
Play in and around the Ancient Novel



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The episodic structuring of ancient novels gives rise to the impression that they are not a serious genre in contrast to other genres like tragedy. Episodic plots tend to imply a playfulness not bound to causality but instead a spontaneity that includes the freedom to reinvent themselves. The author argues that novels like Longus's *Daphnis and Chloe*, Lucian's *True History*, and Xenophon's *Ephesian Tales* share an episodic plot structure, even if they are not all similarly playful in tone or content. For that reason, appreciating the aesthetic effect of such episodic structures not only allows us better to understand these novels and their reception but also helps explain the nature of both seriousness and play. **Key words:** causality in the ancient novel; episodic plot in the ancient novel; playfulness in the ancient novel; seriousness in the ancient novel

IMAGINE THAT SOMEONE asked you to write something playful—not just a short story or essay containing playful elements, but an essay or short story that was exclusively playful. A piece of prose without a serious strand to be found. Would such a piece of writing be possible and, if so, how would you go about it? It is an important thought experiment to make in regards to the ancient novel, since the novel is more saddled with questions of the “serious” than many other ancient genres.¹ Is (or was) the novel “serious literature,” in the way that epic or tragedy is (or was) “serious literature”? Did the ancient world take the novel seriously, and, by extension, should we? The answer lately tends to be yes—a fortunate answer, of course, since it is never quite clear what a scholar ought to do with a text otherwise. But here I would like to approach the novel from a different angle, not from the angle of the serious, but from the angle of that against which the serious defines itself: that is, play.

If the ancient novel fails to achieve the same sort of seriousness of the *Iliad* or Sophocles's *Antigone*, whether intentionally or unintentionally, how does it

manage to do so? Or to state the question positively, how does the novel succeed in avoiding such seriousness and rather approach that opposite ideal, or a trifling, frivolous thing of play? I begin with a consideration of this slippery term, the “serious,” specifically in reference to the ancient Greek novel *Daphnis and Chloe* (the last word of which is *paignia* “games” or “play”) and an important scholar’s discussion of its seriousness. Then, turning to Lucian’s *True History*, I elicit various routes by which the novel might avoid the weight of the serious and thereby achieve the state or status of a plaything: through jokes, content, and, finally, episodic structure. I will draw examples eclectically from the surviving Greek and Roman novels, which cover a period roughly from the first to the third century CE. The first two routes I explore, jokes and content, will quickly be abandoned in favor of the episodic—a structural feature all of these novels share. I will argue that episodic plotting is not just a route for avoiding seriousness, but a route that reveals the very structure of the serious, thereby helping to define what is meant by the term and, perhaps more importantly for us, what is meant by its opposite, play.

Serious Novels

One of the great scholars of the ancient novel, Bryan Reardon—often touted as carrying “the flag for the Greek novel almost single-handed”²—late in his life considered with broad strokes the most beautiful novel surviving from antiquity, Longus’s *Daphnis and Chloe* (written around 200 CE). His concern was that of the novel’s interpretation, or as he put it: “The essential question, then, is: how serious is Longus?” (35). He divides previous scholarly treatments into the nonserious interpretation and the serious interpretation and explores the various aspects that scholars identify to achieve such interpretations: religious allegory, symbolism, irony, and others.

What does Reardon mean by the serious? Longus’s pastoral novel centers on two teenagers—the male goatherd Daphnis, who is fifteen at the beginning of the novel, and the female shepherd Chloe, who is thirteen—a pair so rustic that they do not know what desire is. Even upon learning the word desire, they cannot discern what action it is demanding of them, and so the novel consists of a number of erotic scenes where these young lovers attempt to find relief—kissing, embracing, lying down naked together, and so forth. This of course only inflames their (and the reader’s) desire further and the “real thing” is not

reached until the end. Reardon suggests the novel is like “a fairy story written by a Nabokov,” and the suggestion frames well his question, “How serious is Longus?” Reardon’s question seems to mean “to what extent is Longus writing a great deal of silliness here?” or, alternatively, “to what extent is Longus genuinely attempting to explain, for example, the nature of desire?” as Longus’s narrator claims to be doing at the beginning.

Such a definition of “serious,” however, would oversimplify Reardon’s sense of the term, since it is possible to separate, through the course of his argument, at least three different, although related, meanings. He first uses “serious” in opposition to the word “trivial.” The novel, he says, had earlier often been read as “trivial, nothing more than a charming idyll” as opposed to more recent “interpretations of a quite different kind: *Daphnis and Chloe* as a serious novel.” Here “serious” is an assertion of value: the novel is something to be taken seriously just as a situation or a person ought to be taken seriously. The second meaning of “serious” regards intention or mood: “serious to the point of being solemn,” Reardon writes. Although we can see how the two meanings shade into one another, we should immediately be aware of the break between the two. We might, for example, take someone (or their novel) not at all seriously (assertion of value), even if, and in fact sometimes because, they are “serious to the point of being solemn” (intention, mood). A third, and again related meaning is perhaps the most important of all: if the “nonserious interpretation” asserts that “*Daphnis and Chloe* has no deep meaning,” the sense of “serious” here is something like “with a deep(er) meaning.” Note how well this links the previous two senses of “serious” together: to assign something a deeper meaning is, first, to assert its value and, second, often to assert a serious intention. But again these denotations do not have to be linked. For example, although the deeper meanings Reardon reviews involve symbolism, religious allegory (“more” or “deeper” meaning than meets the eye), he also includes irony (which also offers more meaning than meets the eye). Taking as his guide H. H. O. Chalk—who writes “when [Longus] is at his most serious, he is simultaneously at his most cynically witty” (called “irony” a page later)—Reardon is well aware of the ways that a structure of deeper meaning might best be achieved by not being too solemn. This aspect of the serious which demands something “more” (a deeper meaning, a value) is something we will return to when we consider the structure of episodic plots. For now, however, it is enough to consider Reardon’s three senses of “serious”—value, mood, and meaning—and note the ways one sense slips into the other.

The reason for reviewing these three senses of “serious” is not to reveal it

a useless category and call for its abandonment, as others sometimes do. It is, rather, to appreciate the richness of the term and the opportunities it allows for better understanding its opposite, play. Reardon's question of seriousness, after all, is one Longus wants his readers to ask. The last word of Longus's novel is "play": "Only then did Chloe learn that the events in the woods were just pastoral play." The immediate context is that Chloe is having "real" sex for the first time: she now realizes that all the kissing and fooling around of the previous books was just (fore)play.³ But as a word looking back on the erotic fumbblings of a novel that consists of erotic fumbblings, play becomes highly thematic, one might say programmatic in the reverse: Longus is describing the very content of the novel as play. This is not just because the two young lovers are sometimes described as playing in the novel—among the activities of their first spring together, the two specifically labeled play are Chloe's building a cricket-cage out of reeds and Daphnis's building a panpipe. Nor is it because we find sexual activity separated from reproductive intentions often described elsewhere in Greek literature as a form of play (see, e.g., Ps.-Lucian's *Ass* 11.1). Rather, the final word "play" raises the very question Reardon asks about the novel: how serious is Longus in writing this novel? Or, as I would like to reframe the question: what would it mean to do what Longus suggests he is doing—that is, to write a thing of play, a *paignion*?

How to Write a Plaything: The Case of Lucian

How do you write a thing of play? How do you write this ideal work we have imagined which offers not a single mote of seriousness? Writing roughly a generation before Longus, a brilliant second-century rhetorician by the name of Lucian seemed to be contemplating just this question when he sat down to write what is now thought of as the first science fiction novel in the Western tradition. This wild novella follows its hero from the straits of Gibraltar to the surface of the moon to the belly of a whale. Often in this work, Lucian appears to be following his fancy and writing the first thing that comes into his mind—an impression I will return to later. For now, the most interesting part of the work is its prologue, which describes the status of his novella as something not serious, something trivial. If you were looking for some pointers on how to write a thing of play, Lucian's *True History* would be the place to start.

Lucian begins by considering the idea of "serious" literature and insists that what he is about to write is not that at all: "Athletic types and those who

work hard at bodybuilding concern themselves not only with conditioning and exercise but also with well-timed relaxation—they even consider this the most important part of their training. In the same way, I think it's appropriate for people who take literature seriously, after reading a great deal of the serious stuff, to give the mind some relaxation (*anesis*) and ready it for its next higher exertion" (*True History* 1.1).

Lucian constructs an analogy: physical training is to physical relaxation as mental training is to mental relaxation. In both cases, not only does the training demand relaxation, but the relaxation facilitates the training. He sounds much like Aristotle, who often made this point about relaxation (*anesis*)⁴—we do not work for the sake of relaxation, but we relax for the sake of work, or as Lucian puts it we relax to “ready the mind for its next higher exertion.” That Aristotle often names play (*paidia*) as a form of relaxation (*anesis*) may or may not be on Lucian's mind here, but regardless, Lucian certainly is placing play's opposite—the serious—on the goal-oriented, “training” side of his analogy. Such “serious” study of “serious” literature (he uses the word twice) needs to be broken up with something not serious. We might hesitantly supply, with Aristotle as our guide, the word play.

Lucian goes on to write that what he is about to present is one such form of relaxation. It is not something to be studied seriously but a bit of fun to provide relaxation or recreation for otherwise studious readers. Remarkably this approaches our own thought experiment: he explicitly is setting out to write something not serious, something trifling, as if in penning one thought after the other, each more absurd than the last (grapevine-women, vulture-riders, archers who ride on fleas, which, by the way, are the size of twelve elephants, etc.), he might achieve our frivolous ideal of a literary plaything. But as he confesses at the beginning, he falls short of this ideal by one factor (my italics): “The recreation would be fitting for these readers, if they take up such reading which not *only* furnishes a bare diversion consisting of wit and charm, but *also* presents some contemplative element not altogether foreign to the Muses. Such, I imagine, people will think about this text of mine” (*True History* 1.2).

“Only” is the key word here (only play, mere play, just play). The story Lucian presents is not “just” amusement or play, since there are a number of literary references as well (“also,” *kai*), which might provide “contemplation” for the studious reader. This contemplative element makes it more (or for us, less) than a purely frivolous literary plaything, but, despite this shortcoming, Lucian makes it clear that the thrust of his experiment is not in this contemplative

direction but in the direction of relaxation (*anesis*). That is, if the work were too erudite with too much material for contemplation, we might assume, it would no longer be a piece of recreation but rather an object of study, a piece of “serious literature.” It would not offer but demand some consequent form of relaxation. Lucian insists that his work is no such thing.

Lucian, then, is offering a bit of fun, a piece of literature to be separated from more “serious” works. This claim may provide useful evidence for how novels in general were viewed in antiquity: not “serious” literature worthy of study, but rather a diversion away from such “serious literature,” and so, something resembling a frivolous thing of play. This may be why ancient scholars never seemed to pay much attention to the novel, as if it were not on the radar of literary genres worthy of serious study. And although many of the preserved papyri containing novels were from luxurious and expensive bookrolls, this really provides little counterevidence: as Lucian shows in the *Ignorant Book Collector*, the *luxus* of the bookroll only tells of the wealth of the patron, not the quality of the content. But whether or not novels were perceived as something separate from serious literature (and there is good reason to think that they were), the question of interest for us is this: when a novel was (or is) perceived as “not serious,” what precisely was (or is) being perceived? What criteria provoke this aesthetic response? Lucian offers some explicit clues.

The Content of a Plaything

Lucian writes (to quote him again with different emphasis): “The recreation would be fitting for these readers, if they take up such reading which not only furnishes *a bare diversion consisting of wit and charm*, but also presents some contemplative element.” If the “contemplative element” is Lucian’s additive of serious value, the diversion “of wit and charm” (*ek tou asteiou te kai kharientos*) is the frivolous heart of the work. This is what will provide the “relaxation” (*anesis*) for his readers, and we can find examples of this almost at random. The grapevine women I already mentioned, for example, Lucian describes as having hair of “tendrils and leaves and grape-clusters. . . . They kissed us on the lips, and whoever was kissed immediately became drunk to the point of staggering” (1.8.7–11). Something like a joke, something like a charming tale, it is that middle ground of Lucian’s *to asteion kai kharien*. Another example: after a war between the inhabitants of the Moon and Sun, the two sides draw a treaty

that includes, among others, “That the King of the Moon-People pay the King of the Sun-People an annual tribute of ten thousand gallons of dew” (1.20.7–9). We read such lines with a faint smile about something “just” playful or “just” charming—a “bare diversion,” as Lucian says. Yet Lucian’s jokes can also spring from his philosophical muse. For example, later in his voyage he comes to the Isle of the Blest, where he attends a symposium in the Elysian Fields (outside the city of seven cinnamon gates). Although the place is full of mythological figures and great poets and philosophers, he writes: “Plato alone was not there but was said to be living in his imagined city under the constitution and laws which he had written” (2.17.15–17). The joke works on its own, but it is helped along by his puns: the “Constitution” (usually translated as the “Republic”) and “Laws” are Plato’s two most famous works.

Do other ancient novels provide such Lucianic relaxation (*anesis*) from their “wit and charm”? The range is extremely broad from Petronius’s laugh-out-loud *Satyricon* (the plot appears to center on a young man seeking an end to the “curse of Priapus,” i.e., his erectile dysfunction) to the solemn Xenophon of Ephesus, who seems in his *Ephesian Tales* both unwilling and incapable of cracking jokes. But since wit is a form of play from Aristotle to Freud, a few examples will do. One of the picaresque stories from the second-century Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses* (the title because the narrator has been metamorphosed into a donkey for most of the novel), tells of a woman who has been caught by her husband at home with her lover. She manages to convince him that the man hiding in the large storage jar is in fact inspecting it for purchase. This causes her husband to crawl into the jar to inspect it himself, while she, poking her head into the jar, “points at spots for him to clean here and there and there again” as she finishes off with her lover (Book 9.5–7). In the *Satyricon* (92), the well-endowed compatriot of the novel’s hero receives applause as he runs around naked—“for so heavy and massive were his private parts, that you would have thought the man himself was but an appendage of his own member” (*habebat enim inguinum pondus tam grande, ut ipsum hominem laciniam fascini crederes*, W. C. Firebaugh 1922 translation). The Greek novels, whether by accident of selection or actual generic difference, are not nearly so bawdy as the Latin novels (although the surviving Greek *Ass* relates to Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses*). Yet the Greek romances too have their moments: Daphnis and Chloe, for example, in their helpless quest for sexual relief, at one point decide that they ought to try relieving themselves by “doing what the animals do.” That is, not lying down naked together, but trying it standing up, so Chloe suggests, with their clothes on (“how much thicker

animals' fleeces are than my own clothes!" she says at 3.14.4).

Such jokes, however, are not a shared feature of these novels since, as I have mentioned, the novels themselves are too varied in tone and demeanor. As for Lucian's even vaguer word "charm" (*ek...kharientos*), this, too, is a feature unlikely to unite the novels. But it is reminiscent of Longus's novel, especially that last word again—*paignia* ("play" or "games"). When Longus writes that everything experienced by his title character before the final scene was just pastoral *paignia*, there is yet another resonance to the word beyond those I have already mentioned. *Paignia*—although we do not know a great deal about them—were a type of small-scale, dinner performance, a light and charming mime (or we might say "play") that seemed to have dealt with erotic themes in much the same manner as the novels. Plutarch writes that *paignia* are the worst types of mime and "not fit even for the slaves which carry our shoes to watch" (712e–f). The connection between the novel and mime has been noticed before: Helen Morales, for example, who notes that a "Leucippe" mime preserved on papyrus may be related to *Leucippe and Clitophon*, writes (71–2): "What is clear is that mime, pantomime, and ancient novel exhibit strong affinities in tone and content" for which she lists (n. 112) "*inter alia* sea voyages and shipwrecks, ... viewing pictures in a temple, ... physical punishment, ... frequent use of proverbs and gnomic statements." The *paignia* mimes, as James Davidson describes them, "in form and content fitted well into the confines of the degenerate symposium" (52) with a "combination of indecency and sweetness" (55). He quotes an earlier scholar's discussion of Laevius's *Erotopaignia* as having a "boudoir style eroticism" with its "own charm, and piquant seductiveness" (46–7).⁵ Thus the "pastoral *paignia*" that Longus mentions at the end of his novel might indeed recall a "charming" mime viewed at a "degenerate symposium." It is not hard to imagine two young lovers fumbling around on stage to the arousal of spectators while the various kidnappers and sexual rivals lurk at the margins (cf. the sympotic mime at the end of Xenophon's *Symposium*). Such a genre is a *paignion* (a "plaything") in the sense that it does not aspire to anything but the easiest form of immediate entertainment, so the name suggests.

Nevertheless, for both of the criteria Lucian mentions—wit and charm—the novels are simply too diverse in tone and content to unify under either criterion. If Petronius or Achilles Tatius regularly make the reader laugh, Heliodorus and Chariton simply do not. If the content of sea adventures, travel, shipwrecks, and pirates describe some of the novels, they do not describe all of them: Lucian's *True History* and its near contemporary *The Wonders beyond Thule* by Anto-

nus Diogenes (lost, but preserved in summary) stand apart for their fantastic science fiction elements, while, by contrast, Longus stands apart by keeping his two lovers on Lesbos and eschewing any typical pan-Mediterranean adventure. Neither the “wit and charm” of jokes or content, then, will suffice to answer our question of how to write a literary plaything, at least insofar as the question pertains to the ancient novel.

However, Lucian does provide one further clue beyond those he explicitly states regarding how one might provide an impression that something is not “serious literature.” It is something all the novels share, and it has more to do with structure than content. Looking at the plot of Lucian’s novel is the best way to elicit this final criterion: the narrator sets out westward from the Pillars of Hercules but then a storm drives him and his companions for seventy-nine days. After briefly staying in the land of the grapevine women, they set off again. Then another storm comes and whirls them up into the air, higher and higher, for seven days. Then they land on the moon, get arrested by the vulture cavalry, and are taken to the King of the Moon. Then the king invites them to make war with him against the Sun people. . . . In this vein the novel continues, one episode after the next. And this episodic, one-thing-after-another structure is really how all the novels read.

The Structure of a Plaything

Before exploring the episodic structure of the novel, it is worth stepping back to consider an objection to the question as I have formulated it. How to write a thing of play has been the question—how to create something not serious, that is, the literary equivalent of a frivolous plaything? The objection, which has been posed before, goes like this: is it really sensible to speak of “serious” genres and claim, for example, that comedy is a less “serious” (and so more playful) genre than tragedy? Are not all literary genres equally “playful” inasmuch as they are creative acts of play, that is, products of make-believe?⁶ If one thinks of genres as “playful” in this way, tragedy is no less playful than comedy—both are products of such make-believe play. In that regard, it is not a coincidence that we say we are watching, for both comedy and tragedy, a “play.” The question as I have posed it here is thus fatally flawed: there is no difficulty in writing a literary plaything after all. All literature might be seen as an act of play.

The objection is valid. To write a thing of play could cover the produc-

tion of any literary work. If one plays make-believe about the death of a loved one, it is no less make-believe than that about vine women and flea archers. But it is important to notice that there is a broad spectrum in the way one goes about playing such make-believe. Considering the absolute freedom of play, it is remarkable how much constraint is adopted in, for lack of a better word, “tragic” forms of play. In such make-believe, the death of the loved one is treated as if it really happened—that is, in such play, one must follow through the consequences of mourning, revenge, or selling the family house with all the heartache it brings. All this, despite the fact that we are really free to imagine anything during our play (“the family member is not really dead after all!” and “the property is actually an elephant!”). It is easy to forget that all the constraints and rules of necessity in such tragic play are imagined constraints and rules of necessity. How different is that form of play from the other—comedy—which constantly reminds us of its imaginative freedom (“that corpse isn’t dead, it’s alive!” and “it’s demanding money!”). One might, then, answer the objection rather axiomatically: comic play is that form of play that insists it is play, while tragic play is that form of play that insists it is not.

Where the ancient novel fits on this spectrum has to do with this recreational structure, regardless of whether the novel is in fact insistent about such freedom. By recreational structure I mean precisely that which I sketched out earlier: any two events or episodes in a game of make-believe need not necessitate one another: the player is always free to begin again, and so re-create the game. We can contrast it to that more causal structure of make-believe where one episode is necessitated by the previous episode—for example, “the family member died” and *therefore* “we must grieve,” or *therefore* “we must sell the house,” as opposed to something noncausal like “the family member died,” and now “he is alive again and a barber.”

Aristotle speaks a great deal about this contrast in his discussion of plot structure in the *Poetics* although the term he opposes to the causal structure is “episodic.” He insists that such episodic plots—where one episode follows the next but is not felt to cause the next—are “the worst” (*kheiristai*, 1451b34). It is not enough to say that one event happens after another, rather one must say that one event happens *because* of another. The reason is that a great deal of the effect that one desires from tragedy (or one might say any serious literature)—its meaning, the emotions it arouses, and so forth—arises from this causal structuring. It makes a great difference, for example, to say the army perished *after* it waited for propitious signs and the army perished *because* it waited for propitious signs.

The latter creates a pattern that is “universal,” to use Aristotle’s term, and so can be applied to our own experience. It yields a number of moral questions that do not arise from the episodic pattern (e.g., Should the army have waited for the signs? Was it the right thing to do? And where were the gods anyway while such religious folk perished?). Not to get ahead of ourselves, but we might say that this causal structuring yields precisely that deeper meaning which Reardon associates with the serious.

Aristotle’s regularly cited example illuminates the effect of this perceived causality. Consider the difference between the two plots: (1) a man kills Mityls and some time later a statue falls on him at a festival; (2) a man kills Mityls and some time later a statue of that very Mityls falls on him at a festival (9.12–13). The two plots are really not so different, you might even argue they are equally coincidental, but what is important is that the second plot *feels* causal: “for such things do not seem to be at random,” Aristotle reports. Suddenly these two plot elements become more tightly interwoven. It seems that the statue falls not simply *after* he killed the man but *because* he killed the man. And suddenly, by this sheer act of causal connection everything has changed for this plot: morals emerge (“what goes around comes around” and so forth), and the pattern becomes universalized, that is, applicable to our own lives (if we do *x*, then *y* happens).

How do the novels stack up in terms of episodic structuring, which Aristotle claims is “the worst”? The novels are nothing if not episodic. To take some examples: Xenophon of Ephesus’s novel *Ephesian Tales* tracks two lovers, Habrocomes and Anthia, who get married and then set sail for Egypt, but then are captured by Phoenician pirates along the way. Then the daughter of the pirate-boss falls in love with Habrocomes, who, upon rejection, accuses him of attempted rape. Then Habrocomes is tortured and imprisoned while Anthia is sent off to Antioch. Then Anthia’s master falls in love with her, so his wife orders her to be killed. But then she is sold off to a Cilician merchant vessel, but then there is a shipwreck, and Anthia is captured by a gang of thieves. They decide to sacrifice her to Ares, but then a local militia frees her. But then the leader of this group falls in love with Anthia and wishes to marry her, so then she decides to commit suicide with poison. But then it turns out it was not poison but a sleeping potion, so she wakes up again buried amidst the riches of her tomb. But then tomb raiders come and carry her off to Alexandria. There she is sold to an Indian prince who wants to have sex with her but Anthia manages to avoid his advances. The Indian prince takes Anthia to India, but en route they are attacked by a gang

of thieves (the same gang as before, in fact). Then one of these thieves tries to rape her, and she kills him, and so she is thrown into a pit of hungry dogs. But then the guard of the dog pit falls in love with her and keeps her safe. But then an army captures the gang of thieves and the general falls in love with Anthia, tries to rape her, but she finds safety in the temple of Isis at Memphis. But then she is sold into prostitution and taken to southern Italy where she pretends to be epileptic to avoid the prostitution. But then the ex-leader of the thieves happens to be in Italy as well and buys her for sex but then recognizes her. En route to Ephesus, they stop in Rhodes where Anthia finds Habrocomes—who has meanwhile been suffering his own series of misadventures: shipwreck, unwanted sexual advances, another imprisonment, an attempted execution by pyre with consequent Nile flood to save him, forced labor in the quarries, etc. At last, they have a happy reunion.

The novel, in a word, is episodic: one episode happens *after* the other, but one is generally hard pressed to say that one episode *causes* the other. To take another example: Chariton's *Callirhoe*, a romance usually dated to the first century, tracks two Syracusan lovers after a fit of jealous rage—Callirhoe's husband Chaereas had kicked her in the stomach—caused Callirhoe to appear to have died. Callirhoe is thus put in a tomb, but then tomb raiders come to take her along with the buried fortune. Then they sail across the Mediterranean and sell her into slavery at Miletus. But then her master, a powerful Greek landholder in the region sees her and falls in love. Then Callirhoe realizes she is pregnant from her husband Chaereas and realizes she must indulge her master for the child's sake; then Chaereas arrives in Miletus but is attacked by Persians and is made a slave of the Persian satrap of the region. But then this Persian satrap also falls in love with Callirhoe at a "funeral" held for Chaereas. The Persian satrap and the Greek master quarrel and this reaches the ears of the Persian king in Babylon and he arranges for them to settle their quarrel in court, but then the king also falls in love with Callirhoe. Then Egypt rebels from Persia, so the king goes to war, and Chaereas joins the rebels. Chaereas, in a decisive victory, takes the Persian queen captive along with Callirhoe, and so they are reunited at last.

As with Xenophon's novel, here the structure is highly episodic. One episode happens after the other, but one cannot often say that one episode causes the other. That is, the tomb raiders do not enter Callirhoe's tomb because her husband mistreated her, and Egypt does not rebel from Persia because the king falls in love with Callirhoe. We, of course, might object here that if Callirhoe's husband had not mistreated her, she would not have been in the tomb, or that

if the king had not fallen in love with Callirhoe, she would not have gone to Egypt. But these loose connections point to coincidence rather than cause. The novels' heroes and heroines, as it were, are always in the wrong place at the wrong time (that is, until they just happen to be in the right place at the end). Reardon captures the issue well (25): "*Tyche*, Chance, is a prime mover in romance plots" and this has its effect on the way these novels seem to be structured: episodes do not tightly follow some overarching logical pattern of inevitability, but rather something like "chance" or the roll of the dice.

The historically perceived "frivolousness" of the ancient novel, which Reardon discusses above, is an important aesthetic response worthy of attention. How did (and sometimes still does) this perception arise that the ancient novel is somehow not "serious" literature? The episodic structure, I would suggest, offers some significant clues as to how such a perception might arise. To take one final example: the second-century Achilles Tatius's *Leucippe and Clitophon*, which often reads like a clever send-up of such romantic novels, tracks two lovers of Tyre as they fend off an arranged marriage and run away from home. But then, after escaping by ship, they suffer a shipwreck and, although they arrive safely in Egypt, they are captured by a gang of brigands. Clitophon is rescued, but the gang sacrifices Leucippe which causes Clitophon to plan his own suicide. But he stops short because it turns out that Leucippe had not really been sacrificed at all (it was just a clever theatrical stunt to trick the brigands). Then an Egyptian army saves them, but the general falls in love with Leucippe, but then Leucippe becomes insane due to a love potion secretly administered to her. Then after being given an antidote which brings her back to normal, she is kidnapped. When Clitophon pursues them by ship, he sees her kidnappers behead her and throw the body overboard. Again, it turns out later that it was really someone else being beheaded, as Clitophon learns when he finds Leucippe working as a servant girl for the woman he has married. But then the supposed-dead husband of the woman he marries in Ephesus turns out to be alive and returns home to everyone's dismay. But then this husband falls in love with Leucippe and has her imprisoned but she runs off to the temple of Artemis. In a stunning legal finale all is resolved, and the lovers are reunited. The novel does all this in a clever way, constantly playing with the reader's generic expectations, not least regarding the episodic plot. But whether we read it as a parody of episodic structuring or genuine episodic structuring simply serves the same point in different ways—even if it is a parody, through the course of poking fun at such plotting, it, too, becomes an episodic plot.

Ancient novels, then, are essentially episodic and, further, I would suggest, this episodic nature yields a great deal of these novels' nonserious flavor. It is not just "then came a band of pirates" or "then came a shipwreck" (stereotypes of the ancient novel) but "*then* came a band of pirates" or "*then* came a shipwreck." Episodes tend just to happen after other episodes in the novel but do not often happen because of previous episodes, to use Aristotle's important distinction.

Why does episodic structure yield this peculiar aesthetic response that it is not "serious literature"? Such structuring, as I have suggested, resembles the sort of play that is free to reinvent itself at any moment. It is not the structure of cause and effect but something which appears to be almost random ("Here come pirates!" "Here comes a storm!"). To repeat Reardon's words from earlier, "Fortune is a prime mover in the novels," but the novelists themselves often take this description further when they articulate precisely what the goddess Fortune is doing. When Achilles Tatius, for example, explains his novel's ever-changing events, he often writes that Fortune is "playing" (4.9.7, 5.11.1, 7.5.2). That is, the goddess Fortune is not planning anything or following the constraints of logic and necessity when she moves the events of the novel. Instead, she is simply "playing," or, one might say, following the fancy of the passing moment. This play of Fortune behind the scenes of the novel goes some way in explaining the novel's "nonserious" flavor: episodic plots often read as a transcript of such play.

Conclusions: The Structures of Seriousness and Play

It is not enough to say that causal structure for some reason tends to evoke a serious aesthetic response whereas episodic structure just happens to do the opposite. Although these two types of make-believe play offer a useful analogy—the play that insists it is play does so by re-creating itself, while the play that insists it is not does so by binding itself to consequentiality and necessity—it is not clear why one form should feel more serious than the other, especially when considering the varieties of meanings of "serious" that Reardon demonstrated. Even if the literature as make-believe analogy is appropriate, why should that episodic type of play, or episodic type of literature be perceived as more serious?

I would like to end by suggesting that it is not quite right to say that causal plotting creates this aesthetic effect of the "serious" or of "serious literature." Rather, it is that causal plotting just *is* the structure of the serious—in all of its senses—and that these two structures lie behind the opposition of play versus seriousness.

Although Aristotle, in his discussion of causal versus episodic plots, never applies the terms serious and playful, he does often stress the importance of seriousness in the *Poetics*. Sophocles and Homer represent “serious men” (1448a27), as do tragedy and epic more generally (1449b10), tragedy is a representation of “serious action” (1449b24), and so forth. For Aristotle, what defines such characters as serious are these serious actions and that such an individual goes about his actions in a serious way. But what does this mean? *Spoudaios*, the Greek word for serious, encapsulates an idea of goal-oriented activity. It derives from the word *spoudō*, which is a verb of motion (to make haste or to hurry), as if in being *spoudaios* (serious), one is focused on where one is going and trying to get there as quickly as possible. To be *spoudaios* seems at its root to mean this: to have a goal in mind and pursue that goal with all of one’s resources until it is achieved.

Take an example of the word *spoudaios* from one of the novels. In *Lycippe and Clitophon*, we come across a widow of Ephesus who falls in love with Clitophon. That her husband turns out not to be dead and her servant girl turns out to be Lycippe is no matter: what is important is that this character has a clear goal—to relieve her desire for Clitophon by having sex with him. She is, one might say, serious about attaining it. She has no intention of waiting for ceremonies at Ephesus and wishes to have Clitophon as soon as possible, so, while they are sailing together for their wedding she makes it clear that the time has come. Clitophon resists her advances, debating with her the pros and cons of sex before marriage, sex on boats, and so forth. “Let us philosophize,” he says (5.7). But the widow of Ephesus persists. In fact, she had already been persistent before they set sail and made a joke at the “wedding feast” (5.14.4), which illuminates some of the ideas about the serious that I am suggesting here: “I have heard of a cenotaph [i.e. an empty tomb] but I’ve never heard of an *cenogamion* [i.e. an empty marriage].” This was not just a joke, the narrator says, instead she was “joking in earnest” or more precisely “playing with a serious intent” (*epaize spoudēi*, 5.14.4). This mixture of seriousness and play was as popular in the Greek idiom as it is in ours, but it is worth unpacking what this means.

For the widow of Ephesus to make a joke seriously, it implies that it is more than just a joke, or just play. We might say that what makes the widow’s joke serious is that it still functions within the widow’s patterned, goal-oriented activity. She will have sex with Clitophon, and whatever she says—at least whatever she says that is serious in this context—serves to forward that goal, to take her

one step closer. What makes her utterance have a serious intent, is that it points to something beyond itself, and, further, wishes to achieve something beyond itself. If it were just a joke (and as always it is the word “just” that does all of the work) there would be a complete break. There would be nothing beyond the joke itself, nothing beyond the moment of play. Or to use Achilles Tatius’s word, nothing “serious.”

If the basic structure of the serious is that which points to something beyond itself, Reardon’s various senses of the word fall into place. If the novel is serious (as opposed to trivial), it points to some value beyond itself, and its critics realize that they are appraising a real currency, not Monopoly money, as it were. If Xenophon of Ephesus is serious in the sense of solemn in writing his novel, here too lies something beyond the writing of the novel itself: Xenophon knows the purpose of his novel, and he will not get bogged down in stylistic frills. If a novel is serious in the sense of having a deeper meaning, what lies beyond the novel itself is precisely that meaning, something which seems to be inextricable from its “value.” How that deeper meaning is achieved—whether through religious allegory, symbolism, or even irony, is no matter. The seriousness lies in the structure. This explains why it is so difficult to interpret a text if the reader does not take it seriously. It would seem that the act of taking seriously in such cases is either prerequisite or identical to the act of interpretation.

In this light, note how Aristotle’s definition that tragedy is about serious people, or people engaged in things seriously, bleeds into its plot structure. The seriousness of the widow of Ephesus does not just characterize her, but it structures a significant portion of the novel. That is, in this case, the pair did not meet by chance and then suddenly find that they were on a boat to Ephesus together. They met *because* the Ephesian widow desired and planned the meeting. They were on a boat *because* the Ephesian widow wanted it to be so and because they had met. Such a sequence of events is not episodic but causal, and this causal sequence, I am arguing, is wrapped up in the “serious.” Just as she is serious in her joke—that is, her joke is pushing towards the fulfillment of her ultimate desire—she is serious about every other step in her achievement of her goal. And that focus on achieving the goal might serve to define the very nature of the serious.

Play, by contrast, when imagined in its ideal state—for example, when it is said to be just play—is supposed to be without any such consequence. It points to nothing beyond itself and stands outside the chain of cause and effect. No novel (or really any piece of writing) could ever achieve such an ideal

of fluffiness—not even Lucian’s. Although he seems to follow the randomness of his imagined images (vine women, flea archers, fleas the size of elephants, cinnamon gates, and so forth) and revels in being neither a slave to probability nor necessity, and although he explicitly claims his work to be something that lies outside serious literature (and this act of naming something as play, i.e. depriving an act or utterance of consequence, may be the most important part of play), he nevertheless fails to create a literary object outside serious study. After Greek literature’s centuries of absence from Western libraries, a pioneering Greek scholar of the fourteenth century had to decide which texts to bring with him to Florence when he was helping to reintroduce Greek literature to the Latin West after such a long absence. Lucian’s *True History* was among those texts. It would be wrong, I think, to suppose it was chosen because of the “contemplative element” Lucian mentions. Rather, it seems more likely that Lucian, in so intently creating a plaything, a piece of writing without a serious strand to be found, managed to create something new and unusual, and so a different sort of achievement, no less worthy of study.

NOTES

1. Tim Whitmarsh, *The Cambridge Companion to the Greek and Roman Novel* (2008), 6.
2. Richard Hunter, “New Studies in the Greek Novel,” *Classical Journal* 87 (1992): 175.
3. David Konstan, *Sexual Symmetry: Love in the Ancient Novel and Related Genres* (2014), 87.
4. Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.6, 1176b9-28, *Politics* 8.5, 1339b31–40.
5. Henry Bardon, *La littérature latine inconnue: L'époque républicaine* (1952), 190.
6. Michael S. Silk, *Aristophanes and the Definition of Comedy* (2000), 81; Kendall L. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (1990).
7. David Marsh, *Lucian and the Latins: Humor and Humanism in the Early Renaissance* (1998), 13–14.

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