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The Fragility of Female Beauty in the Greek Novels

While the Greek novels may offer a revolutionary portrayal of reciprocal romantic love (Konstan, *Sexual Symmetry*, 1995), some aspects of the central couple's relationship are far from reciprocal. This paper focuses on the construction of beauty in the Greek novels and examines the dialectic by which the heroine's beauty shifts between divine manifestation and marketable asset. The classical origins of this phenomenon provide a better understanding of the relationship between the body and society seen in the Greek novels of the imperial period.

The construction of the heroine's and hero's beauty in the Greek novels is modeled at the outset upon an Aphrodite-Anchises type schema, similar to that in the Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite 5 in which a gorgeous goddess consorts with an outstanding specimen of manhood. These static characterizations however accurately represent neither the relationship between the heroine and hero nor the function of their beauty in the novels.

The heroine's beauty is an inadvertent act of hubris; it is out of place (Carson, *Before Sexuality*, 1990). She may look like Artemis but Artemis she is not ­ she is a mere mortal whose appearance causes others to worship her as a goddess, lose their self-control and neglect the proper divinities. Her beauty at the same time testifies to her nobility and convicts her for her crime, thereby causing her alienation from society. This association of inner virtue with outward appearance is quintessentially Homeric. Salomon (*Naked Truths*, 1997) argues that *aidos*, just as *sophrosyne*, is an internalized virtue for men but an externalized one for women. Beauty in the Greek novels functions in much the same way. Though, as Perkins (*The Suffering Self*, 1995) points out, due to the "veil of power" torture never really hurts the heroine or hero, the heroine has more areas of vulnerability: her face, hair, body and maidenhead ­ not surprisingly all regions in which her beauty resides.

If a heroine's beauty puts her at odds with society, it also becomes her ticket back to her privileged position. As Zeus in the Homeric Hymn forces an affair with a man upon Aphrodite to keep her from excessive pride in her powers, so are the heroines made to desire their proper place in society behind their husbands through their unsavory experiences with men and women in the world. The heroine's untamed beauty is domesticated through the her attempts to ward off suitors and to counteract the effects of her beauty. She then surrenders this beauty to the hero in exchange for her resocialization ­ until, as is implicit at the end of every novel, the heroine can again unleash her beauty's power privately in the bedroom.