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# THE GIRLFRIENDS' LETTERS: *POIKILIA* IN THE BOOK 4 OF ALCIPHRON'S *LETTERS*

Michel Briand

## Alciphron, an ambivalent post-modern

Like Lucian of Samosata and other sophistic authors, as Longus or Achilles Tatius, Alciphron typically represents an ostensibly post-classical brand of literature and culture, which in many ways resembles our post-modernity, caught in permanent tension between virtuoso, ironic, critical, and distanced meta-fictionality, on the one hand, and a conscious taste for outspoken and humorous "bad taste", Bakhtinian carnivalesque, social and moral margins, convoluted plots and sensational plays of immersion and derision, or realism and artificiality: the way Alciphron's collection has been judged is related to the devaluation, then revaluation, the Second Sophistic was submitted to, according to inherently aesthetical and political arguments, quite similar to those with which one often criticises or defends literary, theatrical, or cinematographic post-modernity. In this respect, Ni Mheallaigh<sup>1</sup> compares Lucian's *True Stories* and at the same time the learned and popular novels of Umberto Eco, viz. *The Name of the Rose*, and the *Wunderkammern*, shadow plays, and automatons which were so fashionable in imperial Greco-Roman culture. Concerning Book 4 of Alciphron's *Letters*, the most cohesive one in the collection, with its typical fluidity and contrasts, it is also possible to compare contemporary epistolary or internet fictions, like Denis Cooper's *The Sluts*,<sup>2</sup> a *queercore* avatar, both erotic and cruel, comical and post-dramatic, of the *Liaisons dangereuses*, with similar games of mendacity and seduction as well as realism and satire. It might also partially remind us of Alciphron's Book 4 through quasi-pornographic effects, or at least the depiction of a so-called *Demi-Monde*.<sup>3</sup>

These various types of ambivalence could be at the core of the patterns of authorship and readership implied in Alciphron's *Letters*, to which one cannot apply the criteria of classical literariness, like cohesion, coherence, linearity; unity of manner, genre, voice, and point of view; representational *mimesis* and imitative intertextuality. Vieillefond's judgement, though well-argued and precise, i.e. really philological, but too simply binary in opposing artificial and learned fiction to authentic and popular historicism, is based on assumptions we can no longer share about the ethic and aesthetical appreciation of a work of art as such:<sup>4</sup> in our times of digital hypertextuality, post-dramatic performances, and social and psychological constructionism, even specialists of classical studies know that a literary masterpiece can be (or even can only be) dialogic, polyphonic, contradictory, without any obvious storyline, neither distinct beginning nor ending. We have read Proust, Joyce, Woolf, Sarraute, or even Houellebecq, whose novel, *La possibilité d'une île* (2005) inspired the Nice conference about Alciphron. Furthermore, the traditional opposition between classical genres (as belonging to high culture and good taste) et popular ones (as low culture and bad taste) is not so clear any more: I referred earlier to Umberto Eco, both a semiotician and the author of best-sellers, and a scholar can now display publicly his interest in a video series like *Game of Thrones* or others, in accordance with more complex than binary reception practices, conceptions of narration, or views about relations between

<sup>1</sup> Ni Mheallaigh [2014] and Briand [forthcoming 2017b].

<sup>2</sup> Da Capo Press, Boston, 2005, translated into French as *Salopes*, POL, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Konstan [2011] and McKechnie [2005]. On gender/sexuality and epistolary literature, see Hodkinson [2014].

<sup>4</sup> Vieillefond [1979], and *contra* Rosenmeyer [2001a], especially *The Letters of Alciphron*, 255-307, and *Afterword*, 339-346.

fiction and factuality.<sup>5</sup> And here also does post-modernity (or the post-post-modernity sometimes called alter-modernity)<sup>6</sup> present similarities with Second Sophistic: the so-called sophistic Greek novels, by Longus, Achilles Tatius, or Heliodorus, allowed a double simultaneous reading, both erudite, critical, distanced, and immersive, ludic, sensational. Far from contradictory, this simultaneity, being a very profitable source of tension, makes literature more vivid, and I wish to show that here *poikilia* does not favour inconsistency, but can act as one driving force in these matters.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, Alciphron's *Letters* could easily be considered a harmonious literary work of art, under specific conditions: its deliberately heterogeneous and colourful appearance should not be a problem, since it might be the real, though paradoxical, basis for its dynamic cohesiveness. However, in Pindaric studies, the challenging issue of the ode's unity becomes much easier to deal with when analysing the Epinician poems in terms of ritual and discursive pragmatic than of semantic meaning: the illocutionary force of praise poetry empowers and connects the various components of the poem, viz. *gnomai*, prayers to the gods, inserted myth, narration of sporting achievements, celebration of victors, families, cities, etc., thanks to what Hummel calls "the cohesive function of disjunction" and Pindar's "paradoxical harmony."<sup>8</sup>

Epistolary fiction is then a creation at once spectacular and structurally unsteady, contrasted and dialogic, and its ethic and aesthetical value is based on qualities that are not all that classical: variety and hybridity of structure, genre, voice, manner (viz. serio-comic); obviously artificial and creative *mimesis*; critical and ludic intertextuality. Alciphron's Book 4 can exemplify this ambivalent complexity, also because the ἐταῖροι it stages are altogether picturesque prostitutes and literate Atticists:<sup>9</sup> the word itself is difficult to translate accurately in modern languages, at the same time 'hétaires', 'courtesanes', 'compagnes', 'copines', 'putains' in French, and 'hetairas', 'courtesans', 'companions', 'girlfriends', 'hookers' in English. These two types of ambivalent *ethos*, often simultaneous or alternating in the same character through Book 4, correspond to the notice about Alciphron in the *Etymologicum Genuinum*<sup>10</sup> or his hypothetical connection to the homonymous author of a philosophical treatise *About Ancient Lust*.<sup>11</sup> A similar ambivalence can be found concerning the social status of these fictional / realistic figures and their capacity of autonomy, or even empowerment: recent scholarship shows that, in Alciphron's *Letters*, Lucian's *Dialogs of the Courtesans*, and several ancient Greek novels, female characters can be sexual agents and that the active / passive distinction, as most of other binary distinctions, is too simple for this type of sophistic prose.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Lavocat [2016].

<sup>6</sup> Bourriaud [2009].

<sup>7</sup> Grand-Clément [2015], especially about the relations of *poikilia* with the notions of virtuosity, harmony, and synaesthetic pleasure, all also interesting for Alciphron. Similarly, about the aesthetic and ethical aspects of *poikilia* in Longus, see Briand [2006].

<sup>8</sup> Hummel [1993], about "l'harmonie paradoxale" and "la fonction cohésive de la disjonction". See also Briand [2010].

<sup>9</sup> See Kalospyros, "Atticisms vs. Style. Towards a New Critical Edition of Alciphron's *Letters*", paper presented at the Alciphron Conference, Nice, 2016. Book 4 is known as the most Atticist, at least for the vocabulary. See also Schmitz [2004] and Vox [2013a].

<sup>10</sup> *Etymologicum Genuinum* α 1263 Lasserre-Libadaros (παρὰ φύσιν . . . κατὰ πρόσοδον τῆς α ἐπιτάσεως καὶ πλεονασμῶι τοῦ ἀσελγαίνειν).

<sup>11</sup> Περὶ παλαιᾶς τρυφῆς. See Anderson [1997: 2189].

<sup>12</sup> Funke [2012] is particularly inspiring on these questions of gender, sexuality, and female agency, in Alciphron and Longus.

This ethical and social complexity has esthetical consequences, viz. concerning the contradictory purposes of fictional letters as a genre, in imperial Antiquity.<sup>13</sup> In this respect this study focuses on a notion which might help to appreciate what Alciphron's "ambivalent post-modernity" could be: *poikilia*, as a formal, thematic, pragmatic, and cultural characteristic of this kind of text, typical for the Second Sophistic and aiming at Atticism. In some exemplary letters, the analysis will focus on interacting levels, which Alciphron intertwines, with tenuous and dynamic, as well as virtuoso and reflexive, effects:

- stylistic level: intense synaesthesia, associating visual, aural, and kinaesthetic notations; association of *enargeia*, *poikilia*, *saphēneia*, in semantic, syntactic, and rhythmical terms . . .
- generic and thematic level: transgenericity and hybridization, esp. of pastoral and erotic references or new comedy and pseudo-'self-writing'; mixing of low and high or sublime and vulgar manners, and of corporal, sexual, affective, ethical, social, and metaliterary themes . . .
- pragmatic level: polyphonies, irony, humour, pastiche, parody; implicit metafiction and simulated autofiction; autoreferentiality and pseudo-spontaneity; realism and artificiality . . .
- reception level: complementarity and simultaneity of immersive (spectacular and 'popular') and critical (sophistic and 'literate') readership; active reception, both ludic and interpretative, and consistent with the experimental nature of the writing . . .

This dialectic relation of structure and movement, coherence and vividness, and variety or contrast and clarity or precision, can be illustrated by the concept of tensegrity, which, coming from architecture and applied to biology or aesthetics, designates the ability of a structure to stabilize itself by means of tensed and compressed elements distributing and balancing the mechanical constraints in the whole system.<sup>14</sup> In this perspective, Book 4 of Alciphron's *Letters* is a complex and vivid structure, like all its components, filled with variety, intensity, and clarity, which is intrinsically and cohesively creative. Some case studies hopefully argue for this judgement about a group of texts which really form an artistic work of literature: letters 2 (Glycera to Bacchis), 7 (Thais to Euthydemus), 14 (Megara to Bacchis), 18 (Ménander to Glycera) and 19 (Glycera to Menander).<sup>15</sup>

#### Letters 4.2 and 7

The first example (Γλυκέρα Βακχίδι, 4.2) is short enough to be quoted in its entirety:

Ὁ Μένανδρος ἡμῶν ἐπὶ τὴν τῶν Ἴσθμίων θέαν εἰς τὴν Κόρινθον ἐλθεῖν **βεβούληται· ἐμοὶ μὲν οὐ κατὰ νοῦν· οἶδας γὰρ** οἶόν ἐστιν **ἐραστοῦ** τοιοῦτου καὶ βραχὺν ὑστερήσαι χρόνον· ἀποτρέπειν **δ' οὐκ ἐνήν μὴ πολλάκις** ἀποδημεῖν εἰωθότα. **οὐδ' ὅπως** [2] **αὐτὸν παρεγγυήσω** μέλλοντα ἐπιδημήσειν **ἔχω, οὐδ' ὅπως μὴ**, βουλόμενον **αὐτὸν** σπουδασθῆναι **ὑπὸ σοῦ, κάμοι** τινα φέρειν φιλοτιμίαν **τοῦτο λογιζομαι· οἶδα** γὰρ τὴν οὖσαν **ἡμῖν ἐταιρείαν** [3] πρὸς ἀλλήλας· **δέδοικα δέ, ὦ φιλάτη, οὐ** (σὲ) τοσοῦτον—χρησιτοτέρω γὰρ ἦθει **κέχρησαι** τοῦ βίου—ὅσον αὐτὸν ἐκείνον. ἐρωτικὸς **γὰρ** ἐστὶ δαμονίως, καὶ Βακχίδος **οὐδ' ἂν** τῶν [4] σκυθρωποτάτων τις ἀπόσχοιτο. τὸ **μὲν γὰρ** δοκεῖν **αὐτὸν οὐκ** ἔλαττον τοῦ **σοι** ἐντυχεῖν ἢ τῶν Ἴσθμίων ἔνεκεν τὴν ἀποδήμησιν πεποιήσθαι, **οὐ πάνυ πείθομαι**. ἴσως **αἰτίαση με** τῆς ὑποψίας. **συγγίνωσκε δὲ ταῖς ἐταιρικαῖς, ὦ φιλάτη,** ζηλοτυπίας. ἐγὼ **δ' οὐ παρὰ μικρὸν** (ἂν) **ἠγοίμην** Μενάνδρου διαμαρτεῖν **ἐραστοῦ**. [5] **ἄλλως τε κἂν μοι** κνισμός τις ἢ πρὸς αὐτὸν ἢ διαφορὰ γένηται, δεήσει **με** ἐπὶ τῆς σκηνῆς ὑπὸ Χρέμητός τινος ἢ Φειδύλου πικρῶς λοιδορεῖσθαι. **ἂν δ' ἐπανέλθῃ μοι οἶος ὄχρετο,** πολλὴν **εἴσομαι σοι** χάριν. ἔρρωσο.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See Gibson and Morrison [2007], König [2007] and Hodkinson [2007].

<sup>14</sup> D'Alessio [2011]. This tension is also related to the dialectic of "order and disorder", as A. Morrison applies it to Alciphron, in his study of the general structure of the collection and of the relations between individual letters.<sup>15</sup> The Greek text quoted here is Granholm [2012], as well as the English translation, completed by Benner-Fobes [1949] and the French translation by Ozanam [1999].

On the stylistic level, this “miniature”<sup>17</sup> combines *poikilia* and Atticism, as well as complexity and fluidity, and exemplifies a so-called middle style, with remarkable qualities of *asteia* and *sapheneia* and some controlled *enargeia*. A good example of these stylistic features is the general layout of the letter: on one side, correlative structures and binary constructions, intertwined with interpolated clauses, parentheses, apostrophes; on the other side a formal device of interlocution, sometimes adjusted to binary sets of syntax, sometimes deviating from it, as a result of an explicit ternary personal system in *I/you/he*, i.e. Glycera/Bacchis/Menander, in symmetric relation to letters 4.18 and 19, and one *we*, i.e. the female author and recipient of the letter, as friends. The pragmatic functioning of the text has other noticeable traits: precise negative constructions, contributing to an effect of cheerful distance between the speaker, her text, and interlocutor; hypothetic or restrictive modalisations, particularly in adverbial subjunctive or optative clauses and adverbs suggesting uncertainty, doubt, nuances; and series of ring effects, on an internal level (viz. “you know” [§ 1] vs. “I am aware of” [§ 2]; “my dearest” [§ 3 and 4]; “if there is a quarrel between us” [§ 5] vs. “if he comes back to me” [§ 5]) and for the general formatting of the text (“I don’t like it; for you know how it is . . .” [§ 1] vs. “I’ll be very grateful to you” [§ 5]).

On the generic and ethical level, both concerning the oratory *ethos* this discourse performs and the moral and social implications of its fictional utterance, we may notice:

- effects of orality, mediated by a fictive epistolarity, which implies spatial and temporal distance, as in a written theatrical monologue, and associated with the benevolent and cautious illocutionary intentions of Glycera towards her lover Menander and friend Bacchis.
- restrained humour, particularly based on implicit metafictionality and ethical reflexion (“not even the gloomiest philosopher could keep his hands off Bacchis”, § 3-4). The courtesan herself is a nuanced moralist, who perfectly knows and expresses the uncertainties of love and desire, with all the delicate and contrasted emotions it entails.
- lastly, in addition, the expertise Glycera and Bacchis are sharing about new comedy and its typical characters, viz. courtesans (“I will have to endure being bitterly ridiculed on the stage by some Chremes or Pheidylus”, § 5).

This ambiguous and serio-comic reflexivity appears at a superior level, in a ring effect associating § 2-3 (“I’m aware of the companionship (*hetairia*) that exists between us”) and § 4 (“please forgive the jealousy of a courtesan, my dearest”). The structural, generic, and pragmatic *poikilia* supports the manifestation of a moral and social *poikilia*, expressing the precariousness of an uncertain destiny and fragile position: Glycera and Bacchis deserve their denomination *hetairai* for several reasons, as ‘friends’, enjoying complicity and possible rivalry, and as ‘courtesans’, in other words perfectly literate prostitutes.

<sup>16</sup> In the Greek text, expressions and words most useful for the commentary are in bold print. Here follows Granholm’s translation: “Our Menander has decided to go to the Isthmian games in Corinth. I don’t like it; for you know how it is to lack such a lover even for a short while. But I couldn’t talk him out of it since he’s not in the habit of often going abroad. [2] I don’t know how to entrust him to you when he intends to come for a visit, nor how not to when he himself hopes to be courted by you, and I reckon this will give me honour as well. For I’m aware of the companionship that exists between us; I don’t fear you, my dearest, as much as I fear [3] him, for you have a more honest character than lifestyle. But he’s divinely passionate, and not even the gloomiest philosopher could keep his hands off Bacchis. The rumour that he has made the trip no less in order to meet you than [4] for the Isthmian games, I don’t find very credible. Perhaps you’ll accuse me of being suspicious; please forgive the jealousy of a courtesan, my dearest. But I would not think it a small matter to be deprived of Menander as my lover. Especially if there is a quarrel between us or a [5] disagreement arises, I will have to endure being bitterly ridiculed on the stage by some Chremes or Pheidylus. But if he comes back to me the same as he went away, I’ll be very grateful to you. Farewell.”

<sup>17</sup> I borrow this label from Anderson [1997].

Our second example (Θαῖς Εὐθυδήμῳ, 4.7) is slightly longer and refers to Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.2.23, and the eponymous dialogue of Plato, *Euthydemus*:

Ἐξ οὗ φιλοσοφεῖν ἐπενόησας, σεμνός τις ἐγένου καὶ τὰς ὀφρύς ὑπὲρ τοὺς κροτάφους ἐπήρας. εἶτα σχῆμα ἔχων καὶ βιβλίδιον μετὰ χειρᾶς εἰς τὴν Ἀκαδημίαν σοβεῖς, τὴν δὲ ἡμετέραν οἰκίαν ὡς οὐδὲ ἰδὼν πρότερον παρέρχη. [2] **ἐμάνης Εὐθύδημε· οὐκ οἶδας οἷός ἐστιν ὁ σοφιστῆς οὗτος ὁ ἐσκυθρωπακῶς** καὶ τοὺς θαυμαστοὺς τούτους διεξιῶν πρὸς ὑμᾶς λόγους; ἀλλ' ἐμοὶ μὲν πράγματα πόσος ἐστὶν οἷε χρόνος ἐξ οὗ παρέχει βουλόμενος ἐντυχεῖν, προσ—[3] φθείρεται δὲ Ἑρπυλλίδι τῇ Μεγάρᾳ ἄβρα; τότε μὲν οὖν αὐτὸν οὐ προσιέμην· σὲ γὰρ περιβάλλουσα κοιμᾶσθαι μᾶλλον ἐβουλόμην ἢ **τὸ παρὰ πάντων σοφιστῶν χρυσίον**. ἐπεὶ δὲ σε ἀποτρέπειν ἔοικε τῆς μεθ' ἡμῶν συνηθείας, ὑποδέξομαι αὐτὸν καί, εἰ βούλει, τὸν διδάσκαλον τουτονὶ τὸν μισογύναιον ἐπιδείξω σοι νυκτὸς οὐκ [4] ἀρκοῦμενον ταῖς συνήθεσιν ἡδοναῖς. **λήρος ταῦτά εἰσι καὶ τύφος καὶ ἐργολάβεια μειρακίων, ὃ ἀνόητε. οἷε δὲ διαφέρειν ἐταίρας σοφιστῆν; τοσοῦτον ἴσως ὅσον οὐ διὰ τῶν αὐτῶν ἐκάτεροι πείθειν, ἐπεὶ ἐν γε ἀμφοτέροις τέλος πρόκειται τὸ λαβεῖν**. πόσω δὲ ἀμείνους ἡμεῖς καὶ εὐσεβέστεραι· οὐ λέγομεν θεοὺς οὐκ εἶναι, ἀλλὰ πιστεύομεν [5] ὁμνύουσι τοῖς ἑρασταῖς ὅτι φιλοῦσιν ἡμᾶς· οὐδ' ἀξιούμεν ἀδελφαῖς καὶ μητρᾷσι μίγνυσθαι τοὺς ἄνδρας, ἀλλ' οὐδὲ γυναῖξιν ἀλλοτριαῖς. εἰ μὴ ὅτι τὰς νεφέλας ὁπόθεν εἶεν καὶ τὰς ἀτόμους ὅποια ἀγνοοῦμεν, **διὰ τοῦτο ἥττους** [6] **δοκοῦμέν σοι τῶν σοφιστῶν**. καὶ αὐτὴ παρὰ τούτοις ἐσχόλακα καὶ πολλοῖς διείλεγμαι. **οὐδὲ εἰς ἐταίρα ὀμιλῶν τυραννίδας ὄνειροπολεῖ καὶ στασιάζει τὰ κοινά**, ἀλλὰ σπᾶσας τὸν ἐωθινὸν καὶ μεθυσθεὶς εἰς ὥραν τρίτην ἢ τετάρτην ἡρεμεῖ. παιδεύομεν δὲ οὐ χειρὸν ἡμεῖς τοὺς [7] νέους. ἐπεὶ σύγκρινον, εἰ βούλει, Ἀσπασίαν τὴν ἐταίραν καὶ Σωκράτην τὸν σοφιστῆν, καὶ πότερος ἄμεινον αὐτῶν ἐπαίδευσεν ἄνδρας λόγισαι· τῆς μὲν γὰρ ὄψει μαθητὴν [8] Περικλέα, τοῦ δὲ Κριτίαν. **κατάβαλε τὴν μωρίαν ταύτην καὶ ἀηδιαν, ὃ ἐμὸς ἔρος Εὐθύδημε**—οὐ πρόπει **σκυθρωποῖς** εἶναι τοιοῦτοις ὄμμασι—καὶ πρὸς τὴν ἐρωμένην ἦκε τὴν ἐαυτοῦ οἷος ἐπανελθῶν ἀπὸ Λυκείου πολλάκις τὸν ἰδρῶτα ἀποψύμενος, ἵνα μικρὰ κραιπαλήσαντες ἐπιδειξώμεθα ἀλλήλοις τὸ καλὸν τέλος τῆς ἡδονῆς. **καὶ σοὶ νῦν μάλιστα φανοῦμαι σοφῆ**. οὐ μακρὸν δίδωσιν ὁ δαίμων χρόνον τοῦ ζῆν· μὴ λάθῃς τούτον εἰς αἰνίγματα καὶ λήρους ἀναλώσας. ἔρρωσο.

Ever since you got into your head to study philosophy you've become a solemn kind of guy with your eyebrows raised to the top of your head. Then you stroll to the Academy with a pompous appearance and with a booklet in your hands, and walk by my house like you'd never seen it before. You have lost your mind, Euthydemus! Don't you [2] know what sort of person this sophist is who takes on a severe look as he delivers these wonderful discourses to you? How long do you think he has been pestering me for a rendezvous while he's corrupting himself with Herpyllis, [3] the maid of Megara? Then I didn't accept him, for I wanted to sleep embracing you rather than the gold from all sophists together. But since he seems to be turning you away from our intercourse, I'll welcome him and show you, if you like, that this misogynist teacher isn't satisfied with the normal nightly pleasures. This is just nonsense and [4] humbug and profit-making off boys, you fool! Do you think a sophist is any different from a courtesan? Maybe in so far as they don't persuade by the same means, but they certainly both have one and the same goal: gain. How much better and pious we are, though! We don't say there are no gods, but we do believe our lovers when they swear they love us. Nor do we think that it's right for men to have sex [5] with their sisters and mothers, or even with other men's wives. But perhaps we seem inferior to the sophists because we don't know where the clouds come from or what the atoms are like. I, too, have spent some time with these [6] sophists and discussed with many of them. No one who spends time with a courtesan dreams of tyrannies and revolting against the state; on the contrary, having drained his morning beaker he rests in his drunken stupor until the third or fourth hour. We are no worse at educating the youth! For compare, if you like, Aspasia! the courtesan and [7] Socrates the sophist, and judge which one of them educated men better. You will see that Pericles was her pupil and Critias his. Give up this foolishness and [8] unpleasantness, Euthydemus, my love—it doesn't become such eyes to be sullen—and come to your lover as you often did having returned from the Lyceum and wiping off the sweat, so that we may get a little drunk and show each other the sweet goal of pleasure! And to you I will now appear most wise. The deity doesn't give us a long time to live; make sure you don't waste it on riddles and nonsense! Farewell.

The stylistic *poikilia* of this letter is as outstanding as in the previous text, maybe flavoured with a more Demosthenian than Lysiac Atticism. I will not specify the details of its properly syntactic and rhythmical structures, but it is possible to mention some other features, typical of a somewhat longer text:

- the marked variety of tones and phrase types, e.g. interrogations (§ 2 and 4), exclamations and imperatives (with or without apostrophes and vocatives, § 2, 4 and 8, i.e. at the beginning and end of the letter, again as in a ring structure).
- the general composition, based on similes and repetitions with variation of formal and thematic devices, especially in the central part (§ 4-7), when Thais compares courtesans and sophists / philosophers, in a rhetoric exercise which abounds in ethical issues, like piety, good education, political positions towards tyranny, sedition, and classical democracy. This argument relies on a main inversion, far from humourless, between the notional couples of sexuality / philosophy and pleasure / self-control: the ‘courtesan’ is a kind of philosopher, also capable of Atticist pleas and dialectic reflexion.

On a pragmatic level, the philosophic courtesan is a burlesque and edifying figure, in line with the *spoudogeloion* style of Lucian’s dialogues. The letter is vividly polyphonic and this dialogism is pleasantly staged by means of a fundamental paradox: the fictitious prostitute here represents the genuine culture, both highly literate and enjoyable, artificial and emotional, which Alciphron intends to show off, in an idealized picture of classical Athens. In the references to Aspasia and Socrates, as well as to Pericles and Critias, who was a disciple of Socrates and one of the Thirty Tyrants, some effects of historical realism are being used, like in Lucian again, for a potentially anti-Socratic or anti-Platonic argumentation: the fictional letter of a courtesan is a literary bravura piece, but it also purports to unmask false philosophers, by denouncing their ostentatious enigmaticity and hypocritical rejection of *truphe*. The *poikilia* makes this text a fine stylistic exercise, but it also puts into place a subversive apparatus: thanks to these paradoxically serio-comic variations, the letter becomes satiric, in an elegant way. The *hetaira* is the ‘girlfriend’ and ‘companion’ of a sophisticated philosopher, but she is a philosopher herself, to some degree a more authentic one: a kind of Second Sophistic Lysistrata, who writes more than she speaks and smiles more than she inveighs against, with efficient and firm irony. So in § 4:

This is just nonsense and humbug and profit-making off boys, you fool! Do you think a sophist is any different from a courtesan? Maybe in so far as they don’t persuade by the same means, but they certainly both have one and the same goal: gain.

#### Letter 4.14

Addressing the same recipient as our precedent example, that is an honest and moderate courtesan, letter 4.14 (Megara to Bacchis) presents a radically different *ethos*. According to Ozanam, Megara, far from being interested in sophistic and philosophy, is a “prostituée infâme, qui ricane méchamment avec ses amies et dépouille ses amants.”<sup>18</sup> And thanks for instance to the personality of the addressee, Bacchis, the ethical and compositional *poikilia* we observed in previous letters spreads out over the whole collection, in polyphonic contrasts and ambivalences: each text echoes others, through skilful variations. It is neither necessary nor really possible at this stage to distinguish stylistic, pragmatic, and thematic levels of *poikilia*. The general composition is classical, especially in the *exordium* (§ 1-2) and peroration (§ 8): these parts are colourful, but in a measured way and mainly organized as an interlocution between *I/we* and *you*. This is only the frame of a discourse which otherwise becomes directly comic and familiar, if not vulgar. In the introduction, Megara polemically draws a distinction between herself and her friends, identified as *philai* “friends” and *pornai* “prostitutes”, not as *hetairai* “companions/courtesans”, and her addressee, whom she blames for her wise behaviour:

<sup>18</sup> Ozanam [1999].

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Σοὶ μόνῃ ἐραστῆς γέγονεν, ὃν φιλεῖς οὕτως ὥστε μηδὲ ἀκαρῆ πως αὐτοῦ διαζευχθῆναι δύνασθαι. [. . .] σὺ φάρων γέγονας σὺ καὶ φιλεῖς τὸν ἐραστήν, μακαρία τῆς εὐφημίας· ἡμεῖς δὲ πόρνοι καὶ ἀκόλαστοι. (4.14.1-2)

Only you have a lover whom you love so much that you can't be separated from him even for a moment. [. . .] You've become virtuous and are in love with your lover, congratulations on that reputation! We, on the other hand, are shameless whores.

The conclusion is simpler and vigorously injunctive:

Ὅπως δ' ἤξεις φέρουσα κηπίον καὶ κοράλλιον καὶ τὸν σὸν Ἄδωνιν ὃν νῦν περιψύχεις· μετὰ γὰρ τῶν ἐραστῶν κραιπαλήσομεν. ἔρωσο. (4.14.7-8)

See to it that you come bringing a little garden, a doll and your Adonis whom you're now fondling, for we are going to carouse with our lovers. Farewell.

But for the reader, all that functions as an indirect praise of Bacchis, who is despised by a despicable character, just as she was praised by Glycera, in letter 4 2, admittedly with some ambiguity.

However, the whole central development (§ 3-7) is anything but Atticist, on the discursive as well as ethical level. The *hetairai*, whose name list we can read in § 2, are shameless revellers (esp. § 4-5) and their feasting is excessively luxurious:

Οἶον ἡμῶν ἐγένετο τὸ συμπόσιον—τί γὰρ οὐχ ἄψομαί σου τῆς καρδίας;—ὅσων χαριῶν πλήρεις. ᾠδαὶ σκώμματα πότος εἰς ἀλεκτρούων ᾠδὰς μύρα στέφανοι τραγήματα (4.14.3)

What a drinking party we had—why shouldn't I make you regretful?—full of great delights! Songs, jokes, drinking till cockcrow, perfumes, garlands and sweetmeats

And the climax of this decadent party is a buttocks contest, i.e. a radically subverted classical, if not philosophical, *symposium*:

Τὸ γοῦν πλείστην ἡμῖν παρασκευάσαν τέρψιν, δεινὴ τις φιλονεικία κατέσχε Θρυαλλίδα καὶ Μυρρίνην ὑπὲρ τῆς πυγῆς ποτέρα κρεῖττω καὶ ἀπαλωτέραν ἐπιδείξει. (4.14.4)

But what gave us the most delight was that a fierce quarrel arose between Thryallis and Myrrhine concerning which of them had the most beautiful and smooth buttocks.

Both rivals compete above all with suggestive “movements of (their) buttocks” and erotic sighs, and the winner, Thryallis, “outdid Myrrhine in shamelessness” (τῇ ἀκολασίᾳ παρευδοκίμησεν αὐτήν, § 5) because she decided to “battle” completely naked:

Οὐ γὰρ διὰ παραπετασμάτων ἐγὼ” φησὶν “ἀγωνίσομαι, οὐδὲ ἀκκιζομένη, ἀλλ' οἶον ἐν γυμνικῷ . . . (4.14.5)

‘I shall not compete behind curtains’, she said, ‘nor play coy, but as in a gymnastic contest . . .’

The effects of visual, aural, and kinaesthetic, or even tactile *poikilia* and *enargeia* intertwine in dialogic diffractions, especially in inserted dialogues and reflexive parentheses, combined plays of rhythm and other sensorial notations, very diverse syntactic structures, from interjections to long periods, and diverse tones, combining eroticism and agonistic utterances and gestures, humour and immersive spectacularity: the whole thing is an *ekphrasis*, i.e. a sophisticated literary exercise, parodically reshaping novelistic dance scenes, lyric celebrations, and epic or historic duels. In stylistic and ethical terms, a perfect example of this burlesque *poikilia* can be found in § 5-6:<sup>19</sup>

‘Ἰδού, σκόπει τὸ χρῶμα’ φησὶν ‘ὡς ἀκριβῶς, Μυρρίνη, ὡς ἀκήρατον, ὡς καθαρὸν, τὰ παραπόρφυρα τῶν ἰσχίων ταυτί, τὴν ἐπὶ τοὺς μηρούς ἐγκλισιν, τὸ μήτε ὑπέρογκον αὐτῶν μήτε ἄσαρκον, τοὺς γελασίνους ἐπ’ ἄκρων· ἀλλ’ οὐ τρέμει, νῆ Δία,’—ἄμ’ ὑπομειδιῶσα—‘ὥσπερ ἡ Μυρρίνης’. καὶ τοσοῦτον παλμὸν ἐξειργάσατο τῆς πυγῆς, καὶ ἄπασαν αὐτὴν ὑπὲρ τὴν ὀσφύν τῆδε καὶ τῆδε ὥσπερ ῥέουσαν περιεδίνησεν, ὥστε ἀνακροτήσαι πάσας καὶ νίκην ἀποφήνασθαι τῆς Θρυαλλίδος. ἐγένοντο δὲ καὶ περιάλλων συγκρίσεις καὶ περὶ μασταρίων ἀγῶνες·

‘there, look carefully at the skin, Myrrhine, how pure, how spotless; look here at the purple lining of the hips, the slope towards the thighs, which are neither too fat nor too lean, and the dimples at the sides; but,

<sup>19</sup> About this scene and its ancient reception, see Funke, “Nostalgic Authority: Alciphron's Use of Visual Culture”, paper presented at the Alciphron Conference, Nice, 2016.



by Zeus, they don't quiver'—and at the same time she smiled—'like Myrrhine's'. And then she made her buttocks quiver so much, and she whirled the whole thing around, to and fro, over her loins, like it was flowing, so that we all applauded and declared that the victory belonged to Thryallis. There were also comparisons of hips and breast competitions.

This kind of text implies a dual reception, on the one hand quasi pornographic, and on the other refined and distanced, which recalls the double simultaneous reception of ancient novels, sophistic and 'popular', as well as entertaining and learned, that is typically post-classical and somehow comparable to some post-modern novels (like those by Michel Houellebecq or Virginie Despentes), or even *pop* video-clips. Alciphron's *poikilia* combines the main modalities of *kitsch* (mass culture and (unintentional) vulgarity, bad taste) and *camp* (a dandyism based on conscious *kitsch* and 'good taste of bad taste').<sup>20</sup>

### Letters 4.18 and 19

The last example, at the end of the collection, contrasts with the previous one: it is a more developed, meta-literary, and dialogic pair of letters which Menander and Glycera are supposed to have exchanged, 4.18 and 19. An interesting moment in the playwright's life is reconstructed, in connection with a suggested third letter from Ptolemy Soter inviting the writer to Alexandria. The anecdote appears in Pliny the Elder, *NH* 7.111: "he gets more honour by preferring the cult of literature than the pomp of the court."

In letter 4.18, § 7 to 14 are the most typical of Atticist *poikilia*, for composition, style, vocabulary, or their spatio-temporal framework, but the whole text is pervaded by this special quality, as fictionally written by Menander, the Athenian comic author:

- the *exordium* contains an invocation of the Eleusian divinities and the epilogue is mostly a eulogy of Menander's homeland and Dionysian mysteries, addressed to Ptolemy, before a final pious, melancholic, and loving supplication to Glycera:

Σὺ δὲ ἐκ τῶν Ἀλφῶων, δέομαι, Γλυκέριον, εὐθὺς πετομένη πρὸς ἡμᾶς ἐπὶ τῆς ἀστράβης φέρου. μακροτέραν ἑορτὴν οὐδέποτε ἔγνω οὐδὲ ἀκαιροτέραν. Δήμητερ, ἴλεως γενοῦ. (4.18.17)

But you, my little Glycera, please come to me flying on your saddled mule as soon as the harvest festival is over. I have never seen a longer or more ill-timed festival. Demeter, please forgive me!

- the style of § 4 and 5, about Menander's relation with the Hellenistic king reminds of Xenophon's and Plutarch's historical, notably biographical, narratives.
- § 6 to 11 are structured as a quasi-stoic deliberation on practical ethics and are chock-full of allusions to the geography of classical Athens (Areopagus, Heliiaia, Twelve Gods, Aegina, Lyceum, Academy, Kerameikos, Agora, Acropolis . . . , "all Greece in Athens, all Ionia, all the Cycladic Islands", ὅλην ἐν ταῖς Ἀθήναις τὴν Ἑλλάδα, ὅλην τὴν Ἴωνίαν, τὰς Κυκλάδας πάσας, § 11-12) and to its civic institutions (festivals, processions, courts, elections, theatre, democracy, and liberty . . .). The *poikilia* of the passage fluidly variegates phrase types and enunciative modalities, first in a rather epideictic way, through a developed sequence of so-called rhetorical questions celebrating Athens' beauties. This style matches its main theme, like a literary and historiographical construction intending, with some nostalgia, to praise Hellenism, altogether gone and extremely present in the culture of Alciphron's times.
- § 12 to 14 show a more vivid and sentimental style, as they celebrate Glycera's multiple qualities, like in the central part of an hymn: here, she is always alluded to by her name and at the third person. The passage follows a remarkable progression, from

<sup>20</sup> Sontag [1966: 275-292]. The expression "good taste of bad taste" (n. 54) refers to Jean Genet, a combination of sexual fantasy and literary sophistication, as well transgression and classicism, not so far away from Alciphron's letter 4.4.

initial interrogations, which assimilate the loving courtesan and the city of Athens itself, until a passionate conclusion:

Καὶ πρὸς ταῦτ' οὐκέθ' ὑπομείνασα τὰς ἐμὰς λύπας δεῖται λοιπὸν οὔτε στρατιώτας ἔχουσα οὔτε δορυφόρους οὔτε φύλακας· ἐγὼ γὰρ αὐτῇ εἰμι πάντα. (4.18.14)

And therefore, when she no longer endures my tears she finally begs me, since she has neither soldiers, spearmen nor guards, for I am everything to her.

This *hetaira* is not just an erotic partner and has some ethical traits of a regular mistress, life companion or legitimate wife, to whom her lover promises eternal fidelity to, even till the netherworld, and he asks her for guidance on a crucial issue; § 2 and 3 could be particularly moving for the addressee:

Καὶ συννεάσαιμεν ἀλλήλοις καὶ συγγηράσαιμεν, καὶ, νῆ τοὺς θεοὺς, συναποθάνοιμεν, ἀλλ' αἰσθανόμενοι, Γλυκέρρα, ὅτι συναποθνήσκομεν, ἵνα μηδετέρῳ ἡμῶν ἐν Ἅιδου συγκαταβαίῃ τις ζῆλος, εἴ τινων ἄλλων ὁ σωθεὶς πειράσεται ἀγαθῶν. (4.18.2-3)

Let us be young together, grow old together and, by the gods, die together, provided we realize that we're dying together, Glycera, so that neither of us may become jealous in Hades if the survivor is going to enjoy further good things.

Glycera was mentioned earlier, with her "girlfriends", but in Menander's letter she is no longer just a *hetaira* and clearly sets herself apart from her *hetairia*, above all the one described in letter 14: she turns almost into an allegory of Atticism and Athens, contrasting with Ptolemy and his too rich, monarchic, and monumental Egypt.

Letter 19 is Glycera's answer to Menander: it would deserve a study *per se*, as a pre-feminist self-affirmation and the triumph of the *hetaira*, being here more a companion of her lover than a friend of her fellow *hetairai*. The text, typically in middle style, is a model for Atticist argumentation, variegated, clear and intense, reflexive and qualified, literate and (artistically) spontaneous: this *hetaira* behaves and writes like a moderate sophist, somehow equal to her lover, to whom she addresses a letter as well written as the one she received.

Concerning *poikilia*, in relation with this unique figure of empowered *hetaira*, we may insist on some typical and strategic passages of the text:

- in the first part (§ 1-6), the *hetairia* is described in a very lively way, as a group of *philai* but among them one is outstanding, also from Menander's point of view, for the quality of her language,

... τῶν φίλων ἦν οἶσθα· καὶ παρὰ σοὶ ἐδείπνησε πολλάκις καὶ ἐπήνευς αὐτῆς τὸν ἐπαχώριον ἀπτικισμὸν. (4.19.1)

... and one of my girlfriends whom you know; she often dined at your house and you praised her local Attic wit.

And she is fine enough to accompany Glycera's mother and sister, who are not presented as mere *hetairai* either. The following dialogue stages the female group discussing about Menander's and Ptolemy's letters, with a refined and typically Athenian *asteia* (§ 3-4). And when Ptolemy seems to have written his invitation with tact and some humour, according to Glycera "he wanted to tease you (Menander) slightly by insinuation with his Egyptian Attic wit" (Ἄτρῆμα δι' ὑπονοιῶν Αἰγυπτίοις θέλων ἀπτικισμοῖς σε διατωθάξειν). The following argumentation is structured by the contrast between Athens (ἐν Ἀθήναις, i.e. Menander and Glycera, with the classical Hellenism the New Comedy represents) and Egypt (ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ, i.e. the rich and powerful Alexandrian monarchy). Being a well-educated Greek courtesan, who perfectly knows his lover's dramatic art of

... ἀκούσαι φιλαργύρων καὶ ἐρώντων καὶ δεισιδαιμόνων καὶ ἀπίστων καὶ πατέρων καὶ υἱῶν καὶ θεραπόντων καὶ παντὸς ἐνσκηνοβατουμένου. (4.19.6)

... listening to the misers, the lovers, the superstitious, the faithless, the fathers, the sons, the servants and every character that appears on the stage,

Glycera equals any king in overseas countries, as is evidenced by the quasi-theatrical transition from the third to the first person:

ῥΩν ἀκούσονται μὲν, οὐκ ὄψονται δὲ Μένανδρον, εἰ μὴ ἐν ἄστει παρὰ Γλυκέρῳ γένοιντο καὶ τὴν ἐμὴν εὐδαιμονίαν ἴδοιεν, τὸν πάντῃ διὰ τὸ κλέος αὐτοῦ Μένανδρον καὶ νύκτωρ καὶ μεθ' ἡμέραν ἐμοὶ περικείμενον. (4.19.6)

These they will hear, but they will not see Menander, unless they should come to Glycera in town and see my happiness; the Menander who is known everywhere because of his fame and lies in my arms night and day.

- in the second part (§ 7-16), Glycera proclaims her love, first by accepting that Menander travels away and by assuring him she is willing to accompany him bravely wherever he will go, despite the upheavals of sea navigation:

Ἡμῖν δὲ βέβαια πάντα, καὶ τὸ ἄστυ καὶ ὁ Πειραιεὺς καὶ ἡ Αἴγυπτος, οὐδὲν χωρίον ἡμῶν τοὺς ἔρωτας οὐχὶ δέξεται πλήρεις· κὰν πέτρῳ οἰκώμεν, εὖ οἶδα ἀφροδίσιον αὐτὴν τὸ εὖνουν ποιήσει. (4.19.10-11)

For us every place is safe, both the town, the Piraeus and Egypt. There is no place that will not receive our complete love; even if we should dwell on a rock, I'm sure our affection would make it a temple of Aphrodite.

But pursuing with a well-balanced piece of reasoning, which combines passion and good judgement, she mentions her fears toward Athenian social and political life, often malevolent, and

... τοὺς Ἀττικὸὺς σφήκας, οἵτινες ἄρξονται πάντῃ με περιβομβεῖν ἐξιούσαν ὡς αὐτὸν ἀφηρημένην τῆς Ἀθηναίων πόλεως τὸν πλοῦτον. (4.19.13).

... the Attic wasps who begin to swarm all around me when I go out, as if I had taken away the very wealth from the city of the Athenians.

Because of this style as well as of the ethical reflexion it stages, Glycera's *ethos* appears to be modest and pious: she avoids giving direct advice to Menander, unless they consult their "friends, both Theophrastus and Epicurus" (τῶν φίλων καὶ Θεοφράστου καὶ Ἐπικούρου, § 14), as well as the Delphic oracle and a Phrygian woman, who is "skilled in gastromancy by observing the tension of the strings at night and by calling up the gods" (γαστρομαντεύεσθαι δεινὴν τῇ τῶν σπαρτῶν διατάσει νύκτωρ καὶ τῇ τῶν θεῶν δείξει, § 15). Moving from Aristotelian and Epicurian ways of life to spectacular divination, Glycera enhances the compositional *poikilia* of the text, since, over a few lines, her style becomes a little less Atticist, though not to the same degree as in letter 14, when she describes the ritual activities of the Phrygian woman:

Καὶ γάρ, ὡς ἔφη, καὶ κάθαρσίν τινα δεῖ προτελέσαι τὴν γυναῖκα καὶ παρασκευάσαι τινὰ ζῶα ἱερεῦσαι καὶ λιβανωτὸν ἄρρενα καὶ στύρακα μακρὸν καὶ πέμματα σελήνης καὶ τὰ ἄγρια φύλλα τῶν ἄγνων (4.19.16-17)

As a matter of fact, so she says, the woman has to perform a purifying ceremony first and prepare some animals to be sacrificed and some strong frankincense and a long stalk of styrax<sup>1</sup> and moon-shaped wheat cakes and leaves from a wild chaste-tree.

- the last part, typically epideictic (§ 17-21), fulfils this portrayal of a loving and learned courtesan, who behaves like a perfect companion, also when she writes in a style similar to Menander's. Her love is also a kind of friendship, for instance when she addresses him as ἐμὴ φίλότης, literally "my love/friendship". After reasserting her superiority over "all the kings" and celebrating Menander's respectful love,<sup>21</sup> Glycera launches herself a long meta-poetical consideration, which she reinforces with a psychological fiction:

<sup>21</sup> Κὰν οἱ βασιλεῖς ἐπιστείλωσι πάντες, ἐγὼ πάντων εἰμὶ παρὰ σοὶ βασιλικωτέρα καὶ εὐσεβεῖ σοὶ κέχρημαι ἐραστῇ καὶ ὄρκων ἱερῶν μνήμονι (4.19.16-17) "Even if all the kings would send you letters I'm still more regal to you than all of them and in you I have found a dutiful lover who's also mindful of sacred oaths".

Ἐγὼ θρασεῖα καὶ τολμηρὰ τίς εἰμι τὰ Μενάνδρου διακρίνειν ἰδιώτις οὐσα; ἀλλὰ σοφὸν ἔχω σου τὸν ἔρωτα καὶ ταῦτ' εἰδέναι δύνασθαι· σὺ γάρ με ἐδίδαξας εὐφυῶς γυναῖκα ταχέως παρ' ἐρώωντων μανθάνειν, (4.19.19-20)

Am I a bold and daring woman to judge Menander's plays when I'm only an amateur? But I have a love for you that is wise and makes me capable of understanding these matters. For you taught me, an attractive woman, to learn quickly from lovers.

And she concludes by describing herself as a character in one of Menander's theatre play, the *Woman Possessed by a God*,<sup>22</sup> this title being the last words of the letter and of the whole collection, just before the final address ἔρωωσο "Farewell". This combination of passion and reason, on the one hand affective and sensorial involvement, on the other critical distance and ironical restraint, is a key feature of these letters, especially this last one, and for the *ethos* of their authors, mainly *hetairai*, i.e. 'friends', as female members of a diverse and dynamic group, organised along specific social and ethic norms, and fictional and historical lovers, 'girlfriends', of fictional and historical men, with various tempers and statuses. The conclusion closes well Alciphron's collection, which continually oscillates between fiction and history, eroticism and sophistic, comedy and ethics. And this oscillation results from an efficient *poikilia*, simultaneously or consecutively associating different types of *hetairai*, with various styles, spectacular and discursive pragmatics, or social and psychological features.

### **Epilogue. Polysemous *hetairia*, multi-layered *poikilia*, paradoxical and dynamic designs**

Hopefully this short study has shown that, in the Book 4 of Alciphron's *Letters*, various types of *poikilia*, especially in stylistic or ethical terms, characterise, on the one hand, particular sections of the text or specific letters, on a micro-level, and some fictional authors, and, on the other hand, on a macro-level, the relations between different letters and authors or addressees, as well as the general structure of the collection. This somehow sophistic argument of variation and variety being a factor of cohesion and cohesiveness fits well what we may imagine of Alciphron's rhetoric and artistic culture, in the context of Second Sophistic and (necessarily post-classical) Atticism. It seems that humour, paradox, and contradiction intensify this typical dynamics of movement and structural order.

Concerning what could be suitable criteria of literariness and artistry, the particular perspective presented here has been related with the notion of tensegrity, in the introduction. It can also be connected, as a secondary literature, with the practice of 'montage',<sup>23</sup> as it may characterise visual (from cinema or video to sculpture, painting, or 'installation') or performing (especially theatre and dance) arts. Alciphron's *Letters*, especially Book 4, are a work of art, based on a process of 'montage', thanks to (and not in spite of) their deliberately extreme variety.

<sup>22</sup> She also humorously mentions "*Thais* or *The Hated Man* or *The Braggart* or *The Arbitrators* or *The Girl who Gets Slapped* or *The Man from Sicyon* or whatever it might be" (4.19.19).

<sup>23</sup> In English, this notion can be translated through different concepts: (film) editing, assembly, arrangement, structuring, assembly . . . About 'montage' in ancient commentaries of classical literature (esp. Pindar), see Briand [forthcoming 2017a], and in the *Odyssey* as well as in its modern reception, Briand [2016]. See also Degenève and Santi [2014].

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