Globethics Repository



From Persia to the Provence

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see https://www.globethics.net. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy.

Item Type	Article
Authors	Agapitos, Panagiotis
Publisher	Universita degli Studi Milano
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-11-12 06:33:52
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/218387

FROM PERSIA TO THE PROVENCE: TALES OF LOVE IN BYZANTIUM AND BEYOND *

For many of us the presence of erotic literature in the western or eastern medieval world (the *Carmina Burana*, for example, or *The Thousand and One Nights*) does not come as a surprise. For the most of us, however, the very existence of erotic literature in Byzantium appears as something quite inconceivable, if not to say outrageous, because we have learned to associate this particular medieval culture to a substantial extent with the ecclesiastical aspects of Christianity. Yet, erotic narratives were written in Byzantium for almost four hundred years, from the twelfth to the late fifteenth century. During these four centuries "tales of love" were also written in the Frankish-Norman West and the Arabic-Persian East. Thus, the geographical distribution of medieval fiction extends from the "land of the Persians", as the Byzantines often called the totality of the Arabic, Persian and Turkish world of Islam, to the "land of the Francs", as they referred to central Europe, primarily France, Germany and Northern Italy. It is therefore no coincidence that this historical geography of the production of erotic narrative is reflected in the fictional geography of the Byzantine tales of love, whose action unfolds in various places from Bagdad to Montpellier.

The aim of my paper is to examine Byzantine erotic fiction in itself and in comparison to the rest of medieval production within the span of these four centuries. It might be useful to point out that, until

*) The present paper is a slightly revised version of a talk given at the Dipartimento delle Scienze della Antichità in November 2008. My thanks extend to Prof. Fabrizio Conca for the invitation to come to Milan and to have the paper published in «Acme». For the present publication, a bibliograpical appendix in narrative form has been added – more of a starting help, than a complete bibliography on the many subjects touched upon in the paper.

ACME - Annali della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia dell'Università degli Studi di Milano
Volume LXIII - Fascicolo II - Maggio-Agosto 2010
www.ledonline.it/acme/

twenty years ago, Byzantine fiction was mostly read as a failed imitation of either the Ancient Greek novels or the Medieval French romances. Needless to say, any comparison with Arabic or Persian narratives was excluded, because the dominant scholarly perspective viewed "influence" as moving from a "superior" and "creative" culture (Ancient Greek or French) to an "inferior" and "imitative" culture (Byzantine). Obviously, this kind of direct influence cannot be historically documented in the arbitrary manner positivist scholars thought it worked. I prefer to take a comparative – literary and historical – approach that allows me to explore in a methodologically satisfactory manner the ways in which the writing of medieval fiction converges or diverges in the lands of the Persians, the Byzantines and the Franks, and to discover similar or dissimilar social and cultural phenomena that interact with fiction within each of these three cultures situated around or connected to the Mediterranean.

I shall begin with Byzantium. Between 1135 and 1145, and for the first time since the end of Antiquity, erotic fiction appeared in Constantinople. Four texts were written by well-known authors who entertained strong connections to the ruling family of the Komnenoi. These texts partly served the aspirations of specific members of the aristocracy, who competed with one another in order to promote their public image by becoming patrons of the arts, an activity that substantially enhanced their political authority. The Komnenian novels – "drama" is their original generic term – are written in an explosive rhetorical style. They manisfestly converse with the Ancient Greek novels whose fictional setting they re-enact; in other words, their plots unfold in a world with Hellenes and barbarians, pirates and prophets, replete with pagan rituals and references to the ancient gods. However, this re-enactment is deceptive: the Byzantine novels do not reconstruct a specific historical past in an archaeological sense of the word; they rather represent textual performances of a literary and imaginary Hellenic landscape. Moreover, while the ancient novels are all written in prose, three of the four Komnenian novels are written in well-regulated twelve- or fifteen-syllable accentuating verse, because they were in all probability composed to be recited in the literary salons – or *theatra*, as they were called – of the aristocracy.

One of these authors, Konstantinos Manasses, wrote for the princess Eirene Komnene around 1150 a long chronicle which he called *Historical Compendium*. Therein he presented in a succinct way a "universal" history from God's Creation of the World down to the rise of Alexios Komnenos to the throne in 1081. However, the *Historical Compendium* diverges in two important points from early Christian prose chronicle tradition: first, the text is written in fifteen-syllable verse, the same accentuating verse Manasses had used for his novel; second, the text employed all the rhetorical conventions of erotic fiction in order to present its story.

Consequently, both deviations accentuate the artful literary composition of the historical narrative.

In the first half of the twelfth century, there appeared a narrative poem about a wreckless warrior. The anonymous poet used oral material from Anatolia – for example, lays about warriors and bandits along the Arab frontier – in order to stitch together a sort of "epic biography" of the hero Digenis Akritis. His name means "Frontiersman of Double Descent", because Digenis is the son of an Arab emir and of a Byzantine general's daughter. This twelfth-century poem has been lost, but two younger adaptations survive. The Escorial redaction is shorter and appears to be a condensed version of a longer text. The Grottaferrata redaction is much longer; it represents an expanded version that uses a rhetorical and moralizing style, as well as numerous devices from erotic fiction. The *Digenis Akritis* as "epic biography" also diverges from received Greek tradition, since in ancient "biographic" narratives about historical persons, such as *The Alexander Romance*, prose rather than verse is used.

For reasons of convenience, I will refer to these three groups of Komnenian narrative texts as the antiquarian, the chronographic and the epic group respectively. Each one of them re-enacts a recognizable, even if not clearly defined, historical past: Hellenic (*qua* pagan) antiquity, Christian world history and the heroic world of Byzantine-Arab warfare. Taken together, these three historical "chronotopes" constitute the panorama of an ideal, poetically reconstructed, past. Borrowing the title of Gabrielle Spiegel's important study, I will call this process "romancing the past". This romance-like historical past is invoked in order to support the ecumenical claims of Constantinopolitan aristocracy in a world of political instability, economic insecurity and military confrontation. During the twelfth century a series of revolts within the Byzantine empire strengthened the separatist tendencies of provincial governors. By the end of the century, the Seljuq Turks had established their rule in Central and Eastern Anatolia, Venetians and Genoese were gradually gaining control over Mediterranean sea trade, while the First Crusade had established feudal principalities in Syria and Palestine.

We will notice that a similar process of romancing the past takes place in the French and Anglonorman world during the first half of the twelfth century. Three groups of verse narratives present re-enactements of specific historical pasts comparable to those in the Byzantine texts. To the antiquarian group belong three romances. The *Roman de Thèbes*, the *Roman d'Enéas* and the *Roman de Troie* took as their respective subjects the history of ancient Thebes, the Trojan War and the adventures of Aeneas up to the conquest of Latium. The three texts focused on and further developed a number of conventions found in their Latin models, Vergil's *Aeneid* and Statius' *Thebaid* in particular. At the same time, the

medieval texts enriched their narratives with a lyrical discourse inspired by Ovid's amatory poetry.

In the chronographic group belongs the *Roman de Brut* of the Norman poet Wace, completed around 1155. Wace used Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, transferring the Latin original to Old French and changing the prose to verse. With the help of the poetic techniques developed in the antiquarian romances, Wace went further than Geoffrey in reconstructing the historical past of the Normans as "Breton kings" through the figures of the Trojan warrior Brut – supposedly a nephew of Aeneas – and the semi-legendary Celtic chieftain Arthur.

The epic group is formed by the *chansons de geste*, narrative poems with a loose strophic and metrical form. Famous examples are the oldest versions of the *Chanson de Roland* and the *Chanson de Guillaume*. Here the confrontation of Charlemagne with the Almoravid Arabs of Spain is recreated through the figures of Frankish war-lords such as Roland, presented as knights of eleventh-century feudal nobility.

This poetical resonstruction of an ideal past through Hellenic mythology, Roman history and the Frankish-Arabic wars reflects an ideological re-orientation in the self-image of kingship, as it was expressed, for example, in the person of Henry II Plantagenet (1154-1189). He was a king who sought political power against the autonomy of feudal tradition and the growing political influence of the pope. Behind these processes obviously lie the major social, economic and ecclesiastical changes that had started since the middle of the eleventh century in the Franconorman world and were to play an important part in the launching of the First Crusade.

If we turn our gaze to the East and, more specifically, to the areas of modern Iraq and Iran, we will discover that another, quite similar, case of romancing the past took place there from the middle of the eleventh to the middle of the twelfth century. We again find the same three groups of verse narratives. In the antiquarian group belong three love romances written in the eleventh century: *Varqeh and her Cousin Gulshah*, *Vamiq and Adhra* (which translates as *The Lover and the Virgin*), and *Queen Vis and Prince Ramin*. The plots of the three romances unfold in different places and times: Arabia just before the appearance of the Prophet Muhammad, Ancient Greek Asia Minor and Zoroastrian Persia of the Sasanid dynasty. Not unsimilar to the *Roman d'Enéas* as an adaptation of the *Aeneid*, *The Lover and the Virgin* by the little-known poet Abulqasim Unsuri is an adaptation (*via* Syriac or Pahlawi) of a once famous Greek novel called *Metiochos and Parthenope*. Written in an artful poetic idiom, the three romances reconstruct the ideal past of medieval, now Islamic, Persia. Their authors belonged to the *shu'ubiyya*, an intellectual movement that promoted Persian literature in the Arabic world, while, simultaneously, promoting the separatist aspirations of Persian provincial magnates against the weak Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad.

These political ambitions were, to a certain extent, supported by the longest and still most popular narrative poem of medieval Persian literature. It forms by itself the chronographic group. The *Shahnameh*, or "Book of Kings", was completed by Abulqasim Firdowsi in 1011, after almost thirty years of immense labor. This colossal romance-like chronicle – it runs to over almost sixty thousand rhyming couplets – begins with the creation of the world and reaches down to the last Sasanian *shah* before the conquest of Persia by the Arabs in the middle of the seventh century. In contrast to Wace and Manasses, Firdowsi treats the rule of each king as an independant narrative entity of substantial length. Yet, like Manasses, he employs all the conventions of Persian erotic literature to sketch the emotional world of his heroes and villains.

In the epic group belong a number of Arabic prose epics whose narrative nuclei reach back to the twelfth century. More specifically, we find in the Abbasid Caliphate a vast prose narrative called *The Life of the Chieftainess Dhat al-Himma*. It is known to us today in a late fifteenth-century version, still recited in the Arab world. In an astonishing thematic and ideological correspondence with the Byzantine-Arab *Digenis Akritis*, this heroic narrative re-enacts Arabic-Byzantine warfare through the story of the valiant Dhat al-Himma, her son Abd al-Wahhab and their Beduin tribe.

The overall historical past reconstructed by these three groups – pre-islamic Mesopotamia, the Zoroastrian Persian empire and the world of Byzantine-Arab warfare – expressed, on the one hand, the cultural and political demands of a new Persian aristocracy and of the intellectuals that surrounded it. On the other, it gave voice to the need of Syrian and Iraqi Arabs to find support in their glorious past for the diminished political rights of the Caliphate, particularly against the Ayyubids of Egypt, who under Sultan Saladin (1174-1193), took up the war against the Crusaders for the recapture of Jerusalem.

Thus, on the map of medieval fiction we can clearly observe a large-scale romancing of the past, that takes place from the beginning of the eleventh until approximately the middle of the twelfth century in three different, but not unrelated, cultural environments. I would suggest that this literary process was the result of partially similar social and ideological developments within political systems whose forms of governance were loosening, changing and being substituted by other power structures. The poetic restoration of an ideal historical past in Frankish, Byzantine and Persian lands cannot for purely historical reasons be the result of a "direct imitation" between these three cultures. However, their strongly parallel literary productions point to a series of convergences in thought and artistic expression within the medieval world of these one-and-a-half centuries.

A first convergence is the use of an ancient and decidedly "pagan" literature as a system of artistic reference: Ancient Greek for Orthodox

Byzantium, Latin for the Catholic West and Pahlawi for Islamic Persia respectively. This use reflects the concept of "authority", a notion quite alien to our understanding of originality in art, but of crucial importance for most pre-modern book cultures. For example, the texts of the three antiquarian groups are – implicitly or explicitly – presented by their authors as direct translations or reworkings of older authoritative texts: Heliodorus' *Aethiopian Tales* in Greek for Theodoros Prodromos' *Rhodanthe and Dosikles*, Statius' *Thebaid* in Latin for the *Roman de Thèbes*, and a lost anonymous prose erotic narrative in Pahlawi for Fakhrudin Gurgani's *Vis and Ramin*. A comparison between the three adaptations and their respective "models" shows that, in fact, the three medieval tales first deconstruct and, then, reconstruct the ancient narratives in a highly creative manner. In other words, artistic innovation masks itself as convention and, thus, acquires literary, cultural and even political "authority".

A second convergence is the creation of an archetypal hero – Roland, Digenis, Abd al-Wahhab – who fights against the heathen enemy in order to defend his rights that might or might not represent the broader rights of a military class owning land. The life, deeds, love affairs and death of the hero have been built on and expressed through an equally old and "authoritative" system of reference, that of oral tradition. The epic texts that survive are not direct records of oral poetry, but written compositions using oral material and appearing as oral poetry to an audience of listeners or readers.

A third convergence between the three cultures is the transformation of an ancient ruler to the wise regulator of world order, the guarantor of the state's cohesion, the supreme judge of himself and of his subjects, the sensitive lover-husband, and the perfect warrior. Such idealized literary representations are King Arthur in Wace's *Roman de Brut*, Emperor Herakleios in the *Historical Compendium* of Manasses, and Shah Khusrow the Just in Firdowsi's *Shahnameh*. All three rulers lived five to six centuries before the times of the authors in whose works they make so marked an appearance.

But let us return to Byzantium. After the fall of Constantinople to the Fourth Crusade in 1204, three Greek states – Trebizond, Nicaea and Epirus – competed to assert themselves as the heirs of the demolished ecumenical empire. It was Nicaea, under the rule of the Laskarid family, that attained this goal. An intense political and cultural activity was launched in order to rescue the remaining fragments and to re-assemble them into a unified, supposedly old but in reality new, image. It was here in Nicaea that learned men collected the various writings of the Komnenian age; it was here that a court culture was again established by means of public oratory and the composition of political treatises; it was here that a revised school curriculum was developed for the formation of a new administrative elite. And it was here that, around the middle of the

thirteenth century, erotic fiction re-emerged. An anonymous poet, who obviously was a well-educated man and who had read the Komnenian novels and knew their literary conventions, composed *The Tale of Livistros and Rodamne*, the longest and most complex of the later Byzantine romances of love.

In contrast to the Komnenian texts, *Livistros and Rodamne* is written in so-called vernacular Greek and in a free-flowing fifteen-syllable verse, the Byzantine *politikos stichos* or "city verse". The action unfolds in a geographically fluid Eastern Mediterranean, without any appearance of Byzantine characters. The plot is very briefly as follows:

At the court of Myrtane, queen of Armenia, a young man (who had fallen in love) tells the story of Livistros and Rodamne. Livistros, the young king of the Latin land Livandros, refuses to fall in love. His relative teaches him about the power of Emperor Eros over the animate and inanimate world. In a dream, Livistros is arrested by the cupid guards of the Amorous Dominion (*Erotokratia*) and taken to the court of Eros. The angry ruler forces Livistros to swear an oath of vassalage and to fall in love with Rodamne ("Rosy-hued"), daughter of the Latin Emperor Gold (*Chrysos*) of Silvercastle (*Argyrokastron*). Eros also forces the princess to fall in love with the young king. After having wondered for two years in search of Rodamne, Livistros succeeds in convincing her of his love. In a joust demanded by Rodamne from her father, Livistros wins her hand from Verderichos, the menacing emperor of Egypt. The couple marries, and Livistros is proclaimed co-emperor of Gold. However, Verderichos returns two years later to Silvercastle dressed as a merchant from Babylon and succeeds with the help of a Saracen Witch to steal Rodamne. Livistros sets out to find his wife. On the way, he meets a stranger who proves to be prince Klitovon, nephew of the king of Armenia. He had fallen in love with the king's daughter, and Klitovon was forced to flee the country because she was already married. Finally, Livistros and Klitovon discover the Witch on a deserted beach. She helps them to cross the sea to Egypt and find Rodamne. Livistros takes her back to Silvercastle, after he has decapitated the Witch, where Klitovon marries Rodamne's younger sister Melanthia. At the end of the romance it becomes clear that Klitovon, after Melanthia's premature death, returns to Armenia and to Queen Myrtane, who proves to be his first love. Thus, the narrator is also an important character of the romance.

Through this device, *Livistros and Rodamne* is structured as a series of stories that are placed like boxes the one inside the other; this technique of encased narrative is, of course, well known from Arabic and Persian literature. However, in the case of the Byzantine romance, the boxes are part of the plot and not independent stories, unrelated to the narrative frame. As to the setting of the action, it is obvious that the marked presence of Latins, but also of such Latin elements as the joust

or the French clothes of the hero and the heroine, give to the romance a color quite different from that of the antiquarian Komnenian novels. Yet, this Latin color is not an indication for the text's "Latin character", as older scholarship believed, because the ideologies and social structures in the romance are completely Byzantine. Moreover, the latter fully coincide with the political ideology of the Nicaean empire. Therefore, one has to ask why the author chose to place his Byzantine story in such a Latin setting. Isliall postpone the answer for a little while.

From the end of the thirteenth to the middle of the fifteenth century, that is during Byzantium's Palaiologan era, another seven "tales of love" were written in Medieval Greek. Some (like *Kallimachos and Chrysorroe*, *Velthandros and Chrysantsa*, or *The Tale of Achilles*) were produced in Constantinople, others were most probably composed in Frankish Morea (like *Imberios and Margarona*), Venetian ruled Crete (like *Florios and Platsiaflore*), but also Ottoman dominated Thrace (like *Alexander and Semiramis*). These anonymous romances – also written in a vernacular idiom and in fifteen-syllable verse – stage their plots in an apparently contemporary setting with Franks, Byzantines, Turks and Saracens, with customs and practices both Byzantine and Frankish.

In contrast to the Komnenian novels, whose textual trasmission is very stable, the Palaiologan romances, once they had left the social environment of their primary reception, were adapted to new social surroundings in order to conform to different aesthetic preferences. During the first phase of their production, the romances were written to be recited infront of an audience, while, later, they were written to be read by individual readers. This difference in their primary reception reflects a differentiation in the social status of their recipients. The texts travel away from the aristocratic audiences of the Laskarid and early Palaiologan era, where the poet recited himself, to an urban public of the fifteenth century, where people read the texts on their own.

Let us move once again to France in the second half of the twelfth century. As the production of antiquarian romances was coming to an end, Chrétien de Troyes appeared. He composed from 1165 to 1191 five verse romances: *Erec*, *Cligès*, *Le chevalier de la charrette* ("The Knight of the Chariot") or *Lancelot*, *Le chevalier au lion* ("The Knight with the Lion") or *Yvain*, and *Le conte du Graal* ("The Tale of the Graal") or *Perceval*. All five fictional tales are anchored in a specific historical niche by being related to the figure of King Arthur. Furthermore, Chrétien combined historical narrative, heroic song and antiquarian romance in order to reconstruct the literary world of an ideal Christian knighthood.

I would like to take a closer look at the *Cligès*, written by Chrétien between 1170 and 1176. The action unfolds in a geographically fluid Europe, covering England, Brittany, Germany, Greece and Constantinople. The plot is as follows:

A young knight, Alexander, son of the Greek emperor, goes to the court of King Arthur, where he performs feets of valor and falls in love with Soredamors, the young lady in waiting of Queen Guenevere and sister of Gawain. The lovers marry, return to Constantinople, but die when their child, prince Cligès, is fifteen years of age. The throne has been taken by Alis, brother of Alexander. Alis had sworn to his brother that he would not marry so as to secure the succession of Cligès. In order to prove his knightly valor, the Greek prince also visits Arthur's temporary court at Oxford, where he (pretending to be four different knights) wins the central joust on four consecutive days. However, he hastily returns to Constantinople as soon as he finds out that his uncle is about to marry princess Fenice, daughter of the German emperor. At Regensburg, the two young people fall in love. Fenice is abducted by the knights of the evil duke of Saxony; Cligès, in a series of stupendous combats, saves her and, thus, wins her heart. At Cologne, the official residence of the German emperor, Alis knights Cligès and marries Fenice. With the help of Thessala, Fenice's cunning nurse, and through a series of ingenious machinations, the lovers succeed in preventing Alis from consummating his marriage. Back in Constaninople, they convince him that Fenice has died. With the help of the Greek artisan Jean, Cligès hides Fenice in a secret subterranean apartment within a tower built by Jean himself. There Cligès can visit Fenice undisturbed, and the young couple enjoy a full year of sexual pleasures in the tower's garden. Finally, the lovers are discovered, but escape to the court of Arthur who starts a huge expedition against Constantinople. Alis dies in madness from discovering the truth, the expedition is cancelled, the couple returns and ascends the throne of Byzantium.

Almost half of the *Cligès* takes place in Constantinople. The imperial protagonists and certain elements of the setting – the presence of eunuchs, the subterranean palace – undeniably appear as Byzantine. At the same time, the imperial family at Constantinople thinks and behaves in a manner fully consonant with French chivalric and feudal practices. It thus becomes obvious that the ideological and social framework, as well as the broader plot structure (it has been recognized as a partial parody of the story of Tristan and Iseult) and its intertexts are wholly French, probably targeted towards the court of Henry II in the Seventies of the twelfth century. Needless to say, no Medievalist ever saw the Byzantine color of the *Cligès* as an indication of the text's "Byzantine character". But, as in the case of the *Livistros*, the question remains why Chrétien chose the "empire of Greece" in order to stage his French story.

Let us again postpone the answer to this question and let us direct our gaze for a last time to Persia, where, in the late twelfth century, one the most important poets of medieval Persian literature appeared. Ilyas ibn-Yusuf Nizami was born in 1141 in Ganjah, today in Azerbaidjan, and

died there in 1209. Between 1174 and 1204 he composed five verse narratives, called *masnavi* in Persian: *The Treasury of Secrets*, *Khrusrow and Shirin*, *Layla and Majnun* ("Night and the Madman"), *The Seven Images* and *The Book of Alexander*. In contrast to Chrétien, who chose only one legendary past through which to present his image of ideal knighthood, Nizami uses different historical settings each time: Medina at the time of the Prophet Muhammad, Sasanian Persia for two of his narratives, pre-islamic Beduin Arabia and, finally, the Greco-Persian world of Alexander the Great. A central subject of Nizami's narratives is the quest for mystical knowledge either through love, or visions of the divine, or even the renunciation of secular power.

Let us take a look at Nizami's *The Seven Images*, completed in late July of 1196. The plot is set in Zoroastrian Persia. After the successful defense of the land against the invasion of the Chinese Emperor and his vast armies, the young Shah Bahram Gur – a much idealized version of the historical Varahran V (420-438) – decides to retreat to a luxurious desert palace built by a Greek architect for the previous king. As a young boy, Bahram Gur had seen in a secret room of the palace the seven "images" (i.e. panel paintings) of seven beautiful princesses. Now, he installs in seven pavillions his seven wives who come each one of them from a different country. In the course of a week, Bahram Gur visits every evening one of his wives. The cupolas of the seven pavillions are decorated with a specific color that correlates astrologically to the specific day of the visit and to one of the seven planets. The romance is organized around a repetitive structure that is based on the device of encased narratives. Each princess receives her king and husband with music and food. During the ensuing conversation, the princess tells a complex and long story. Then, the couple makes love and falls asleep. The seven encased stories constitute a sort of didactic manual for the ruler who is taught human wisdom by his seven wives. Thus, for example, on Sunday, the day of the Sun, Bahram Gur visits in the Yellow Pavillion the blond princess Humay from the land of Rum, that is, Byzantium. Humay tells the story of the king who did not wish to marry and of the princess who did not wish to fall in love.

Despite the reference to Byzantium, the readers of *The Seven Images* are not confronted with any specific image of Byzantium within the text, because Nizami did not include a single Byzantine decorative element in his narrative. Just as with the lands of Bahram Gur's three other wives, who come from areas that were not Muslim at the time of the poet – China, Russia and India – the fictional setting and the ideological background remains consistently Persian. Again, the question is why should this be so.

It is time to offer a tentative answer. While examining the production of narrative poetry from Persia to the Provence between the middle

of the eleventh and the middle of the twelfth century, we noticed that the three-fold romancing of the past appeared as a convergence resulting from similar social, political and cultural processes. By the end of the twelfth century the situation had changed. In France, the *Cligès* constructs – supplied with a substantial amount of subversive irony – a setting of exotic "orientalism". The romance's fluid geography, directly connecting the court of Arthur to Constantinople, accentuated the western view of Byzantium. This perspective, where the dominant ideology of the poet's social environment permeates an exotic setting, is, in my opinion, connected to the initial successes of the Crusaders in Palestine and the growing aspirations of Western rulers for a stronger control of the Eastern Mediterranean before the capture of Jerusalem by Saladin in 1187. With the assistance of erotic fiction, the aristocratic patrons of Chrétien defined the image of their world through the idealized image of an Other, in this case of the enticing but weak "Grecian empire". The "orientalist" Byzantium of the *Cligès* does not reflect the acceptance, much less the incorporation, of Byzantine ideologies in Anglonorman and French medieval culture.

The Tale of Livistros and Rodamne shows a similar attitude. Obviously, 1204 was a critical break but the restoration of the empire in Nicaea was quick and successful, to the extent that Emperor John III Vatatzes (1222-1254) emerged as a powerful ruler with an international presence. The intellectual climate in Nicaea, the military successes against the Latin principalities and the Seldjuq Sultanate, in connection with an extended policy of alliances with Cyprus, Cilician Armenia and the German emperor, strengthened the self-confidence of the imperial court. In my opinion, it is this situation that is reflected in *Livistros and Rhodamne*. The poet's aristocratic patrons percieved the image of their world through the idealized image of the attractive but controllable Otherness of the Crusader principalities in Syria and Palestine, an image permeated by the Nicaean ideology of empire. The romance's fluid geography, with the Kingdom of Armenia as its spatial narrative frame, intesifies the eastern view of the West, as does the device of encased narrative. Thus, the Byzantine romance presents us with the first and only literary example of an exotic "occidentalism". However, in contrast to the *Cligès* with its Arthurian system of reference, *Livistros and Rodamne* unfolds in an exclusively Latin setting, not unsimilar to the exclusively Hellenic and, in my opinion, equally exotic, setting of the Komnenian novels.

In *The Seven Images* the situation is different. The image of the various people within the encased narrative of the romance is not exotic, because Nizami does not confront any image of Otherness with the world around him. The explanation, I think, is again to be sought in the historical and cultural environment of this particular area of the Middle East. The efforts of the Persian magnates at the beginning of the twelfth

century towards indepence failed, while the Caliphate begun to regain its power and reached a last period of prosperity around the middle of the thirteenth century. At the same time, the lands north of Mesopotamia and between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea stood under the control of the Turkic sultanates of Anatolia, Azerbaidjan and Isfahan. It is not a coincidence that the three rulers mentioned by Nizami in the prologues of his works are Turks who, however, did not succeed in luring the Persian poet to their courts. The Persian world recreated by Nizami in his poetry is wholly imaginary and internalized, unrelated to the Turkic surroundings in which this lonely artist lived. We can discern here a major divergence of Persia from Byzantium and France, since Nizami consciously separated in his romances fiction from history as personal experience and gave precedence to a didactic aesthetics and a theophilosophical mysticism.

At the same time, however, we find an interesting convergence. In contrast to the older authors of romances and novels, the three poets express most consciously the power of their poetic talent. Chrétien, in the prologue to the *Erec*, states that «from a tale of adventure he has fashioned a most beautiful composition» (13-14: «tret d'un conte d'avanture | une molt bele conjointure»), while the anonymous poet of the *Livistros* has the narrator say in the prologue that he will present «a strangely drawn tale of love» (17: «xenocharagon aphegeman agapes»). Thus, both artists underline the contribution of the art of poetry to the art of narrative. Nizami, again, pointing to himself in the prologue of *The Treasury of Secrets*, declares: «Poets are nightingales under the dome of heaven; | they do not resemble anyone. | Ecstatic in the flame of inspiration, | they are kin to the angels. | Poetry weaves the veils of mysteries | and, thus, becomes the mirror of wisdom» (338-343). It is not, therefore, coincidental that the works of the three poets became important models for later generations of writers.

The separation of history and fiction begun to appear in France in the first half of the thirteenth century with the gradual substitution of the *chansons de geste* by prose chronicles and of the verse romances by huge prose romance cycles. In Byzantium this separation takes place around the middle of the fourteenth century. Until then, the surviving romances were original texts composed in Constantinople. They clearly reflected an aristocratic milieu which, in times of violent civil wars, sought refuge in the utopian world of love and war, as these were reflected in *Kallimachos and Chrysorroe* that re-enacted an exotic wonder-tale setting, or in the *Tale of Achilles* that, by invoking the heroic world of Digenis Akritis, presented the amorous adventures of the Byzantinized Hellenic prince Achilles with the Frankish princess Polyxena, and their sad deaths.

During the second half of the fourteenth century, the continuing disintegration of the state and violent theological controversies were major factors in the silencing of fiction in the capital. By 1400, the production

of romances had shifted to new, intellectually less conservative and financially more attractive centres where new audiences had different tastes. The last three surviving Byzantine tales of love are free adaptations of an Italian, an Ottoman and a French model respectively. Even if these three poems echoe, to a certain extent, the style of the older narratives, they reflect, at the same time, a bourgeois environment, far removed from the ideologies and social structures of the Byzantine world. As the Byzantine empire ceased to exist and Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror established himself in Constantinople, the Renaissance construction of the *medium aevum* was gaining in force. When the grand "medievalist" narratives were written in the sixteenth century (Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*, and Spencer's *Fairy Queen*), any intellectual and artistic convergences or divergences between politically and culturally equal environments around the Mediterranean had long ago ceased to exist. By 1600, the "Middle Ages" had shrunk to an imaginary "chronotope" of fictionalized history. With the publication of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, in which the medieval romance and its machinery became the parodic vehicle for social and political critique, the "Middle Ages" finally ended and the way was paved for the gradual rise of the modern novel.

PANAGIOTIS A. AGAPITOS
University of Cyprus
p.a.agapitos@ucy.ac.cy

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL APPENDIX

The Byzantine world

For the Komnenian novels and the Palaiologan romances the reader may find brief informations in the handbooks of H. Hunger, *Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur der Byzantiner* [Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft XII.5.1-2], Munich 1978 and H.-G. Beck, *Geschichte der byzantinischen Volksliteratur* [Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft XII.2.3], Munich 1971 respectively. Useful is the study by R. Beaton, *Medieval Greek Romance*, 2nd edition, London - New York 1996, though it has to be used with the critical remarks by P.A. Agapitos & O.L. Smith, *The Study of Medieval Greek Romance: A Reassessment of Recent Work* [Opuscula Graecolatina 33], Copenhagen 1992. A very good recent overview of Byzantine romance with an updated bibliography has been written by C. Cupane, *Il romanzo*, in G. Cavallo (ed.), *La cultura bizantina* [Lo Spazio Letterario del Medioevo. 3: Le Culture Circostanti, I], Rome 2004, pp. 407-453. A good introduction to the Komnenian novels is the collective volume by P.A. Agapitos & D.R. Reinsch (eds.), *Der Roman im Byzanz der Komnenenzeit. Ein internationales Symposium, Berlin, April 1998* [Meletemata 8], Frankfurt 2000.

For Constantine Manasses and his chronography one must consult the critical edition by O. Lampsidis, *Constantini Manassis Breviarium Chronicum* [Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 36], Athens 1996. The issue of literaricity in relation to the erotic novels has been discussed by D.R. Reinsch, *«Historia ancilla litterarum?». Zum literarischen Geschmack in der Komnenenzeit: Das Beispiel der Σύνοψις χρονική des Konstantinos Manasses*, in P. Odorico & P.A. Agapitos (eds.), *Pour une «nouvelle» histoire de la littérature byzantine: problèmes, méthodes, approches, propositions. Actes d'un colloque international philologique* [Dossiers Byzantins 1], Paris 2002, pp. 81-94. On this connection from the perspective of rhetorical descriptions see I. Nilsson, *Narrating images in Byzantine literature: the ekphraseis of Konstantinos Manasses*, «Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik» 55 (2005), pp. 121-146 and Ead., *Discovering literariness in the past: literature vs. history in the Synopsis Chronike of Konstantinos Manasses*, in P. Odorico & P.A. Agapitos (eds.), *L'écriture de la memoire: la littérarité de l'historiographie. HERMENEIA. Actes du troisiéme colloque international sur la littérature byzantine (Nicosie, mai 2004)* [Dossiers Byzantins 7], Paris 2006, pp. 109-120.

From the extensive bibliographhy on *Digenis Akritis* I would indicatively single out the following: S. Alexiou (ed.), *Βασίλειος Διγενής Ακρίτης (κατά το χειρόγραφο του Εσκοριάλ) και Το άσμα του Αρμούρη* [Φιλολογική Βιβλιοθήκη 5], Athens 1985; R. Beaton & D. Ricks (eds.), *Digenes Akrites: New Approaches to Byzantine Heroic Poetry* [Centre for Hellenic Studies, King's College London. Publications 2], Aldershot 1993; P. Odorico, *Digenis Akritas: Poema anonimo bizantino*, Florence 1995; E.M. Jeffreys, *Digenis Akritis: The Grottaferrata and Escorial Versions* [Cambridge Medieval Classics 7], Cambridge 1998; P. Odorico, *L'Akrite: l'épopée byzantine de Digénis Akritas. Versions grecque et slave, suivie du Chant d'Armouris*, Toulouse 2002.

For the Palailogan romances I refer comprehensively to my following studies, where the readers will find all the older bibliography: *Η θέση της αισθητικής αποτίμησης σε μια "νέα" ιστορία της βυζαντινής λογοτεχνίας*, in Odorico - Agapitos, *Pour une «nouvelle» histoire*, pp. 185-232; *Genre, structure and poetics in the Byzantine vernacular romances of love*, «Symbolae Osloenses» 78 (2004), pp. 7-101; *Από το "δράμα" του Έρωτα στο "αφήγημαν" της Αγάπης: Το ερωτικό μυθιστόρημα στο Βυζάντιο (11ος-14ος αιώνας)*, in Chr. Angelidi (ed.), *Το Βυζάντιο ώριμο για αλλαγές: Επιλογές, ευαισθησίες και τρόποι έκφρασης από τον ενδέκατο στον δέκατο πέμπτο αιώνα* [Εθνικό Ίδρυμα Ερευνών. Ινστιτούτο Βυζαντινών Ερευνών: Διεθνή Συμπόσια 13], Athens 2004, pp. 53-72; *Writing, reading and reciting (in) Byzantine erotic fiction*, in B. Mondrain (ed.), *Lire et écrire à Byzance* [Collège de France – CNRS: Centre de recherche d'Histoire et Civilisation de Byzance 19], Paris 2006, pp. 125-176; *In Rhomaian, Frankish and Persian lands: fiction and fictionality in Byzantium and beyond*, in L.B. Mortensen & P.A. Agapitos (eds.), *Medieval Narratives between History and Fiction: From the Centre to the Periphery of Europe (1100-1400)* – forthcoming. No comprehensive edition of all eight romances exists. Still useful for some the texts is the volume by E. Kriaras, *Βυζαντινά ιπποτικά μυθιστορήματα*, Athens 1955 (offering editions of *Kallimachos*, *Velthandros*, *Florios* and *Imberios*), while revised texts with Italian translations, introductions, substantial notes and good bibliographies will be found in C. Cupane, *Romanzi cavallereschi bizantini. Callimaco e Crisorroe - Beltandro e Crisanza - Storia di Achille - Florio e Platziaflore - Storia di Apollonio di Tiro - Favola consolatoria sulla Cattiva e la Buona Sorte*, Turin 1995. We now have recent critical editions of *Semiramis*

(U. Moennig, *Die Erzählung von Alexander und Semiramis. Kritische Ausgabe mit einer Einleitung, Übersetzung und einem Wörterverzeichnis* [Supplementa Byzantina 7], Berlin - New York 2004), as well as of two of Livistros' three redactions; see P.A. Agapitos, *Αφήγησις Λιβίστρου και Ροδάμνης. Κριτική έκδοση της διασκευής «άλφα»* [Βυζαντινή και Νεοελληνική Βιβλιοθήκη 9], Athens 2006 and T. Lendari, *Αφήγησις Λιβίστρου και Ροδάμνης (Livistros and Rodamne): The Vatican Version. Critical Edition with Introduction, Commentary and Index-Glossary* [Βυζαντινή και Νεοελληνική Βιβλιοθήκη 10], Athens 2007.

The French and Anglonorman world

As introductions to the Old French romances in general, one may consult the following volumes which include substantial bibliographies: J. Frappier & R.R. Grimm (eds.), *Le roman jusqu'a la fin du XIII^e siècle. Tome 1: Partie historique. Tome 2: Partie documentaire* [Grundriß der Romanischen Literaturen des Mittelalters IV.1-2], Heidelberg 1978-1984; K. Brownlee & M.S. Brownlee (eds.), *Romance: Generic Transformation from Chrétien de Troyes to Cervantes*, London 1985; J. Bumke, *Höfische Kultur: Literatur und Gesellschaft im hohen Mittelalter*, Munich 1986; D. Kelly, *Medieval French Romance*, New York 1993; M.T. Bruckner, *Shaping Romance: Interpretation, Truth, and Closure in Twelfth-Century French Fictions*, Philadelphia 1993; B. Schmolke-Hasselmann, *The Evolution of Arthurian Romance: The Verse Tradition from Chrétien to Froissart.* Translated by M. and R. Middleton [Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 35], Cambridge 1998; R.L. Krueger (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, Cambridge 2000; D.H. Green, *The Beginnings of Medieval Romance: Fact and Fiction, 1150-1220* [Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 47], Cambridge 2002. For the antiquarian romances, more specifically, there are the important studies by J.-Ch. Huchet, *Le roman médiéval*, Paris 1984; D. Poirion, *Résurgences: Mythe et littérature à l'âge du symbole (XII^e siècle)*, Paris 1986; L.W. Patterson, *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature*, Madison 1987. Of major importance for the historical and social background of medieval courtly literature remains the three-volume study by R.R. Bezzola, *Les origines et la formation de la littérature courtoise en Occident (500-1200)*, Paris 1955-1963.

From the immense bibliography on the *chansons de geste* and especially the *Chanson de Roland* I list here indicatively the following: M. Menéndez Pidal, *La Chanson de Roland et la tradition épique des Francs*, 2nd edition, Paris 1960; H. Krauss (Hrsg.), *Altfranzösische Epik* [Wege der Forschung 354], Darmstadt 1978; M. de Combarieu du Grès, *L'ideal humain et l'expérience morale chez les héros des chansons de geste des origines à 1250*, Aix-en-Provence 1979; I. Short, *La Chanson de Roland* [Lettres gothiques], Paris 1990; P. Haidu, *The Subject of Violence: The Song of Roland and the Birth of the State*, Bloomington, Indianapolis 1993; S. Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature* [Cambridge Studies in French 53], Cambridge 1995, pp. 22-70.

On Chrétien one might mention, very selectively, the following studies: P. Haidu, *Aesthetic Distance in Chrétien de Troyes: Irony and Comedy in Cligès and Perceval*, Geneva 1968; N.J. Lacy, *The Craft of Chrétien de Troyes: An Essay in Narrative Art* [Davis Medieval Texts and Studies 3] Léiden 1980; D. Kelly (ed.), *The Romances of Chrétien de Troyes: A Symposium* [Edward C. Armstrong Monographs

on Medieval Literature 3], Lexington, Kentucky 1985; D. Maddox, *The Arthurian Romances of Chrétien de Troyes: Once and Future Fictions* [Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 12], Cambridge 1991; S. Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in French Literature* [Cambridge Studies in French 53], Cambridge 1995, pp. 71-121; S. Kay, *Who was Chrétien de Troyes?*, «Arthurian Literature» 15 (1996), pp. 1-35. On the *Cligès* more specifically, one may consult with profit the following: M.A. Freeman, *The Poetics of translatio studii and conjointure: Chrétien de Troyes's Cligès* [French Forum Monographs 12], Lexington, Kentucky 1979; L. Polak, *Chrétien de Troyes: Cligès* [Critical Guides to French Texts 23], London 1982; S. Gregory & C. Luttrell (eds.), *Chrétien de Troyes: Cligés*, Cambridge 1993; Sh. Kinoshita, *The poetics of «translatio»: French-Byzantine relations in Chrétien de Troyes's «Cligès»*, «Exemplaria» 8 (1996), pp. 315-354. The romances of Chrétien have been all excellently edited in the *Lettres gothiques* series (*Erec et Enide* by J.-M. Fritz [1992], *Cligès* by Ch. Méla and O. Collet [1994], *Lancelot* by Ch. Méla [1992], *Yvain* by D.F. Hult [1994], *Perceval* by Ch. Méla [1990]), as well as in the *Bibliothèque de la Pléiade* by a team of scholars under the general editorship of D. Poirion, *Chrétien de Troyes: Oeuvres complètes*, Paris 1994 (A. Berthelot, P.F. Dembowski, S. Lefèvre, K.D. Uitti, Ph. Walter); both publications include critical editions (often based on different manuscripts), French translations, substantial introductions, notes and bibliographies. A solid English prose translation has been published in the *Penguin Classics* series by W.W. Kibler & C.W. Carroll, *Chrétien de Troyes: Arthurian Romances*, Harmondsworth 1991.

For the modern concept of "Orientalism" the study by Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York 1978 remains essential, even though or exactly because it has generated serious debate on a number of issues; see the broad overview by G. Prakash, *Orientalism now*, «History and Theory» 34 (1995), pp. 119-212. For the application of postcolonial theory to the study of Western Medieval literature, especially of the twelfth and thirteenth century, I refer indicatively to the following: J.J. Cohen (ed.), *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, New York 2000; J.M. Ganim, *Medievalism and Orientalism: Three Essays on Literature, Architecture and Cultural Identity*, New York 2005; A.J. Kabir & D. Williams (eds.), *Postcolonial Approaches to the European Middle Ages*, Cambridge 2005; Sh. Kinoshita, *Medieval Boundaries: Rethinking Difference in Old French Literature*, Philadelphia 2006.

The Arabic and Persian world

For Medieval Persian literature in general the following handbooks are still useful: E.G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia*, London 1907-1924; A. Bausani, *Letteratura persiana*, Milan 1960; J. Rypka, *History of Iranian Literature*, 2nd edition, Doordrecht 1968. For the love romances of the eleventh century one might find interesting (if sometimes fanciful) ideas in the essay by D. Davis, *Panthea's Children: Hellenistic Novels and Medieval Persian Romances* [Biennial Yarshater Lecture Series 3], New York 2002.

A synthetic study of Firdowsi's *Shahnameh* has been published by D. Davis, *Epic and Sedition: The Case of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh*, 2nd edition, Fayetteville, Arkansas 1998, who also published an almost complete prose translation of this historical epic (*Abolqasim Ferdowsi: Shahnameh. The Persian Book of Kings* [Penguin Classics], London 2006). For a pioneering comparison of the *Shahnameh* and the *Digenis Akritis* see V. Pecoraro, *La nascita del romanzo moderno nell'Europa del*

XII secolo: le sue origini orientali e la mediazione di Bisanzio all'Occidente, «Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik» 32, 2 (1982), pp. 307-318.

For the Arabian epics essential is the three-volume study by M.C. Lyons, *The Arabian Epic: Heroic and Oral Story-telling* [University of Cambridge Oriental Publications 49], Cambridge 1995, who also published detailed summaries of twelve epics, among which the *Sirat al-Mujahidin* (vol. 3, pp. 310-504). Of particular interest is the comparative study of Cl. Ott, *Byzantine Wild East – Islamic Wild West: an expedition into a literary borderland*, in Agapitos - Reinsch, *Der Roman im Byzanz der Komnenenzeit*, pp. 137-146.

For a concise presentation of Nizami's life and works see the excellent article by P.J. Chelkowski, *Nizami Gandjawi*, «Encyclopaedia of Islam» 8 (1995), pp. 76-81, where also the older bibliography is to be found. Two recent literary approaches are by K. Talattof & J.W. Clinton (eds.), *The Poetry of Nizami Ganjavi: Knowledge, Love, and Rhetoric*, New York 2001 and A.A. Seyed-Gohrab, *Layli and Majnun: Love, Madness and Mystic Longing in Nizami's Epic Romance* [Brill Studies in Middle Eastern Literatures 27], Leiden 2003. For the *Seven Images* in particular, the readers might consult the abbreviated translation by P.J. Chelkowski, *Mirror of the Invisible World: Tales from the Khamseh of Nizami*, New York 1975, pp. 69-112, or the following complete translations: J.S. Meisami, *Nizami's Haft Paykar: A Medieval Persian Romance*, Oxford 1995; J.C. Bürgel, *Nizami: Die Abenteuer des Königs Bahram und seiner sieben Prinzessinnen*, Munich 1997; M. Barry, *Nezâmî: Le pavillon des sept princesses*, Paris 2000. The reading of the romance by Italo Calvino (in his volume of collected essays *Perché leggere i classici*, Milan 1995) remains intelligent and charming.