

XV.—A Romantic Narrative in Eunapius

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Those who try to explore the literary remains of the fourth century soon find their attention drawn to Eunapius' *Lives of the Sophists*, a work loosely modelled upon the earlier series of biographies by Philostratus of Lemnos. Though his style is affected and many of his pages read dully enough, there is something engaging in his airy ingenuousness, and occasionally he offers us, apart from useful factual data, a belief or superstition characteristic of his age or a curious digression like that which will form the subject of these notes — the early training of the Neoplatonic prophetess Sosipatra.¹ Eunapius apologizes for including this lady in a catalogue of men, but he inserts her biography in that of the sophist Aedesius on the grounds that she was the wife of Eustathius, Aedesius' successor as a teacher in Cappadocia; that her gifts far surpassed those of her husband; and that Antoninus, one of her three sons, also became a philosopher of some repute.²

Sosipatra was born in the early years of the century,³ the child of a prosperous family living near Ephesus, in the plain of the Cayster. When she was five years of age, two old men, clad in hides and carrying knapsacks or philosophers' wallets, appeared in that region and persuaded her father's overseer to entrust them with the care of his vineyards. The vintage was so abundant that it seemed due to some divine agency, and Sosipatra's father received the strangers as guests at his table. The visitors, who, as Eunapius remarks later, must have been either heroes or daemons or even

¹ Pages 32–36, ed. Boissonade. This old edition (Amsterdam 1822), with additional notes by D. Wyttenbach, is still standard for the citation of Eunapius, though the text was later included in the Didot edition (Paris 1878) of the Philostrati and Himerius. The passage discussed here can be found also in Mrs. W. C. Wright's Loeb edition of Philostratus and Eunapius (1922), pp. 401–409. J. C. Vollebregt has published *Symbola in novam Eunapii Vitarum editionem* (Amsterdam 1929), but his edition has not appeared.

² Eunapius is apparently the only source for Sosipatra (see *RE*, Zweite Reihe, 3.1167) and Antoninus (*RE* 1.2572), but Eustathius (*RE* 6.1451, not quite complete) is known also from Amm. Marc. 17.5.15, St. Basil, *Ep.* 1, Julian, *Ep.* 34–36 Bidez (= 76, 39, 72 Hertlein), and Liban., *Ep.* 123.

³ This fact can be elicited from the articles cited in note 2.

members of some more godlike race, confided to their host that so far they had exhibited only a modest portion of their occult powers, adding that in gratitude for his hospitality they would give him something of imperishable worth, that is, they would rear and train his little girl for five years, during which period he was to leave the district, confident that the child would be safe in their keeping and that his lands would continue to flourish. He agreed and, when he duly returned, his daughter gave proof of her progress by a remarkable feat of clairvoyance. In wonderment and gratitude he made obeisance to the two strangers and begged them to disclose their identity, but they would only admit, in enigmatic terms, that they had some acquaintance with "the so-called Chaldean wisdom." Even so, he was convinced of their divinity, and called to mind the lines in Homer⁴ which tell how gods often travel from one city to another, disguised as human beings. After dinner, when he had fallen asleep, Sosipatra's teachers gave her the robe in which she had been initiated, together with certain mystic implements and a number of books, which they bade her seal in a chest. At dawn, when the two had gone out to the fields with the other workers, she ran to show the gifts to her father, but when he looked for the strangers they had vanished. Sosipatra remembered that they had said they were going to the Western Ocean, a circumstance which was taken as clear proof that they were daemonic beings.

The romantic character of this story is of course unmistakable, and I should like to point out that it is in fact a peculiar variant of a rather familiar folk motif. We recall that in folk literature gods or angels in human form frequently travel about among mortals in order to scrutinize, and later reward or punish, their virtuous or sinful ways.⁵ Best known, perhaps, is Ovid's tale (*Met.* 8.620-724) of Philemon and Baucis, the pious old couple who welcome Jupiter and Mercury to their humble dwelling when all others refuse such hospitality; receive a first intimation of their guests' divinity when they see the winebowl miraculously replenished; leave their house, at the gods' behest, and flee to a mountain to escape the flood which is to destroy their wicked neighbors; and, as special boons, are granted permission to serve as priests of the temple into which their cottage is transformed and finally to perish together, changed

⁴ *Od.* 17.485-487; cf. Hesiod, *Opera* 122-126.

⁵ See Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, in *Indiana Univ. Studies*, Nos. 108-110 (1935) 140.

into an oak and a linden. This tale, to be sure, contains much that is irrelevant to our purpose, because it combines with the *theoxenia* two other major elements, a deluge and a tree-cult,⁶ and it is related to the stories of Lot (Genesis 19:1–29) and Lycaon (Ovid, *Met.* 1.163–312), of which the former begins with the *theoxenia* and both include the themes of disguised divinities and punishment of the sinful, by fire and flood respectively.⁷ But we may also summarize two simpler narratives from antiquity in which we find the *theoxenia* apart from the motif of flood or holocaust. (1) Hyrieus, an aged widower, entertains Jupiter, Mercury, and Neptune. The seagod, having drunk some proffered wine, requests his host to serve it next to Jupiter, and by naming him divulges his identity. Hyrieus then slaughters and serves an ox, and the gods repay him by granting his wish for a son, whom they jointly engender from the oxhide in a way suggested by a fantastic etymology of his name (*ouros-Ourion-Orion*).⁸ (2) Paul and Barnabas, driven out of Iconium, arrive at Lystra, in Lycaonia, where Paul cures a cripple. The people hail the apostles as gods in human guise, calling Barnabas “Zeus” and Paul “Hermes.” The priest of the temple of “Zeus” (some local divinity) has to be dissuaded from sacrificing an ox to them (Acts 14:8–18). Fontenrose (above, note 7) 105, makes the appropriate comment: “It is clear that in the folklore of this region Zeus and Hermes, or their native equivalents, were said to wander in disguise through the land.”

Sosipatra’s adventure is placed in the vicinity of Ephesus, while the story of Philemon comes from Phrygia, and that of Paul and Barnabas, dating some three quarters of a century later than Ovid’s time, belongs to that part of Lycaonia which lay near the Phrygian border.⁹ Fontenrose (see note 7) traces the movement of the Lot-Philemon-Lycaon story westward from Asia Minor into Arcadia, and the tale of Hyrieus, the scene of which Ovid leaves unspecified, belongs properly to Hyria in Boeotia, of which “Hyrieus” is the eponym. Thus the locale of our narrative lies more or less in the path which this motif had followed, much earlier, in its westward

⁶ See L. Malten, “Motivgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur Sagenforschung, 1: Philemon und Baukis,” *Hermes* 74 (1939) 176–206.

⁷ See J. Fontenrose, “Philemon, Lot, and Lycaon,” *CPCP* 13 (1944–1950) 93–119.

⁸ Ovid, *Fasti* 5.495–536. Frazer, in his note on line 494, cites and briefly differentiates the other extant versions of this tale. See also *RE*, Suppl. 6.118–119.

⁹ Cf. Xen., *Anab.* 1.2.19, and Ruge, *RE*, 13.2253.

passage, supporting the assumption that there is probably some more than chance relation to the *theoxenia* of the other stories. The disparities are chiefly due to the special purpose of our tale, on which I shall have a word to say later.

Eunapius, or rather his source or informant, has left the tutors' identity a matter of mere inference from their behavior, suggesting that they may be godlike men rather than members of the Olympian pantheon.¹⁰ Their duality, like that of the two angels, the two apostles, the two gods Jupiter and Mercury, or, in later times, Christ and Saint Peter, belongs, I think, to folklore rather than biography. One might note in passing that Hyginus, in the words of Frazer, "... omits Neptune . . . from the divine trio who were concerned in the begetting of Orion" (*Astron.* 2.34), though he restores him when telling the tale a second time (*Fab.* 195); it might perhaps be suggested that Neptune, while normally out of place in stories of this kind, had been added to that of Hyrieus because Orion, in a quite different version of his birth ascribed to Hesiod, was the son of Poseidon by Euryale, the daughter of Minos.¹¹

Let us now consider three minor themes common to several of these stories: (1) the first intimation of superhuman powers, (2) the host's reward, (3) his departure at the bidding of his guests.

(1) The angels in Genesis reveal their powers by blinding the Sodomites, and in Acts the people of Lystra attribute divinity to the apostles when Paul heals a cripple. But the secular stories are more in point here. In the case of Philemon and Baucis the miraculous replenishing of the winebowl discloses the guests' divinity; in the story of Hyrieus, the slip of the tongue made by Neptune while drinking wine serves the same purpose, though it is a rather grotesque variant. Scholars have compared several versions of a story in which Dionysus repays hospitality with the gift of his wine, which is both the revelation and the reward.¹² In Eunapius' tale we have a clear analogue to this wine-miracle in the marvellous vintage which results when the two strangers take charge of their host's

¹⁰ Eunapius says that both of the men were past their prime but one was older than the other, a statement which has no bearing whatever on the subsequent course of the narrative. Is this meant simply to lend an air of reality or is it a faded reminiscence of an older and a younger god, such as Zeus and his son Hermes?

¹¹ Eratosthenes, *Cataster.* 32; Hyginus, *Astron.* 2.34; and Apollodorus 1.4.3, with Frazer's note.

¹² Hyginus, *Fab.* 129 (Oeneus); Nonnus, *Dionys.* 17.37-86 (Brongus); Achilles Tatius 2.2 (a Tyrian herdsman); Silius Italicus, *Pun.* 7.162-211 (Falernus).

vineyards. To be sure, the usual order of events is reversed, because the formal act of hospitality follows and rewards this miracle, though of course the employment given to the strangers is, in a sense, an initial act of hospitality, repaid by the vintage. And this first hint of their supernatural power is later reinforced by their pupil's feat of second sight¹³ and by their departure for the Western Ocean, a not wholly gratuitous embellishment.¹⁴

(2) So varied are the ways in which wandering gods repay their hosts¹⁵ that it need not surprise us if none of the tales that we have reviewed affords an exact parallel at this point to that of Eunapius, in which Sosipatra's father is rewarded with her education. Yet there is a certain resemblance, which one would not press, to the case of Hyrieus, for whom the gods beget a son, because the strangers, when offering to teach Sosipatra, remark that they will be her "truer fathers," so that they are surrogates for her intellect if not her person.

(3) An odd feature lies in the strangers' bidding their host to leave the country during the period of his daughter's instruction, for which the utmost secrecy is enjoined. Yet, as it is difficult to see how his continued presence on the estate would necessarily have violated the mysteries of her initiation, this command must be either another theme from folk literature or else a religious tabu. The distortions which folktales suffer in the course of their transmission¹⁶ are such that this feature might be justifiably regarded as a "disintegrated" form of the situation in which Lot and Philemon are ordered to leave their homes to escape destruction, but it would

¹³ Sosipatra relates to her father all the vicissitudes of his return trip, made prosaically in a four-wheeled carriage. The belief in clairvoyance was widespread in Eunapius' day, and he seems to have had a special interest in it, for he records two other such feats performed by Sosipatra (pp. 39-41, Boissonade), and one by Iamblichus (pp. 13-14); it is interesting to read that the latter's friends ascribed his success to an unusually keen sense of smell. See E. R. Dodds, "Telepathy and Clairvoyance in Classical Antiquity," *Greek Poetry and Life: Essays Presented to Gilbert Murray* (Oxford 1936) 364-385, where, however, no reference is made to Eunapius.

¹⁴ Near Ocean is the Elysian Plain to which chosen heroes may repair without dying (Homer, *Od.* 4.561-568), and here later poets (e.g., Hesiod, *Opera* 167-173, Pindar, *Olymp.* 2.76-84) place the Isles of the Blest. See P. Capelle, "Elysium und Inseln der Seligen," *ArchRW* 25 (1927) 245-264, 26 (1928) 17-40.

¹⁵ Many examples, chiefly from postclassical literature, are collected by M. Landau, "Die Erdenwanderungen der Himmlischen und die Wünsche der Menschen," *Zeitschr. für vergl. Litteraturgesch.* 14 (1901) 1-41.

¹⁶ See W. R. Halliday, *Indo-European Folk-Tales and Greek Legend* (Cambridge 1933) 24-29. For another possible case of disintegration, see note 10 above.

probably be safer to fall back upon the comprehensive principle that one must not be present or, like Lot's wife or Orpheus, look back, to witness any divine act of mystery or awe, whether it is the annihilation of a people or the fulfillment of a sacred compact.

This analysis shows, I believe, that although our narrative has no close literary congeners it is framed, however roughly and unconsciously, in terms of a stereotype indigenous to the cultural area from which it sprang.

On reaching maturity, Sosipatra gives Eustathius, her chosen husband, a prophecy of his future life and his eventual ascent to the sublunar sphere, and her terminology shows that she has become a fullfledged Neoplatonist (p. 37, Boissonade). Here the significance of her mentors' "so-called Chaldean wisdom" grows evident, for we realize that the purpose of the story is not merely to demonstrate the precocity of a wonder child but to establish her bona fides as a Neoplatonist and an heir of Oriental doctrine. Of course it was no new thing to accredit a philosopher in this general way; for example, the youthful Democritus is said to have received instruction from Chaldeans and Magi in the train of Xerxes, whom his father entertained in Abdera.¹⁷ But for these philosophers of an earlier age "Chaldean wisdom" refers in vague terms to Babylonian astronomy, while we know that many of the later Neoplatonists were strongly influenced by a definite body of "Chaldean" literature in Greek, the *Oracula Chaldaica*, which for them were virtual holy writ.¹⁸ Since the two strangers, who stand for philosophers or theurgists — *theioi andres* rather than actual gods — give Sosipatra a present of books as well as oral instruction, it is tempting to see here a reference to the *Oracula Chaldaica*, the sacred literature of the sect into which she was initiated.

The tale, then, was professionally valuable for its heroine. It may have developed as a family legend, beginning with hints let

¹⁷ Diog. Laërt. 9.34; on this legend see Cyril Bailey, *The Greek Atomists and Epicurus* (Oxford 1928) 110. Cf. also Porphyry, *Vita Pythagorae* 1 (Pythagoras taken by his father from Samos to Tyre, where he acquires "Chaldean" learning), *ibid.* 12 (Pythagoras a student of "Zaratus" and other Chaldeans in Babylon).

¹⁸ See G. Wolff, *Porphyrii De philosophia ex oraculis haurienda librorum reliquiae* (Berlin 1856) 29–30, 66–67; Guilelmus Kroll, "De oraculis Chaldaicis," *Breslauer philol. Abhandlungen*, 7.1 (1894); E. R. Dodds, *Proclus: The Elements of Theology* (Oxford 1933) xi–xiii; W. Theiler, "Die chaldäischen Orakel und die Hymnen des Synesios," *Schriften der Königsberger Gelehrten Gesellschaft, Geisteswissenschaftliche Klasse*, 18, Heft 1 (1942). The influence of the *Oracula* on Porphyry, *De regressu animae*, can be seen from Augustine, *De civ. Dei* 10.9–10, 21, 23, 26–32.

fall by the lady herself, either privately or in her well-attended lectures at Pergamon, and elaborated by the exemplary Antoninus or conceivably even by certain other members of the family who are said to have made a cult of Sosipatra and Eustathius even though their own pretensions to philosophy were entirely fraudulent.¹⁹

¹⁹ Eunapius, p. 41, Boissonade. On this passage see K. Latte, "Eine Doppelfassung in den Sophistenbiographien des Eunapios," *Hermes* 58 (1923) 441-448. One of the results of Latte's discovery is to make these poseurs identical with the two unnamed brothers of Antoninus instead of more remote descendants in the family. In fact they, like Eunapius, who was born in 346, must have belonged to the generation just after Sosipatra's (cf. note 3 above). Eunapius' strong antipathy toward them may rule them out as a likely source for our story, though their devotion to the memory of Sosipatra would weigh in their favor.