

FEMININE EQUIVALENTS OF GREEK LOVE IN MODERN FICTION

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ABSTRACT: Exact counterparts to male Greek love relationships are more frequently encountered in lesbian literature than in male homosexual literature, from the Victorian epoch to date. They are more clear-cut than the male versions because they stress relatively uncensored emotional ties rather than overt sexual expression. Tragic denouements in such fiction, when found at all, arise either when the older woman fears and rejects such attachments or when outsiders misunderstand them and forcibly break up the affairs, even as in actual case histories in both genders.

The psychosexual patterns of Greek love—defined as the love between a man and an adolescent boy—have definite equivalents between women and girls and have been, perhaps, more often treated in fiction. The novel of feminine Greek love differs both from the novel of adult lesbianism and from the novel of boy-man love. First of all, the typical theme is that of love, or intense emotional attraction, between a woman and an adolescent—rarely, a pre-adolescent—girl. Secondly, these novels are less likely to deal with overt sex than their male equivalents. There are exceptions, but in general the pattern of Greek love between woman and girl is one of emotion rather than sensuality, involving heroine-worship, admiration, emulation. Frequently there is a strong maternal element in these attachments.

Because the sexual element in these feminine attractions is so often deeply sublimated, the pattern appears in books written for adolescents themselves, even in the most staid and stuffy Victorian period of the nineteenth century. Because emotional relationships

between girls are looked on as less censurable than comparable relationships between males, and because physical expressions of affection are less interdicted, the pattern of the feminine Greek love story emerges more clearly in the 19th century girl's book than in that written for her brothers. A recurrent pattern in such books is the adoration of a schoolgirl, either for an older girl or for a schoolmistress. Possibly the best known example is a Sunday-school tearjerker of the 1870's, by "Susan Warner" (Elizabeth Wetherell), entitled *The Wide, Wide World*. This book was mentioned by Louisa May Alcott in *Little Women*—Jo finds Beth "reading and crying over *The Wide, Wide World*"—and that it has a continuing appeal for generations of adolescent girls is evidenced by the fact that it was still in print as late as 1930.

The Wide, Wide World tells the story of little Ellen, who, at the age of 8 or 9, loses her mother—her father is travelling abroad—and is sent to live with an aunt, a somewhat coarse farm woman. Ellen is not abused or actually ill-treated, but she is not understood, and her well-bred manners and schooling are laughed at and ridiculed. Into her lonely life comes "Miss Alice," the ladylike daughter of the local minister, who first lends Ellen books and continues her education; afterwards she repeatedly has Ellen to stay at her house, fondles and makes much of her, and in general supplies the need in Ellen's life for an older woman of her own kind as a focus for emotion and tenderness. Much of the first half of the book is concerned with the growing warmth and closeness between Ellen and Miss Alice, and the death of Alice marks the end of the first part of Ellen's tribulations.

Obviously, no overt sexuality is indicated or implied in this book, but kisses and embraces are frequent, and the affectionate endearments between Ellen and Alice are more like those of lovers than those of mother and daughter. The relationship is definitely one of the Greek love sort.

Somewhat less explicit, but identical in pattern, are the relationships in the first of the well-known Sunday-school series of girls' books by Martha Finley, *Elsie Dinsmore*. Elsie—ten years old when the book begins, and probably in her early teens at the close of the story—is an orphan with no mother and a domineering, stern father. The only tenderness in her life comes from her be-

loved "Miss Rose," a girl of twenty or thereabouts, who fondles Elsie, defends her against harsh punishments from her stern governess and cruel relatives, and is in turn admired and imitated by Elsie.

The worth of such an older girl as a model and friend for a little girl was evidently a known psychological fact to writers and readers of that day, no matter how the relationship was overlaid with sentimentality and religious feeling. In virtually every girls' book of that era, some such pattern reappears.

As the Sunday-school religiosity began to appear old-fashioned, and the discovery of Freud and modern psychology made novelists aware of the meaning behind this recurrent pattern of love and adulation between little girls and older women, the novels written on the subject became less explicit, but, when they occurred, more knowledgeable about the quality of the attachment between the woman and the girl. In 1900, Ellen T. Fowler's novel *The Farringtons*, deals with a series of no less than three "passionate attachments experienced by the motherless heroine,"¹ and the author refers to "that passionate and thrilling friendship . . . so satisfying to the immature female soul."² Each of these intense attachments is for an older girl or woman, and each partakes of the nature of romantic love, though all are free of physical intimacy. That the author was well aware of the kind of emotion she portrayed is perfectly clear from the following:

"People sometimes smile at the adoration of a young girl for a woman. . . But there is no doubt that the girl who has once felt it has learned what real love is."³

The French writer Colette achieved her early *succès de scandale* with the four Claudine novels, all of which dealt in one way or another with lesbian relationships, and all of which were so explicit that at the time of their publication (1900-03) they could not be translated into English. (To the modern reader they now appear extremely circumspect and innocuous.) The first of these, *Claudine à l'école* (*Claudine at School*), presents in the opening pages a picture of the 15-year-old Claudine falling passionately in love with Mademoiselle Aimée, an under-teacher at her country school. Curiously—for fiction of this type—the child is in this case the aggressor; she arranges for Aimée to give her English lessons privately,

which are spent mostly in kisses and embraces. Aimée, however, prefers to be the petted favorite of the headmistress, and Claudine is disconsolate for many days, after which she plunges into a round of mischievous tricks on the "faithless" Aimée, as well as becoming the domineering lover of Aimée's 13-year-old sister Luce.

In the first two decades of this century, two writers portrayed Greek love attachments in historical novels, shifting the period to historical antiquity or the Middle Ages. The Russian novelist Dmitri Merezhkovskii—best known as the author of a novel about Leonardo da Vinci said to have inspired Freud's monograph on Leonardo's homosexuality—portrayed just such a passionate attachment in *The Birth of the Gods*, a novel of the bull-dancers in Crete. Diotima, a priestess of the Mount Dikte cult of the Great Mother, is loved by a little girl named Eoia, who stows away on a ship to follow Dio to Crete. Dio "knew that the little girl had fallen in love with her in the way that children often do, which seems so ridiculous to grown-up people." When she discovers Eoia aboard the ship, she intends to send her immediately home to her parents, but she "never did; she came to love Eoia as passionately as Eoia loved her." Eoia becomes Dio's novice in the cult; when the two perform together in the bull-ring, they are taken occasionally for "boy and girl" and a casual spectator is certain that they are lovers. The relationship, presumably at first innocent and maternal, becomes sensual in nature following a religious ritual, when priestess and novice were required to bathe together, naked, in the sea; Eoia weeps heartbrokenly, saying, "You don't love me," and Dio responds with tenderness. One of Dio's lovers sees the "boy and girl" lying in each other's arms on the beach, and in a fit of insane jealousy, arranges for Eoia to be killed in the ring, hoping Dio will turn to him; instead, the child's death nearly destroys Dio as well.

In John Clayton's *Dew in April*, a central figure in the story is Mother Leonor, prioress of the convent of St. Lazarus of the Butterflies. Described as a woman "beautiful yet terrible," wasted by unbelievable asceticism, "some ineradicable tinge of warmth had saved Leonor from the common fate of mystics." Her whole emotional life is wrapped up in her novices, those young creatures "entrusted to her," and it is clear that this emotion is more than maternal. Much of the story revolves around the upheaval produced

in the convent by the admission of Dolores, a homeless gypsy waif, with whom Leonor falls immediately in love. A deeply repressed woman, Leonor is unaware of the underlying sexuality of her interest in Dolores, but it is evident throughout. When Dolores is received formally as a novice, Leonor summons her to her cell; chronic invalidism has kept Leonor from the ceremony, but she wished to give Dolores the ritual kiss of peace.

"Later, in her own agony, Dolores understood the emotion that surged over Leonor's face . . . it was as if a mummy should be torn and twisted by the passions of adolescence."

Later, Leonor shelters Dolores even from the Inquisition when the iconoclastic girl, too realistic for convent life, innocently commits heresy after heresy and later takes a knightly lover.

The popular writer of women's books, Helen R. Hull, in a magazine novelette *The Fire*, shows how the friendship of an older woman helps a teen-age girl in a stuffy small town to become alive to books, music and art. This theme appears in several minor novels of the day, but perhaps the most explicit novel of the first half of the century is Christa Winsloe's *The Child Manuela*, the novel of the German film *Mädchen in Uniform*. Both in the film and the novel, a classic Greek love attachment leads to terror and tragedy.

Manuela, motherless at 14, and the daughter of a father who does not care to be bothered with children, is accused of misconduct with a boy neighbor. Actually, the orphan girl has merely been glamored by the boy's mother, a warm, gentle and kindly woman who has treated the forlorn Manuela with real motherly tenderness. Manuela's attempts to explain this are derided as mere excuses, and she is packed off to a restrictive military-style boarding school for the daughters of officers. Here she finds that all the children are fascinated by Fräulein von Bernberg, a situation which Manuela finds, at first, incomprehensible: "In love with a governess? How could that be? I don't understand." Fräulein von Bernberg, though strictly correct in behavior, is a warm and outgoing woman who responds to the adoration of the children; Manuela, too, soon falls under her spell, and the woman realizes that for once a child has touched a string in her nature which is deeper than the maternal gentleness she feels for all. Her nature, however,

sees "nothing ahead but renunciation" and she sternly rebuffs any touch of favoritism.

Sheer coincidence brings on the tragedy. Manuela, sent to school hurriedly and without proper preparation, has not the proper supply of underclothing, and Fräulein von Bernberg, scolding her for the state of her clothes, takes pity on her and gives her one of her own shifts, which Manuela may make over for herself. This trivial occurrence, in the bleak round of the repressive school, is exaggerated by Manuela to hysterical proportions. At a school party where the children are served a punch spiked with crude alcohol, Manuela—overexcited and somewhat drunk—babbles innocently of the delight of wearing something which her adored Fräulein has worn next to her body. The repressive headmistress, hearing this, is shocked, and Fräulein von Bernberg, questioned about the incident, attempts to protect Manuela by repudiating all interest in the child. Manuela is punished by isolation from the school life, which weighs so heavily on her that she throws herself from a fourth-story window.

In this case, a Greek love affair is regarded as unhealthy and abnormal, but the tragedy clearly arises, not from the love itself, but from the failure of narrow-minded parents and teachers to understand the need for love and tenderness in a girl cut off from normal associations and relationships. A similar theme is the center of another German novel of roughly this period, Elizabet Weiraugh's *Der Skorpion* (*The Scorpion*).

The heroine, Melitta Rudloff, known as Metta, also loses her mother very young. The persistence of this pattern indicates that novelists—usually well versed, even if only unconsciously, in psychology—are aware of the particular susceptibility of the motherless girl to fall romantically in love with an older woman. Metta, as a small girl, falls in love with her governess, who ruthlessly exploits the child's devotion, even requiring her to pawn the family silver in order that the governess may have money to give her lover. When the complicity is discovered, Metta protects the governess by silence, the woman is sent away, and Metta—since they had deprived her of her idol—revenge herself by refusing to do lessons or learn anything.

In her middle teens, Metta, bored, daydreaming and idle, makes the acquaintance of Olga, a woman in her late twenties; sophisticated, worldly, and something of an adventuress. Metta's

immediate love for Olga gives, at first, new purpose to her life; she "wakes up," begins to take an interest in reading good books and in cultivating her mind again. Olga introduces her to the world of art and music, and generally helps Metta to break the mould of stuffy bourgeois householdry. Olga is, however, an unstable and somewhat unbalanced woman, blowing hot and cold; she accepts presents of money from Metta, and allows the girl to deceive her family. Eventually the girl's father and Aunt Emily become suspicious of this friendship, set detectives on Olga, discover that she is a notorious lesbian, and send Metta away to stay with relatives. Metta takes money from her uncle's desk to run away to Olga; Olga receives her tenderly, and the two spend a few ecstatic days together in the country. The relationship has previously been innocent, without physical contact except for kisses; now, touched by Metta's evident longing and need for her, Olga accepts the girl's sexual overtures as well. A heart attack suffered by Metta's father breaks into their happiness; Metta returns home, but after the shock of her father's death, slips away to Olga again. In the middle of the night, the two are discovered together by Metta's aunt and uncle; Olga, unable to face them, harshly repudiates the girl, and Metta, completely broken, leaves Olga.

As she recovers her spirits, she tries again to contact Olga, but her letters go unanswered. Eventually she discovers that Olga, her debts bought up by Metta's family, has been hounded remorselessly by detectives and harassed to suicide. This gives Metta the strength to break permanently with her family, and set out on her own life.

In this book, a Greek love affair, although tragic and regarded as abnormal by the girl's guardians, has served as a vivifying force to awaken a young girl to the dullness of her surroundings and provide her with intellectual interests. The same theme—Greek love as a constructive force—appears in a recent novel by the young French writer, Françoise Mallet-Joris: *Le Rempart des Béguines*, translated under the title *The Illusionist*. Indolent, daydreaming Helene, 16 years old, makes the acquaintance of her father's Russian mistress Tamara, a worldly, sophisticated and somewhat corrupt woman who promptly seduces the girl into sexual contact. Helene is amazed to realize that this relationship, which she knows is regarded as a vice,

changes her for the better to such a degree that her father and her schoolteachers all notice that she has begun to "wake up" and take more interest in her schoolwork, her clothes and her daily life. However, the relationship has its destructive element as well. Like Olga in *The Scorpion*, Tamara blows hot and cold; now fondling and caressing the girl, now terrorizing and even beating her. The relationship is approved by Helene's father on the ostensible grounds that Helene needs someone to teach her about clothes, and give her feminine companionship in general. When Helene falls ill with scarlet fever, and in delirium keeps calling for Tamara, Tamara becomes frightened at the openness of this relationship. Helene's father decides to marry Tamara, thinking Helene will be happy at actually having her loved Tamara for a stepmother; instead, Helene turns viciously on Tamara and after the marriage refuses to have anything more to do with her.

A virtual enslavement between a girl of 16 and a crippled, emotionally starved stepmother is portrayed in Margaret Ferguson's *Sign of the Ram*. Leah, paralyzed after an accident endured in saving her stepdaughter and stepson from drowning, has used their gratitude to bind the entire family to her whims, and to gratify her sense of power. This passionate devotion to Leah is most noticeable in young Christine, in whom it approaches such proportions that her older sister suggests, "Tell her she'll have to go away to school if she keeps on acting like a fourth-former with a crush on the games-mistress." When Sherida, Leah's young secretary, comes to the house, Leah subtly works on Christine's devotion, first making Christine believe that Sherida is the mistress of Christine's father (Leah's husband). She excites the girl to such a pitch that Christine attempts to poison Sherida with sleeping pills. When she realizes what she has done, however, Christine repudiates Leah in disgust and shock: "She just wanted to see if she could get me to do that for her. . . I don't ever want to see Leah again." And Leah, rejected by her formerly adoring family, commits suicide.

If such an attachment can bring disaster on a young girl, tragedy can also result, psychologically, from an older woman's rejection of a Greek love attachment. In *Thalia*, by Frances Faviell, a young woman goes to Cornwall as a summer companion for a family of young children, and adolescent Thalia, starved for love, seeks

hungrily for affection and confidence from Rachel; when Rachel rebuffs her, Thalia drowns herself. Less melodramatic, but perhaps more realistic and telling, is a brief portrait in a novel written by a girl herself barely out of her teens: Pamela Moore's *Chocolates for Breakfast*. Courtney, child of a neurotic and narcissistic movie-star mother, is sent away to boarding school, and for a short time is taken up by a friendly, kindly teacher; but just as Courtney is coming out of her shell, the teacher realizes the nature of this attachment and rebuffs her, and Courtney withdraws again into loneliness. It is hinted at that this rejection of her overwhelming need for love touches off the sexual promiscuity and dissipation which characterize Courtney's later adolescent years.

This handful of examples of Greek love in fiction will serve to show some of the general characteristics of these relationships.

They usually occur between a maturing girl—somewhere between nine and sixteen—and a woman of mature years. Motherless girls, or those with inadequate maternal attention and support, appear to feel the greatest need for these attachments, usually from a lack of understanding or tenderness in their lives. The relationship is usually as good—or as bad—as the woman with whom the girl is lucky or unlucky enough to fall in love. At best, such a relationship enriches and broadens the girl's entire life; at worst, it can lead to such tragedies as Christine's in *Sign of the Ram*. The relationship is often innocent and romantic rather than openly sexual, and at least in fiction this appears to be the least punished and the best tolerated. Tragedy, however, seems not to be inherent in such a relationship (unless, like Tamara in *The Illusionist*, or Leah in *Sign of the Ram*, the woman is herself corrupt), but occurs only when (1) the relationship is misunderstood and interrupted by outsiders, or (2) the older woman fears or rejects such an attachment.

But, the reader may comment, these are not real case histories; they are novels, and one should hesitate to draw conclusions from them.

I venture to disagree. Not a single one of these novels can be classed as a "commercial novel"; all are serious works of honest purpose, and they therefore reflect how intelligent women of maturity, psychological insight, and intellectual honesty, view the Greek love relationship in social context. It is, after all, from the imagina-

tion of novelists rather than from the dry research of sociologists that we derive our knowledge of an era's interpersonal relationships, of how people in that era actually think and feel. Therefore, this handful of novels can be taken as a valid, though partial, picture of Greek love relationships as these occur between women and young girls.

NOTES

1. *The Farringdons*, 56-7, cited in Jeannette Howard Foster, *Sex Variant Women in Literature*, N.Y., Vantage, 1956, 243.

2. Foster, 244.

3. *The Farringdons*, 14, cited in Foster, 244.

Other citations in this article are from novels seen by MZB; page references would differ depending on edition.

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SUPPLEMENT

Other titles are known which may or may not touch lightly on the theme of female counterparts to Greek love. They have not been recently enough

rechecked for this article, but presumably would not affect its conclusions. A partial list follows:

- Bennett, Arnold. *Elsie and the Child*. N.Y., Doran, 1924.
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Hull, Helen R. *The Quest*. N.Y., Macmillan, 1922.
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Rehder, Jessie. *Remembrance Way*. N.Y., Putnam, 1956.
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The abbreviations used in the bibliography are uniform with those in the Checklists of Lesbian Literature. For those unfamiliar with them, they are here repeated:

- hcr = hard-cover reprint
pbr = paperback reprint
ss = short story
tct = Title changed to
tr = translation

Other abbreviations are obvious in context.