 ; Parkinson (2002) 24–25 ; (2009) 15–19 and 188–189 ; Quirke (2004) 29–36.

narrative has been to see structural features as being dictated entirely by the tradition rather than as resulting from authorial choice : that is, that the texts supposedly followed standard patterns somewhat mechanically.

Structural devices

The techniques of narration and the deployment of repetition are two facets of structure that repay close study. In the case of both bodies of material, an area that has received considerable attention is narratology in the narrowest sense : questions of who narrates, the authorial voice, the use of stories-within-stories. This has perhaps been followed up more rapidly and thoroughly for the Greek Novels²⁷. The situation among these is very varied, with the nesting of stories-within-stories sometimes very complex. It has often been pointed out that the Demotic narratives contain a high proportion of direct speech. This could seem an unhelpful or even perverse way of describing the texts, in the light of the fact that stories-within-stories are so prevalent : that is, much narration of essential plot-information is placed in the mouths of characters. The outstanding example is the First Setna story (papyrus manuscript of the Ptolemaic Period)²⁸. In this, one third of the total length of the narrative is an account by the « ghost » of the wife of a great magician of the distant past of the circumstances by which her only child, she herself, and finally her husband perished, and sadly came to be buried in tombs half the length of the country apart. Partly it is indistinguishable from authorial narration, but at a number of points it reveals itself as the voice of a character in the plot ; for example its final words very clearly bring out who is speaking to whom :

These are the calamities that happened to us because of this papyrus roll that you are demanding be handed over to you ; you have nothing to do with it, whereas our life on earth was taken away because of it²⁹ !

Certain kinds of direct speech cannot be mistaken for narration : for example, when two or more characters engage in conversation, above all if they ask questions or make requests or commands. The Demotic narratives certainly do make plentiful use of this kind of presentation. Regardless of whether its use is deliberate or not, it compensates for other respects in which Demotic story-telling is less complex : the stories avoid the description of personality, and rarely indicate what characters think, although telling what they see or discover is a frequent device for revealing information that other narrative traditions put across in different ways.

Repetition of whole passages of text is prominent among our surviving Demotic material : there is considerable variation in its operation. A feature that is seemingly universal is that the *fabula* – the bare story-line that underlies the narrative – involves similar incidents that recur, and which therefore can be related in the same words. Such repetitions are not a substantive issue in the Greek Novel : the interest lies in what other aspects of structure may play a similar role, and this has been studied chiefly in relation to individual authors³⁰.

The Demotic narrative that we tend to see as the most sophisticated, the First Setna story, already cited above, has some striking examples of repetition. One occurs within a very short passage. The serpent who guards the boxes in which a magical book belonging to the god Thoth is stored is twice killed by the hero, but twice it magically comes back to

²⁷ See Bartsch (1989) ; Reardon (1994), repr. in Swain (1999) 243–258 ; Whitmarsh / Bartsch (2008).

²⁸ Text and translation are to be found in Goldbrunner (2006) ; translations in Hoffmann / Quack (2007) 137–152 ; Lichtheim (1980) 127–138 ; Simpson (2003) 453–469.

²⁹ 4/25–26 : the translations here are by the author.

³⁰ E.g. Reardon (1982) 1–27, repr. in Swain (1999) 163–188.

life. At his third attempt to kill it, the hero cuts it in two and uses sand to prevent the segments from reuniting. The repeated struggles with the serpent highlight the herculean nature of the task of overcoming it, but the exact repetition of words is not the only way in which this idea could have been put across. In fact, the text does employ essentially verbatim repetition, adding only « again » and (for example) « for a second time » :

*He fought with it and he killed it ; it came back to life and was as before. He fought with it again for a second time and he killed it ; it came back to life again. He fought with it again for a third time and he cut it into two pieces (...)*³¹.

Similarly, the tragic deaths by drowning, in successive incidents, of the hero's only son, and of his wife (already mentioned above – as the whole episode is narrated by the « ghost » of the hero's wife herself, her own death is naturally told in the first person) are narrated in exactly parallel phrases. The cumulative effect upon the hero is thus brought out, and his own decision to drown himself as a consequence is again expressed in similar phraseology. These instances occupy a lengthier span of text than the previous example of the combat with the serpent :

*(...) Meribptah the boy came out from under the awning of Pharaoh's boat. He fell into the river, and he became a « praised one » of Pre [drowned]. Everyone who was on board cried out with a scream (...)*³².

Several lines of text later :

*(...) I came out from under the awning of Pharaoh's boat. I fell into the river, and I became a « praised one » of Pre. Everyone who was on board cried out with a scream (...)*³³.

Several lines of text later :

*(...) Nanerferkaptah came out from under the awning of Pharaoh's boat. He fell into the river, and he became a « praised one » of Pre. Every man who was on board cried out with a scream (...)*³⁴.

These instances of repetition are in each case confined to particular sections of the narrative : they concern a particular stage in the *fabula*. They are not formulae that might be exploited in a variety of narrative situations. A different feature is to be seen in one of the Inaros-Petubastis stories known as Papyrus Spiegelberg (the designation of the chief papyrus manuscript, which is of the first century BC)³⁵. In the nature of the *fabula*, warrior heroes are frequently arming themselves for and taking part in single combat. Also, the Pharaoh frequently finds his supporters worsted in the conflict, and has recourse to consulting the image of the god Amun for confirmation as to how to meet each emergency. Similar phraseology therefore occurs frequently, and the repetitions are distributed widely across the text. However, interestingly, the various manuscripts differ as to whether or not they introduce elegant variations in the phraseology, or try to achieve variety by adding extra material in individual passages.

³¹ 3/32–33.

³² 4/8–9.

³³ 4/13–14.

³⁴ 4/20.

³⁵ See Hoffmann / Quack (2007) 88–107 ; Spiegelberg (1910).

Conclusion

This brief discussion has concentrated upon a few examples taken from Demotic narratives. The main aim has been to illustrate that, despite the very different modes of study that have grown up around the two bodies of material, there are a number of areas where very direct comparisons between Greek and Demotic narratives are both feasible and potentially useful.

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