
This book presents for the first time to a modern readership a verse translation of The Tale of Livistros and Rodamne, the longest and most lyrical medieval Greek romance dating to the thirteenth century. Panagiotis Agapitos’s meticulously edited volume renders visible a body of literature that predates in its twelfth-century emergence the French romances of Chrétien de Troyes, whose contributions to the study of medieval European romance have been well studied, and unites the rise of the novel in Roman Alexandria to its medieval revival in twelfth-century Constantinople. It thus helps fill some of the missing gaps in the scholarship of the novel between late antiquity and the early Renaissance—i.e., between the work of post-classical narrative fiction, such as the novels of Achilles Tatius, Chariton, and Heliodorus, and early modern fiction through the novels of Cervantes and Rabelais. As such, it is a landmark contribution to early modern and world literary studies.

The translation will help bring vernacular Greek love poetry into the literary mainstream of medieval studies and pave the way for the study of the genre in association with other romances of Persian, Armenian, and Old French descent. It is part of Liverpool University Press’s valuable series, Translated Texts for Byzantinists, that aims to make Byzantine texts accessible to experts and non-specialists through scholarly editions and translations in English. The publication follows the first English-language edition of four Byzantine novels, by Elizabeth Jeffreys (2012), and the first prose translation of Livistros and Rodamne, by Gavin Betts (1995).

The book is divided into three sections: an introduction, in three parts (1–53); the translated romance itself, in verse and unaccompanied by notes (55–180); and a bibliography that corresponds to notes in the introduction (181–94).

The introduction situates The Tale of Livistros and Rodamne historically in the imperial court of thirteenth-century Nicaea, during the last decade of the reign of John III Doukas Vatatzes. It surveys literary, linguistic, and narratological issues and offers a useful plot summary that will be invaluable to readers unfamiliar with the poem’s narrative complexity. The most extensive section, “Literary Matters,” addresses issues of chronology, transmission, organization, reception, and influence. It also remarks on the influence of post-classical rhetoric in the constitution of narrative strategy in thirteenth-century poetics. The plot of The Tale of Livistros and Rodamne is complex, yet concise by late medieval standards. It is framed around events that align temporal reality with spatial otherness—the latter manifested in dreams, dreamscapes, and artificial expanses. The language of the poem is varied and rich, full of repetition, echo, and wordplay. Agapitos captures every sound, rhythm, and movement with attention to the lyricism of the original language—even though he has not produced a rhymed text. He instead allows the occasional rhymes to occur as naturally as possible within the verses and sentences, and leaves the poem’s musical orchestration to be performed by pronounced alliteration, mixed repetition, and the skilled placement of compound words. Again and again the poet “throws a word up into the air,” so to speak.
and then sees how the light hits it as it falls into different positions—and the translator catches it and renders it in brilliant verse. Consider, for example, the songs, letters, and love poems exchanged in an extended courting scene between the hero and the heroine in the second part of the romance (Discourse 2, ll. 952–2719). They represent some of the most lyrical and passionate examples of love poetry in the Middle Ages. Agapitos offers additional insight into the textual idiosyncrasies of the poem in the notes and approaches the medieval author’s narrative technique with considerable discernment and sensitivity.

The notes that frame the introduction are rich in contextual references and to the point. They provide helpful background information and scholarly guidance on literary, cultural, and aesthetic matters related to the romance. The expert and the first-time reader will benefit from them. The decision to forgo notes in the romance is born out of deep familiarity with the genre’s performative ethos and complex oral transmission. The English-speaking reader will not need notes, or any type of supportive commentary, to appreciate it. Equally, the choice to opt for a verse translation is prudent. Agapitos captures the newly coined compound words of the original composition along with the romance’s frequent tone shifts and playful orality with notable skill. The effects of this are obvious in the confessions, love poems, and songs that are recited (or inscribed in letters) and in the instruction the hero receives on matters of love. Collectively, their narration (in English, as in Greek) blurs the boundary between the lyrical and the quasi-fantastical.

The only point of criticism for this most valuable edition is the omission of a section in the introduction that would consider “next steps” in the scholarship of Byzantine erotic poetry. Under such a section, key observations made under “Literary Matters” and “General Issues” could be productively addressed within a wider diachronic trajectory that could encompass the Byzantine approach to gender, space, nature, race, ecology, artifice, performance, alienation, and exoticism (or “Byzantine occidentalism”) (19). All of these areas are creatively explored in the poem and are also of growing interest to scholars in Byzantine literary studies and medieval studies across disciplines. Again, such a criticism is minor when weighed against the service that this volume offers to readers with a serious interest in the history and development of narrative genres.

This essential scholarly edition and translation of The Tale of Livistros and Rodamne is a literary triumph and a solid step forward in the right direction in Byzantine and world literary studies. It brings medieval Greek erotic fiction into productive dialogue with its literary and cultural interlocutors in Europe, Asia, and North Africa, and extends the geographical distribution of the genre from central Europe and the Franco-Norman West to Asia and the Arabic-Persian East.

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In Europe and the Americas, especially, the political right attaches itself to what it believes to be the European Middle Ages. It points to them as a time of ethnic purity, of righteous Christian war against Islam, and of uncomplicated gender and social hierarchies. It sometimes invokes the thaumaturgic mystery of Latin to lend pretentious dignity to its tedious