



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Review: Milesian Tales

Reviewed Work(s): Studien zur Struktur der 'Milesischen' Novelle bei Petron und Apuleius by E. Lefèvre

Review by: Vincent Hunink

Source: *The Classical Review*, 1999, New Series, Vol. 49, No. 1 (1999), pp. 80-82

Published by: Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Classical Association

MILESIAN TALES

E. LEFÈVRE: *Studien zur Struktur der 'Milesischen' Novelle bei Petron und Apuleius* (Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, Mainz). Pp. 100. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1997. ISBN: 3-515-07181-4.

Students of Petronius and Apuleius are often referred to the so-called 'Milesian Tales' of Aristides. Since these texts are no longer extant, it is hard to say anything about them with certainty, except that they were erotic tales widely read in antiquity. In this small monograph, Eckard Lefèvre attempts to go well beyond this general conclusion and reconstruct what these tales must have been like, mainly on the basis of the two Roman novels. L.'s underlying assumption is that Petronius and Apuleius

must have reworked the tales in a manner analogous to how Romans wrote comedy or epic modelled on Greek originals.

Analysing some well-known passages from the *Satyricon* and *Metamorphoses* commonly held to be of a 'Milesian' nature, such as 'The Widow of Ephesus' (*Sat.* 111-12) or the adultery tales in *Met.* 9, L. discerns a twofold structure in nearly all of them. The first part in each case contains an orderly series of events with a satisfying climax, while the second part further complicates matters, repeating or mirroring motifs, adding unexpected turns and specific Roman elements, or piling up jokes. For instance, the Widow of Ephesus tale could have ended with the motif that the virtuous lady was seduced by the soldier and persuaded to live (*Sat.* 112.3). Instead, however, it goes on with new developments, finally attaining a new climax, shocking or tasteless to some readers: the 'dead man on the cross' (112.8).

A similar 'appendix technique' is detected by L. in most of the other examples. So his conclusion hardly comes as a surprise: in these second parts of their tales, Petronius and Apuleius are adding elements of their own, thereby trying to surpass the Milesian originals followed in the initial sections. These Milesian originals, then, were fairly uncomplicated, straightforward stories.

Although much of this must remain speculative, given the lack of evidence, a general literary development from simple models to more complex reworkings seems likely enough, even beforehand. But having said this, some objections may be raised. L.'s approach remains rather one-sided, focusing only on the Milesian model behind the Roman texts, at the expense of other possible influences such as comedy, satire, or mime, which are hardly more than mentioned in passing. The model of the 'appendix technique' is applied rigidly and almost mechanically: every element in a Petronian or Apuleian tale that according to L.'s norms does not fit in organically is immediately taken as a sign of a conscious addition.

Regrettably, L. appears to value such contributions of the Roman novelists rather negatively. From his various aesthetic and stylistic remarks a conviction emerges that the pure simplicity of the Greek originals has given way to Roman imbalance and disharmony, or even to bad taste and sloppy writing. On occasion L. also quotes extremely negative value judgements by others without dissent; thus he refers to Friedländer's devastating remarks on the latter half of the famous 'Cupid and Psyche' tale by Apuleius ('teils gezielte und frostige Allegorie, teils platte Travestie', p. 61). Perhaps even more characteristically, L. repeatedly compares a Renaissance reworking of a motif to show how the later author returns to a more sober and organic narrative structure. For example, Boccaccio's version of the 'lover in the wine cask' is clearly preferred by L. to Apuleius' version (9.5-7), criticized for not being well-rounded (pp. 46-7). All this seems to reflect a decidedly 'classicist' approach to or even bias against Silver Latin Literature, such as is rarely expressed in studies nowadays.

The final chapters on pseudo-Aeschines, Aristaenetus, and Sisenna remain too short to be satisfying (twelve pages), and do not add much to the main argument, while the 'Ausblick' merely functions as a repetition of the negative judgements on Petronius and Apuleius: the Greek Milesian tales probably were 'von ziemlicher Frische und Unverbrauchtheit', unlike the Roman novels that stem from 'den Pulten gewiegter Literaten' (p. 87). As a conclusion, this is rather meager. To mention another thing, there is not a word on the macrostructure of Aristides' book. Was it anything like a coherent, thematic collection, or was it only loosely arranged? Lack of evidence is not a sufficient reason to leave such a question unasked, certainly in a book like this.

In short, allowing for some speculation, L.'s study may be right in the end about the

Greek originals: these tales are likely to have been fairly straightforward. But its one-sided approach and consistently classicist attitude seriously detract from its merits and usefulness. What counts most in the end is to understand more about extant texts rather than lost texts.

Leiden University

VINCENT HUNINK