

Continuity, tradition and innovation in the Palaiologan novels

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The Palaiologan novels are among the first works to be written in vernacular language. They represent a novelty in terms of the choice of language and thematic compared to their predecessors, the Comnenian novels.

We intend to show a certain line of continuity between these novels and the later Cretan work *Erotokritos*, continuity that is not recovery of specific motifs, but of a transformed and interpreted tradition.

These novels, all anonymous, are difficult to place geographically and chronologically, as is the language used: although the language is close to the spoken language, it does not contain a sufficiently heightened dialectal color but rather reflects a crystallized language, which betrays no evolution.

References to reality and to Byzantine society are too vague; and historical frameworks remain fairly broad: the Fourth Crusade (1203) leading to the conquest of Constantinople by the Latins is a historical caesura of great importance because Byzantines had a more direct knowledge of the customs and various aspects of Western culture.

The Palaiologan novels are: *Libistros kai Rodamne*¹, *Callimachos kai Chryssorroë*, *Beltandros kai Crysantza*. *Imperios kai Margarona*² and *Florios kai Platziaflore*³ are adaptations, the first of a French romance, the second of a Tuscan *cantare*⁴ as the *Apollonius of Tyre*⁵.

Unlike Comnenian novels⁶ written in the twelfth century, Palaiologan novels written about two centuries later, drew inspiration from a different source, the Western chivalric romances. Moreover, they choose the vernacular, which had already been used within the context of other literary forms. These works therefore differ from their predecessors in terms of their subject matter and linguistic register, as well as in their style: they are much more sober in their use of rhetorical figures, but more fanciful as concerns the invention of long compounds describing the ineffable beauty of the protagonists. These lengthy compounds, which are meant to express in persistently superlative terms the astonishment of the narrator

¹ Ed. by Agapitos 2006 and by Lendari 2007.

² Ed. by Lambros 1880, Legrand 1880, Kriaras 1955 and Pisa 1994.

³ Ed. of *Callimachos*, *Beltandros*, *Florios*, *Apollonios* and *Λόγος παρηγορητικός δυστυχίας και εὐτυχίας* by Cupane 1995.

⁴ Ed. by Balduino 1970.

⁵ Kechagioglou 2004. In the third volume is annexed the Italian text of Antonio Pucci, which is, according to the author, the source of the Greek novel.

⁶ Ed. by Conca 1994.

at the extraordinary and ineffable charms of young people and the wonders of nature or art, are often *hapax*.

The effect thus produced is further emphasized by repeated, metaleptic, intra-diegetic verbal addresses made to the readers and purposefully distributed throughout the course of the narration, resulting in either prolonged suspense, or the evocation of feelings of compassion and surprise in the reader. This direct address technique generates the illusion of an oral poetry recounted to the reader as a member of the court, an illusion which is especially pronounced for example in the novel *Libistros and Rhodamne* via a kind of *jeu de miroirs*⁷.

The Byzantines did not appropriate Western works verbatim, but adapted them to their sensitivity, thanks to the absence of the modern concept of author and his rights. These writers offered to their audience a domesticated form of work, which did not shock the expectations and conventions established by tradition. Reading the Western models, although the plot is maintained in the Greek translations and the patterns included in novels written *ex nihilo* are quite recognizable, the result is always different. Western literature, based on the *fin amor*⁸, emerged in a feudal society which elevated as an ideal the conventions and rituals which were specific to the class of the warrior landless knights. Western literature intended to give an idealized and cultivated self-image, far from the political and social reality of brutality and tension between lords and knights, always ready to break out.

Our corpus also meets the expectations of an elite aristocracy based in the various courts which emerged in the wake of the fragmentation of the Byzantine Empire after the Fourth Crusade, an educated and curious public, especially open to what was at the beginning mostly experimental. Nevertheless, the social reality of the recipients of Byzantine novels was very different from the system of feudalism, despite similarities to that of *πρόνοια*⁹, which responded to the decentralization and the weakening of imperial power.

For example, the romance *Imperios*, less detailed and shorter than its French model¹⁰, deprives us of the words exchanged between the two young people, as they begin to know each other and meet secretly, under the benevolent and maternal watch of Maguelonne's nurse, exchanging three rings as a pledge of love. In addition to the description of the crescendo of love, which is lacking in the Greek novel, the motif of the *amour de lonh* is also absent from *Imperios*: the *topos* of the hero who sets off in search of the unknown beloved,

⁷ For the question of the apparent formularity and the repetition of verses Fulciniti 1987, Pioletti and Rizzo Nervo 1995.

⁸ For an analysis of the social and historical background Kohler 1976.

⁹ Patlagean 2007.

¹⁰ Ed. by Colliot 1977 and Babbi 2003.

whose charms are celebrated in distant lands and whose beauty is praised by a friend in the presence of the inexperienced Imperios: he leaves his kingdom after a quarrel with his father, who wanted to prevent from dueling his beloved son, desperately hoped after a long period of infertility (the *topos* of infertility absent in the French model, is a common element both in Palaologan novels and hagiography). This rude and impolite behavior reminds rather the attitude of Beltandros when, careless of the prayers of his brother, he leaves his country and also mercilessly slaughters with a club ten knights rushed to stop him.

The contrasted love stories and adventures endured by the heroes are not certainly new: innovation consists in the decision to abandon the framework of classical antiquity, the Greek cities, as we read in the in many way unparalleled archaeological, antiquarian retrieval of the Comnenian authors.

Both groups of novels represent different types of experimental texts. If Comnenian novels fit into the definition of the ancient novel given by Bakhtin¹¹, because of the accurate imitation of the old model, the Palaiologan novels, with their hybrid nature, cannot be included within the framework of the medieval chivalry romance.

Therefore the authors of Palaiologan novels intermingle different traditions; they are at the crossroads of several types of inheritance they mix with varying degrees of success; the marriage of heterogeneous elements, of discordant narrative segments and the inconsistent behavior of the characters are even more discernible when hybridization and grafting are not successful. For example, one may refer to the novel *Callimachus and Chryssorroë*, in which the young protagonist, the youngest son of a king, shows the courage of a brave, in accordance with western chivalry ethics, in contradistinction with his two brothers, discouraged at the sight of Δρακοντοκάστρον, but then, upon entering the room where Chryssorroë hangs by her blonde hairs, he becomes a timid young man, lacking initiative and needing the heroine's encouragement to take action.

These texts maintain the taste for long monologues and tend to endow with the heightened sensitivity their protagonists, who weep and despair and faint as their Comnenian ancestors do; although they sometimes have Latin names and clothes and hesitate in their attitudes, between curiosity for the unknown and the familiar Byzantine aversion to the condition of ξένος. This term, whose negative sense is undeniable, also indicates in vernacular Greek poetry, the more general state of miserable implicit in the foreign condition, according

¹¹ See Bakhtin, 2003 : chapters "Le roman grec" pp. 239-60 and "Le roman de chevalerie" pp. 298-304.

to the Greek conception. Some Palaiologan novels use the words ξένος and ξενιτεία¹² with this meaning intended: see *Callimachus*. v. 608 and *Beltandros* vv. 61-2, vv. 133 and 136-40, 151-2; *Λόγος παρηγορητικός δυστυχίας και εὐτυχίας*, text which tells the story of a wretched individual persecuted by fate.

In this regard Bakhtin¹³ showed that the motor of the action in ancient novels is not the character, but fortune, which separates the lovers, while in chivalric romances the protagonist looks for adventure, which is a kind of educational voyage, rewarded with the finding of love: the male protagonist must deserve his wife, showing his value during his exploits. On the contrary in ancient and Comnenian novels the heroes suffer the events; they do not cease to complain about their cruel fate, their hostile Fortune and the cruelty of the capricious gods and petty rivals that cause their painful separation. Palaiologan novels are more open to popular elements: this novelty is not limited to the level of language as we mentioned: we can notice that their content requires the use of tale motifs as the magical element.

For example, in the novel *Libistros and Rhodamne*, the Rhodamne's sea voyage and then of her husband who goes looking for her is not achieved in the conventional way, but thanks to the magic of an old witch, who provides first Berdericos, Libistros' rival, and then Libistros with two horses capable of flying and traversing great distances in the blink of an eye. It is not a ship which approaches the port providentially when the character has to leave, to facilitate the rebound of action, as the conventions of adventure novels require, but the magical element rather in conformity with the genre of fable and folk tales. Cupane¹⁴ has already shown that the flying horse, carrying the hero on extraordinary journey is well attested in tales, particularly in the *Arabian Nights*.

For example in the *Callimachus* the author mentions many magical objects: the ring which enables its owner to fly, the gorgeous incusted pearl coat, which heals horrific wounds and the enchanted apple that can kill and brings back to life, in vv. 1553-1563. Callimachus did not use the coat to cure the beautiful Chrysorroë, but takes care of her with a whole human care nor takes with him the ring, which would have spared him a tiring and long journey, and arrives after walking as any common mortal, to the kingdom of his rival. These fabulous objects remain blind motifs that the author does not use for the development of the plot, when it would be appropriate, and they are mentioned awkwardly and inconveniently in the narrative.

¹² For the condition of ξένος Cupane 1994 and Cupane 1995 : n. 44 p. 97 for verse 608 *Callimachos*, n. 12, p. 233 for verse 62 *Beltandros* and n. 6 p. 649 for verses 26-7 *Λόγος παρηγορητικός*.

¹³ Bakhtin 2003 : 247.

¹⁴ Cupane 2009 : 61-79.

On the contrary in the Comnenian novels, the magical element is absent. One exception is an episode in the novel of Prodromos, *Rhodante and Dosicles* in which Mirilla, a Rhodante's rival, feeds her poison: the antidote is a magical herb the hero takes by chance, because he doesn't know the crime that has taken place at home, while he was hunting. In fact, he saw a wounded bear which rubs against a herb healing itself miraculously, so he decides to take this plant in case it proves useful. This pattern, unique to the fabulous repertoire, is integrated into the novel: it is both fortuitous and providential, as the plot requires, but it remains an isolated case.

The Latins' settlement accelerated probably a process which had already begun: the brief government of Western rulers and the fragmented Byzantine territories, already exiguous before the diversion of the Fourth Crusade, had somehow delegitimized the rigor of the Byzantine court, its universalist ideology with its antiquated rituals, and may have accelerated a process already *in fieri*.

This political weakness would only lead the authorities, as the patrons, to let go, to loosen their grip, so that hidden currents might manifest themselves, thereby not only promoting mutual exchanges and the promiscuity of scholarly language with the vernacular and the permeability of these two levels, but also opening the door to less aristocratic as well as foreign elements, which tradition had not before consecrated so far as literary canon.

After the fall of Constantinople, Crete, which was ruled by the Venetians since 1211 and until 1669, when the Ottomans conquered the island, took over.

The Venetian presence could only give further impetus to the recovery of Italian works in Greek, the *Pastor Fido* of Guarini, represented in Candia in 1611 inspired the *Panoria*, Greek pastoral drama, the *Re Torrismondo* of Tasso the *Βασιλεύς ὁ Ρωδολίνος* of Troilo, *Lo Isach*, popular drama of Luigi Groto *The sacrifice of Abraham*, work attributed to Cornaros in rhymed decapentasyllable and the *Orbecche* of G.B. Cinzio the *Erofili* of Chortatzis¹⁵.

The *Erotokritos* was the work which drew on the legacy of the romance; it is attributed to Vinzentzos Cornaros, thanks to the last lines of the text¹⁶: according to experts Vinzentzos is the brother of Andreas Cornaros, founder of the Accademia dei Stravaganti (τῶν Παράξενων) in the city of Kastro. Chortatzis, born in 1545, wrote his plays between 1580 and 1601: his tragedy *Erofili*, probably finished in 1595, displays similarities with *Erotokritos* in terms of characters and plot. Experts are almost unanimous about the direction of influence,

¹⁵ Vitti 1989 : 80-103 and Holton 1991b.

¹⁶ Alexiou 1995 : τ' -τη' and Holton 1991b : 211.

which goes from *Erofilo* to *Erotokritos* and which leads us to place the writing of *Erotokritos* between 1595 and 1613/4¹⁷.

The protagonists Panareto and Erofilo married in secret as Rotokritos and Arethousa get engaged in secret, the hero has a friend who advises and supports him, Karpophoros and Polydoros. Their presence is a pretext for the expression of the hero which recounts his passion and defends his reasons against social disapproval. Arethousa and Erofilo have as confident their nurse, who is yet present in other dramas, *Romeo and Juliet* for example, and, to remain in our *corpus*, the romance *Pierre/Imperios*: « she is the voice of popular wisdom, with her frequent use of proverbial expressions »¹⁸.

We can observe that the language used, the Cretan dialect, is purified and Italian words are avoided.

As some of Palaiologan novels inspired by Western models, *Erotokritos* takes an Italian version of the French novel *Paris et Vienne* (1432), of Pierre de la Cypède. Alexiou does not think the model is the version of Albani, but the prose of a lesser-known Italian¹⁹.

In the French novel Vienna is the daughter of the dolphin Godefroy de Lanson, Paris the son of a wealthy courtier, Jacques. The story begins in the south of France, but Paris travels to Genoa, Istanbul, Tabriz (Persia) before going through Bagdad, Jerusalem and Alexandria, where he releases his future father-in law from his imprisonment by the Moors.

In the Western romance the story is connected to the crusade: there is no question of crusade in *Erotokritos*, where the hero must to save his king and the Athenian kingdom against Vlachs. The story is transported into an ancient pagan Athens, without historical depth, where the heroes act as knights: only the names betray their epoch time: Heraklis, the king and Artemi, the queen etc.

Alexiou²⁰ mentioned many influences from Ariosto, like the black knight and the duel between Karamanite (the warrior from Asia Minor, in Boiardo Caramano, the leader of the Turks) and the Cretan Charidimos which could be –as Holton argues- an allusion to the battle of Lepanto in 1571. As regards the use of literary motifs, other echoes are present: in vv. 1-10 of the prologue, is mentioned the wheel of Fortune: why does Cornaros mention the wheel κύκλος, τρόχος even before the theme of love? This theme is also present in the Πένθος Θανάτου of Gioustos Glykos, printed in Venice in 1524 and in previous vernacular novels. It

¹⁷ Holton 1991a : 5. About the influence of the character of the King Filogonos see p. 48.

¹⁸ Holton 1991a : 51-2.

¹⁹ Alexiou 1995 : κε΄-κστ΄. Babbi 1991 for an Italian version of the French romance.

²⁰ Alexiou 1995 : κζ΄.

indicates the transitoriness of human fortune, which is a conventional trope of the novel and common also in the popular tradition.

For example *Florios*: νν. 993 πάλιν τοῦ Χρόνου ὁ τροχὸς δι' ἐμέμεναν ἐγυρίσθην / πάλιν ἢ κλώστρα ἢ Μοῖρα μου κατ' ἐδικοῦ μου ἐγέρθη

and *Λόγος παρηγορητικός περί δυστυχίας καὶ εὐτυχίας* : νν. 426-7 καὶ κάτω εἰς τὰ ποδάρια του τροχὸς ἦτον γραμμένους. / νὰ ἔχη τριγύρον ὁ τροχὸς πρόσωπα ἱστορισμένα

The terms ξενιτιά, ξενιά, ξενιτεύω, ξορίζω and ξορισμός²¹ are common in *Erotokritos* but they are not employed with meaning of misfortune or devastating fate intended, which are canonical in the Byzantine literature, as we have showed, and in the popular poetry τραγουδία της ξενιτιάς. Rotokritos goes on a self-imposed exile in order to forget Arethousa and see other countries, and on another exile to which the king Heraklis compels him. Arethousa uses the pretext of the ξενιτιά with her parents to refuse a marriage. The theme of exile provides the author with an opportunity to deploy his irony: Rotokritos threatens his father to go into exile if he will not ask the king on his behalf for Arethousa's hand, shortly before the king exiles him for his shameless request.

An additional example of author's irony is when Rotokritos tells his beloved that he will die in a foreign country, but he will himself give her the false news of his own death. His lie is believed, for the hero is totally unrecognizable because of the potion the witch gave him: the magic potion darkens his hair and his skin, but it is of course accompanied by the antidote and our hero has fun taking the two alternately to verify their effectiveness, and he passes from an angelic appearance to a brown Moorish one. We notice that this is the only magical motif which appears in the *Erotokritos*; on the contrary in the Palaiologan novels, the magic element, as we have seen, is frequent.

With respect to its structure, which is rigorous and well organised, the work is divided into five books, like the five acts of the neoclassical drama. In the classical comedy the first and second act expose the situation, the third introduces conflicts and obstacles, the fourth introduces the solution that is realized at the end, in the fifth act. Moreover, the odd books deal with the theme of love, the even-numbered with battles.

The Italian version, much simpler, is greatly surpassed by the talent of Cornaros, who confers more consistency changing many things: for example the two tournaments of the original become one. In the Western romance Paris has to win the love of Vienne, Rotokritos

²¹ Holton 1991a : 60-67.

doesn't need that, because young people know their mutual passion without declaring it in words.

In the Cretan text, « the jousting is not to be seen as a digression or interlude in the *Erotokritos*, but rather as an intégral section contributing to our understanding of the relationship between the protagonists and leading directly to the dramatic events of the poem's central book »²². The tournament is an allegory of the story²³: the characters of the tournament follow the development of the plot: the first opponent, the lord of Mothoni, is the symbol of unreciprocated love. The second is Iraklis from Egripos, where Rotokritos has spend his first exile and whose emblem is a tree withered from lack of water, like the character who is faded by the separation from his beloved. Rotokritos outgoes Kypridimos, the Cypriot who had explicitly despised Eros: it prefigures the victory of love over social conventions.

The Cretan Charidimos has an important role in the battle of the three jousts. His tragic story takes the famous legend of Cephalus and Procri: this story is the consideration for the main story because it relates a tragic end and represents the wrong side of a passionate love.

When Rotokritos returns to the king, he tells him the story of the Cretan as his own story. The Cretan is the black knight and Rotokritos has turned black by witchcraft. This parallelism is not casual or anodyn because the resemblance is not purely physical: as we saw, the valiant knight Charidimos represents the conclusion of a tragic love between two young people of different social status, and whose condition is reversed compared with that of the protagonists. His story is a story within a story, a kind of pastoral idyll, popular in Italy in the sixteenth century and, in the Cretan literature it is represented by the anonymous poem Η Βοσκοπούλα.

Another difference from the plot of the Western model emerges: the protagonists do not escape together, as happens in *Imperios*, faithful to its Western source; they rather face every trial separately. However, as in the *Imperios/Pierre* the protagonists remain separated for years and the ring deceives the female protagonist who believes in the death of her beloved²⁴. This detail of the ring, given as pledge and received by the woman at the end of the plot just before the reunification with her beloved, is used also in *Erotokritos* but with an

²² Holton 1991b : 224.

²³ See Holton 1991a : chapter "The tournament", pp. 19-24.

²⁴ The plot of a couple of young lovers separated from hostile family members or adverse events which meets after many adventures, is quite trivial, however there are some novels that have pronounced similarities, like the novel *Pierre de Provence* with *L'escoufle*, the *Guillaume d'Angleterre* and the story of *Qamar az Zaman* in the Arabian nights. See Pecoraro 1999, who attempts to establish homogeneous groups of texts on the basis of the use or exclusion of the some common motifs in novels or tales written in various languages.

interesting variation: Rotokritos himself disguised gave to Arethousa the ring. In the Cretan work the *agnitio* is slower and more suspenseful than in *Paris*, because of the Rotocritos' behaviour, who shows his sadistic side while testing the fidelity of Arethousa.

In vv. 723-34 in the final book, when disguised Rotokritos is about to submit his beloved to the ultimate test by telling her that he is dead, the narrator pleads with him on behalf of the girl: Ἄδικον εἶν', Ρωτόκριτε, ἐτοῦτα νὰ τὰ κάνης, / βλέπε μ' αὐτάνα ἔτσ' ἄδικα νὰ μὴν τὴν ἀποθάνης. / Θωρεῖς τη πῶς εὐρίσκεται, μ' ἀκόμη δὲν πιστεύεις.

Although the characters remain conventional, monologues and dialogues, more articulate than in Palaiologan novels, and some inventions and details absent in the original, such as the excessive zeal of Rotokritos in testing the fidelity of Arethousa, provide the characters with more liveliness, especially the two protagonists whom the narrator seems to look with sympathy and empathy. Concerning once more the author's irony: the narrator plays with his characters: Polydoros becomes friend with the stranger, who is indeed his friend Rotokritos, without knowing his true identity and he is surprised at how quickly Arethousa forgets her oath to consent to marry the foreigner.

It is as if we enter into a conspiracy with Rotokritos, or we may react by pitying the victims of the deception and criticising Rotokritos for playing such a cruel trick on his wife-to-be, his friend and his parents.

Later, he asks his audience not to condemn Arethousa for her behaviour: μὴν τὴν καταδικάσετε τὴν πρικαμένη κόρη... III 1577. He is an « intrusive narrator »: manifesting his presence, normally hidden, the omniscient narrator plays with irony and winks to his audience, as Ariosto did.

Here there is no question of simply soliciting the reader's attention, highlighting the beauty of the story, the extraordinary charm of the protagonists, or anticipating the reversal of fate, as was the case in some Palaiologan novels, which simulated the performance before a court, but the point is to generate a more refined form of play with the audience with whom he seems to establish a relationship of complicity at the expense of the characters, unaware of their fate not only anticipating or alluding to the subsequent events, as well as making explicit the implicit agreement between his audience, user of fiction narrative, and the author.

Through the some examples mentioned we showed that Cornaros uses disparate models with the control and maturity of an accomplished writer, transforming a conventional canvas into a complete and coherent work where the Greek legacy harmonizes without cacophony with the Western and, in particular, Italian tradition.

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