ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

Three Medieval Greek Romances

Velthandros and Chrysandza, Kallimachos and Chrysorroi, Livistros and Rodamni

Gavin Betts

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Translated by

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THREE MEDIEVAL GREEK ROMANCES

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To Katharine

Κρεῖττόν μοι βρῶσις, ἔλεγεν, νὰ γένω τῶν θηρίων
καὶ τῆς ζωῆς νὰ στερηθῶ παρὸ τῆς κόρης ταύτης.

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Most volumes contain Introductions with the following features: (1) a biography of the author or a discussion of the problem of authorship, with any pertinent historical or legendary information; (2) an objective discussion of the literary style of the original, emphasizing any individual features; (3) a consideration of sources for the work and its influence; and (4) a statement of the editorial policy for each edition and translation. There is also a Select Bibliography, which emphasizes recent criticism on the works. Critical writings are often accompanied by brief descriptions of their importance. Selective glossaries, indices, and footnotes are included where appropriate.

The Library covers a broad range of linguistic areas, including all of the major European languages. All of the important literary forms and genres are considered, sometimes in anthologies or selections.

The General Editors hope that these volumes will bring the general reader a closer awareness of a richly diversified area that has for too long been closed to everyone except those with precise academic training, an area that is well worth study and reflection.

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General Introduction

Her mouth was small and lovely—enough to suffice for the kiss of a loving heart. Her lips were red and thin, like a rose when it opens at dawn to receive the dew. . . Such a countenance, I swear by my soul's pain and my woe, will never be seen again in the whole world.

For all her charms Rodamni, the heroine of the medieval Greek romance *Livistros and Rodamni* to whom the above lines refer, has not previously attracted an English translator, and this is also true of the other two romances presented here, *Velthandros and Chrysandza* and *Kallimachos and Chrysorroi.* The three form part of a curious niche of literature which has, until recently, been unjustly neglected. The genre to which they belong contains eleven stories, all in verse, and all with the theme of romantic love. Information about the circumstances in which the poems were produced and the audience to which they were addressed is scanty, but on the basis of what evidence there is they can be dated to the fourteenth century.

It seems likely that the poems were popular at the time of their composition in the late medieval Greek world. This, however, would not have recommended them to the scholars of the Renaissance when Greek and Roman studies were seriously taken up in the West. These men were laboring to produce editions of the great literary works of ancient Greece and Rome and they idealized the societies which produced them. They had little respect for the civilization of the very recent Greek past and only valued contemporary Greek culture inasmuch as it preserved a knowledge of the ancient language. The language of the romances, which was based—how closely it is now difficult to tell—on the spoken language of the fourteenth century, would have been held in contempt by scholars and one actually characterized it by the damning epithet *barbarograecum* (*barbarous Greek*).[1] Consequently, it is not surprising that references to our poems in the scholarly literature of the Renaissance are few.

Subsequently, although manuscripts were acquired by some of the great libraries of Europe, no scholar of the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries thought it worthwhile to produce an edition of any sort.

It was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that attitudes started to change. The romances were recognized as being among the first examples of modern Greek literature and some appeared, for the first time, in print. But even so, they were not studied solely for their own merits. Nineteenth century scholars began to investigate the form and immediate antecedents of modern Greek and realized that the language of these poetical texts provided evidence for the spoken language of the late middle ages. Because of this the poems provided ammunition for a particularly vicious controversy waged in Greece itself over the form that written modern Greek should take. The possibility that they might have literary merit was usually ignored.

Recent decades have seen a quickening of interest in medieval Greek literature, particularly the romances. The three poems presented here are now seen as complex works and have been subjected to studies of various sorts. But it will be some time before past neglect has been remedied. Much work is still required in the all-important matter of establishing satisfactory texts. The situation is particularly serious in the case of *Livistros.*

For Renaissance scholars the poems were the degenerate offspring of a great tradition. A hundred years ago they were seen as quarries providing raw material for linguistic battles. But to achieve an understanding of them we must examine their background and character; to do this a summary of their plots is necessary.

Velthandros and Chrysandza

Velthandros, the second son of a mighty Greek king, Rodofilos, is dissatisfied with the treatment accorded to him by his father. Despite the desperate attempt of his elder brother, Filarmos, to dissuade him, he goes abroad with three squires. After an adventure at Turk's Hill he comes to the city of Tarsus. In the vicinity he discovers a stream which contains a band of fire within its current. He is intrigued by this and sets out to find the stream's source. Finally, he comes to a mighty castle from which the stream issues forth. An inscription on the gate declares it to be Love's Castle and warns against entering. However, leaving his squires outside, Velthandros goes in. He follows the stream through a beautiful garden and comes to a building containing a dining hall. In front of the building is a

statue from which the water pours although, as we later learn, its true source is inside the building.

Velthandros goes into the hall and on the wall he sees two bands of reliefs; a lower one shows men and women being tortured by cupids, and an upper one displays a group in a state of happiness. The men and women represented are labelled with their names and some details of their history. At the end of the hall Velthandros notices a sapphire statue of unspecified gender holding a peacock. The statue is in an advanced state of misery. Its tears are the source of the stream's water while its constant sighs provide the stream's band of fire.[2] When Velthandros reads a message on the statue declaring that he himself suffers a passion for Chrysandza, the daughter of the prince of Antioch, he is very distressed. Further inspection reveals another statue, this time designated as male, with an arrow in its heart. It too bears an inscription, which states that Love has determined the destinies of both Chrysandza and Velthandros. In a state of disarray, the hero continues his tour. When he ventures out of the building he sees a terrace on which stands Love's throne.

At this point a cupid appears before Velthandros and summons him to Love's presence. After Velthandros explains to Love how he happens to be there, Love announces that he wants Velthandros to judge who is the fairest of forty noble women. Velthandros is then left to do this and the meticulous approach he adopts leads him to make some very sharp comments on the first thirty-nine participants, whom he rejects. The fortieth he pronounces to be without flaw and he presents her with a wand of victory. He then reports back to Love on the lady's beauty in glowing terms. When he has finished Love disappears and there is nothing left for Velthandros to do but collect his squires at the castle's entrance and set out for Antioch to find his predestined love. He does not at this stage know that she is in fact the woman he selected as the beauty queen.

On arriving at the plains of Antioch Velthandros meets the city's prince, who is hunting. Velthandros joins in the hunt and impresses the prince with his archery. The prince takes him back to the palace and installs him in the royal retinue. On a later occasion Velthandros goes to see the prince when he is with his wife and his daughter, Chrysandza. Velthandros realizes that Chrysandza is his love and the woman he selected as winner of the beauty contest, and Chrysandza recognizes him as the judge. Velthandros does not press his suit, however, and things stay as they are.

One evening, after two years and two months have elapsed, Chrysandza is beside herself with frustration. She goes into her garden and gives vent to her feelings but is overheard by Velthandros. He decides to take the initiative and approach her. With little by way of preamble they embrace and before the night is over they have made love. But when Velthandros leaves at dawn he is apprehended by the guards. Immediately afterwards, Chrysandza hears of this and sends her faithful maid, Fedrokaza, to her lover. The maid tells him that he must say that *she* was the object of his attentions, not her mistress. Chrysandza then goes to see her father, the prince, and in a feigned rage complains that Velthandros has trespassed in her garden.

The prince becomes angry and immediately arranges a trial. However, when he hears of Velthandros's (pretended) love for Fedrokaza he softens and suggests that they marry. This happens, and their unconsummated marriage serves to conceal Velthandros's relationship with Chrysandza.

After ten months Velthandros becomes afraid. The lovers decide to escape together with Fedrokaza and the three squires. Unfortunately, the night on which they abscond is wild in the extreme. They try to cross a river but are separated by the current. Velthandros reaches the opposite bank, destitute and clad only in his underpants. Chrysandza, completely naked, is tossed back to the bank from which they started. Ignorant of each other's survival, they wander along the opposite sides of the river. After Velthandros finds the corpse of Fedrokaza, and Chrysandza that of one of the squires, they are reunited. A search reveals the two remaining bodies and they then follow the river to the coast. A ship appears and they make contact. It transpires that the captain has been dispatched by Velthandros's father, Rodofilos, to find him. After a recognition scene Velthandros learns the sad news that his elder brother, Filarmos, is dead. Velthandros and Chrysandza embark. They return to Velthandros's native land and receive a rapturous welcome. The story ends with their marriage and Velthandros being declared king.

Kallimachos and Chrysorroi

A mighty king sends his three sons out into the world to seek adventure and determine by their exploits who is the most valiant and most worthy of his father's throne. The youngest is called Kallimachos. When the three come to a castle guarded by supernatural creatures the elder brothers abandon the venture and return home. Kallimachos enters the castle, which is owned by a dragon who has conceived a passion for a young maiden, at present his prisoner. Kallimachos kills the dragon and rescues

the lady, who has been suffering from the dragon's somewhat unconventional method of courting. The two fall in love. After exchanging vows they take a bath in the castle pool and consummate their relationship. They then live together happily in Dragon's Castle as man and wife.

But their idyll is not destined to last. A powerful king, as yet unmarried, is wandering about with his army and happens to come near Dragon's Castle. When he sees Chrysorroi looking over the castle wall he falls hopelessly in love. Before taking further action he returns to his kingdom, where a witch offers her services. An expedition to the castle is mounted and Chrysorroi is abducted by a trick of magic devised by the witch. The king takes her home but she resolutely rejects his offer of marriage and he is forced to delay the fulfilment of his desire.

Though the witch left Kallimachos in a death-like coma, he is revived by the timely (and unexpected) intervention of his brothers. He immediately sets out to look for his beloved. After some time he discovers her. He finds that she is in mourning for him and that the king is absent on a military campaign. Kallimachos takes up employment as a gardener to gain access to her. Recognition follows and the lovers enjoy secret trysts. Finally they are discovered and Kallimachos is thrown into prison. The king returns to sit in judgement on them both but after Chrysorroi's spirited defence of herself and her true lover the king grudgingly releases them and they return to their former happiness in Dragon's Castle.

Livistros and Rodamni

Livistros and Rodamni has a more complicated narrative structure than the other poems. Here two stories are brought together through a character, Klitovon,[3] who is the protagonist in one story (the subsidiary one) and the friend of the protagonist in the other. The romance is given a further degree of complexity by the fact that it is Klitovon who tells both stories.

Klitovon is addressing an audience consisting of a noble lady, Myrtani, and a mixed group of inhabitants of the land of Litavia. These others are not named and we subsequently learn that Myrtani is their queen. The romance concerns a man, Livistros, and his love for Rodamni.

Klitovon begins his tale in this way. He has left his native land because of an unhappy love affair and is riding through a beautiful meadow when he is intrigued to see a Latin knight utterly absorbed in grief. After a little

coaxing, the stranger, whose name is Livistros, tells his story, but on the condition that they become friends and never separate.

Livistros explains that he had been the ruling prince of a country called Livandros and that, although he had reached manhood, he had been completely unfamiliar with romantic love. When a striking example of such love was brought to his notice he was profoundly troubled. He then had a dream in which he was taken to Love's court, where, after being upbraided for his neglect of love, he swore to become Love's servant. Love then informed him that he was destined to marry Rodamni, the daughter of the king of Silver Castle. Later, in another dream, he actually saw his fated spouse and, on waking, was impelled to go off in search of her. After two years he found Silver Castle and solved the initial problem of establishing contact by writing a message on an arrow and shooting it onto the lady's balcony. Subsequently, Livistros improved his technique by tying messages to the arrows. He used this means of communication to dispatch many letters. Although Rodamni showed a good deal of contrariness during this courtship by post she finally fell in love with him. A meeting was arranged and proved wholly successful, apart from Rodamni's disturbing news that her father had already arranged for her to marry Verderichos, the king of Egypt, who was about to arrive. But, excellent heroine that she is, she had a solution. She would suggest to her father that the two suitors joust and that she would accept the winner as her husband. In the event, her father was happy with this arrangement and in the ensuing fight Livistros was an easy victor. He then not only married his beloved but became ruler of Silver Castle. However, Verderichos was not easily put off. Two years later, he immobilized Livistros with the aid of a witch, kidnapped Rodamni and carried her off to Egypt. When Livistros returned to his senses he set out to find his beloved. He was still searching when he met Klitovon and his narrative ends at this point.

Klitovon now tells Livistros about his own unhappy love affair. But we can ignore his story for the moment as Klitovon gives up his own concerns completely and lends his full support to Livistros. The two set off for Egypt. They arrive at a strait separating them from their goal and appear to be at an impasse. But they find the witch who had helped Verderichos, only to be abandoned at this very spot. She tells them that Rodamni has so far resisted her abductor's importunities and has managed to persuade him to set her up as an innkeeper. She will keep the inn for four years and only after that time will she submit to his will. In her adopted profession Rodamni hopes to learn something about Livistros from travellers. The witch then gives the two friends magic horses to cross the strait to Egypt and tells them how to find and rescue Rodamni.

They follow her advice successfully. But on the return journey they call on the witch and Rodamni is so seized by hatred that she demands that Livistros kill the woman immediately. This is done and the three then return to Silver Castle where Klitovon marries Rodamni's sister and becomes co-regent.

So much for the main story. Klitovon's story is much simpler. He was born in Armenia, the nephew of the ruling prince. He had fallen in love with Myrtani, his cousin and the prince's daughter, while her husband was abroad. He was accepted by the lady but the prince learnt of their affair and threw him into prison. The situation was not improved by the return of Myrtani's husband. However, the resourceful lady bribed the guards and enabled her lover to escape. Not long after this he met Livistros and joined forces with him.

We learn Klitovon's story slightly after the middle of the romance but it is not until the end that it is concluded. We are told that after some years of marital happiness Rodamni's sister dies and the disconsolate Klitovon decides to return to his home. There he finds Myrtani, now a widow. She is the person whom we met in the opening lines and to whom he has told the whole story. He ends by announcing his intention to spend his remaining years with her.

The background

The background of the medieval Greek romances is complicated. It is made up of three strands, historical, linguistic and literary, which come from antiquity and after frequently intertwining, provide the fabric for the canvas on which the poems were composed.

The Byzantine empire, from the time of its inception in late antiquity, was centred on Constantinople. It had waxed and waned over the years until, at the beginning of the thirteenth century, it consisted of about half of Asia Minor and the greater part of the Balkan peninsula (considerably more territory than is occupied by Greece today). These territories represented a decline from the great days of the sixth century after Justinian had reconquered a large part of the old Roman world. But the empire could still boast of a cultural and intellectual tradition that went back in an unbroken line to antiquity. In 1200 A.D. Constantinople, alone of all the ancient centres of civilization and culture, had never been conquered or subjected to foreign control. And its society was essentially static. The long centuries during which the empire had survived numerous

emergencies confirmed a general belief in the excellence of its traditional institutions. The Byzantines had little interest in progress or change, and nowhere was this attitude more in evidence than in matters of language. But to understand this conservatism we must go back to the period before Constantine, in 324 A.D., founded Constantinople, the new Rome and capital of the Eastern Empire.

In the second century A.D., when the Greek world had long been taken over by Rome, we see the beginnings of an educational movement which is called the Second Sophistic. Its missionaries were teachers of rhetoric. As a result of their activities rhetoric came to be an important part of higher education and its practitioners were regarded as upholding an aspect of Greek culture, the art of public speaking as it had been practised in the glorious days of the long dead city-states. The rhetoricians of the Second Sophistic turned to the great Athenian orators of the fourth century B.C. for models and this, combined with the prestige of Attic (i.e. Athenian) literature generally, led them to attempt a revival of the form of Greek used at Athens in its political and cultural prime, the period between 450 and 340 B.C.

This bizarre attempt to resurrect an old form of the language was destined to be the linguistic strand of the fabric of the background to our romances. The enthusiasm which it generated among the educated classes of the second century A.D. seems attributable to a mixture of cultural chauvinism and nostalgia. The Greek language had changed considerably over the previous four centuries, rather more than has been the case with English since Elizabethan times. It would have been no easy task to speak and write in an idiom that might have been acceptable to Demosthenes or Plato. Despite this difficulty, Attic Greek was taught to a greater degree than had happened previously and was given a very rhetorical flavor. Teachers, famous and otherwise, re-enforced this element by delivering set-piece speeches in which every trick of eloquence was exploited. With this skill they acquired both fame and wealth, and the practice of this type of oratory became popular by the end of the second century A.D.

As a result of this, Attic Greek, with at least a tinge of rhetoric, became obligatory, not just for speeches, but for many works of literature that claimed serious attention.[4] Several centuries later this idiom replaced Latin as the official medium of communication in the Byzantine court and its bureaucracy. As far as literature is concerned, the practice persisted up to the end of the Middle Ages (the romances are among the few exceptions). We have no means of judging to what extent and with what competence the classical tongue was spoken at different times, but it

dominated the written word. Indeed it remained the vehicle used by the Greek intelligentsia for history and ecclesiastical matters even after the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453.

This linguistic conservatism is reflected in the third strand of the fabric, which concerns a literary genre, the ancient novel.

By the time the Second Sophistic movement was under way in the second and third centuries A.D. the novel had long since established itself as a popular literary genre. Its origins were bound up with the new form of Greek culture which had developed from the end of the fourth century B.C. in Egypt and the countries fringing the eastern Mediterranean as a result of the conquests of Alexander the Great. These conquests had brought an end to the power and influence of the old city-states in Greece itself and elsewhere but had also placed vast new areas under Greek control and influence. After Alexander's death in 323 B.C. his enormous empire broke up into a number of independent states which lasted for several centuries. The elements which these states had in common were Greek rulers and an upper and middle class which, though by no means always of Greek origin, used the Greek language and saw themselves as the heirs of previous Greek cultural achievements. This period (late fourth century to middle first century B.C.), to which the term *Hellenistic* is given, witnessed the rise of various elite literary schools which gave new directions to Greek literature but which had little or no appeal beyond their dedicated initiates. However, with the geographical expansion of the Greek world literacy in Greek was increasing. A new reading class was created which needed some form of contemporary literature less sophisticated than that offered by the intellectuals with their high-brow productions.

It was for this new type of reader that the novel was created. In essence, it was a prose work of some length which told the story of a young man and woman in love who, after separation and many tribulations, are finally united. The heroine was given the same importance as the hero because the novel was intended to have an appeal for female audiences—literacy among women had also increased. The basic plot was mandatory. But this was not a disadvantage. Like many a stereotyped television drama the ancient novel was primarily meant to provide its readers (mainly city dwellers) with a means of escape from the banality of city life to a world of excitement, adventure, and, above all, romantic love. The ways in which this escape from reality was achieved reflected the anxieties and preoccupations of the day. They also stamped the novel with characteristics which it bore until the end of the Middle Ages and beyond.

For many people of the Hellenistic period the eastern Mediterranean was a dangerous place. The rival Greek states were more interested in furthering their own ends than in policing the seas and this, combined with the haven provided by the many clusters of small islands, gave ample scope for pirates, whose main activity, kidnapping, was intimately connected with the slave trade. As the basic theme in the novel was the triumph of true love over adversity it was little wonder that most ancient novels involved the hero or heroine, or both, being abducted by pirates and sold into slavery. This also involved them, albeit unwillingly, in foreign travel, a motif which has always been important in escapist literature. (We can see the abduction motif recurring in *Kallimachos* and *Livistros*, as well as journeys into unknown countries; the latter is also a feature in *Velthandros.*)

The Hellenistic period brought changes in religion. In previous centuries the civic organization of a city state and the lives of its citizens had been intimately bound up with the city's own variety of traditional religious beliefs. Under the new political conditions, where autocracy was the rule rather than the exception, the old divinities were often seen as irrelevant to the individual and as remote as the monarch to whom the individual's allegiance was due. Loss of political rights helped to stimulate a fatalism which saw events as irrational or pre-ordained, or both. One form which this fatalism took was a belief in Fortune (Τύχη *Tyche*), who was conceived of as an unpredictable goddess capable of taking a malign delight in her perverse treatment of mortals. She became so fixed a part of the novel that she was not subsequently banished by Christianity.

When in 30 B.C. Cleopatra was defeated and Egypt, the last surviving independent Greek state, was incorporated into the Roman empire the Hellenistic age came to an end. The Romans saw themselves as the inheritors of Greek civilization and now that all the old Greek states were under their control they began a policy of benign paternalism. Under their rule the Greek world fell into a state of peace and tranquillity previously unknown. But although pirates and other paraphernalia of the previous age no longer existed in real life, they were still part of the novel, which continued to present the same picture of the world as it had previously done.[5] In the Christian era its popularity continued and it became the literary form which had the broadest appeal in the Greek world.

Five ancient novels have survived complete and their authors are Chariton, Xenophon of Ephesus, Longus, Achilles Tatius and Heliodorus. Exact dating is difficult, but Chariton and Xenophon of Ephesus were probably writing in the first century A.D. or earlier as they do not show