

Combating/Combative Desire: A Literary Criticism of Achilles Tatius' *Leukippe & Clitophon* (1.4–1.6.2)

With the growing body of feminist theory, recent decades of scholarship surrounding the Ancient Greek novel have engendered a vast array of inquiries into power dynamics between bodies that harbour desires. Similarly to other Greek novels, Achilles Tatius' *Leukippe & Clitophon* from the 2nd century CE pays great attention to detailed descriptions of the bodily location of the experience of desire. Erotic encounters are described as spread across the individual body and consciousness with both being part of one rich tapestry of sensory and affective possibilities of self-experience. And yet, violence too is portrayed as part of that same fabric of the body – and thus in close proximity to desire. As both come to bleed into each other, the novel portrays desire as at times indistinguishable from violence, as both overtake bodily consciousness. In this way, gazes of desire assume a physical dimension that invites complex interpretations of the often-voyeuristic relationships surrounding Leukippe's body. This paper follows a similar trajectory of feminist-informed explorations of power relations in the nature of desire by focusing on Leukippe's and Clitophon's first encounter. The passage upon which this paper will focus is taken from the beginning of the novel and spans over the sections 1.4 - 1.6.2. The extract describes the first encounter between the protagonists Clitophon and Leukippe and sheds light on Clitophon's first experiences of desire. In this way, it marks a

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pivotal moment for establishing character dynamics and plot motivation, and thus offers fertile ground for explorations of the novel's overall engagement with the linguistic structures of desire. Following Froma Zeitlin's reading of the body as a "site of desire and fantasy,"¹ I will approach subjecthood through a phenomenological lens that takes consciousness as embodied and thus defines the body as a mode and site of experiences.² I will then focus on the narrative structures of desire and its correlation with shame as an affect. This essay's ultimate goal is to explore the complex structures of subject- and object-hood in (non-)agents of desire that permeate the overall narrative of *Leukippe & Clitophon* and offer great potential for approaches to re-defining agency in erotic encounters.

Reconfigurations of Consciousness

Although Clitophon is the subject of gazing *at* Leukippe during their first encounter, it is Leukippe who is the linguistic agent: "καταστράπτει μου τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς τῷ προσώπῳ."³ The careful balance of the violence evoked by "καταστράπτει"⁴ and Leukippe's face ("τῷ προσώπῳ") as the means of violence is then further elaborated in the gnomic expression: "κάλλος γὰρ ὀξύτερον πιτρώσκει βέλους καὶ διὰ τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν εἰς τὴν ψυχὴν

¹ Froma Zeitlin, "Gendered Ambiguities, Hybrid Formations, and the Imaginary of the Body in Achilles Tatius," in *Narrating Desire: Eros, Sex, and Gender in the Ancient Novel*, ed. Marília P. Futre Pinheiro et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 107.

² Among the many philosophers of this tradition of thinking about the body, I will refer to Merleau-Ponty's seminal text: Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Donald A. Landes. New York: Routledge, 2012.

³ Achilles Tatius, 1.4: "she hit my eyes with her face." All translations are my own unless stated otherwise.

⁴ Achilles Tatius, 1.4: "hit."

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καταρρεῖ".⁵ As this remark on Leukippe's appearance reflects on her face as a metonymy for her beauty, it reduces her level of agency to that of a physical quality, namely her being beautiful, and not a quality of proactive volition. Nevertheless, the emphasis on facial features as weaponised objects in the distinctly violent *modus operandi* of desire – both on the side of the sender (Leukippe's face) and of the receiver (Clitophon's eyes) – charges individual body parts semantically within the landscape of desire. In this way, the fragmented body assumes power in the linguistic system of desire that escapes the subject's volition; the body emerges as a collage of individualised agents or objects – or both simultaneously. This assumption of power on behalf of the gazed-at object however does not transfer power to the individual, as Leukippe remains an object of Clitophon's – and other male characters' – gazes. And yet, this violent mode of desire, albeit not empowering those who are gazed at, may disempower those who gaze. Dwelling in the discomfort of this ambivalence, this line of inquiry has the potential to complicate dichotomous understandings of subject-object relations.

Furthermore, the narrator's gnomic statement that beauty inflicts wounds on the beholder suggests a multisensory interconnection not only of individual limbs and sensory input channels but of the (physical) body as a whole and the soul. As Leukippe hits Clitophon's eyes, it is his *soul* ("ψυχή"⁶) that is affected. It would be insufficient to say that he is *emotionally* affected, as he describes the sensation as distinctly *physical* in

⁵ Achilles Tatius, 1.4: "for beauty inflicts wounds more sharply than any weapon."

⁶ Achilles Tatius, 1.4.

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the form of a wound (“τραύματι”).⁷ And yet, this wound is qualified as “έρωτικῶ”,⁸ an adjective that remains vague in its sensory/affective quality. For what is the textured nature of an erotic wound in this interconnected network of (bodily and affective) sensations? Clitophon approximates his experiences of erotic desire to the sensation of a full stomach and an alcohol-infused mind: “τῶν τε τῆς κόρης προσώπων γεμισθεὶς καὶ ἀκράτῳ θεάματι καὶ μέχρι κόρου προελθὼν, ἀπῆλθον μεθύων ἔρωτι.”⁹ While the food comparison assigns solidity to the experience of desire (as one that physically fills), the textuality of wine evokes a sensation of liquidity. Combined, the two states of aggregation richly add to the layers of sensory qualities of experiencing desire. Most importantly, both comparisons shed light on the correlative nature of this re-configured body. While the food comparison remains in the dimension of bodily sensations (a full stomach), wine has the unique capacities to alter faculties of perception and cognition, as evoked by “μεθύων.”¹⁰ Accordingly, desire is portrayed as affecting modes of self-experience and self-perception in a physical environment. The textured experiences of cause and effect are therefore dislocated and re-distributed over a richly layered landscape of affected consciousness that is nevertheless inherently bodily. To further explore this imagery, I suggest Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenologically-informed conception of the ‘living body’ that aims to corrode the Cartesian body/mind division and instead takes consciousness as spanning over the sensation of

⁷ Achilles Tatius, 1.4

⁸ Achilles Tatius, 1.4: “of love.”

⁹ Achilles Tatius, 1.6: “I was more than satisfied from her face and, from the unmixed sight, had reached a state of surfeit. I left tipsy with desire.”

¹⁰ Achilles Tatius, 1.6: “tipsy.”

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perception and that which is affected by perception.¹¹ To Merleau-Ponty, perception is inherently embodied, as external input is received through the body and, when processed into emotions, experienced bodily.

Merleau-Ponty's approach to consciousness lends itself particularly well to further exploring the mechanics of desire, as it allows for an infinite number of dimensions of (sub-) consciousness to contribute to the experience of the sensuality of reality – including dreams or dream-like states. During dinner, Clitophon relates: “ἔωκειν γὰρ τοῖς ἐν ὄνειροις ἐσθίουσιν.”¹² Winkler's translation as “I ate like a man in a dream” preserves the phrase's unsettling suspension of reality: is Clitophon experiencing a general sense of unrealness, that is, is he eating while being in a dream-like state? Or does the dream-like condition extend to and therefore qualify the act of eating in that the food lacks any sense of satisfaction – solidity?¹³ While the latter may contradict Clitophon's later sensation of fullness, both interpretations equally point to the impact desire has on the limits of an individual's consciousness to constitute itself as part of a material reality; the experience of desire profoundly destabilises conceptions of that which is deemed material or physical and naturally reflects back onto the (bodily) self. If the reader is to assume that the food Clitophon consumes is not fulfilling because it is of the same nature as food in dreams, a fabrication of the subconscious, then that which is being consumed in the state of desire has no solidity

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*.

¹² Achilles Tatius, 1.5.

¹³ John J. Winkler, “Leukippe & Clitophon” in *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, ed. B.P. Reardon (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2019), 209.

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and has no value of sustenance. The dream-like state is even further unsettled by the introductory “*ἐώκειν*” (i.e., “like” in Winkler’s translation, literally also “I seemed/appeared [to myself]”) that complicates understandings of gazes in desire by adding a level of self-observation in the desiring subject. If Clitophon *seems to himself* to be eating in a dream-like state, desire appears to operate as a force that divorces the self from the self. Clitophon not only experiences the dream-like state itself but also the distinctly visual manifestation of this experiential shift. As he emerges as the object of his own gaze, desire is portrayed not only as a deeply destabilising force that redefines the boundaries of sensory experiences; it also complicates matters of power of the self over the self. Accordingly, the model of experiencing subjecthood in the novel is one that does not simply dissolve “the body and its boundaries” or “project(s) the inner world of psychological experience as an organic and objectified reality,” a proposition that rests on the presumption of two distinct spaces (the interior and the exterior).¹⁴ Instead, I argue that the synthesis of affects and consciousness as embodied defies any such distinction in the first place by dislocating and fragmenting unified notions of the self.

Narratology of Desire

By approaching the mechanics of desire through different states of mind (namely through dreams) and the literal consumption of food, Achilles Tatius may have drawn from a passage from Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura* (Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, Book

¹⁴ Zeitlin, “Gendered Ambiguities, Hybrid Formations, and the Imaginary of the Body in Achilles Tatius,” 106.

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4, 1097-1111). Wallace already convincingly argued for a reading of Achilles Tatius as being influenced by Lucretius.¹⁵ Similarly to Achilles Tatius, Lucretius approaches desire through the experiential (non-)reality of food consumption in dreams. What is most striking in Lucretius' passage is the distinctly ateleological notion of desire as one whose nature defies its very drive to fulfilment.¹⁶ Lucretius illustrates this understanding of desire in an almost morbid way – one that evokes Leukippe's various fake deaths throughout the narrative¹⁷ – in the impossibility of the lovers to fully ("*corpore toto*," 1111¹⁸) enter ("*penetrare*," 1111) or disappear ("*abire*," 1111) into the other body. Desire thus follows no narratological arc at the end of which awaits some sense of relief; desire is naturally cyclical. Lucretius' passage is also quoted at length in Jean-Luc Nancy's experimental text *Sexistence* which takes desire as "an anticipation that does not merely project but precedes or assumes the precocious character of a premature enjoyment with regard to a fulfilled coitus."¹⁹ This "fulfilled coitus" however is a "simulacrum," as Nancy argues with reference to Lucretius' text. Nancy writes:

¹⁵ Richard Wallace, "Amaze Your Friends! Lucretius on Magnets," *Greece & Rome* 43, no 2 (1996), 178 – 187.

¹⁶ Due to reasons of brevity, I will not be able to nuance the differences between Lucretius and Achilles Tatius which would certainly be a fruitful endeavor.

¹⁷ Achilles Tatius, 3.15-16, 5.7, 7.3. In the last instance, Leukippe is assumed dead by Clitophon who is told only bits of information from which he infers her death. By contrast, in the first two passages Clitophon believes to see her being killed. In both cases, his visual perception is revealed to have fallen prey to tricks.

¹⁸ Lit. 'with the whole body' – again, an attempt at quantifying a body, mapping out its limits within which desire can be experienced or acted upon.

¹⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Sexistence*, trans. S. Miller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021).

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"Sex... ignores what is properly at stake in touch: it is made of touch, through and through, and touch is all it does (tact, proximity, intimacy, dexterity, grazing, caress, thrill, tremor, trouble) but all it knows about touch is élan, thrust, itch, hunger, and appetite. It knows nothing else, neither *where it comes* from nor *where it's going*. Nothing except that it *is* agitated, animated, and excited."²⁰

Accordingly, desire has neither history nor future and no epistemology of its own, while its manifestation through sensory exchange drives it even further towards its own "fatality."²¹ Desire simultaneously condenses and vaporises itself in its mere existence. Accordingly, Clitophon experiences consumption both as the subject who consumes and the object who is being consumed. Desire emerges as a polychromatic, multidirectional state of affect that complicates understandings of subject- and object-hood. By extension, the experience of desire also destabilises the viewing subject of the "male gaze" – a process that, as Morales convincingly argues, renders the concept of the male gaze insufficient in capturing the power dynamics of gazing in Achilles Tatius' novel.²² Morales' line of argument further resonates with Talia Bettcher's proposition of an Erotic Structuralism. Bettcher writes: "the complexity of sexual attraction is that sexual attraction to a person possesses an internal, constitutive structure that includes the eroticized self as an element."²³ According to Bettcher, understanding erotic encounters demands a taxonomy of erotic content and sexual attraction both of which constitute and qualify encounters of

²⁰ Nancy, *Sexistence*, 6 - my emphasis.

²¹ Nancy, *Sexistence*, 3.

²² Helen Morales, *Vision and Narrative in Achilles Tatius' Leucippe and Clitophon* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 157.

²³ Talia M. Bettcher, "When Selves Have Sex: What the Phenomenology of Trans Sexuality Can Teach About Sexual Orientation," *Journal of Homosexuality* (2013), 2.

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desire. By understanding the experience of desire as one that includes a perception of the self as an integral part of this encounter, Bettcher argues for an understanding of desire as inherently self-reflective. With respect to *Leukippe & Clitophon*, Bettcher's approach to desire therefore allows to trace character development along the narrative progression of desire in the novel, as it treats desiring characters as intricately interwoven with the plot's erotic journey.

Narrativising Shame and Desire

Finally, the overlap of Nancy's and Bettcher's theories in the importance of delay and augmentation of sensory intimacy points to another aspect of Clitophon's first sight of Leukippe. Among the sensations that Clitophon experiences upon seeing Leukippe, he lists both "αἰδῶ" (shame) and "ἀναιδέια" (shamelessness).²⁴ And later, he describes: "ἔβλεπον ἀναιδῶς, ἡδούμην ἀλῶναι."²⁵ Accordingly, the sensation of shame is not only connected to the action itself (seeing) but in particular to the act of being caught which implies that shame is deeply indebted to the agent's social context. Typically translated as "shame," the root "αἰδῶς" has long puzzled Classicists for its particular relation to notions of honour and guilt.²⁶ However, as David Konstan has pointed out, shame continues to be a topic of confusion for contemporary philosophers, psychologists, and interdisciplinary thinkers.²⁷ While shame as a negative response

²⁴ Achilles Tatius, 1.4.

²⁵ Achilles Tatius, 1.4. Winkler's translation: "I stared shamelessly, ashamed I might get caught," Winkler, "Leukippe & Clitophon," 208.

²⁶ Douglas L. Cairns, *Aidôs: The Psychology and Ethics of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greek Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

²⁷ David Konstan, "Shame in Ancient Greece," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (2003), 1031–1060.

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reflecting *character* has often been juxtaposed against guilt as referring to a negative response to an *action*, Konstan takes a genealogical approach to understanding the phenomenon of shame. Konstan draws inspiration from Aristotle's conception of shame as *pathos* that focuses on the textured sensation of shame – similarly to what I have argued about affect in the embodied consciousness – which transcends boundaries of socio-culturally specific contexts.²⁸ In other words, the *affect of shame* prevails even if its causes may be different. In fact, precisely because its causes differ, time gives rise to different *conceptions of shame*. In his analysis, Konstan draws from psychologist and philosopher Silvan Tomkins whose Affect Theory shows striking relevance to the mechanics of desire and introspection in *Leukippe & Clitophon*. Tomkins writes:

“In contrast to all other affects, shame is an experience of the self by the self. At that moment when the self feels shame, it is felt as a sickness within the self. Shame is the most reflexive of affects in that the distinction between the subject and object of shame is lost. Why is shame so close to the experienced self? It is because the self lives in the face.”²⁹

Similarly to Bettcher's Erotic Structuralism, Tomkins abandons dynamics of shame for an emphasis on the affect and effect of shame that leads to a dissociation from the self. Ultimately, shame evokes a hyperawareness for the self as a locus of affect. Tomkins further argues that shame is the diametrical opposite – and thus compound – of desire: “The experience of shame is inevitable for any human being insofar as desire outruns

²⁸ Konstan, “Shame in Ancient Greece,” 1036.

²⁹ Silvan Tomkins, *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness Volume IV: Cognition – Duplication and Transformation of Information* (New York: Springer, 1992), 120.

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fulfilment. The essential condition for the activation of shame is 'I want, *but...*.'³⁰ Accordingly, shame and desire are interlocked in the cyclical dynamic of Nancy's anticipation of that which yet cannot be fulfilled; shame is the fuel that drives desire towards its inherent fatality. This dynamic of delay again manifests corporally in Clitophon's attempt to draw his eyes away from Leukippe: "τέλος ἐνίκησαν."³¹ This "τέλος" emphasises a struggle between him and his eyes that suggests fluctuating levels of visual access to her body. The augmentation of access to erotic content through self-imposed (attempted) restrictions thus adds to the sensation of intimisation as a gradual process of approximation and heightened affect. In other words, the correlation between shame and desire suggests an equal and compound share in the experience of sexual attraction and the eroticized self, again blurring boundaries between "internal" experiences and social surroundings. The overall dynamic of desire as one that meanders and that is marked by fluctuations can even be traced in the novel's overall structure: although Clitophon and Leukippe are married eventually, the novel's frame narrative obscures the internal narrative's seemingly self-contained unity, teasing with the idea of fulfilment – or indulging in the simulacrum of narrative satisfaction.

Conclusion

In sum, I have argued for a new understanding of subjecthood in *Leukippe & Clitophon* through a phenomenological lens that nuances modes of experiences as affects. Furthermore, the living body in the state of desire is re-configured into a

³⁰ Tomkins, 406 - my emphasis.

³¹ Achilles Tatius, 1.4: "finally they [the eyes] triumphed."

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landscape of complex cause-effect chains that complicate understandings of character introspection. Finally, my discussion of the narratology of desire and its correlation with shame aimed to reveal internal narratological structures of those affects as representative of the novel's overall approach to narrativity. While further explorations of the novel's intertextual debt to the literary heritage of narratives of desire are beyond the scope of this paper, I believe that this unconventional use of psychological analyses of shame could serve as proof of the novel's intriguing and rich engagement with narrativity, representations of desire, and their relations to identity constructions.

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