



GREECE IX. GREEK AND PERSIAN ROMANCES

GREECE

ix. GREEK AND PERSIAN ROMANCES

Three Persian verse romances of the 11th century (Fakr-al-Din Gorgāni's *Vis o Rāmin*, Ayyuqi's *Varqa o Golšāh*, and the fragmentary *Wāmeq o 'Aḍrā* of 'Onṣori) stand out as significantly unlike other Persian verse romances (see below), and they share enough features with the Greek Hellenistic Romances (written between about 100 B.C.E. and about 300 C.E.) to suggest the existence of links between the two sets of tales. The nature of the relationship is not, however, the simple one of the earlier (Greek) material influencing the later (Persian) material, as the Greek novels contain a number of motifs and topoi which are identified within the narratives themselves as Persian in origin. The relationship between the love narratives of the two cultures appear, therefore, to have been one of mutual reciprocity over a considerable stretch of time, rather than a more straightforward set of transactions in which one culture was always the donor and the other the recipient.



The Persian romances in question can be distinguished from most other examples of the genre by two important factors, in that a) they end happily with the lovers united in marriage and with an unclouded future ahead of them, and b) their rhetoric contains no trace of Sufi or mystical allegorization of erotic motifs; to the contrary, carnal love and desire are presented as valid goals in and of themselves. This avoidance of both tragedy and transcendence set them apart from the later romances of Neẓāmi Ganjavi, ‘Abd-al-Raḥmān Jāmi, and their numerous followers. Prima facie they appear to have more in common with the romances embedded in the mythological/legendary sections of Ferdowsi’s *Šāh-nāma*, as these too tend to end happily, and their rhetoric is similarly devoid of allegorical and mystical implications. But there are significant differences between these two sets of tales. First, the love relationships within the *Šāh-nāma* are almost without exception exogamic (the male lover is Iranian, the female is non-Iranian); when this relationship is reversed, as with Zāḥḥāk and Jamšēd’s daughters, and Arjāsp and Goštāsp’s daughters, the connection is always presented as rape/abduction rather than love. We may take this concern with exogamy as emblematic of the political relationships espoused by a national epic. Second, with the single exception of *Bēžan o Manēža*, the purpose of the love relationships in the legendary section of the *Šāh-nāma* is the future birth of a hero and/or heir. *Vis o Rāmin*, *Varqa o Golšāh*, and *Wāmeq o ‘Aḍrā*, on the other hand, display an almost obsessive interest in endogamy rather than exogamy, and progeny (either real or desired) play no part in the relationships they celebrate.

The three romances clearly have roots in pre-Islamic narratives. Following the work of Vladimir Minorsky, there is general agreement that the origins of *Vis o Rāmin* belong in the Parthian period. Bo Utas and Tomas Hagg have demonstrated in a number of articles that the fragmentary *Wāmeq o ‘Aḍrā* derives from the (also largely lost) Greek romance of *Metiochus and Parthenope*. The evidence for this is overwhelming: with the exception of the hero’s name, all the names in the Persian text, both of people and places, derive from Greek, ‘Aḍrā as a calque (since, like Parthenope, it connotes virginity), the others by transliteration (often mangled, but still recognizable), and the plots of the two tales, in so far as they can be gleaned from the surviving fragments, appear to be identical. The origins of *Varqa o Golšāh* are more obscure. The text claims an Arab source, which is supported by details within the poem. However, the tale shares so many motifs and topoi with *Vis o*



Rāmin and *Wāmeq o 'Adrā* that it seems reasonable to assume that the three were elaborated, at some point in their development, within milieux that shared a specific set of aesthetic assumptions as to the nature of a love narrative.

A comparison of the narratives of *Vis o Rāmin* and *Varqa o Golšāh* reveal that they share the following plot elements: the forced separation of lovers and their subsequent wanderings in search of one another; the abduction of a bride around the time of her wedding ceremony; serial attempts by a number of different men on the chastity of the heroine; the failure of all such attempts; the existence of a man who seems to have the heroine in his power but who does not take advantage of her, either because he cannot or out of magnanimity; the apparent loss forever of one of the lovers (e.g., when Golšāh's death is faked, and again when Varqa dies of exhaustion and despair; when Rāmin abandons Vis for Gol) and the remaining lover's lament; the reunion of the lovers after this apparent loss; the marriage and subsequent happy life of the lovers. Further similarities are the heroines' supposed weakness (she is always at the apparent mercy of predatory men) and her actual resourcefulness (particularly at warding off, by a variety of ruses, unwanted sexual attention), the importance of chance in the development of the plot, and the fact that the narratives take place in what Mikhail Bakhtin has cogently described as "adventure-time" (pp. 85, 90-92). All these elements are also the basic building blocks of the Hellenistic romances, which, like the Persian romances, display a preoccupation with close endogamous relationships. The period when the Greek novels were written (between ca. 100 B.C.E. and ca. 300 C.E.) corresponds in large part with the Parthian Empire in Persia. Culturally this was perhaps the most hybrid and syncretic moment in Persian history. The surviving artifacts indicate "vast concessions to Greek art" (Yarshater, in *Cambr. Hist. Iran* III/1, p. xxvii.) and Greek was written, spoken, and understood in court circles and, certainly in the west of Persia, beyond them (the Greek geographer Isidore of Charax was a Parthian citizen, Greek poetry from the Parthian period, including a hymn to Mara (Apollo), has been found at Susa in an inscription kept at the Louvre Museum (see Cumant and Vollgraff, ed., pp. 89-96, no. 6). Given that this is also the period to which the origins of *Vis o Rāmin* have been assigned, and that we are about as certain as one can be that *Wāmeq o 'Adrā* had a Greek origin, the likelihood of a connection between the plots and aesthetic ethos of the 11th-century Persian



romances and the Greek novels seem very strong.

The hypothesis of Greek-Persian connections in the realm of love fiction is considerably strengthened by an examination of the Greek novels themselves. They are all historical novels, set in the period of the Achaemenid Empire, and in areas ruled by that empire (the eastern Mediterranean, Egypt, and Asia Minor; a very small number of scenes take place on the mainland of Greece, and a few in Sicily; otherwise the novels' events occur within the confines of the Persian Empire). References to Persia and Persian mores abound in them, and two of them (Chariton's *Chaereas and Callirhoe* and Heliodorus's *Ethiopica*) have substantial scenes that take place at the Persian court. Prototypical elements for the plots of all the romances are to be found in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* (4th century B.C.E.), in the tale of Panthea and Abradatas, and this may be one reason why the novels are set in the Achaemenid Empire, as this is the setting of Xenophon's tale. This story, which is of course Persian in every detail, has been called "the western pioneer in (the) field of (romance) literature" (Miller's Intro. to the *Cyropaedia* I, p. x), and includes a number of the elements to be found in subsequent Greek novels. Among these are the separation of the lovers (Panthea and Abradatas) by the fortunes of war, the captivity of the heroine, a foiled attempt on her chastity by someone set to guard her, the presence of a magnanimous man (Cyrus) who has the heroine in his power but does not take advantage of her, the happy reunion of the lovers, their renewed separation, the heroine's lament over the body of her beloved. Panthea, the woman who is faithful to her absent beloved under all circumstances and who, despite being at the apparent mercy of men who have no cause to respect her, is able by various ruses to preserve her chastity, is the model for the heroines of all the Greek romances. The one major difference between Xenophon's narrative and the later novels that made use of its major motifs is that the story of Panthea and Abradatas ends tragically, with the death of Abradatas and the suicide of Panthea. When she speaks her lament over her husband's corpse, he is in fact dead. In the novels a lament by one lover for the death of the other is almost always there, but the supposedly dead lover is in fact alive and the two are eventually reunited.

The shift from the tragic ending of the tale of Panthea to the happy endings of



the Greek novels may also be in part due to a motif identified as Persian by the first Greek author to refer to it. Athenaeus (3rd century C.E.) recounts a tale from a work of Chares of Mytilene (4th century B.C.E.) which concerns the abduction by a Persian prince (Zariadres) of the woman with whom he was in love (Odatis, a Scythian princess) at the moment when she was about to be married to someone else. The lovers had not previously met, but had fallen in love by dreaming of one another, and when the prince had asked the girl's father for her hand, he had been rebuffed. When he appears incognito at the Scythian court to abduct the princess, she recognizes him from her dream. This last motif (the dream, the incognito prince, the lovers' recognition at the moment when the woman is about to be married to someone else) appears in the *Šāh-nāma*, in the story of the courtship of Goštāsp and Katāyun. Zariadres and his abducted bride live happily ever after. The abduction of a bride by her true beloved when she is about to be married to someone else figures with some permutations in two of the most important of the Greek novels, Heliodorus's *Ethiopica* and Achilles Tatius's *Leukippe and Kleitophon*. Bridal abductions also occur at the opening of both *Vis o Rāmin* and *Varqa o Golšāh*, but it is difficult to say whether the motif has derived directly from older Persian sources, as Deborah Gera argues (p. 16) is the case with the similarities between the tales of Zariadres and Goštāsp, or via Greek reworkings of the topos. In *Vis o Rāmin*, Vis is not abducted by her true love, but the abduction eventually leads to her meeting her true love, Rāmin, since he is the brother of her abductor. It thus broadly conforms to the Zariadres tale, in that the abduction is the means by which the lovers are brought together. We may remark incidentally that the interrupted marriage at the opening of *Leukippe and Klei-tiphon* is between a half brother and sister (they have different mothers and the same father): this is as close as Greek mores could come to a brother-sister marriage, which is the nature of the marriage interrupted at the opening of *Vis o Ramin*. In *Varqa o Golšāh* the bride is not abducted by her true love (who is her cousin, to whom she is about to be married), but by a marauding bandit who subsequently falls in love with her. The abduction here does not conform to the Zariadres pattern, in that it serves to separate rather than bring together the narrative's hero and heroine. However, this version of the topos exists in the 2nd century C.E. Latin novel, *The Golden Ass*, by Apuleius (assumed to be a Roman reworking of a lost Greek original), in which the marriage of cousins is interrupted in the same way and with the same results. The permutations of the topos are thus quite complex; the version identified as Persian by Atheneaus (the bride is abducted by her true love) was present in at least two Greek novels, while the "western" version, as we see it



in *The Golden Ass* (the bride is abducted from her true love), appears in a Persian romance.

Of particular interest is the motif in the Greek novels of fire refusing, or being unable, to burn an intended victim, and this being seen as a divine sign that the person is innocent of the crime of which he/she has been accused. This occurs in both Xenophon of Ephesus's *Ephesiaca* and in Heliodorus's *Ethiopica*. The incident in the *Ephesiaca* seems to be based on a moment in Herodotus (1.86-89), also referred to by the poet Bacchylides, when Croesus either mounts a pyre to evade capture by the Persian king (Edmonds, III, p. 141), or is put on a pyre by the Persian king (Herodotus), and the pyre is put out by water (a storm in Herodotus and Bacchylides, the flooding Nile in the *Ephesiaca*). The association of a fire which will not burn an intended victim with the Persian court is even clearer in the *Ethiopica* (8.9; Reardon, ed., pp. 525-28), where a young woman is placed on a pyre by Arsake, the wife of the Persian satrap of Egypt, and the fire refuses to burn her. In both the *Ephesiaca* and the *Ethiopica* the background to the attempted burning is the lust of an older and socially powerful woman for a chaste young man who refuses her advances. Although this topos, the lust of an older powerful woman for a chaste young man, was a relatively common one in the ancient world, none of the Western versions include a fire trial until its appearance in the Greek novels. Such a plot inevitably recalls the story of Siāvaš and Sudāba from the *Šāh-nāma*, and some details of the fire scene in the *Ethiopica* are remarkably close to the scene of Siāvaš's fire trial. A similar yoking together of the motifs of the Persian court, an attempt on a young person's chastity, and a fire which refuses to burn the victim, is to be found in the tale of the Coptic martyr St. Parthenope, which appears to be a Christian reworking of the *Metiochus and Parthenope* tale that is behind *Wāmeq o 'Adrā* (Hagg, 1984, pp. 61-92). Given that whenever the topos appears in a Greek text it is associated with the Persian court, or appears to be based on a text in which that association was made, it seems likely that it was seen by the Greek authors as having been derived, like the tale of Panthea and that of Zariadres, from a Persian milieu.

Apart from their appearance in the verse romances, motifs that are to be found in the Hellenistic novels also turn up in Persian prose romances, but generally in a more diffuse and apparently random form, suggesting that these



works derived from material at a greater remove from Greek influence. The prose romance which seems closest to Greek culture is Abu Ṭāher Moḥammad Ṭarsusi's *Dārāb-nāma* (q.v.), which not only includes part of the Wāmeq and 'Adrā (Metiochus and Parthenope) story, but also contains clear echoes of the Odyssey and of Pseudo-Callisthenese (q.v.). A special case is presented by the *Alexander Romance* of Pseudo-Callisthenese (see ESKANDAR-NĀMA), which either directly or indirectly contributed material to the *Šāh-nāma*. This is naturally most obvious in the sections dealing with Alexander (Eskandar), but is also present elsewhere in the poem: e.g., Kay Kāvus's attempt to fly echoes Alexander's similar attempt in Pseudo-Callisthenes (much more closely than it echoes the Avestan version of the tale), and the account of the death of Mardās in the *Šāh-nāma* shows striking similarities to the death of Nectanebos in Pseudo-Callisthenes.

It will be noted that when it is possible to date the incorporation into their work of motifs identified as Persian by Greek authors, this occurred during the period of the Achaemenid Empire (Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, Chares of Mytilene's version of the Zariadres tale, Bacchylides's and Herodotus's story of the extinguished fire). The point of entry into Persian culture of motifs from the Greek novels, which can then be found in the 11th century Persian romances, is harder to pin down, but, given its artistically hybrid nature, the Parthian period would seem to be the most likely moment for this to have occurred. This makes sense in that the prestige and power of the Achaemenid Empire had a profound cultural effect on Greek civilization (see, e.g., Miller), whereas the relatively greater prestige of Hellenistic civilization in the post-Alexander period would have meant that the traffic was more likely to have been largely in the other direction.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe and Clitophon*, ed. Ebbe Vilborg, *Studia Graeca et Latina Gothoburgensia* 1, Stockholm, 1955. Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, tr. with



comm., Patrick Gerard Walsh, Oxford and New York, 1994. Ayyuqi, *Varqa o Golšāh*, ed. ʔabiḥ-Allāh Ṣafā, Tehran, 1343 Š./1964. Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel," in idem, *The Dialogic Imagination*, tr. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin, 1981. Glen Warren Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity*, Ann Arbor, Mich., 1990. Mary Boyce. "Zariadres and Zarēr," *BSO(A)S* 17, 1955, pp. 463-77. Chariton, *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, tr. Warren E. Blake, Ann Arbor, Mich., 1939. Franz Cumant and W. Vollgraff, eds., *Mémoires archéologiques de Perse XX*, Paris, 1928. Dick Davis, *Panthea's Children: Hellenistic Novels and Medieval Persian Romances*, forthcoming. John Maxwell Edmonds, *Lyra Graeca*, 3 vols, New York, 1928-40. Deborah Levine Gera, *Xenophon's Cyropaedia: Style, Genre and Literary Technique*, Oxford, 1993. Faḳr-al-Dīn As'ad Gorgānī, *Vīs o Rāmīn*, ed. M. A. Todua and A. A. Gwakharia, Tehran, 1349 Š./1970; ed. Moḥammad-Ja'far Maḥjub, Tehran, 1338 Š./1959; tr. G. Morrison as *Vis and Ramin*, New York, 1972. Tomas Hagg, *The Novel in Antiquity*, London, 1983. Idem, "The Partheope Romance Decapitated?" *Symbolae Osloensis* 54, 1984, pp. 61-92. Idem, "The Oriental Reception of Greek Novels," *Symbolae Osloensis* 61, 1986, pp. 99-13. William L. Hanaway, "Anahita and Alexander," *JAOS* 102/2, 1982, pp. 285-95. Heliodorus of Emesa, *An Aethiopian Romance*, tr. Moses Hadas, Philadelphia, 1999. Margaret Miller, *Athens and Persia in the Fifth Century B.C.: A Study in Cultural Receptivity*, Cambridge, 1997. Vladimir Minorsky, "Vīs-u-Rāmīn: A Persian Romance (i)," *BSO(A)S* 11/4, 1946, pp. 741-63. Idem, "Vīs-u-Rāmīn (ii)," *BSO(A)S* 12/1, 1947, pp. 20-35. Idem, "Vīs-u-Rāmīn (iii)," *BSO(A)S* 16/1, 1954, pp. 91-92. Idem, "Vīs-u-Rāmīn (iv)," *BSO(A)S* 25/2, 1962, pp. 275-86. Abu'l-Qāsem Ḥasan 'Onṣori, *Maṭnawi-e Wāmeq o 'Adrā*, ed. Moḥammad Ṣafi', Lahore, 1967. Bryan P. Reardon, ed., *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, Berkeley, 1989. Eduard Schwartz, *Funf Vortrage uber den greichischen Roman*, Berlin, 1943. Aḥmad Tafāzzoli, *Tāriḳ-e adabiyāt-e Irān-e piš az Eslām*, Tehran, 1377 Š./ 1998. Abu Ṭāher Moḥammad Ṭarsusi, *Dārāb-nāma-ye Ṭarsusi*, ed. ʔabiḥ-Allāh Ṣafā, 2 vols., Tehran, 1344-46 Š./1965-67. Bo Utas, "Did 'Adhrā Remain a Virgin?" *Orientalia Suecana* 33-35, 1984-86, pp. 429-41. Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, ed. and tr. Walter Miller, 2 vols., London and New York, 1933. Xenophon of Ephesus, *Les Éphésiaques: Le Roman d'Habrocomès et d'Anthia*, ed. and tr. Georges Dalmeyda (Greek text with Fr. tr.), Paris, 1926.

(Richard Davis)