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VITSENTZOS KORNAROS

EROTOKRITOS

A translation with introduction and notes

by

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Introduction

The Cretan Renaissance

The Venetians ruled Crete from 1211, when they acquired the island in the aftermath of the capture of Constantinople by the Fourth Crusade, until 1669, when they were supplanted by the Turks. During this period of four and a half centuries the inhabitants of the island, who were Greek, gradually became accustomed to ideas and influences from western Europe as represented to them through Italian eyes. With the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453 and the Turkish expansion over the eastern Mediterranean it was natural that Cretans, now that the last vestiges of Byzantine power had gone, should become more reconciled to occupation by foreigners with whom they at least had the common bond of Christianity. Although Crete was an outpost of the Venetian empire it felt the influence of the intellectual and cultural movements prevalent in Renaissance Italy, and this influence bore fruit in the world of letters and in painting (most notably the work of Dominikos Theotokopoulos, *alias* El Greco). After modest beginnings Cretan literature came to flower at the end of the sixteenth century and produced a range of works, including theatre, which, while sharing the exuberant spirit of the Renaissance, were unmistakably Greek in character. Indeed, the principal work of the Cretan Renaissance, *Eratokritos*, has been described as a major force in preserving the Greek spirit (Llewellyn Smith 1965: 65).

The author

We know the name of the poem's author, as the work ends on a personal note:

I see and have heard that many desire to learn who has laboured on what is written above. I shall not conceal or keep myself unknown, but I shall be revealed for all to know me. The poet is VITSENTZOS, and of the KORNAROS family. May he be found without sin when Haros takes him. He was born in Sitia, raised in Sitia. There he toiled and worked on what he writes for you. In Kastro he married, as Nature advises. He will meet his end where God commands. (E1539-48)

This is the only direct evidence we have: the poet was Vitsentzos Kornaros (a Hellenised Italian name) and he came from the city of Sitia in eastern Crete. With these co-ordinates scholars have searched the surviving archives of Venetian Crete and, as the name was a common one, they have found no fewer than seven possible candidates.¹ One of these seems more likely than the rest: a Vitsentzos Kornaros, born in Sitia in 1553. He was a member of a noble Veneto-Cretan family who married in Kastro (modern

¹ For a summary of the dispute surrounding the authorship see Holton (1991a: 4ff.).

Iraklio) in 1590.² He held positions in the Venetian administration and shared literary interests with a brother, who founded an academy, the *Stravaganti*,³ which Vitsentzos himself joined. Both wrote poetry in Italian, which survives. While nothing in the archives indicates his authorship of *Erotokritos*, corroborating evidence is strong: our author would certainly have known Italian since the immediate source of his story was in Italian, and the poem shows him to be conversant with current Italian literary trends. This identification and other textual evidence⁴ would give the poem a plausible author and a date of about 1600, but such information would not add greatly, if at all, to our understanding of the poem.

The poem

More important is the background against which the poem is written. Educated Cretans of the day would have been completely aware of the central position Greek civilisation once enjoyed in the eastern Mediterranean, although their knowledge of precise details may have been slight. They saw how this area was now almost wholly in the hands of Moslems and its Greek population subjected to an alien culture. Under these circumstances the temptations of nostalgia would have been irresistible. The glorious past could be interpreted and represented in various ways. For a poet of the late sixteenth century a romantic tale was a natural option. Its imaginary setting might indeed reflect the interval between Byzantine and Turkish domination when the Franks, Venetians and Genoese split up the old Greek world into separate kingdoms, but the main players would be Greek and would be represented as fending off the barbarian hordes who threatened their existence. Such is the backdrop for the love story of *Rotokritos* and *Aretusa*.

The poem contains about 10,000 lines⁵ and is written in rhyming couplets of what is termed political verse (*πολιτικός στίχος*). This metre, whose history goes far back into Byzantine times, consists of a line of fifteen syllables arranged according to word accent. It had been used, both with and without rhyme, by earlier writers, including those of verse romances. The form it takes in *Erotokritos* is often, but not invariably, marked by a stronger pause in the sense at the end of a couplet.

² See Panagiotakis (1994: 378); this valuable information, which has only recently come to light, agrees with what is said in the epilogue about Kornaros's marriage.

³ On academies in Renaissance Crete see Holton (1991a: 8) and Bancroft-Marcus (1992).

⁴ The text of *Erotokritos* reveals that its author was familiar with the tragedy *Erofilii*, which was written c. 1595 by Georgios Chortatsis.

⁵ The exact count depends on how many lines found in the manuscript, but not in the first edition, are accepted.

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The language of the poem is that of east Crete about 1600 AD. This reflects the fact that Kornaros was born and raised in a town of east Crete, Sitia, but we find such modifications as one might expect a poet to make.

The title page of the first edition states that *Erotokritos* is a love poem (ποίημα ἐρωτικόν), and recent commentators have for the most part been content to define it as a verse romance. Others have periodically sought to raise 'the national poem of Crete' (Stephanides 1984: 27) into the supposedly more exalted genre of epic by emphasising the deeds of arms prominent in parts B and D. Thus Mavrogordato (1929: 6 n.2) refers to Soteriades's 'spirited and charming eulogy of the Franco-Hellenic epic', while labelling it 'a romantic epic' on his own account (1929: 1). The later translator Stephanides calls *Erotokritos* a 'love epic' and refers to its allegedly inferior French model as a romance (1984: 27). Complicating matters further, the essay by Constantine Trypanis prefixed to Stephanides's translation rejects the definition of it as epic in favour of "'heroic" verse romance' (Stephanides 1984: 19 = Trypanis 1981: 568).

Holton (1991a: 9-18) provides a balanced discussion of generic issues, including the fairy-tale elements of the story and the theatrical structure of the plot, and places the poem decisively in the verse romance genre.⁶ We concur with this classification.

Summary

The poem is divided into five parts, labelled by tradition with the first five letters of the alphabet. In the following summary Kornaros's masterly contortion of a trite and simple story-line (the forced separation of a pair of lovers and their eventual reunion after various violent adventures and mishaps) into a plot of sophisticated structure will be made clear. References in brackets are to the part (A-E) and to the line numbers of the original Greek text, which are also numbered in tens in our translation.

Part A

The poet states that what has prompted him to tell this edifying tale of exemplary devotion and fidelity between young lovers is the instability of human fortune, the turmoil of war, the power of Cupid and friendship's charm (A1-18). The story is set in ancient Athens, seat of learning and nobility, ruled over by the wise and powerful King Iraklis (A19-32). After years of childlessness, his worthy spouse Artemi bears him a daughter of incomparable beauty and precocious studiousness, named Aretusa; the royal couple's happiness is now complete (A33-70).

⁶ Holton (1991b: 205 ff.) gives a succinct account of the rise of the romance genre in Greek tradition and the West.

Erotokritos

The king's very sagacious counsellor, Pezostratos, has a son named Rotokritos, a peerless boy in every regard (A71-86). Frequenting the palace daily, Rotokritos falls madly in love with Princess Aretusa (A87-104). After trying in vain to suppress this passion by hunting (A105-140), he discloses his love to his confidant Polidoros, whose plentiful advice has no effect (A141-388).

Rotokritos next tries to ease his pain with nightly serenades to his beloved. His love songs, which are of his own composition, touch the hearts of all who hear them, notably Aretusa (A389-428). She writes down the verses, learns them by heart and discusses their content with her nurse, Frosini, who disapproves of such unsuitable concerns, but to no avail (A389-466). The king's curiosity about the identity of the mysterious singer increases to the point where he sets guards to capture him; Rotokritos and Polidoros escape arrest by killing two guards and injuring the other eight (A467-622). This incident adds to Aretusa's infatuation with her unknown admirer and causes her to neglect her reading and embroidery (A623-644). She confesses her passion to the nurse, who demands that she desist from it immediately, again to no avail (A645-756; A847-1062).

Rotokritos abandons his serenading for fear of being identified (A757-774). He mopes around aimlessly. His changed behaviour distresses his father (A775-846) and exasperates his friend Polidoros, who eventually persuades him to take a holiday away from Athens (A1063-1286). On leaving for Egripo (modern Evia or Euboea), Rotokritos entrusts the keys of his quarters to his mother, leaving strict instructions that no one must enter them (A1287-1315). In order to cheer up Aretusa, King Iraklis announces a joust, the prize being a garland woven by her own fair hands (A1316-1372).

Rotokritos's father, Pezostratos, falls ill; the queen and Aretusa visit him at home and, during a walk in the grounds, are admitted by Rotokritos's mother to the building which she had promised to keep locked. Aretusa's curiosity leads her to a secret room and there she discovers the manuscripts of the serenades; the identity of the secret serenader is revealed. The nurse is scandalised by the discovery, but Aretusa further finds a portrait of herself painted by Rotokritos and takes it away with her (A1373-1564). The nurse's continued remonstrances have no effect on Aretusa, who has visions of marrying Rotokritos despite their social disparity (A1565-1745).

Pezostratos's sickness also causes his son to hasten home where he is mortified to discover that Aretusa knows his secret (A1746-1888). With Polidoros's connivance, Rotokritos feigns sickness and avoids visiting the palace, until he receives a get-well present of four apples from Aretusa (A1889-2018). Thereafter he frequents the court, the two lovers exchange glances, and their passion develops discreetly (A2019-2216).

Part B

As the day of the joust approaches, Rotokritos resolves to use this opportunity to display his prowess, despite the discouragement of Polidoros (B1-86). Polidoros prepares his friend's costume for the joust (B87-96).

A dais is constructed in the square for the royal entourage to view proceedings, and a public warning is issued for infants and the infirm to be kept out of harm's way (B97-108).

On the appointed day, 25 April, knights arrive from various parts of Greece and from neighbouring lands, and are summoned to parade before the assembled crowd on their way to register for the joust at the royal dais (B109-126). The queen has prepared a supplementary prize for the knight of fairest appearance, an exquisitely bejewelled flower (B127-140). The description of the parade of knights which follows (B141-590) dwells selectively on the manner of their entrance (some being accompanied by fireworks or theatrical effects), together with their deportment, the salient details of their attire (surcoat, armour, helmet) and their mount. Particular attention is given to the device inscribed on each knight's helmet. First to appear in the pageant is Dimofanis, Lord of Mitilini (B143-162); second, Andromachos, Prince of Anapli (Nafplion or Nauplia) (B163-184); third, Filaretos, Lord of Mothoni (Methoni) (B185-200); fourth, Iraklis, Lord of Egrido (Evia) (B201-214); fifth, Nikostratis, Lord of Macedonia (B215-228); sixth, Drakomachos, Lord of Koroni (B229-258); seventh, Tripolemos, Lord of Sklavounia (Dalmatia) (B259-283); eighth, Glikaretos, Lord of Axia (Naxos) (B284-318); ninth, Spitholiondas of Karamania (a Turkish emirate in Asia Minor) (B319-364); tenth, Pistoforos, Prince of Byzantium, whose resplendent opulence impresses all except Aretusa (B365-452); eleventh, Drakokardos, Lord of Patras (B452-494); twelfth, Kipridimos, Prince of Cyprus (B495-516); thirteenth, Rotokritos, representing Athens, whose appearance is greatly admired by Aretusa (B517-580). Last to arrive is Haridimos, Lord of Gortyn in Crete (B581-590 and B757-768). The poem digresses to narrate the tragic tale of how he killed his wife on Mt. Ida, mistaking her for game, and subsequently became a knight errant (B591-756).

Upon seeing the Lord of Gortyn, the Karamanite demands an immediate duel to determine the rightful ownership of the Cretan's sword; the challenge is accepted and the king reluctantly agrees to allow the duel to proceed (B769-992). The sword fight results in the death of the Karamanite, the suicide of his horse and a postponement of the joust until the following day (B993-1226), to the annoyance of the impatient Rotokritos and Aretusa (B1227-1248).

At dawn the participants and spectators return to the square (B1249-1268). The king has selected three champions, Haridimos, Kipridimos and

Rotokritos, to joust against the remaining knights, each champion's allocation having been drawn by lot (B1269-1306). Rotokritos waits impatiently for his turn to joust, while, on the dais, Aretusa admires him alone (B1305-1364). Rotokritos runs against three knights: Filaretos of Mothoni (B1365-1414), Iraklis of Egripo (B1415-1442) and Drakokardos of Patras (B1443-1526). The Cypriot Kipridimos jousts with four opponents: Dimofanis of Mitilini (B1527-1586), Andromachos of Anapli (B1587-1654), Glikaretos of Axia (B1655-1758) and Pistoforos of Byzantium (B1759-1830). Haridimos the Cretan runs against three: Drakomachos of Koroni (B1831-1942), Nikostratos of Macedonia (B1943-2058) and Tripolemos the Sklavounian (B2059-2174). The king's three selected champions defeat all the knights drawn against them. Though defeated, the Prince of Byzantium is awarded the queen's prize for the best appearance, to the secret displeasure of Aretusa and Rotokritos (B2174-2222). The two participants in the final joust are determined by lot to be the Cypriot and Rotokritos (B2223-2266). The hapless Cretan departs disgruntled (B2267-2274). Rotokritos defeats the Cypriot and, to popular acclamation, receives the victor's garland from the hands of his beloved Aretusa (B2275-2464).

Part C

Aretusa's passion has become unbearable, and she is determined to discuss it in secret with Rotokritos (C1-52). Despite her nurse's impassioned protestations (C53-383), Aretusa selects a location for a nocturnal tryst, taking elaborate precautions to protect her modesty (C384-414), and then skilfully secures Frosini's acquiescence (C415-538). At their first meeting Rotokritos stands on a low roof, and Aretusa behind a barred window (C415-630). Subsequent trysts follow the same scrupulously chaste form (C631-690).

At Aretusa's suggestion Rotokritos asks his father to propose their marriage to the king (C691-762). Pezostratos is horrified at his son's temerity but accedes to the request when Rotokritos threatens to find an early death in exile (C763-919). When the proposal is made the king dismisses Pezostratos from his service and banishes Rotokritos from his kingdom (C920-936). While Rotokritos tries to comfort his distraught father (C937-1008), Aretusa receives the news from the king together with an instruction to prepare for her marriage to the Prince of Byzantium, who has sought her hand (C1009-1046). She outwardly retains her composure and makes no reply, but resolves to exchange vows with Rotokritos immediately, to the scandal of her nurse (C1047-1202). By accusing Frosini of callous indifference to her plight, Aretusa even prevails upon her to act as witness at the betrothal (C1203-1336).

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At their next nocturnal tryst Aretusa gives Rotokritos her ring through the barred window, they hold hands and swear eternal fidelity (C1337-1516). Three more tearful meetings occur at the same window before Rotokritos must go into exile (C1517-1554). Their final farewell is accompanied by supernatural occurrences (C1555-1576), and the poet is at pains to dispel any suggestion of impropriety on the part of his precocious heroine (C1577-1612). Frosini tries to console Aretusa with hope (C1613-1646), while Rotokritos takes his leave of his sobbing parents and his friend Polidoros, who will stay in Athens and keep him informed of developments by letter (C1647-1710).

Leaving the city, Rotokritos invokes disaster and invasion upon the king and his realm, exempting only Aretusa from their effect (C1711-1744). The final image of separation is that of Rotokritos's parents who withdraw totally from society, as though bereaved (C1745-1760).

Part D

Still annoyed by the proposal of Pezostratos, the king suspects that Aretusa is in love with Rotokritos and decides to conclude her marriage to Pistoforos, the son of the King of Byzantium (D1-48). Later, Aretusa has a dream that seems to her to forebode trouble and she is not comforted by Frosini's efforts to discredit her fears. Next morning, however, a delegation arrives from Byzantium with the marriage proposal. Deeply apprehensive, Aretusa obeys her father's summons and is told that she is to marry Pistoforos. She declines tactfully, saying that she cannot bear the thought of being separated from her parents (D49-360). Her refusal sends her father into a frenzy as he realises his suspicions were correct. After a heated argument during which Aretusa is subjected to physical violence she is dispatched to a dungeon. Frosini's pleas on her behalf only secure her own imprisonment in the same cell. The conditions of the two prisoners are made as bad as possible, but Frosini attempts to solace the deep despair of her ward, who persists in her obstinacy. Meanwhile the exiled Rotokritos settles in Egripo and from there keeps in contact with Polidoros and his parents. In this way the two lovers learn of each other's suffering (D361-850).

Three years later Athens is invaded by Vladistratos, King of Vlachia. Hearing of this Rotokritos decides to return incognito and assist the Athenians. To do this he enlists the expertise of a local witch who makes up a lotion to turn him black. Armed with this, and its antidote, he proceeds to Athens in his new disguise. Camping well away from the Athenian force, he joins his countrymen every day with devastating results for the unfortunate Vlachs (D851-966). In desperation Vladistratos attempts a night raid on his opponents' camp. This is successful until Rotokritos, awakened by the

noise, comes to the rescue and turns the Athenian rout. However, in the ensuing turmoil Iraklis, who is manfully trying to lead his forces, is sorely pressed, and he and Polidoros fall into mortal danger. Racing up, Rotokritos saves the day and the Vlach king is forced to retreat. Although Polidoros is carried off gravely wounded, Iraklis is safe and sound. He expresses his gratitude to Rotokritos, whom, of course, he does not recognise; he expresses the wish that Rotokritos should be his heir (D967-1220).

A truce of twelve days is declared. During this time the nephew of Vladistratos, Aristos, a mighty warrior who has been abroad, arrives to help his uncle. The latter suggests to Aristos that he should represent the Vlachs in a single-handed fight to the death with a champion nominated by the Athenian king; the side of the winner would be declared victor in the war. Aristos's enthusiastic acquiescence prompts Vladistratos to make a formal offer to Iraklis, who is apprehensive until Rotokritos proffers his services. Iraklis, still ignorant of his true identity, accepts and now promises to make him his heir in the event of victory (D1221-1528).

The time for the combat arrives. The two kings commit themselves to a winner-takes-all arrangement and the fight begins. Aristos proves his worth and the fighting is even, but Rotokritos is finally victorious, although badly wounded. The Vlach king is devastated by the death of his nephew and after arranging an elaborate funeral procession leaves with his army for Vlachia (D1529-2020).

Part E

Rotokritos, almost dead, is taken back to the palace where, much to his delight, he is lodged in Aretusa's old room. While his beloved, completely unaware of who the deliverer of Athens really is, languishes in her depressing dungeon, he recovers gradually and is visited by Polidoros who feels a strange yearning towards the unknown, black-skinned man (E1-140). When visited by the king and quizzed about his identity, Rotokritos tells an elaborate lie and declines to say why he came to Athens. He politely brushes aside the king's offer of all his possessions but asks one favour: to be given the hand of his daughter. The embarrassed monarch agrees in principle if Aretusa is willing, but he suggests that Rotokritos first go and see the lady as she now is. Rotokritos willingly agrees and persists in his proposal for marriage (E141-310).

Two counsellors are dispatched to inform Aretusa of her suitor but she angrily dismisses them. On learning this Rotokritos is delighted at her faithfulness and proceeds to visit her himself. When informed of his approach Aretusa flies into a rage and puts mud on her face to make herself even more repulsive (E311-448). After Rotokritos appears and makes a formal proposal he is emphatically repulsed. As he is leaving, he takes the

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ring he received from Aretusa when they parted at her window and slips it to Frosini with instructions to give it to her mistress. Aretusa recognises the ring and imagines that her beloved has died. She sends word that she must see the stranger immediately (E449-621).

When Rotokritos appears, Aretusa asks how he came by the ring. Rotokritos replies that he will tell her at dawn on the next day. Again he is delighted at her faithfulness and is rebuked by the poet for putting her to further trials. Aretusa spends a night of agony. At dawn two beautiful birds fly into the dungeon and embrace. Frosini takes this as an omen that Aretusa should accept the stranger but Aretusa can only say that if Rotokritos is dead she will kill herself and be united with him in Hades (E622-863).

Rotokritos arrives and tells an elaborate story about how he had received the ring from a man who, mortally wounded by wild beasts, gave it to him with the words, 'I have lost you, Aretusa' and then died. On hearing this Aretusa is shattered but after a pause she begins a lengthy lament for her apparently lost love (E864-1048). Her lament ended, she falls to the ground, and appears dead. When she regains consciousness Rotokritos relents. He reveals himself and washes himself in the antidote to remove his blackness. The sight is too much for Aretusa, who promptly swoons for the second time. But now all is well. After she recovers both are lost in joy (E1049-1130).

Aretusa suggests that Rotokritos go to her father and announce that she accepts him; he should, however, resume his blackness so that his true identity remains concealed. He does this. The whole city rejoices except for Polidoros and Pezostratos, who imagine that Rotokritos is dead. Aretusa is brought from prison and, suitably washed and dressed, presents herself to her parents to ask their forgiveness and to state, with no small equivocation, her acceptance of the hero of the Vlach war (E1131-1278).

Rotokritos's parents appear, full of apprehension as to why they have been summoned. Rotokritos reveals himself to the world at large and uses the antidote for the second time. Those present are stunned, not least the king, who, in an excess of joy, hands over the kingship to his future son-in-law and declares that the wedding will take place on that very day (E1279-1437). Aretusa, pretending that she did not know who her future husband was before his latest transformation, maintains a tactful silence, but Pezostratos has a sharp word for the king on how he himself has been treated. The wedding now takes place amid universal rejoicing. Next day Rotokritos assumes his position as king. The narrative concludes with a short description of his success as a ruler and of the marital bliss enjoyed by the couple (E1438-1526).

In a tailpiece the poet, after alluding to his supporters and detractors, gives his name and some personal details (E1527-1548).