

# Late Byzantine and post-Byzantine Vernacular Love Poetry: An Overview\*

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Αγάπη, ως δείχνεις απ' αρχής να ήσουν ως του τέλους·  
πρώτα δείχνεις την αρετή κ' ύστερα το φαρμάκιν,  
και διασκορπίζεις τες καρδιές να σε αναθεματίζουν.  
(from *Στίχοι περι έρωτος αγάπης: Καταλόγια*)

This paper examines love poetry from the late Byzantine and post-Byzantine periods as a distinct body of literature. To be precise, it provides a list of the known texts (which is certainly not complete) together with brief introductory notes on each and examples where necessary. A few of these texts (mainly distiches added by readers in manuscripts) are presented for the first time for discussion as part of this corpus. Furthermore, the paper looks at issues such as their treatment by previous scholars and possible reasons why the love poetry from this period is meagre. Overall, it aims to open up a discussion on possible new approaches to the topic.

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\* This study of love poems began to take shape while I was in Hamburg in 2001 as a fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, preparing a critical edition of a collection of love poems (*Στίχοι περι έρωτος αγάπης: Καταλόγια*). Once again I would like to express my sincere gratitude for the Foundation's most generous assistance. However, most of the corpus of works listed here derives from two ARC-funded research projects at the Department of Modern Greek, University of Sydney; their chief investigators were Michael and Elizabeth Jeffreys and Alfred Vincent (part of the

## Preliminaries

In this paper I will be using the term *love poetry* to refer specifically to compositions, mostly quite brief, which deal with the emotional experiences of persons in love, their longings or sufferings, their views on their loved one and on love in general, their wishes and desires, their grief at the loss of the lover and so on. Certainly, at least three of them (see below nos. a.1b, b.6 and b.7) contain a simple story, although the emphasis is placed on lyrical aspects and on the description of emotional situations. Hence I will not discuss the love romances (*ερωτικά μυθιστορήματα*) as a whole, since they are narrative rather than lyrical in form, even though love is certainly the central theme in their plots. Besides, these works belong to a genre of their own. However, I will include some poems and songs which form part of the text of the romances, and which are supposed to have been written and/or sung by characters in the narrative. These texts form a special category in the list I provide below. I will also exclude the dramatic works of the Cretan and Heptanesian School. By *poetry* I simply refer to anything written in verse, without implying any judgement of quality. Applied to early modern Greek literature it is obviously a very inclusive term, since the vast majority of what we consider early modern Greek literature is written in verse.

In quantitative terms and in comparison to their western counterparts, the surviving texts of late Byzantine and post-Byzantine vernacular love poetry are very few in number.<sup>1</sup> Altogether there are

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data collected in these projects has been published in: Jeffreys & Doulaveras 1997 and 1998). Finally, I am most grateful to my colleague and friend Dr Alfred Vincent for his very useful observations and comments on the topic.

<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that the number of love romances is also small. Moreover, apart from *Livistros and Rodamni* and *Imperios and Margarona*, which appear to have been popular (the former is found in a considerable number of manuscripts, the latter was published in a printed edition in Venice in 1543 and was reprinted at least fourteen times up to 1779), the other romances are transmitted in one or two manuscripts each and seem to have fallen into oblivion at an early stage. (I would like to thank

five collections of poems, or rather anthologies, varying in length and in style; three short independent poems; and several fragments found scattered around the margins or flyleaves of manuscripts or in spaces left blank by the scribes, written usually by readers and/or owners of the manuscripts. Regarding their preservation, we must note that, with two exceptions,<sup>2</sup> each of these poems is found in only one manuscript. Is there a special reason for this phenomenon? Were Greeks in this period not interested in love poetry? Was love poetry an exclusively oral creation, usually not considered serious enough to be written down and copied in manuscripts? Can we speak at all of a *tradition* of love poetry in early modern Greek literature, apart from the romances?

Before we begin to answer these questions, I will give a brief account of the surviving works and will discuss how love poetry has been presented by scholars since the late nineteenth century, when late Byzantine and post-Byzantine vernacular literature first became a subject of systematic research.

## Works:

I have divided the corpus into the following four categories:

- a. collections;
- b. independent short narrative poems;
- c. independent short lyric poems and fragments (many of these are in fact extracts from longer poems);
- d. poems embedded in romances and other works (these include mainly songs and the so-called love letters).

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my friends and colleagues Panagiotis Agapitos and Tina Lendari for sending me their forthcoming editions of *Livistros*.)

<sup>2</sup> These are the *Rhyme of girl and boy* (Ριμάδα κόρης και νιου) and a variant of the *One hundred words [of love]* (Εκατόλογα [της αγάπης]). For their manuscripts see below, footnotes 15 and 23.

This type of categorisation is understandably schematic rather than generic. However, for the purpose of this study I found it more useful, as well as safer, to present the works by using general, mainly external characteristics, rather than placing them according to their genre and/or sub-genre. A more thorough investigation is needed to determine which of these texts are, for example, clearly distiches or fragments from alphabets or other longer poems. Besides, prior to this, the definitions of genres need to be established.

What follows is a list of the poems in the four categories with a short historical and literary introduction to each and a few brief examples for some of the works. For ease of reference I have given each item a number.

### a. Collections

1. *Verses on passionate love: Love Songs (Στίχοι περί έρωτος αγάπης: Καταλόγια; Henceforth Katalogia).*<sup>3</sup> The collection is found in a late fifteenth-century manuscript (British Library, Additional 8241, ff. 165r–200v), which also contains two vernacular romances, the *Achilleid* and *Phlorios and Platziaphlora*.<sup>4</sup> The manuscript is the work of a copyist, so we have no information on the identity of the poet(s) or the compiler; nor do we know the exact place of composition. For the latter an Aegean island has been suggested, most likely the island of Rhodes.<sup>5</sup> However, scholars who regard the city of Constantinople as a major literary metropolis have indicated

<sup>3</sup> Καταλόγι (or κατελόγι and καταλογίτισιν) in medieval Greek has various meanings and is used to describe different kinds of works, including poems, songs and even proverbs. See: Kriaras, 1982:19. Linos Politis (<sup>2</sup>1975:152) states that the word means mainly a “folk song (usually love song)”. Hence he, like others before him, considers the poems in this collection to be folk songs. However, it is interesting that when he discusses the poems in the Vienna codex (see below) he describes them as “love poems” and in brackets “καταλόγια”.

<sup>4</sup> In this paper I will be using the text from the edition I am preparing; the division into individual poems and their numbering is also according to my edition.

<sup>5</sup> This was first suggested by Wagner and it was later taken up by the Rhodian Papachristodoulou (1966). We must note that both scholars’ arguments on this issue











































































