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TANTALIZING CLITOPHON AND MELITE’S ANTI-PHILOSOPHICAL LOVE: AN UNDETECTED HYPOTEXT IN ACHILLES TATIUS’ NOVEL

The anti-novel of Melite in *Leucippe and Clitophon* is surely the best known – and most studied – case of gender-reversal featuring in ancient fiction. And yet, a close reading of the text can still hold unexpected surprises. Gender-reversal is far from being a straightforward notion in Achilles Tatius’ narrative. The very construct of “reversal” in the story of Melite raises a series of issues, which are to do less with gender than with other sets of ethical and social expectations.

In what follows, I will focus on some very distinct verbal clues scattered throughout the Melite episode. On this basis I will argue that, in construing Melite’s failed romance, Achilles Tatius had in mind a precise hypotext, namely the torment of Tantalus. Such a mythical blueprint, explicitly mentioned by Melite, is constantly reaffirmed in her speeches by means of formulae closely connected to the relevant myth. My analysis has a twofold aim: on one hand it will reinforce recent readings

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2 One could also argue that the story of Tantalus suitably captures the essence of the elusive erotic of reading (the reader’s desire is constantly enticed and never entirely fulfilled), typical of the ancient novel (see Whitmarsh 2011: 168-176). In this respect, truly, as Horatius has it, Tantalus’ fabula de nobis narratur (*Satyræ* I 1, 69). As to the proverbial meaning of the torment, see the passages listed by Floridi 2007: 169-170. For the different mythographic traditions associated with Tantalus and his reception in the modern era, see Trombley 1998, 9-27.

of the Melite episode by adding further and stronger textual evidence; on the other, it will point to hitherto unnoticed layers of meaning as well as to structural symmetries embedded in Achilles Tatius’ narrative texture.

“Not farther than the eyes”: a refrain for Melite’s torment

As noted, readers of the ancient novel should be quite familiar with Melite’s and Clitophon’s failed romance. We are in the fifth book: six months have elapsed since Leucippe’s second Scheintod. Clitophon is still grieving in Alexandria, even though time has soothed his sufferings. Furthermore, over the last four months, he has been the love-target of Melite, a persistent, wealthy, young, and charming widow from Ephesus, eager to turn him into her new husband. Clitophon eventually agrees, but only because he wants to escape Alexandria and avoid the encounter with his father, who is about to arrive in town and has no clue about Leucippe having passed away. Nonetheless, Clitophon asks his new wife to postpone the actual consummation of their marriage, so as not to soil the memory of Leucippe, whom he believes buried in Alexandria. Yet, upon their first day in Ephesus, Clitophon finds out that Leucippe is still alive and, on top of that, a slave in Melite’s estate. As a result, Clitophon again refuses to have intercourse with his wife, to which Melite reacts by comparing her own fate to that of Tantalus:

Ποταμόν παρατιθείς πολίν κωλύεις πίνειν. Τοσούτον χρόνον ὀδὸρ ἔδωρ ἔχουσα διψῶ, ἐν αὐτῇ καθεύδουσα τῇ πηγῇ. τοιαύτην ἔχω τὴν εὐνήν, οἶον ὁ Τάνταλος τὴν τροφῆν.

You have set before me a mighty river and you refuse to let me drink! So long I have been thirsting, though the water is there for me – though, in fact, I sleep in the very riverhead! I have the sort of cohabitation that Tantalus had alimentation! (transl. Tim Whitmarsh)

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4 V 8, 1-2.  
5 V 11, 6.  
6 V 11, 3-5.  
7 V 12, 2.  
8 V 18.  
9 V 21, 4.
In what follows, Melite seems to hint three more times at Tantalus’ wretched destiny, by repeatedly using the formula μέχρι τῶν ὀμμάτων (“not farther than the eyes”) to refer to their peculiar marital relationship. I shall now look at these instances more closely.

Soon after Clitophon’s last refusal in Ephesus, Melite, believing Leucippe a Thessalian and hence experienced in magic, asks her for help. Talking to the girl, she describes her *marriage blanc* as follows:

“When husband? Pah!” replied Melite. “He is more like a stone than a husband. (...), as good husband as a stone would be! (...), But he is deaf to my demands as iron, wood, or some other inanimate object. In time, and reluctantly, he was persuaded, but persuaded only into my eyesight. I swear to you by Aphrodite herself: this is the fifth day I have slept with him, only to rise in the morning as if from a eunuch’s bed! He is like a loving statue; I have a beloved not farther than the eyes.” (transl. Tim Whitmarsh, slightly modified)

At the end of book five, when Melite’s husband has also come back on the scene, Melite finally persuades Clitophon to sleep with her, as an act of supreme pity and respect toward Eros. Yet, before that, in a surge of anger, Melite rubs in Clitophon’s face all the humiliations she had gone through for his sake:

“Oμοί διελαία τῶν κακῶν: καὶ γάρ τὸν ἄνδρα ἀπώλεσα διὰ σὲ, οὕτε γάρ ἂν ἔχοιμί σε τοῦ λοιποῦ χρόνου καὶ μέχρι τῶν ὀμμάτων τῶν κενῶν, ἐπεὶ μὴ δεδύνησαι τούτων πλέον.

O poor me, alas for my woes! Thanks to you, I have lost my husband; nor will I have you for the future, not even as far as my empty eyes (and that was all you could manage).” (transl. Tim Whitmarsh, slightly modified)

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10 On this topos, see Phillips 2001.
11 V 22, 3-6.
12 V 25, 4-5.
Thus, all of the three love-speeches uttered by Melite in Ephesus are characterized by a reference to her “watch and do not touch” agony. The phrase μέχρι τῶν όμματών, moreover, is repeated three times in two passages. Finally, the formula seems to be strongly connected with the myth of Tantalus. A speech by Dio Chrysostomus supports this hypothesis 13.

In his sixty-fourth discourse On Fortune, Dio presents a parade of illomened figures. As expected, he does not fail to linger on Tantalus’ fate, which he emphatically describes as follows 14:

Τάνταλος δὲ ἄρα ἐπὶ γῆρως ἁργῇς ἦν· διὰ τούτο ἄρα μέχρι τῶν χειλῶν ηὐδαιμόνει καὶ τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς μόνον ἥμυττεν: τὰ πάντα δὲ ἐκεῖνα ἀρπασθέντα οἶχεται καὶ λίμνη καὶ καρποί καὶ τρώφη καὶ ποτόν ὑπὸ τῆς τύχης, οὕτω γ᾽ ὡς ὑπὸ πνεῦματος.

But Tantalus, you know, was idle in old age; on that account, therefore, he was prosperous only as far as his lips, fortunate only with his eyes, while all those things he longed for—lake, fruits, food, and drink—vanished, snatched away by Fortune as by a blast of wind.

Interestingly, throughout the Melite episode, Achilles underlines that the woman, during the meals, did not eat at all, preferring to stare at Clitophon, thereby nourishing her erotic desire, rather than her alimentary appetites 15. As Helen Morales points out, in the story of Melite food consumption and visual consumption are indeed associated 16. Melite reverses masculine practices of looking, by commodifying Clitophon’s body through her persistent gaze 17. And yet, as noted by Morales, such a commodification is not complete, as we never come to know what Clitophon actually looks like, whereas we have an accurate

13 It should be noted that the expression μέχρι τῶν όμματών is not very common. Significantly, it is found in a passage from the Timaeus (67e8), where Plato presents his extramission theory of sight; cf. also Chrysippus, fr. 863, 8 von Arnim (Aetius, Placita IV 21).
14 LXIV 7
15 Morales 2004: 222-223. The play is between ὠψων and ὠψς.
16 It is not a coincidence that, as soon as he comes to know that Leucippe is alive, Clitophon wants to look at her again. Achilles Tatius, with one of his usual puns, has Clitophon say (V 19, 5): Εἰτα ἐσφιγμένος ὀργῇς καὶ μέχρι τῶν ὦν καὶ ἐνεργείς, ἀλλ’ οὐ δεικνύεις καὶ τοῖς ὀμματισ τὰς τύχον.” (“You have stopped”, he said, “at these good news and you rejoice just up to your ears: you won’t receive any benefit for your eyes”).
17 It is as if Leucippe retaliated by denying Clitophon even the only thing he accords to Melite.
description of Melite’s looks. The torment of Tantalus, I argue, is a fitting paradigm to both epitomize such a failed reversal and underline the infringement of established social norms. Melite may well look at Clitophon, savoring his beauty, just as other men look at her as if she were a statue; however, her gaze is not a source of pleasure. On the contrary, as she stresses, it ends up causing torment and anguish. Even the “statuesque quality” 18 of Clitophon backfires: being made of stone, he is not able to react and to take action in order to fulfill her lust for intercourse. Melite, just as Tantalus, has broken a taboo, and in her case too the punishment fits the crime, as she is condemned to deal with a male body as beautiful as unresponsive.

If we now look at Clitophon’s perspective, we realize that, in inflicting such a tantalizing pain to Melite, he also reverses his usual behavior. Any reader of Achilles Tatius would remember the beginning of the novel, when Leucippe and Clitophon do nothing but stare at each other 19. In the first stages of their love story, Clitophon abides by the recommendations of his cousin Clinias, who, in book one, had extolled the pleasure of looking at one’s darling boy or girl, comparing it to bodily union 20. Action is not excluded, even though the action recommended by Clinias is a subdued one. In giving such pieces of advice, and in his emphasis on the gratification of the eyes, Clinias seems to be rather influenced by the rules of homosexual, and, more generally, philosophical love, as we shall see. After ten days of gazing, Clitophon in fact voices his dissatisfaction, taking the more pragmatic – and heterosexual – Satyros as his confidant and helper 21. In his first direct speech, Satyros informs Clitophon that

18 Ancient novelists often use statues as a term of comparison in order to extol human beauty: see ZEITLIN 2003, 2013: 24-26, with further bibliography. On the sex-appeal of statues in the Second Sophistic, as well as on the notion of ”touching gaze”, see KINDT 2012: 155-189.

19 II 3, 3: καὶ τούτα μὲν ἐμὲν ἤμεραν ἔπραττεν τὸ δέκα· καὶ πλέον τῶν ὁμότων ἐκερδάνεμεν ἡ ἐπιλογήν μεν στὸν ἡμῶν (“In this state of affairs ten days passed, but we made no other progress nor ventured further than this duel of eyes”).

20 I 9.

21 From a narrative point of view the change is motivated by the fact that Clinias is busy mourning his beloved Clisthenes (I 12-14). In such a situation Clitophon clearly could not bother him with his own love sickness. WHITMARSH (2011: 162) underlines that, in fact, Clinias seems to disappear after the death of Clisthenes: Clitophon does not share his friend’s grief. Such a “vanishing”, I argue, has also a narrative function, as the change
they can rely on the help of his lover Clio, who is also Leucippe’s servant. He then suggests to the boy a change of strategy.\footnote{22 II 4, 3-4.}

Dei δε σε κα την κορην μη μεχρι των ωθολμιων πειραν, άλλα και ημια δριμυτε- ρον ειπειν. τοτε δε προσαγε την δευτεραν μηχανην. Θυε χειρος, θλυον δακτυλον, θλιβον στεναξον. “Ην δε ταυτα σου ποιουντος καρτερη και προσιηται, σον εργον ηδη δεσποιναν τε καλειν και φιλησει τραχυλον.

Your task is to make an attempt on the girl, and farther than the eyes: you must also speak more penetrating words to her. Then draw up your second battery: touch her hand, massage her finger, and sigh as you do so. If she submits to these actions of yours and endures them, your next task is to call her your mistress and to kiss her neck. (transl. Tim Whitmarsh, slightly modified)

In point of fact, Satyros’ advice diverges from Clinias’, as the latter had explicitly discouraged Clitophon from using direct language, lest the maid be embarrassed or even scared.\footnote{23 I 10.} Clearly enough, Satyros’ stance is more in tune with Clitophon’s inclinations, as proven also by the “show-case speech” performed for Leucippe’s benefit at the end of book one. Here Clitophon, with Satyros playing his right-hand man, depicts the all-encompassing power of love, which goes as far as to move even lifeless objects such as stones or pieces of iron.\footnote{24 I 17, 1-2. On this speech, see BARTSCH 1989: 156; MORALES 2004: 54; 185-193.}

... εγω δε δοκω μοι, και λιθων. Ερα γοιν η Μαγνησια λιθος του σιδηρου καιν μονον ιδη και θηγη, προς αυτην ειλκυσεν, ύστερ ερωτικων ενδρον εχουσα πυρ. Και μη τι τουτο εστιν ερωσης λιθου και ερωμενου σιδηρου φιλημα;

… No [he can reach] (in my opinion) stones as well! For example, the megnet desires iron: if she only sees him and touches him, she attracts him towards her as though she has an erotic flame inside her. Is this not a kind of kiss of advisor lets the story advance toward the attempted intercourse with Leucippe (made possible by Satyros’ connection with Clio) and the subsequent elopement. In this respect, I do not share Chew’s view (2000: 62), according to which “Clinias more closely resembles the tricky slave-character from the New Comedy”. Achilles Tatius’ strategy is more subtle and builds on gender representations and perceptions, using the shift from the homosexual to the heterosexual discourse as a narrative trigger.
between the desirous stone and her beloved, the iron? (transl. Tim Whitmarsh, slightly modified)

Gazing and touching go hand-in-hand here, the former would not be effective without the latter. Four books and many mishaps later, however, Clitophon has radically changed his behavior. He now inflicts on Melite precisely the same torment he could not endure with Leucippe. Whitmarsh points out how Clitophon’s character is “specifically heteroerotic” 25. Roman Brethes has recently argued that such a characteristic partly falters in book five, where Clitophon reveals the reversibility of his “masculine Self”, behaving like a eunuch – according to Melite 26 – or proving capable of “becoming a woman with men” – according to Sopatros, counselor for Thersandros during the trial in book eight. 27 Furthermore, in talking to Leucippe, Melite refers to Clitophon as “made of iron” and, just like the piece of iron of book one, Clitophon plays now the role of the ἐρωμένος, if a very unfeeling one. As a matter of fact, unlike the loadstone, Melite does not manage to attract him: while allowing kisses, Clitophon does not move, he does not yield to his ἐρωσία. The shift from being an active ἐρωσία to become a passive ἐρωμένος affects Clitophon’s attitude toward the pleasures of the eye: he is now a tantalizing object to be stared at and has no desire to go further. However, as we shall see in the next paragraph, such a picture is far from being a reliable one. Clitophon’s feminized portrait is always filtered by Melite’s frustration and shaped by her anti-philosophical attitude toward σωφροσύνη.

Σωφροσύνη and the eyes: capsizing ethical principles through the novel

At the end of book two, while the two heroes are sailing to Alexandria, accompanied by Satyros and Clinias, we find Clitophon and their new friend, the Egyptian Menelaos, occupied with a famous and animated discussion about two different types of love: which one is better, the

26 V 25, 8.
27 VIII 10, 9. See Brethes 2012.
homosexual or the heterosexual one? Clitophon cannot really accept Menelaos’ argument about the intensity of male-male feelings and replies as follows 28:

“Πῶς δριμύτερον,” ἐφην, “ὁ τι παρακώμαν μόνον οἶχεται καὶ οὐκ ἀπολαύσαι δἰδωσι τῷ φιλόντι, ἀλλ’ ἔοικε τῷ τοῦ Ταντάλου πόματι; Πολλάκις γὰρ ἐν ὧ πίνεται πέφευγε, καὶ ἀπήλθεν ὁ ἐραστής οὐχ εὑρὼν πιεῖν τὸ δὲ ἔτι πινόμενον ἀρπάζεται πρὶν ὁ πίνων κορεσθῇ. καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν ἀπὸ παιδός ἀπελθεῖν ἐραστήν ἀλυπον ἕχοντα τὴν ἱδονήν καταλείπει γὰρ ἔτι διψώντα.”

“Keener?” I replied. “How can anything be so, when it disappears just as soon as it has peeked out? It allows the lover no enjoyment of it, but acts just like the draught of Tantalus: often it disappears even as it is being drunk, and the lover leaves without having found a way to drink. While it is still being drunk, it is snatched away before the drinker is satisfied. It is impossible for a lover to leave a boy without a certain pain mixed in with his pleasure: it leaves him still thirsting for more.” (transl. Tim Whitmarsh)

The more experienced Menelaos replies condescendingly by saying that Clitophon has no idea about real pleasure, which is unsatisfied by its very nature 29. Thus, the pattern characterizing Melite’s failed romance seems to be closer to the dynamic of a homosexual relationship than to that of a heterosexual one, at least according to Clitophon’s view. Furthermore, Melite definitely seems to be assigned the role of the ἐρασθὴ, while Clitophon is granted that of the ἐρωμένος. Brethes’ reading advocating the reversibility of Clitophon’s masculine Self would apparently be further supported by internal, explicit cross-references. The paradigm of Tantalus, first mentioned by Clitophon as a negative image capturing the essence of man-man love, would later on be replicated in his affair with Melite and signals the way the widow considers their relationship.

However, this is just Melite’s part of the story and it does not capture, by any means, the full picture of the “reversal” in book five. Equally, the accusation leveled by Sopatros in book eight, according to which Clitophon imitates men with women and becomes a woman with men, can hardly be taken at face value. The allegation has to be assessed against the background of the judicial setting and it shall not be forgotten that Thersandros will

28 II 35, 4-5.
29 II 36, 1.
eventually lose the trial. In fact, the reference to Tantalus calls for yet another exegetical layer, one that is less to do with gender than with ethical principles pertaining to self-constraint. As noted by Simon Goldhill, the torment of Tantalus could be used as a negative example to epitomize chaste, homoerotic love, based on σωφροσύνη. Goldhill, in particular, points to the dialogue ascribed to Lucian’s Amores or Affairs of Heart. The hero of the dialogue is Theomnestos, a great expert in love matters. “You would find it quicker, my dear Lycinius, to count me the waves of the sea or the flakes of a snowstorm than to count my loves,” he says at the beginning of the dialogue to his friend and (more chaste) interlocutor. At some point, Lycinius asks him to take position in the quarrel between the supporters of homoerotic love and those who favor heterosexual love. In addressing the former, Theomnestos, a glowing ἐραστής, strongly refuses the sweet agony that may arise from pure contemplation:

I must say I admired the solemnity of the very highbrow speeches evoked by love of boys, except that I didn’t think it is very agreeable to spend all day with a youth suffering the punishment of Tantalus, and, though the waters of beauty are, as it were, almost slapping against my eyes, to endure thirst when one can help oneself to water. For it is not enough to look at the loved one or to listen to his voice as he sits facing you, but love, like in an escalation of pleasure, first experiences the depth of sight, then, if has gazed, it desires to go on touching (transl. Austin Morris Harmon, modified).

Without any doubt, Melite would subscribe to these words. Both she and Theomnestos use hyperbolic images, stressing the paradoxical prox-

30 Goldhill 1995: 108-109, 123
31 See also Chew 2000: 59, 61-68.
32 Amores 2.
33 Amores 53.
imity of the unreachable object: while Melite speaks of a source gushing next to her bed, Theomnестos mentions streams of water “slapping” against his eyes. Interestingly enough, Strato of Sardis makes the same point in one of his epigrams, emphasizing the unnatural aspects of love without enactment:

"Η μή ζηλοτύπει δούλοις ἐπὶ παισίν ἐπαίρους.
Η μή θηλυκοπλητεὶς οὐ κοινοῦς πάρεις.
Τις γάρ ἂν ἐρωτᾶ ἀδαμάντινος; ἡ τις ἄπειρης
Οὐναὶ τις δὲ καλοῖς οὐ περίειρα βλέπεις;
Τις γάρ ταῦτα ὀποὺ δόκηται ὡς εἰς τὸν ἐφοτες
Οὐδὲ μέθαι, Διοφάνοι, ἡ ἐθέλης, ἀπεθάνοι:
Κάκει τε θερεισήν ἢ Ταντάλον ἐς πόσον ἔλλει,
Τόν μὲν ἐπὶ οὐδέν ἱδεῖν, τόν δὲ ἐπὶ μοῦνον ἱδεῖν.

Either be not jealous with your friends about your slave boys, or do not provide girlish-looking cup-bearers. For who is of adamant against love, or who succumbs not to wine, and who does not look curiously at pretty boys? This is the way of living men, but if you like, Diophon, go away to some place where there is no love and no drunkenness, and there induce Tiresias or Tantalus to drink with you, the one to see nothing and the other only to see (transl. William Roger Paton).

Strato’s rhetorical question reminds again of Melite’s perplexity at Clitophon acting like a senseless lump of iron. In this respect, Clitophon proves once again to be anything but an ἄνήρ, as he can indeed be adamant against temptation. Strato, moreover, maintains that such a self-contained behavior is not suitable for a sympotic context. His attitude is thus comparable to Theomnéstos’s fiery temper, in that both seem to

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34 This image sounds like a joke at the expenses of more refined theories about erotic gaze and streams of love pouring from the eyes, on which see Goldhill 2001; Bartsch 2006: 57-114. It shall not be forgotten that Achilles Tatius has Clinius voice such theories in 1.9.

35 AP XII 175 (16 Floridi) with Floridi 2007: 170. Floridi points out the epigram’s implications: desire and arousal are natural phenomena, only death can remain unresponsive to beauty. The epigram has a close parallel in Martial IX 25: in Martial, however, the mention of Tantalus is missing. The chronology of Strato is far from certain: the traditional dating to the Second century cannot be taken for granted. It may well be possible than Martial took Strato as a model, rather than the other way round (see Floridi 2007: 7-11).

36 On the notion of ἄνθρεια in the ancient novel see Jones 2007.
argue against the excess of self-mastery or σωφροσύνη and deem necessary to move “farther than the eyes” 37.

Goldhill also shows that the option chosen by Theomnestos was not the only one available. In certain milieus, homoerotic love based on sheer contemplation was not only accepted, but even recommended. It is the chaste affection theorized by philosophers moving in the footsteps of Socratic and Platonic ethics 38. In such contexts Melite’s “Tantalic” catchphrase loses its negative meaning and points to commendable behaviors.

Maximus of Tyre, a contemporary of Achilles Tatius, devotes no fewer than four ‘dissertations’ to Socratic love. In the second one (Or. 19), Maximus reminds the reader that in spite of semantic and superficial similarities, love may take very different forms. What Socrates refers to as “love” is nothing to do with unleashed and sensuous desires. Along the same lines, Maximus goes on by saying that there are different ways of looking, depending on the state of mind of the onlooker, rather than on the quality of the object observed 39:

Τὸ δὲ κάλλος, τὸ αὐτὸ ὁν, ἀλλοιῶτερον μὲν φαίνεται μοχθηροῖς, ἀλλοιῶτερον δὲ ἐρασταῖς νομίμους· καὶ γὰρ τὸ ζῦφος, τὸ αὐτὸ ὁν, ἀλλοιῶτερον μὲν φαίνεται τῷ ἄριστῳ, ἀλλοιῶτερον δὲ τῷ δημῷ· καὶ τὴν μὲν Πενελόπην ἀλλοίως μὲν Ὀδυσσεῖς ὁρᾷ, ἀλλοίως δὲ ὁ Εὐρίμαχος· καὶ τὸν ἦλιον ἄλλος μὲν ὁρᾷ Πυθαγόρας, ἄλλως δὲ Ἀναξιγόρας, Πυθαγόρας μὲν ὡς θεῖον, Ἀναξιγόρας δὲ ὡς λίθον.

Beauty, though always the same beauty, appears differently to the eyes of the wicked than it does to more law-abiding lovers. A sword too, though always the same sword, appears differently to the war-hero than it does to the executioner. Odysseus and Eurymachus look on Penelope with different eyes. Pythagoras and Anaxagoras look on the sun with different eyes: Pythagoras sees it as a god, Anaxagoras as a stone. (transl. Michael B. Trapp)

This remarkable text explicitly conceptualizes the subjectivity of the gaze 40 so often exploited by ancient novelists. Also, Maximus clearly sees in social norms one of the main sources of such a subjectivity, as shown

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37 On the “ideological” background shared by Strato and the pseudo-Lucianic dialogue, see Whitmarsh 2011: 160.
40 What Elsener 2007 refers to as “ways of viewing”.
by the contrast husband (Odysseus)/moichos (Eurymachus). Finally, it shall be noted that in the following paragraph he typically links manliness and self-restrained love. However, it is in the last part of the dissertation that we find a passage that will prove crucial to our concerns.

After theorizing about love in more or less abstract terms, Maximus moves on to illustrate his point by means of practical examples. As he argues, self-mastery is for everyone, not for the philosophers alone. Therefore, when he has to provide a paradigm for σωφροσύνη, he picks Agesilaus, the Spartan king, who once fell in love with a young, barbarian, and stunning boy:

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History tells us of a Spartiate who had not been brought up in the Lyceum or trained in the Academy or educated in philosophy who once encountered a foreign youth, but one of extreme beauty, just coming into flower. He fell in love with him – how could he fail to? – but he let his love go no further than his eyes. I have more praise for this Agesilaus for his triumph than I do for the celebrated Leonidas. Love is a far more difficult opponent than the barbarian, and Love’s arrows wound more deeply than any Cudusian or Mede. So it was that Xerxes trampled on the corpse of the fallen Leonidas and advanced beyond the Gates; but when Agesilaus’ love had advanced as far as his eyes, it halted there at the threshold of his soul. This is the greater achievement; I award it the prize. (transl. Michael B. Trapp)

Agesilaos does not allow ‘love’ to go further than the eyes, thus behaving like the perfect, philosophical lover. Hence, it comes as no surprise that Melite, in tune with her famously anti-philosophical attitude:

41 19, 4.
42 On Agesilaus and the Persian boy, see Davidson 2007: 423-430.
refuses, just like Theomnestus, to abide by the same ethical rules. The paradigm of Tantalus is thus paradoxically used to situate Melite not only within the debates about the correct way to love (boys), but, more broadly, within the current debates about σωφροσύνη. In this respect, philosophical, homoerotic love is just a subset of a more comprehensive field of discussion. Focusing, as Brethes does, only on the polarities male/female, ἐρωτευμένος/ἐρωτής does not do justice to the dense richness of Achilles Tatius’ text. The issues at stake are subtler and entail references to contemporary discussions about ethics as well as verbal echoes of a wide-ranging, easily recognizable philosophical vulgata connecting manliness and σωφροσύνη. The reversal practiced by Melite does not involve only her being a ‘manly lady’, or Clitophon behaving in a ‘girly way’. More generally, Melite subverts, by refusing them, established behavioral and ethical norms. We see Clitophon turn into a woman because we look at him through Melite’s eyes and her gaze cannot possibly be an objective one. Granted, Melite transforms Clitophon, rising “clean” from the bed of his aspiring ἐρωτής, into a woman 44:

... ἀλλὰ, τὸ πάντων ύπριστικότατον, προσπυτόμενος, καταφιλὼν, οὕτως ἀνέστης ὡς ἄλλη γυνὴ.

No, and this is the most outrageous of all, when you had stroked me and kissed me, you got up after that as though you had been another woman! (transl. Tim Whitmarsh)

Such an apparent reversal, however, is not really caused by Clitophon giving up his “specifically heteroerotic character”; rather, it is primarily motivated by the fact that Melite does not acknowledge the value of his composure just because she, like Theomnestos and unlike Maximus, does not associate manliness to σωφροσύνη. The ‘subjective’ reversal of book five has its roots in Melite’s assessment of σωφροσύνη. The catchphrase she resorts to, “no farther than the eyes”, complete with its ‘tantalizing’ subtext, also points to the general domain of philosophical self-restraint. “No farther than the eyes” was the golden rule for those wanting to live a philosophical life. Such a characteristic emerges more clearly in later

44 V 25, 7. Clitophon acts just as recommended by Callicratides, the supporter of chaste love, in the pseudo Lucianic dialogue: Amores 48.
sources, such as the lives of the Neoplatonic ‘saints’. A striking and telling case in point comes from Marinus’ *Life of Proclus*, where the philosopher’s attitude toward pleasure is described as follows 45:

Καὶ τὸν θυμὸν δὲ, καθ’ ὅσον οἴον τε ἦν, ἐκάλαξεν, ὡστε ἢ μὴ κινεῖσθαι τὸ παράπαν ἢ μὴ τὴν λογικὴν εἶναι ψυχὴν τὴν ἑσυχὰς ἀναγοριζόμενην, ἑπέρου δὲ ἐἶναι τὸ ἀποσιέρεσθαι τοῦ εὐπρέπειον, καὶ τούτῳ δὲ ἑλίγον καὶ ἀθενεῖς. Ἀφροδισίασιν δὲ ἀυτῷ ὕστατον ἔσται συναφῶς καὶ τούτῳ. And he would tame the irascible part, to the extent possible, so that it be not moved altogether or the rational soul be not pushed to anger and controlled by something else, in a miserable and weak way. He would participate in the physical erotic pleasures, as I believe, not farther than imagination, and only if he was taken by surprise 46.

A Christian text, ascribed to Basil of Caesarea, further proves that σωφροσύνη implies a kind of restraint allowing room only for visual pleasure without enactment. Pleasurable stimuli may well reach the eyes; the wise man, however, shall not act upon them, thus proving his virtue 47. Interestingly enough, Ps. Basil describes such an attitude as typical, or even stereotypical. This is yet another evidence of the easily recognizable philosophical tinge of Melite’s refrain 48:

The unjust man despises and disparages justice; and the incontinent one speaks against self-restraint, whenever he scorns the strict ones who are accurate in every instance and teach that one has to be moved not farther than the eyes.

45 *Vita Procli* 507-513.
46 My translation. Literary pleasures may be handled in the same way, as shown by Damascios in the *Life of Isidorus* 61 Zintzen: Isidorus listens to poetry without really getting involved; or better he takes part in the pleasure of fiction not farther than imagination.
47 See also BARTSCH 2007 for similar concerns in Seneca.
48 My translation. Ps. Basilius, *Enarratio in prophetam Isaiam*, XIII 268, 47-51 Trevisan. The way Eumathios Macrembolites in the Twelfth century employs the phrase shows that the link with σωφροσύνη was the most apparent one to a late, Christian reader (Hysmine and Hysminias X 2, 6).
To sum up, Clitophon’s reversal does not entail just femininity and passivity, or else the transformation of the hero into a ἔρωμενος. More importantly, it involves different attitudes toward σοφωσύνη. On the one hand, Melite, who seeks sexual gratification, is not ready to ascribe any value to self-restraint. On the other, Clitophon himself shows a new attitude toward σοφωσύνη. If in book five the hero behaves like a philosopher, as Melite stresses by teasing him 49, with Leucippe he had systematically infringed the rules of self-restraint, going as far as to blame his girl for practicing “untimely σοφωσύνη” 50. When it comes to Melite, on the contrary, he is the champion of an untimely chastity and therefore the woman depicts him as a lover worth of Socrates. Ironically enough, the presence of Leucippe in Clitophon’s life seems to rule out his beliefs in self-restraint. Such an ethical reversal, recently pointed out by Meriel Jones, makes also more understandable his yielding to Melite after – and also because, as he himself says – he has regained Leucippe’s love and confidence. After he comes back to his senses, Clitophon completely capsizes the ‘philosophical’ arguments used to push Melite away during their navigation to Ephesus 51.

As ever, Achilles Tatius’ text is multilayered and cunningly ironical. We should be wary to jump too quickly on the bandwagon of one-sided, if fascinating, exegetical readings. Gender-reversal in book five makes no exception, and must be read as part of a broader discourse about pleasurable stimuli, perception, self-restraint, and, eventually, manliness. In spite of all his subtleness, however, Achilles Tatius never fails to reveal his authorial intentions. As shown by the Tantalus paradigm, the novel always provides the readers willing to listen with clear markers and textual cross-references.

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49 V 16, 3 and V 16, 7.
50 I 5, 7 with Chew 2000: 62. See also for the link between self-restraint and manliness, subverted by Clitophon, Jones 2012, 159 and 243.
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