

The Judaism of an Egyptian Heroine in a Greek Novel: the Eclectic Identity of Aseneth¹

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Abstract

Joseph and Aseneth is a Greek text from the Jewish Diaspora in Egypt. The text is also the first Hellenistic novel we possess. The essay considers intertextual parallels to the Bible and four ancient Greek novels (Chariton's *Callirhoe*; Achilles Tatius' *Leucippe and Clitophon*; Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe*; Xenophon of Ephesus' *Ephesiaca*). It aims to cast light on the figure of the pagan Egyptian Aseneth, who converts to Judaism in order to marry her beloved Joseph. The paper offers a wide perspective on a narrative of a journey from feminine frivolousness to true adherence to the righteous Jewish patriarchal society, weaving together Biblical accounts and erotic literature.

Keywords

Joseph and Aseneth; ancient Greek novels; Greek literature; pseudepigrapha

1. Introduction

Joseph and Aseneth (hereafter *JA*) is a Greek text most likely written between the first century B.C.E. and the first century C.E.² It is unlikely that the text is of Christian origin,³ although some still contend that it is.⁴ It is generally accepted that it was composed by a Jewish author, possibly in Egypt.⁵ Hence it is placed among the Apocryphal writings written during the Jewish Diaspora.⁶ It is still discussed whether it is possible to claim that the author was a member of an Essene community,⁷ or a Jew of Egyptian origin.⁸ It is also debated whether the text was first composed in Greek⁹ or in Hebrew.¹⁰

¹ I wish to thank Professor Garth Fowden for his patient guidance and encouragement while editing this paper. This was originally wrote during the last year of my MA degree at SOAS University of London.

² Coogan 2010, 2277.

³ Batiffol 1889-90, 29; Brooks 1918, 11.

⁴ Nir 2012.

⁵ Buchard 1985, 187.

⁶ Guevara Llaguno 2005, 3-5.

⁷ Kohler 1902, 172-76; Riessler 1922, 1-22 and 145-83; Kuhn 1957, 65-93.

⁸ Philonenko 1968, 109.

⁹ Batiffol 1889-90, 11.

¹⁰ Aptowitz 1924, 281.

At Genesis 41.50 we read about the marriage between Joseph and Aseneth, daughter of Potiphera, priest of On/Heliopolis (פּוֹטִיפָרֶע בֶּהֶן אֲוֶן-בֵּת, אֲסֵנֶת). Taking this as his or her starting out point, the anonymous author of *JA* composed twenty-nine chapters concerning the beautiful Egyptian Aseneth, said to have converted to Judaism in order to marry her beloved Joseph.

The story of Aseneth and her abrupt conversion told by an unknown author is intriguing in many ways. It has fascinated scholars interested in Judaism, gender studies, inter-religious relations and the Hellenistic milieu of Jewish minorities. The story was also investigated as regards the ethical ideals it aims to promote.¹¹ This essay will be devoted to study of the characterization of Aseneth, adopting an eclectic perspective but prioritizing a gender-based approach which focuses “on gender as a major analytic category”.¹²

A critical examination of *JA* will hence be offered, taking into consideration both Biblical and non-Biblical texts with which *JA* shares multiples features. These include the only five ancient Greek novels which have survived intact, namely Chariton's *Callirhoe* (first century C.E.), Achilles Tatius' *Leucippe and Clitophon* (second century C.E.), Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe* (second century C.E.), Xenophon of Ephesus' *Ephesiaca* (also second century C.E.) and Heliodorus of Emesa's *Aethiopica* (third century C.E., not discussed here).

JA should be considered in virtually every regard as the first Greek novel we possess. Beyond showing many intertextual parallels with the Bible, it is also akin to the above-mentioned Greek novels. Their similarity goes beyond their subjects and the language in which they were transmitted, namely Greek *koinè*. These novels are in fact all believed to be “not fictitious”¹³ but instead “always in some sense based on real things”.¹⁴ Literature is not always mimetic, and it is known that “‘realistic’ characterization in ‘novels’ are largely anachronistic”.¹⁵ However, literature often becomes an instrument to interpret political authority, social interaction and cultural changes. This is often the case of romances, aiming to establish a dialogue with historical circumstances and questions of identity.¹⁶

These Greek novels always balance realism and fantasy,¹⁷ and can be defined as “creative working-through of contemporary identity politics”.¹⁸ Characterisation systematically occurs here through mythological analogue and Homeric narrative model.¹⁹ Although mythological literature and Homeric epic are not behind *JA*'s narrative texture, its anonymous author extensively borrowed from another masterwork, namely the Biblical accounts. *JA* hence seems to present social instructions for Jews living in a multicultural social milieu dominated by paganism.²⁰ It succeeded, as the other five novels did, in conveying the new Hellenistic spirit at the

¹¹ Chesnutt 1991, 107-27.

¹² Davidman and Tenenbaum 1994, 8.

¹³ Reardon 1989, 1.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ De Temmerman 2014, 16.

¹⁶ Whitmarsh 2011, 255-60.

¹⁷ Wiersma 1990, 109

¹⁸ Whitmarsh 2011, 12.

¹⁹ Cueva 2007.

²⁰ Chesnutt 1988, 21 - 48.

basis of the reception of the novel genre, and born in response to the fact that “the emotions of the individual, without regard to their social implications, were claiming more and more attention”.²¹

2. The Eclectic Identity of Aseneth

The *JA* narrative is divided into two parts. The first is set in the first year of the seven years of plenty (1.1)²² and opens with a general introduction (1-6), leading to the encounter between the two protagonists (6-10), Aseneth’s conversion (10-19) and the heroes’ ensuing marriage (19-22). The second part, dated as the second year of hunger (22.1), is less focused on Aseneth and instead more interested in depicting the Jewish male characters. It is dedicated to the conflicts that the couple has to face in order to stay together.

Unlike other ancient Greek novels, the plot is set entirely in one place, namely the district of Heliopolis where the father of Aseneth, the satrap Pentephres, lives. The presence of an Egyptian satrap at the very beginning of the narration immediately recalls one of the secondary characters of Chariton's *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, namely the satrap of Artaxerxes II, Great King of Persia. The presence of Artaxerxes in Chariton's novel has been seen as proof that the Greek novels were forerunners of the modern historical novel.²³ The same consideration may be applied here to the figure of Pharaoh in *JA*, which has been identified as Senusret II (1897-1878 B.C.E.).²⁴ Nevertheless, it is Aseneth who is meticulously described in the story.

Appearance is often an index of character in the ancient Greek novels.²⁵ Aseneth is hence the most beautiful virgin in the land, “unlike the daughters of the Egyptians, but in every respect like the daughters of the Hebrews” (1.7-8). This foreshadows the heroine’s conversion to Judaism. Her beauty also binds her to both Rebecca, her grandmother-in-law, said in Genesis 26 to have been “beautiful in appearance” (מְרֹאָה טוֹבָה),²⁶ and to Rachel, her mother-in-law, “of beautiful figure and beautiful in appearance” (וַיִּפֶּת מְרֹאָה, תֹּאֲרֵ-יָפֶת).²⁷ The characterization of the heroine as a beautiful virgin also corresponds perfectly with that of the Biblical Esther and the female protagonists of the five Greek novels; Callirhoe’s beauty is for example described as “more than human” (οὐδὲ γὰρ ἀνθρώπινον τὸ κάλλος)²⁸ and the beautiful Anthia’s in Xenophon’s *Ephesiaca* is said to have been “an object of wonder” (οἷον θαυμάσια).²⁹

²¹ Reardon 1989, 7.

²² For all future references to the Greek text see the ‘short text’ of *JA* in Philonenko 1968. For an English translation see Cook 1984, 473-503.

²³ Hägg 1987, 184-204.

²⁴ Merrill 2008, 66-68.

²⁵ De Temmerman 2007, 239.

²⁶ Gen. 26.7.

²⁷ Gen. 29.17.

²⁸ Charit. 6.3.5.

²⁹ X. Eph. 1.2.5.

Furthermore, Aseneth is said to live in a golden room inside a tower, as it is often the case of erotic heroines “located in others’ houses [...] jealously protected by an antagonistic male guardian” (here, her parents).³⁰ Inside the tower, she venerates “innumerable gods” offering sacrifices (2.5) surrounded by seven virgins (2.10), all chaste and pure as the heroine. It has been highlighted that in the five Greek novels “virginity or chastity, at least in the female, is of crucial importance, and fidelity to one’s partner, often combined with trust in the gods, will ultimately guarantee a happy ending”;³¹ this is also the case of Aseneth’s celibacy, remarked on numerous occasions scattered all over the text, precluding her conversion to Judaism.

As with the heroines of the other Greek novels, Aseneth is the object of rivalry between men. Although this is clear from the very beginning of the story, the quarrel does not take place until the end of the first part of the novel, when we witness “a temporary happy ending”. However, Joseph is not the first to fall in love with the female protagonist, but instead it is Pharaoh’s eldest son, never named in the story.

Until the appearance of Joseph in the third chapter, everything seems to point to Pharaoh’s son being the hero of the tale. Similarly to the case of Chaereas, the reciprocal love between Aseneth and Pharaoh’s son is ferociously contested by his parents, who would rather he married a nobler woman. However, since Pharaoh’s son later claims that Aseneth “was originally pledged” to him (23.4), their marriage must have been approved by the girl’s parents at least. Nevertheless, her parents have visibly changed their minds when Joseph decides to visit them. They hence decide to marry Aseneth to the Jewish hero since he is: 1) ruler of Egypt; 2) the distributor of corn; 3) a wise worshipper of God (4.8-9). If we bear in mind that Pentephres does not share Joseph’s creed, it is clear that this marriage is motivated by the first two reasons, namely by pure economic gain, a portrayal that may aim to present the Egyptians in a negative light.

Aseneth’s “arrogantly and in anger” answers to her father, ferociously criticizing Joseph (4.12-4). As in the case of Manto in *Anthia and Habrocomes* or of Callirhoe, Aseneth’s inclination to rage contrasts with her angelic appearance and makes her resemble more Biblical Judith than the beautiful Esther. Moreover, her recklessness and her “acceptance of false Egyptian gossip”³² exemplifies a “stereotypical trait of women in ancient sources”.³³

However, right after the conversation with her father, Aseneth surprisingly runs upstairs in order to “see Joseph” (5). The Jewish hero is carefully described as being dressed as a king (“there was a golden crown on his head [...] the robe wrapped around him was purple [...] a royal scepter was in his right hand” (5.6-3)) and as a handsome man who emanates “great light” (6.2). Aseneth falls deeply in love with him, confirming Achilles Tatius’ romantic supposition that the “eyes are the counsellor of affection” (ὄφθαλμὸς γὰρ φιλίας πρόξενος).³⁴ The heroine

³⁰ Whitmarsh 2010, 336

³¹ Reardon 1989, 2.

³² Kraemer 1998, 195.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ach. Tat. 1.9.6.

claims that she would be glad to be Joseph's "maidservant and slave" (6.8), a declaration continuously reiterated until Joseph finally accepts her as his wife and symbolically lets her wash his feet (20.2-3). This is however not an easy goal to achieve.

Joseph is in fact constantly on guard "against the strange woman", and "afraid she too might solicit him". At first, he even asks Pentephres to send his daughter away (7.7). The satrap reassures Joseph of the virtues of his daughter and organises the two protagonists' encounter. Yet during the meeting Joseph refuses to kiss "a woman who with her mouth blesses dead and dumb idols", though he lifts "his right hand above her head" asking God to bless her (7.4-10), with a gesture which possesses many antecedents in the Torah.³⁵ The following chapters (10-18) are dedicated to Aseneth's conversion, necessary in order to let her marry Joseph, since inter-religious marriage was at that time strictly prohibited. Moreover, it is also probable that there was a special restriction against marrying Egyptian women.³⁶

Since Joseph will come back to Heliopolis "in eight days' time" (9.5), Aseneth disposes of seven days for being "re-created". The designated period clearly resembles the six days of creation plus the one day of rest.³⁷ Other Biblical resonances are the amount of time commanded for Aaron and his sons' consecration;³⁸ the eight-days process ordered for purification;³⁹ and the eight-days of age prescribed for some sacrificial animals⁴⁰ and for the circumcision of males.⁴¹ It is clear how this passage aims to establish a connection with the Biblical text, insinuating that *JA* should have been placed in the Jewish scriptural canon.

From a different perspective, Aseneth weeps like many other Greek heroines do after having met their lovers ("She laid on her bed, covered her face, silently crying").⁴² She also fasts (10) and dresses in "a black and sombre tunic" (10.9), throws out of a window her royal belongings for the poor (10.12-4), and repeatedly beats her breast (10.17). She then lays ashes (τέφρα) on the floor (10.15) which are said to have become "like mud" (10.18). This ritual vaguely reminds us of the dusty substance (עָפָר) from which Adam is generated.⁴³ Furthermore, a ritual involving ashes (עָפָר) is clearly prescribed in Numbers 19 for purifying "an unclean person" (אָנָּקִים).⁴⁴

Aseneth's soliloquy again reiterates her desire to become Joseph's "slave for all the seasons" (13.12). After her confession, the sun rises and "a man from heaven" (14), who looks "like Joseph in every respect" (13.8), comes to visit her. Although the angel has a blurry resemblance to the one that appeared to Moses "in a flame of fire",⁴⁵ such a detailed description

³⁵ See Gen. 48.18.

³⁶ Ezra 9.1.

³⁷ Gen. 1.1-2.3.

³⁸ Lev. 8. 33.

³⁹ Lev. 14.10.

⁴⁰ Lev. 22.27.

⁴¹ Gen. 17. 9-14.

⁴² Charit. 1.1.14.

⁴³ Gen. 2.7.

⁴⁴ Num. 19.17.

⁴⁵ Ex. 3.2.

of an angel is not normal in the Bible. We do however have information about a “highly developed hierarchical angelology” that was developed in Hellenistic times by the Essenes,⁴⁶ perhaps suggesting an Essene provenance for the text.

The anonymous author of *JA* let the divine agent shape the plot as Chariton does in his novel.⁴⁷ The angel orders Aseneth to wear an unworn robe, to shake the ashes off and cover her head with a veil (14.13-7). When she finally takes off the veil, she has become “a pure virgin” and her head is described as that of “a young man” (15.1). Veiling had in antiquity a deep significance in the Mediterranean area; Plutarch states in *Sayings of Spartans* that it had the purpose of protecting married women from the eyes of men,⁴⁸ and this consideration is nowadays believed to have been true at least in regard to upper class women⁴⁹ like Aseneth. On the other hand, it has been recently suggested that Asenath’s transformation results in her resembling Jacob.⁵⁰ It may also aim to symbolize a “transformation into neutral masculinity”. Furthermore, Aseneth’s temporary androgyny, revealed after she takes off the veil, may be more broadly linked with the status of initiates who, in Antiquity, were usually men.

The angel later announces that Aseneth's name is to be changed; she is now going to be called “City of Refuge” (πόλις καταφυγες) (15.6) and her pagan name, possibly connected to the Egyptian goddess Neith, will soon be forgotten. Neith was the Egyptian goddess of war; Aseneth’s pagan name may underline her impetuous temperament described in the first part of the story, so emphasizing her changed disposition. If this reading is correct, it also underlines the moral ripeness she has acquired through conversion to Judaism, and her metaphorical transformation into “walls” where “those who give their allegiance to God in penitence will find security” (15.6).

Aseneth’s brand-new name may also have a Biblical correspondence; πόλεις φυγαδευτήρια (Hebrew פְּרִי מִקְּלָט) are mentioned in Numbers 35 in connection with the Israelites’ entrance into the Promised Land.⁵¹ The significance of the name in *JA* is clarified only in the second part of the story, when Aseneth shows her mercy to the opponents of her marriage to Joseph. In her new role of Refugee, she thus shows the same disposition that God showed to her when letting her conversion succeed, and with the Israelites in *Numbers 35*.

Adorned “as a bride” (15.10), Aseneth is asked to bring to her divine guest a honeycomb (κηρίον μέλιτος) which has magically appeared in her room (16.1-3). The honeycomb is described as “white as snow and full of honey [...] its smell was like the breath of life” (16.4). The angel places his hand on Aseneth’s head (16.7), as previously Joseph had (16.4-10), and reveals that the mysterious honeycomb has been made in paradise where those who eat it are immortals (16.8-9). Allowing her to taste it, he then stretches his hand out and puts his finger on the eastern and northern edge of the comb, making the path of his finger become like blood (16.10-1). Finally, white bees with purple, blue and gold wings, colors that usually indicate

⁴⁶ Mendels 1979, 207.

⁴⁷ Doulamis 2012, 23.

⁴⁸ Plutarch, Mor. 232.C.2.

⁴⁹ Llewellyn-Jones 2003, 14.

⁵⁰ Thiessen 2014, 246.

⁵¹ Num. 35.11.

regality, fly around Aseneth, while bigger bees settle on her lips (16.13-4). They later fall dead to the ground, get up and go to the court around Aseneth's tower (16.16-7). The divine man thus touches the comb which combusts, blesses the other virgins and disappears "like a chariot of fire being taken up into heaven towards the east" (17).

This complex ritual is the object of passionate scholarly debate. The honeycomb has been identified with manna for its supposed taste, color and purpose,⁵² but is also seen as an indicator of "Neoplatonic mystic sensibilities"⁵³ or a symbol of "God's sweet mercy".⁵⁴ As far as I know, *JA*'s honeycomb has not been connected with Greek mythology, or studied in relation to the Greek cultural context of the text.

The so-called ambrosia was for example closely related to nectar (or maybe even corresponded to it in ancient Greece)⁵⁵ and was supposed to have made the Greek gods immortal,⁵⁶ as also indicated by its semantic link with the Sanskrit *amṛta*, "undying".⁵⁷ The relationship between the divine sphere and honey in Greece is traceable from prehistoric times.⁵⁸ This connection was surely strong if we consider that the most authoritative women among the Greeks, the Delphic priestesses, were supposed to have previously been bees, and used to seek their inspiration in honeycombs.⁵⁹ There are also interesting references to nectar and honey in the already mentioned Greek romances. In *Leukippe and Kleitophon*, boy's kisses are described as crystallized nectar (νέκταρ ἐπήγνυτο),⁶⁰ and compared to "new honey" (νέον μέλι)⁶¹ which causes madness as also stated by other ancient sources specifically referring to the honey made in the Pontic region.⁶²

Aseneth's conversion is sealed by the honeycomb ritual. Afterwards, she can wear golden bracelets and even a crown, covering her head again with a veil and cleaning her face, which now shines "like the sun" (17.5-6). She has become as bright outside and virtuous inside as her future husband, Joseph. She is now a divine means, she is finally a Jew. The transformation allows her to wash Joseph's feet ("no one else shall wash your feet" (20.3)) and to venerate her husband as she venerated the golden idols. Ultimately, she is no longer an "other"; she has ceased to be an Egyptian, pagan and woman (again, her head is that of "a young man's"), and is now accepted by the virtuous Jewish community.

Joseph does not sleep with Aseneth before their marriage (20.8) but instead goes to ask Pharaoh's permission to marry her (21.1). Pharaoh is said to be "astonished at her beauty" (21.3). Nevertheless, Aseneth now seems to look "beautiful" only in the eyes of the pagan Egyptians. Her encounter with the Jews instead focuses on their vision of her "in the highest

⁵² Philonenko 1965, 152-53.

⁵³ Kraemer 1998, 172.

⁵⁴ Portier-Young 2005, 157.

⁵⁵ Clay 1981, 114.

⁵⁶ Griffiths 1996.

⁵⁷ Mallory 1997, 538.

⁵⁸ Lawler 1954, 103.

⁵⁹ Harrison 1908, 442; Cook 1895, 1-24.

⁶⁰ Ach. Tat. 2.38.5.

⁶¹ Longus 1.25.2.

⁶² Trzaskoma 2007, 354.

heaven” (22.8). Pharaoh’s eldest son still sees her as “beautiful” (23.1). He deeply desires to kill Joseph (23.4) and, like the Greek *Oedipus Rex*, is willing to commit patricide to have her (24.13). He then tries to convince Levi and Simon, Leah’s sons, to help him kill Joseph (23). Failing in this, he gains the support of Dan and Gad, who are attracted by the prospect of not dying “as women die” (24.7, reiterated at 25.8).

Dan is one of the sons of Bilhah, Rachel’s slave.⁶³ He is negatively described as a serpent in Genesis,⁶⁴ but also by many Christian traditions which deem that the AntiChrist will come from Dan.⁶⁵ This tribe may be also identified as the descendent of the ancient Denyen, one of the “People of the Sea”,⁶⁶ as suggested by a passage of the Song of Deborah according to which they “remain in ships”.⁶⁷ Gad is the son of Zilpah, Leah’s maid.⁶⁸ Being descended from a handmaid, he has also been identified as not of entirely Israelite origin.⁶⁹ Not possessing a fully Israelite origin, and being sons of handmaids, both Dan and Gad are inclined to accept Pharaoh’s son’s offer, as surreptitiously suggested by the anonymous writer of *JA* (24.2). On the contrary, it is the righteous and fully Jewish Benjamin, Rachel’s son,⁷⁰ who will successfully save the protagonists from the wicked plot of Pharaoh’s son (27). Of course, he will be helped by divine intervention (“the Lord is fighting for Aseneth against us” 28.1).

The last scene of the novel, where Aseneth is the protagonist, is narrated in the penultimate chapter (28). Getting down from a chariot, in an image reminiscent of the earlier angelic visitation (28.6), she begs the men to spare the culprits, thus instantiating her new given name (28.7-16). Aseneth’s mercy will not save Pharaoh’s son, wounded by Benjamin, but the strength of the Jewish men will save Pharaoh, who will hence be able, later on, to crown Joseph (29.4-11). At the end, however, Joseph will give the crown to Pharaoh’s grandson (29.12), the last male mentioned in a tale dominated by a woman.

Nothing is in fact said about Aseneth in the last chapter, which is entirely dominated by men. Aseneth is hence neglected at the end just like Ruth⁷¹ and Esther,⁷² the Bible’s accounts of whom end, respectively, by reporting David’s genealogy and praising the male hero Mordecai. This is hardly surprising since the female illiteracy rate was enormous in antiquity,⁷³ and literature was produced to amuse only men. We do possess some personal letters signed by women living in Graeco-Roman Egypt, but the existence of documents attesting written communication does not necessarily point to widespread literacy.⁷⁴

Aseneth is depicted as a heroine in a patriarchal society. *JA* sheds some light on the condition of women in Antiquity, in addition to stimulating reflection on a broad range of themes

⁶³ Gen. 30.5.

⁶⁴ Gen. 49.17.

⁶⁵ Hill 1995, 99-117.

⁶⁶ Bartusch 2003.

⁶⁷ Judg. 5.17.

⁶⁸ Gen. 30.10.

⁶⁹ Hirsch, Broydé et al. 1906.

⁷⁰ Gen. 35.16.

⁷¹ Ruth 4.18-22.

⁷² Est. 10.

⁷³ Thomas 1992, 10 and 153.

⁷⁴ Cole 1981, 146.

such as inter-religious relations, ethnicity, and angelology. The boundary between literary pastiche and representation of the oecumene had never been so thin.

3. Conclusion

The five aforementioned ancient Greek novels follow a standard motif: a beautiful young couple fall in love and after various adventures manage to live together happily ever after. A pivotal moment is provided by a recognition scene or ἀναγνώρισις, which Aristotle defined as “a change from ignorance to knowledge”.⁷⁵ Aseneth’s tale could be read as an ἀναγνώρισις of her Jewish inner self. Her “Jewish” aesthetic counterpart is instead visible from the beginning of the story, being her physical appearance “in every respect like the daughters of the Hebrews” (1.7).

In *JA* the opposing “other” is constituted both by the enemies of the young couple and by the female protagonist. In order to become her true self, she must undergo a process of transformation which culminates with her submission to her original family and with the act of washing her husband’s feet, only then to be recognized by her new Jewish family. Doing so, she acquires *ἡμάρτη/σοφία* (wisdom), the same quality which characterizes Joseph (ἀνὴρ δυνατός ἐν σοφία 4.9) and which is often considered to be like a female goddess.⁷⁶

Aseneth offers mercy to her belligerent enemies proving that, as the possibly Greek⁷⁷ author of the Biblical Qōheleṭ wrote, “wisdom is better than weapons of war”.⁷⁸ She also stops being identified as “beautiful”, like heroines of Greek novels, but instead develops a strong brand-new personality. Not by chance, Aseneth’s self-awareness reaches its climax when we witness a change in the narration space, from the soothing feminine indoor setting of Aseneth’s room into an outdoor male-dominated battle field. Women in ancient Greek novels become heroines only thanks to male interest in them, and they always need to be rescued from wicked males and sexually aggressive women, such as the Egyptian women that were pursuing Joseph, but also just like the impetuous “other” Aseneth presented at the beginning of the story. They are typically set free by the male heroes, a *topos* which guarantees the affirmation of traditional sex roles and tends to reassure the readers.

Aseneth however, after being set free by her love at the first sight of a righteous man, is domesticated by her own sudden conversion. Nevertheless, the conversion is not the last action of an independent and tenacious woman, but instead the last decision of a pagan Egyptian heroine. After the conversion Aseneth keeps taking brave decisions. However, she does not think only of herself anymore but of the well-being of her people, offering mercy to enemies and acting in the spirit of her new Jewish name.

⁷⁵ Aristotle, *Poet.* 1452a.

⁷⁶ Niditch 1998, 38.

⁷⁷ Bartholomew 2009, 54-5.

⁷⁸ Eccles. 9.18.

Ultimately, *JA* is Aseneth's tale, narrating a journey from feminine frivolousness to true adherence to the righteous Jewish patriarchal society, weaving together Biblical accounts and contemporary Greek erotic literature. This feature markedly differentiates *JA* from other ancient Greek romances, where the heroines are less independent and not gifted with a strong personality, whilst remaining aligned to their traditional narrative framework. Although her role in the story may be seen as that of a medium or as a pretext for triggering hidden antagonism between males, therefore comparable to that of the Biblical Esther, Aseneth is definitely the protagonist of *JA*. This is not just a fairy tale as can be said in the case of the other Greek romances. Supposedly composed inside a Jewish community during the Diaspora, the story conveys a deep meaning, and is not a mere divertissement.

Aseneth's personality is un-canonical in many respects if compared with that of some Biblical heroines, but she is not even a canonical heroine for a Greek romance. If she were, Aseneth would have probably married Pharaoh's eldest son helped by divine intervention. Instead, she abruptly changes her mind and marries Joseph, an outsider. Her strength and originality, which distinguishes her from other Greek heroines, is contained in her conversion to Judaism. Only the conversion gives her purpose as a character, and meaning to her timidly feminist *Bildungsroman*. It is true that she ends up washing the feet of the man her father chose for her, and that the story neglects her at the very end. Yet Aseneth has by then proclaimed Judaism as superior to paganism and clearly indicated the righteous role for Jewish women in society. If the ancient Greek novel heroines are a symbol of the integrity of the Greek elite under the Roman empire,⁷⁹ Aseneth may be seen a symbol of the uprightness of the Jews. With *JA* narrative, she has successfully offered a Refuge to Jewish readers in the Diaspora.

⁷⁹ Haynes 2003, 80.

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