

The two Ephesian Matrons

Paola Francesca Moretti

Università degli Studi, Milano

In the *Apocryphal Acts of the apostle John (AJ)*, both in the Greek (II century) and in the later Latin version¹, we find the story of Drusiana, which seems to be a Christian response to a Milesian tale such as that of the famous Ephesian matron.

1. The two Ephesian matrons.

The first, and most famous, Ephesian matron is the woman whose story is told by Eumolpos in Petronius' *Satyricon*².

The story is well known: a honest wife follows her dead husband into the tomb, willing to die; a *miles*, who is looking after the corpse of a man who had been crucified in the same place, succeeds in seducing her in the tomb and, when the crucified man is stolen from the cross, is saved by the woman who lets him crucify her husband's corpse.

The story has an erotic content and presents us with an immoral kind of woman. We know it from Phaedrus and Petronius³; I refer to Petronius' version of the story as a witness for a source common to both⁴, because, as the point I'd like to make concerns narrative themes rather than precise textual elements, Petronius is more easily comparable to a prose narrative text such that of the *AJ*. The story of the second Ephesian matron is told in the *AJ*⁵, composed in the second half of the II century, possibly in Egypt: it is a quite "complicated" text,

¹ Junod - Kaestli 1983.

² Bibliography about Petronius in Vannini 2007.

³ Here I will not take into consideration the esopic version of the tale.

⁴ I presuppose a common source for the two authors, a Greek or Latin text (Sisenna?), presumably belonging to the Milesian tradition (*contra*, Fedeli - Dimundo 1988, 81 and Courtney 2001, 167 affirm the derivation of Petronius from Phaedrus). About the common source, see Weinreich 1930/1931, 56-57; Pecere 1975, 3-7; Huber 1990, 69-71; Panayotakis 1994, 460 n. 15. Lefèvre 1997 is the only one who goes so far as to deny Phaedrus' authorship of the fable in the *Appendix Perottina*. The situation is complicated by the existence – beside Aristides and Sisenna – of an oral tradition which is unknown, but surely existed, if we judge from the worldwide spread of the story.

⁵ About the *AJ*, see Junod - Kaestli 1983, 689-695; Bremmer 1995b, 54-56. About the chronology of the *AAA*, cf. Bremmer 1995b, 54-56 (*AJ*); Bremmer 1996a, 56-59 and Hilhorst 1996, 163 (*Acta Pauli et Theclae = APTh*); Bremmer 1998b (*Acta Petri*); Bremmer 2000a (*Acta Andreae = AA*); Lalleman 2000 (*AJ, AA*). A useful synthesis is presented in Bremmer 1998a, 161-164.

preserved partially in a Greek version⁶. The stories about John are mainly located in Ephesus; what did not take place there, is now lost⁷.

In this text too adultery – which is the main theme of the Petronian tale – is a recurrent subject. For instance, we find it in John's speech to the Ephesians, who had gathered in the theatre of the town (*AJ* 35); then in the story of a young man who – angry against his father, who didn't want him to committ adultery with a woman – had kicked his father to death: John meets the man while he is going to kill both the woman and her man and himself, prevents him from doing so and resurrects the father (*AJ* 48-54).

But the most famous adultery (better: "would-be adultery") story is that of Drusiana and Callimachus (*AJ* 63-86).

Callimachus, a noble Ephesian man, falls in love with Drusiana, a Christian woman who has converted her husband Andronicus and has persuaded him to treat her as a sister (in the previous – lost – part of the text, Andronicus had also closed her alive in a tomb to win her over). Drusiana refuses Callimachus' proffers, asks God to die as she has caused Callimachus' moral ruin, and her desire is immediately fulfilled. After her death, she is buried. Callimachus enters Drusiana's tomb with the help of Fortunatus (a steward of Andronicus) and, while trying to rape her corpse, is bitten by a serpent, and so is Fortunatus. After three days, Andronicus and John enter the tomb and find the three dead: John resurrects Callimachus (who converts) and Drusiana; Fortunatus is brought back to life too, but refuses God's grace and chooses to die again.

This story – as we can understand also from this *resumé* – has much in common with Greek erotic novels⁸.

2. A preliminary remark.

Here I must make a preliminary remark. I'm not going to show, of course, that the author of the *AJ* read Petronius; instead, I would like to show that, in creating the plot of Drusiana's story, he might have aimed at reacting to that kind of immoral matron we know from Petronius: a falsely virtuous wife who gives up to a seducer in her man's tomb, a kind of woman which belonged to

⁶ Junod - Kaestli 1983, esp. 98-100.

⁷ Bremmer 1995b, 39.

⁸ Cf. Bremmer 1995b, 41-44. Another "novel" contained in the *AJ* is the story of Lykomedes and Cleopatra (*AJ* 19-29): see Bremmer 1995b, 39-40 and n. 11. Moreover in *AJ* 103 John's speech, asserting the fact that God is near to those who suffer every kind of vicissitude, seems to contain a list of "fiction" accidents; cf. Junod-Kaestli 1983, 87-88.

that Greek narrative Milesian tradition which hasd presumably inspired also Petronius. I will compare the two texts, in search for points of similarity that could be considered as traces of the Milesian narrative tradition⁹. Milesian tales were part of a «genere di consumo», which had not only a literary tradition but presumably also an oral one: so, the comparison will show perhaps nothing more than the fact that there is a sort of «aria di famiglia»¹⁰ between the two stories.

3. Points of similarity.

Although I know that I move on a slippery ground, I'll present a short survey of the elements common to the two texts¹¹. The following clues will suggest that the autohr of the *AJ* could also have drawn from the Milesian narrative tradition which inspired the Petronius.

a) The geographical location of the story.

The geographical designation in Petronius has a great importance (111,1; in Phaedrus it is missing¹²). It has a negative connotation¹³ and suggests the immorality of the story that follows¹⁴. Moreover, Ephesus is a "novel" place *par excellence*¹⁵, but it seems to be also a "Milesian" place¹⁶, «a geographical

⁹ I don't touch the very discussed subject of which could be the original Greek structure of the story of the Ephesian matron. A «Diptychon-Erzählung» structure would be typical of the petronian re-writings of the Milesian tales, according to Lefèvre 1997: in Petronius the "vitalistic" triumph of the *miles* is only a first, apparent end, and it is followed by the moral of the story (*si iustus inquit imperator fuisset...*). Such "second end" reminds the reader of the Roman environment (*imperator provinciae...*; cricifixion). I remark here that Lefèvre's reconstruction of the original *Milesia* of the "matron of Ephesus" would support my hypothesis: in fact, it is better to suppose that the author of the *AJ* knows an immoral story, ending with the triumph of life, which didn't propose to the reader any moral teaching.

¹⁰ Cf. Barchiesi 1996.

¹¹ About those which are *topoi* of Greek erotic novels, see Junod - Kaestli 1983, 548-550, who remark that they are concentrated in chapters 63-64 e 70-71.

¹² The absence of the Ephesian location is the main difference between Petron and him; it could depend on the tendency to «universalizzazione» which belongs to the genre "fable", that has a main moral and didactic aim (Pecere 1974, 13-14).

¹³ At least, it seems so from Cicero *Phil.* 3.15. Instead, according to Daviault 2003, Ephesus is mainly the religious town of the *Artemision*.

¹⁴ Fedeli 1986, 11; Fedeli - Dimundo 1988, 42-43, 74.

¹⁵ See the role played by Ephesus in Xenophon Ephesius (more or less contemporary to the *AJ*); in the *Historia Apollonii regis Tyri* (lost Greek original dating to the III a.C.; ed. Schmeling 1988); in Achilles Tatius (the story of the Ephesian woman Melite: Ach. Tat. 5,11ff.; see Pecere 194, 42-45).

¹⁶ Also according to Lefèvre 1997, 8 the Ephesian location would suggest that the text belongs to the Milesian tradition.

indication» which «symbolizes literary (*scil.* Milesian) origin»¹⁷. In fact, as Harrison remarks, «the ... Ionian settings (*scil.* of the two Milesian stories of the *Satyricon*, those of the boy of Pergamum and of the matron of Ephesus) clearly suggest that these cities are the kind of environment where such sexually interesting things happen ... Both Pergamum and Ephesus are like Miletus Greek cities on the west coast of Asia Minor, and it is difficult not to bring the Milesian association into play when the content of the stories is so obviously similar to what most scholars imagine to have been the content of the Milesian Tales: the geographical proximity of these tale-settings to Miletus seems to be mirrored in the thematic proximity of their contents to the Milesian literary tradition»¹⁸.

As for the *AJ*, nearly all the facts narrated in the preserved sections¹⁹ take place in Ephesus; I suspect that this location could have “attracted” the exemplary story of Drusiana, which subverts the story of the “Milesian” Ephesian matron.

b) The two women’s virtue, that pushes them to long for death.

The matrons are both represented as longing for death.

The Petronian matron follows her husband into the tomb, mourning and crying more than any other widow, and wants to follow his destiny (111,2-3)²⁰: which is the ideal – almost topic – behaviour of the Roman widows. As everybody know, in the end of the story this “wife-virtue” will be subverted.

Drusiana falls ill and calls upon God for death, as she feels guilty to have lead a man (Callimachus) to moral ruin; with her prayers, she obtains what she asks (*AJ* 64). In the end, Drusiana’s true “virtue” will gain victory.

c) It is in a tomb that the two women’s virtue is put to trial and shows itself.

In Petronius the tomb is the place of the woman’s mourning, of the soldier’s curiosity, of the violated chastity (111,2: *positum... in hypogaeo Graeco more corpus*; see also 111,4.7.8; 112,3.5.6).

A tomb appears twice in Drusiana’s story: first, the tomb where Andronicus had closed her when she had refused to have sexual intercourse with him (in a lost section of the text; we know this fact from the words of those who try to

¹⁷ Harrison 1998, 69.

¹⁸ Harrison 1998, 67-68.

¹⁹ Since some parts were lost as they were located elsewhere, some other were lost for doctrinal reasons (Junod - Kaestli 1983, 104-106).

²⁰ Pecere 1974, 54-55.

dissuade Callimachus from his bad purpose, in *AJ* 63); then, when Callimachus tries to violate her corpse²¹. And here we should probably remember neither the cases of apparent death of novel heroines buried alive (as they are believed dead)²² nor an episode such as that of the tomb-house where Onesiphorus and his family live in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (23); rather Drusiana's tomb reminds us of tombs – and prisons – as the place where the heroine gives rise to the desire of seducers, of course resisting them (see also Drusiana in *AJ* 63)²³.

Here we have to remark:

1) the “novel” kind of the burial of the two corpses, the husband and Drusiana. *Graeco more* (Petron. 111,2) must not probably be referred to the use of an *hypogeum* (as burial – vs. cremation – was usual also among the Romans), but to the fact that the corpse was “free” (not closed within a sarcophagus), a device which was useful for “novel” developments of the story²⁴. The same is true for Drusiana, who is only enveloped in linen (*AJ* 70) and covered with a δικρόσσιον (*AJ* 71, 74, 80);

2) in both cases a seduction takes place within the tomb.

In Petronius (111,8-112,2) it is compared to a military assault, perpetrated with the weapons of food, wine and words of persuasion (pronounced also by the *ancilla*).

A similar attempt we find in the *AJ*: a love-foolly pushes the adulter first not to leave the corpse of the beloved (μετὰ θάνατον τῷ σώματι προσλιπαρῶν), then to assault the tomb (εἰσεπήδησεν²⁵: *AJ* 70; see also Callimachus' flashback in *AJ* 76).

d) Last not least: the theme, that suggested to me the idea of this paper, of the return to life.

Each of the two women, at the end of the story, goes back to life. The Petronian matron yields to the assaults of the soldier and goes back to life as she gives up her purpose to follow her husband; Drusiana, although dead, doesn't yield to

²¹ There τάφος will be the place where the corpse is, while μνημεῖον is the whole monument (Junod - Kaestli 1983, 546-547 n. 1).

²² Xen. Eph. 3,5-9; Charit. 1,4-9; Ach. Tat. 3,15-18; 5,7; see Letoublon 1993, 185-189.

²³ Xen. Eph. 1,16,4; 5,9,3; 2,1,2-6; Char. 2,8,1: see Junod - Kaestli 1983, 549.

²⁴ Pecere 1975, 51-53 (cf. Xen. Eph. 3,7,4; 3,8,1; Charit. 1,8,1-2; 1,9,4).

²⁵ And with the words of the soldier and of the servant we can probably compare Callimachus' outrageous speech, when, in front of Drusiana's corpse, he asks which advantage she took in renouncing something she could have enjoyed (Τί ... ποιησαμένην: *AJ* 70)

Callimachus (with Jesus' help) and, after resurrection, she goes back to a true life, which is both a physical and a spiritual one. Perhaps the true life which Drusiana gains with her resistance sheds light on the falsity of the life the Petronian matron goes back to.

In Petronius the theme of the return to life is present in the speech of the servant, who remarks that there's no advantage in dying before the right time (111.,8-112,2): ... "*Quid proderit, inquit, ... si te vivam sepelieris? ... Vis tu reviviscere? ... Ipsum te iacentis corpus admonere debet ut vivas*" (one must remark especially the verb *reviviscere*)²⁶.

In the *AJ* we find the theme of resurrection, a return to true life, which will involve not only Drusiana but also Callimachus. We find this theme in many passages: the beautiful young man (Christ) explains to John that he is there in the tomb to bring back Drusiana to life (*AJ* 73); Callimachus, as soon as he is resurrected, tells that he had been diverted from his bad purpose by the young man who had covered Drusiana and had told him to die to find true life (Καλλίμαχε, ἀπόθανε ἵνα ζήσης ... ἡ φωνὴ ἀληθῆς ἧ ἡ εἰρηκυῖά μοι ἐνθάδε· Ἀπόθανε ἵνα ζήσης: *AJ* 76); Drusiana, after coming back to life, resurrects Fortunatus with a prayer in which she thanks Christ for saving her from Callimachus and for giving her life²⁷ (*AJ* 82).

In the *AJ* we are taught about the paradox that a physical life can be a spiritual death, and a physical resurrection does not necessarily mean a spiritual one (see the example of Fortunatus²⁸). Something here is perhaps gnostic (while in some other elements we can see an influence of encratism)²⁹: in general, «The pagan participants are spiritually dead whereas the Christians are already raised to a new life, even in their earthly existence ... The physical existence of man has no meaning if he is not resurrected also in a spiritual sense» (Bolyki 1995, 34).

So in both texts we find the preminence of the "return-to-life" theme and the final triumph of life over death: in the first case, physical life is mainly concerned; in the second, it is a both physical and spiritual life that wins.

²⁶ Such a triumph of life over death reverses the end of the didonian hypotext of the matron's story (Müller 1990; Fedeli 1986).

²⁷ Instead Fortunatus deplores to have come back to life and escapes, to die again once and for all (*AJ* 83; see also *AJ* 86).

²⁸ See above, n. 27.

²⁹ Bolyki 1995, 30-31.

4. Drusiana, the Christian response to the Ephesian matron.

We could interpret the story of Drusiana as a “Christian response” to that of the Ephesian matron. What do I mean when I say “Christian response”? An example will make it clear.

In Gregory of Tours’ *Liber de miraculis Andreae apostoli* (4) we find a story which is the Christian response to “Phaedra’s *topos*”: Sostratus, a young man, is charged with rape by his mother (who had fallen in love with him); the man doesn’t dare to denounce the falsity of the charge in front of the proconsul, but – as she accuses also Andrew – the apostle prays and causes an earthquake, so that the mother dies and the proconsul recognizes the innocence of the two and converts³⁰. Of course, this is a new story, for some aspects different from that of Phaedra (e.g., Hippolytus is Phaedra’s step-son, while Sostratus is the real son), a new story which is re-narrated and used by the Christian author with a clear aim: it becomes an occasion for God to display great miracles, in order «to teach them [*scil.* the simple Christian people] Christian morality» (Adamik 2000, 45).

So: Sostratus takes revenge over all the immoral women of myth and of novel (such as Manto in Xenophon *Ephesius* and others), who had become famous leveling false charges to innocent men. In this sense – according to my view –, Drusiana takes revenge over all immoral “Milesian” literary (and perhaps not only literary) matrons.

5. Conclusions.

The Milesian narrative tradition could have suggested, with its stories of adulterous matrons and in particular with the story of a honest matron seduced in her husband’s tomb, the opportunity to correct the immorality of such a story³¹, re-narrating it so that it should be not less attractive, but surely more moral; and this “moralized” love story – like many others which are told in the *AAA* – is useful for teaching the Christian moral³² to the reader. Of course, I’m not speaking of a direct derivation “from” Petronius “to” the *AJ*; rather, I just affirm the existence of a Milesian narrative tradition behind them: a tradition which Petronius reflects in a “light-hearted” manner (at least if we read the novel of the Ephesian matron outside its immediate context) and that the *AJ* re-interpret in a strictly moralistic sense.

³⁰ Adamik 2000, 37-38.

³¹ See also above n. 9.

³² Cfr. Adamik 2000, 37-38.

The appropriation of a pagan narrative tradition, accomplished in the *AJ*, is one of the aspects of the complex interrelationship between pagan and Christian narratives in the ancient world. If I agree with Bowersock³³, when he asserts the possibility that Christianity with its narratives³⁴ has influenced the development of some novel *topoi*³⁵, here, instead, we have an example of the fact that the Christians have taken some *topoi* and themes from the pagan narrative tradition, in order to appropriate them with a missionary aim³⁶.

Maybe that such an interrelationship and mutual influence between the two narrative traditions was favoured by two facts:

1) the fact that narrative texts, pagan (Greek erotic novels and Milesian tales) and Christian, were read by the same public³⁷, that of romanized Asia Minor: a public which most probably was *also* female³⁸, as it is shown by the «prominent position of women» in the *AAA*; women were presumably part of the «actual readership» and of the «intended readership» both of pagan narratives (Greek erotic novels and Milesian tales) and of Christian ones (the *AAA*)³⁹. (Moreover, the presence of Romans in this public is suggested by the fact that the Roman world, while it is usually «carefully eliminated» from Greek erotic novels, is not at all eliminated in the *AAA*);

2) the presence of religious elements in erotic novel and in Milesian tales⁴⁰.

In fact, I think that from the Christian (gnostic?) re-interpretation of a traditional Milesian erotic tale we find in the *AJ*, we can learn something more about what a *fabula Milesia* was or could be.

There are some facts which suggest that the relationship between the two genres – Milesian tales and *AAA* – was wide and that perhaps “Milesian tales”,

³³ Bowersock 2000, esp. 95-114.

³⁴ Belonging to what has been called “Christian discourse”: Cameron 1991, 89-119.

³⁵ E.g.: the reaction to Christian resurrection tales can partially justify the diffusion of the *Scheintod topos*. That could be true also for some themes we find in the tale of the Ephesian matron: cf. Cabaniss 1954; Cabaniss 1960; Cataudella 1975, 171-172; Ramelli 2001, 163-192.

³⁶ Bremmer 1998a. But to such a moral aim even the Petronian and Phaedrian re-appropriation of the original esopic story is after all coherent (Adamik 2003, esp. 8-9).

³⁷ Bowie 1994; Stephens 1994; and Bremmer 1989, 1995b, 1998a (for Christian narrative).

³⁸ Cf. Bremmer 1995b, 53; Bremmer 2006, 85-87. See also Moretti 2006, 41 n. 181 on the theme of Christian women possessing Christian books (and asked about that during process) in the *Martyrium ss. Agapae, Chioniae et Irenae* 4 (cf. Franchi de' Cavalieri 1902, 17).

³⁹ Bremmer 1998a, 171-178: 173.

⁴⁰ Bremmer 1998a, 161; about *AJ* and *APTh*, Bremmer 1998a, 175.

which are usually thought to have a light and erotic content, could be also given a religious and philosophical one.

I'm thinking here of Tertullian's witness about the use of Milesian tales by the gnostics. Tertullian affirms that Valentinian's disciples use stories and Milesian tales to explain the operations of their eons (*De anima* 23.4)⁴¹; if Milesian tales were exploited – as Tertullian asserts with some contempt – to tell the stories of the gnostic eons, we can suspect that Milesian tales could have – or could be given – also a religious content⁴². To this, we can add Tertullian's *Adversus Valentinianos*, according to which the Valentinians have a complex doctrine about Sophia, a doctrine where we find unions, generations, etc., and that is therefore suitable to be narrated in *fabulae* (see Tert. *Valent.* 1.1, 3.3-4, 10.2, 13.2, 32.4, 33.1), also with obscene aspects⁴³ (*Valent.* 3.4: Fredouille 1980/1981, 1: 84). (Maybe this gnostic exploitation of *Milesiae* could also be linked to the presence of women among Valentin's disciples⁴⁴: e.g., we know that a follower of Valentin, Ptolemy⁴⁵, wrote a letter to a female disciple named Flora⁴⁶)⁴⁷.

The view has been supported that this kind of *Milesia*, exploited for religious aims, was an African variant of Milesian tales. Moreover, the opinion that there was a special "*Punica* (scil. African) *Milesia*", open to religious and philosophical suggestions, could explain Apuleius' reference to himself as *Milesiae conditor* in the story of Cupid and Psyche (which has evident links with religion and philosophy); but we'd better think that the standard definition of the Milesian

⁴¹ Menghi 1988, 108-109; about Valentinian's doctrine, see Menghi 1988, 227-228.

⁴² About the Milesian tales told by the gnostics, «di carattere filosofico e religioso, e con la totale esclusione dell'elemento erotico e comico», see Mazzarino 1950 (especially 141-142), and most of all Moreschini 1994, 86.

⁴³ Fredouille 1980/1981, 1: 17-18.

⁴⁴ Bremmer 1989, 39, 42-43.

⁴⁵ See Fredouille 1980/1981, 2: 203-204 (ad Tert. *Valent.* 4,2).

⁴⁶ Ed. Quispel 1966; preserved by Epiphanius, *Panarion* 1,33,3-7 (Greek text in Holl 1915, 450-457; Engl. transl. in Williams 1987, 198-204).

⁴⁷ Then we have the witness of Epiphanius bishop of Salamina (IV century), the same who preserves the letter to Flora: he compares the Valentinians' stories to the work of Antonius Diogenes, *The incredible things beyond Thule* (and, if Antonius Diogenes' public had been scanty, Epiphanius wouldn't have mentioned him as a clarifying example). See Epiph. *pan.* 1,33,8 (Holl 1915, 457-458; Engl. transl. in Williams 1987, 204); ed. also in Stephens - Winkler 1995, 120.

tale must be dilated to embrace also religious-philosophical stories⁴⁸. This is true both for Apuleius' Cupid and Psyche, and for the re-use of Milesian tales by the gnostics. So Tertullian – who doesn't ignore neither the Milesian tradition nor the AAA⁴⁹ – probably reflects a first kind of exploitation of the Milesian tales, perpetrated by the Christians: the religious-didactic re-interpretation of erotic Milesian tales in order to clarify complex religious-philosophical doctrines. Instead the *AJ* show a second kind of exploitation: the moral-didactic re-interpretation of erotic Milesian tales, in order to teach Christian moral.

Both of them represent an aspect of the fascinating link between the two narrative (pagan and Christian) worlds, two worlds that knew one another and that undoubtedly borrowed a great deal of "raw material" from each other.

⁴⁸ Moreschini 1994, 77-90: when Apuleius refers to himself as *Milesiae conditor* (*met.* 4,32) and introduces his novel saying *sermone isto Milesio varias fabulas conseram* (*met.* 1,1), he doesn't refer to a geographical variant of the *Milesia* but uses the term with a wider meaning, embracing comic-erotic and philosophical-religious-symbolic elements.

⁴⁹ Tertullian mentions the *APTh* in *bapt.* 17,5, speaking about baptism given by women (see Hilhorst 1996); the *APTh* were probably composed in South-West Asia Minor (Iconium?) between 160 and 200 (Bremmer 1996a, 56-57; Bremmer 1998a, 161).

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