

Shining castles and humans of metal/floral appearance – metaphorical language in the Palaiologan romances *Kallimachos* and *Velthandros**

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ABSTRACT: About eight centuries after Heliodorus, the Greek novel resurfaced in the twelfth century, in Komnenian Byzantium, and again two centuries later under the Palaiologan dynasty. This latter literary revival was due to the political stability of the imperial Byzantine government, which promoted cultural production, rhetorical education, and patronage networks. *Kallimachos* and *Velthandros*, two Palaiologan romances presented as court literature, combine ancient and medieval tropes with rhetorical artistry to blur the boundaries between the artificial and the natural. Castles and objects made of precious metals thus resemble living, natural spaces, and human characters are portrayed in metallurgical, anthomorphic, and zoomorphic terms.

KEYWORDS: Palaiologan romance — Homeric model — ekphrasis — metaphorical language — simile

1. Introduction

The twelfth century is held by consensus to be a time of medieval revival due to the confluence of several factors, political, demographic, and economic, as well as cultural and intellectual. Although the Byzantine Empire was shaken throughout the eleventh and early twelfth centuries by successive civil wars, territorial conflicts, political instability, and financial difficulties, the fact is that “it was also a time of cultural and intellectual innovation and achievement” (Angold, 2008: 583), which had begun with the accession of Alexios I Komnenos in 1081. The apogee of the Komnenian dynasty, under Alexios I (1081-1118), John II (1118-1143), and Manuel I (1143-1180), was marked, among other cultural developments, by investment in education, the emergence of the sophists, and the

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flourishing of the arts. In fact, several well-educated scholars frequented the court and the aristocratic milieu presenting literary entertainment and eulogies to the emperor and other powerful political figures; and wrote laudatory texts and hymns infused with examples of courage and virtue which they drew from classical literature and myth. This classical trend was highly admired at the Komnenian court, to the point that sophists revived old literary genres from antiquity, like satire, Lucianic dialogues, and the novel (Beaton, 1996b: 12; Roilos, 2005: 6). Kaldellis (2008: 238, 252) calls this time the Third Sophistic of Greek literature and acknowledges that “the classical inheritance provided the vehicle and the inspiration for the moral, aesthetic, and literary expansion of Byzantine literature”.¹

It was in the context of this Byzantine classicism that the Greek novel reappeared in the twelfth century. Four Byzantine novels from this century have come down to us: *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* by Theodore Prodromos, *Drosilla and Charikles* by Niketas Eugenianos, *Aristandros and Kallithea* by Konstantinos Manasses, and *Hysmine and Hysminias* by Eustathios Makrembolites.² Manasses’ novel survived only in the form of fragmentary excerpts and Makrembolites’, which is distinguished from the others by being written in prose, makes use of first-person narrative. These Byzantine novelists employed and imitated the standard plot of Hellenistic novels: the protagonists are young and beautiful, fall in love at first sight but are torn apart, and endure the twists and hardships of Fortune (e.g. abduction, pirates, storms, war, slavery, imminent death), after which they are reunited and live happily ever after.³ These Byzantine novelists imitated the literary and rhetorical conventions of the Hellenistic model, but they did more than that, since they adapted these features to the taste of the public of their own time. In this way, the novel was not only revived, it is also and above all reinvented, given the new performative context and the medieval audience to which it is presented and addressed.⁴

After the reign of Manuel I, the Byzantine Empire lost much of its political power, and the cultural movement that allowed the revival of the novel also faded. The Byzantine novel then reappeared again during a second cultural revival after Michael VIII Palaiologos recovered Constantinople from Latin rule in 1261. Therefore, the later thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were a time of important political and commercial change, which also reverberated in cultural life. In fact, there were a large number of

¹ On the Komnenian period as a time for literary experimentation and renewal, see Nilsson (2014: 121-131) and Zagklas (2017: 229-248). On the imitation of classical authors in Byzantine literature, see Hunger (1969-1970: 15-38).

² For an English translation of these four novels, see Jeffreys (2012). Italian translations are available in Conca (1994). For a Spanish translation of Prodromos’ novel, see Moreno Jurado (1996).

³ On the use of Greek novels and their rewriting/revival by Komnenian novelists in twelfth-century Constantinople, see e.g. Nilsson (2016: 39-66) and Nilsson – Zagklas (2017: 1120-1148). On the poetics and modulations of the Komnenian novel, see Roilos (2005).

⁴ Beaton acknowledges that “the Byzantines did more than read and copy the novels of antiquity: they also, in the twelfth century and again two centuries later, wrote their own, and added significant innovations to the genre which perform an important bridging function between the earliest literary fiction and the apogee of the genre in more modern times” (1996a: 713). See also Arrignon – Duneau (1992: 283-290) and MacAlister (1994: 308-322). On the audience of the twelfth-century Byzantine novel, see Roilos (2016: 463-478).

literati in Byzantium acquainted with the classical tradition and supported by influential patrons. Aristocratic and imperial patronage contributed substantially to the funding of intellectual and artistic production.⁵

It was at this time of renewed interest in culture that novels reappeared again in the Byzantine milieu as literary entertainment, presented before the imperial court or for an elite aristocratic audience.⁶ These new novels were composed in Greek using political verse, the fifteen-syllable meter, or adapted from western originals.⁷ Among the extant works that have come down to us are *Kallimachos and Chrysorrhoe*, *Velthandros and Chrysantza*, *Livistros and Rhodamne*, *The Tale of Achilles*, *The Tale of Troy*, *Florios and Platziaflore*, *Imperios and Margarona*, *The War of Troy*, *Apollonios of Tyre*, Boccaccio's *Teseida*, and *The Old Knight*. These Palaiologan romances date to between the mid-thirteenth century (*Livistros*) and the late fifteenth (*Teseida*). Important, albeit obvious, differences may be noted between these eleven romances and the four survivors of the previous renaissance: the first wave of Byzantine novels from the twelfth century are learned and their authorship is known; those of the second were written in the vernacular and are mostly anonymous. In addition, the former are very close to the Hellenistic novels of the Second Sophistic, with frequent imitations and adaptations of works by Achilles Tatius and Heliodorus. The latter, on the other hand, while still engaging with the Hellenistic heritage and classical rhetoric, are chivalric romances where influences from other literary traditions and genres also intersect. One may find in these works elements and motifs from fairy tales, *chansons de geste*, epics, and oriental narratives (such as Arabic and Persian); these romances exhibit truly medieval features. The Komnenian novels make use not only of the literary conventions of Hellenism, but also mimic the geographical, cultural, social, and religious universe of that time, their characters traveling in many lands around the Mediterranean. The Palaiologan romances offer us stories of love and adventure in distant and exotic lands, which are not always geographically identified, in a world dominated by fantasy and the supernatural, with castles, dragons, witches, and magical objects (Cupane, 2016a: 96).⁸

The heterogeneous influences present in the Palaiologan romances are the result not only of medieval conventions and the preferences of an elite audience with a refined taste for the exotic, but also of Byzantium's privileged geographical position. The medieval Mediterranean was a space of multicultural exchange, of material goods and luxury objects as well as literary motifs. Byzantium was located in a strategic position for travel and commercial, diplomatic, and cultural contact between Europe and the eastern territories of Asia and India; it was "a distributor and recycler, in a way, of exotic eastern

⁵ For women as important patrons of artists, writers, and scholars in different fields of science, see Laiou 2008: 814-815.

⁶ On the later vernacular romances as oral tales recited aloud to a listening audience, see Cupane (2016b: 479-494). See also Conca (1986: 45).

⁷ On the thin line between translation/adaptation and originals regarding late Byzantine romances, see the compelling arguments of Yiavis (2016: 127-155; 2019: 19-39).

⁸ Jeffreys also states that "The Palaiologan romances share several characteristics that mark them out as a group [...] They share plot motifs, most notably the castles and gardens" (2013: 222-223).

narrative material, which it forwarded to Western Europe” (Cupane – Krönung, 2016: 3).⁹ Difficult as it may be to determine exactly the result of this exchange of literary motifs and reciprocal influence on Palaiologan literature, it is certain that Byzantium functioned as an important center of culture, allowing the mobility of cultural products both material and immaterial (this latter regarding the diffusion of literary ideas and topics).

Notwithstanding the diversity of traditions that shaped Byzantine novels and romances, two inevitably made their mark on them: Homer and the *progymnasmata*. The twelfth century was truly a Homeric century. Scholars showed an undeniably obsessive interest in Homer, which is attested by the large amount of material produced, including scholia, *lexika*, and commentaries, as well as the recurring use of quotations from Homeric poems, allegorical interpretations and rewritings, imitations, and adaptations of epic themes in all kinds of works (Kaldellis, 2008: 243).¹⁰ Byzantine literary fiction shared this interest in the Homeric model, shown either directly, by explicit quotation of or reference to the ancient Greek epics, or indirectly, by applying and adapting conspicuously Homeric scenes, themes, and motifs¹¹. Along with the epic poems, *progymnasmata* played a significant role in the development of the Byzantine novel. This set of rhetorical exercises was an important part of any scholar’s education which had a major impact throughout Byzantine literature, and whose subjects were based on the myths and history of ancient Greece. Three of these exercises stand out in the revival of the novel in the twelfth century: *diegema* (narrative), *ethopeia* (characterization), and *ekphrasis* (description).¹²

Rhetorical skill is indeed one of the key features of the Byzantine novel. Castles and artistic objects are described as in harmony with nature. Shining precious materials, gleaming surfaces, and their exquisite craftsmanship all contribute to bring art closer to nature, to make painted and sculpted images in the likeness of living creatures – *technē* seeking to mimic the natural world. By contrast, the portrayal of heroes and heroines is achieved through the materialization of their physical and psychological traits. The beauty of the lovers and other characters is often enhanced by its association with precious metals, as if they were skillfully sculpted statues or works of art. Thus ekphraseis and similes are often used to describe characters and their actions. By employing metaphorical language, Byzantine novelists could create a symbiosis between characters and the natural world, their actions and feelings often being described in both anthomorphic and zoomorphic terms (i.e. associated with flowers and animals). The origins of these

⁹ Also Magdalino: “The Byzantine state was one of the most centralised in the medieval world, and never more so than in the period 1081-1180” (2008: 653). On Constantinople as crossroads, see also Heilo – Nilsson (2019).

¹⁰ Quotations from the Homeric poems enjoyed special popularity in Byzantium: “Since Byzantine authors writing in the high language liked to parade their learning, they quoted abundantly, sometimes using a mass of quotations, which one might call a kind of mannerism” (Hunger, 1969-1970: 29-30).

¹¹ For the presence of Homer in Byzantium, see e.g. Browning (1975: 15-37). Specifically on the reception of Homer in Byzantine novel, see the recent study of Goldwyn – Nilsson (2019: 188-210).

¹² On *progymnasmata* and the Byzantine novel, see e.g. Mango (1980: 125-128); Beaton (1996b: 24-28); Kaldellis (2008: 258-259) and Whitby (2010: 241-244). On ekphraseis in Byzantine literature, see e.g. Nilsson (2005: 121-146) and Veikou (2018: 15-32).

rhetorical devices, although further developed in the novel, are also found in Homeric poetry. It is the ekphrastic description of castles and characters and the use of the simile in two Palaiologan romances, *Kallimachos and Chrysorrhoe* and *Velthandros and Chrysantza*, that I intend to analyze here, taking into account the Homeric influence and its further adaptation in the medieval context.¹³

2. Shining castles

Carolina Cupane has noted that the appearance of the castle in Byzantine narrative is a new descriptive *topos* and a hallmark of the romance genre in its last phase. The ekphrasis of the castle is not limited to a purely ornamental function, which interrupts the progress of the action (1978: 229-230; 1986: 58); it is an important structural element within the Palaiologan romance. In both *Kallimachos* and *Velthandros*, having completed his chivalric voyage, the male hero reaches a castle, where he meets a maiden, falls in love, and begins his romantic adventure. The castle is presented as a *locus amœnus*, located in a supernatural (in the case of *Kallimachos*) or a dream world (in the case of *Velthandros*).¹⁴

It is possible to relate the ekphrasis of the medieval castle (κάστρον) to the description of the Homeric palace (δῶμα). The palace in Homeric epic, particularly in the *Odyssey*, presents certain features that would be taken up and developed further in Palaiologan romance, and the medieval romance in general. Odyssean palaces are said to be dazzling, reflecting the brightness of the sun or moon. The high-roofed palace of Menelaus in Sparta is remarkable because it gleams as of the sun or moon (*Od.* 4, 45), as does the similarly high-roofed palace of Alcinous in Scheria (*Od.* 7, 84).¹⁵ Other times, the splendor of the royal abode is only generically expressed by the use of the adjective κλυτός, “glorious”, as in the palaces of Aeolus and Antiphates (*Od.* 10, 60 and 112). The shining fabric of the palace can still be seen, however, in the description of a small part of the building: thus we see the “bright doors” of Circe’s palace (*Od.* 10, 230, 256, 312: θύρας φαεινάς) and Penelope’s “bright upper chamber” (*Od.* 19, 600; 22, 428: ὑπερώϊα σιγαλόεντα) and the “bright entrance wall” of Odysseus’ palace in Ithaca (*Od.* 22, 121: ἐνώπια παμφανόωντα). In descriptions of Homeric palaces, their dazzling splendor is often related to gold and bronze, like the palaces of Menelaus (*Od.* 4, 72-73) and Alcinous (*Od.* 7, 82-102; 13, 5), or that of Aeolus situated on a floating island surrounded by an

¹³ *Velthandros and Chrysantza* is an anonymous Byzantine romance dated to late thirteenth century. *Kallimachos and Chrysorrhoe* belongs to the first half of fourteenth century and was most probably written by Andronikos Palaiologos. For the Greek texts, I have used Cupane’s edition (1995), and I quote the English translation of Betts (1995). For Spanish translations, see Moreno Jurado (1998), and Egea (1998); Bergua (1965), and García Gual (1982).

¹⁴ On Velthandros’ real and oneiric visit to the *Erotokastron*, see Cupane (1974: 285-286).

¹⁵ See the narratological remarks on these two Homeric scenes by De Jong (2004: 92). I have used Murray’s edition (1919) the *Odyssey*’s Greek text and his translation, available at the Perseus Digital Library (<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/collection?collection=Perseus%3Acollection%3AGreco-Roman>).

unbreakable bronze wall (*Od.* 10, 3-4). The natural brightness of the sun or moon is blended with the luxurious splendor in Menelaus' and Alcinous' palaces, which are built from different kinds of metals and precious stones: the former stands out for its shining bronze, gold, electrum, silver, and its ivory; the latter presents several spaces and ornamental objects made of bronze and gold, and also of silver and dark-blue enamel. Finally, we are told of the exceptional skill that has gone into these three Odyssean palaces: the gold and silver dogs that guard Alcinous' palace were fashioned by the cunning skill of Hephaestus (*Od.* 7, 91-93), and along the hall are ranged seats draped in "robes of soft fabric, cunningly woven, the handiwork of women" (*Od.* 7, 95-97); Circe's palace is built of polished stone (*Od.* 10, 210-211); and Odysseus' is beautiful (*Od.* 17, 264-268). It's noteworthy that while, on the one hand, the broad immaterial space of heaven is often presented in metallurgical terms as being made of iron (*Od.* 15, 329; 17, 565; σιδήρεον οὐρανόν)¹⁶ and bronze (*Od.* 3, 1-2: οὐρανὸν πολύχαλκον), the goddess Dawn appearing in her golden throne (*Od.* 10, 541; 12, 142; 14, 502; 15, 56; 15, 250; 19, 319; 20, 91; 22, 198; 23, 244; 23, 347: χρυσόθρονος Ἡώς), on the other hand, the physical and luxurious space of the palace is ornamented with natural features, since the brightness of the precious metals is combined harmoniously with that of the sun and moon.

The *Drakontokastron* (Dragon's Castle) in *Kallimachos* and the *Erotokastron* (Love's Castle) in *Velthandros* are the central spaces of these Palaiologan romances. Both castles play a major role within the narrative structure, opening a new phase in the adventures of the male protagonists, as they are the places where the heroes begin their romantic adventures.¹⁷ The ekphraseis of these two castles present the ornamental features of Odyssean palaces. At first sight Kallimachos and Velthandros are amazed when they see these castles which are remarkable for their height. While in the *Odyssey* there are only brief references to the height of some palaces (Menelaus' and Alcinous' high-roofed palaces, and the floating island-palace of Aeolus), in these medieval romances this same feature receives closer attention. Not only are the *Drakontokastron* and *Erotokastron* large and tall, their height is said to be unlimited, the walls and towers reaching the heavens. In fact, the *Drakontokastron* is first presented as "great, fearsome and strange" (*KC* 174: μέγα, φορικτὸν καὶ ξέρον) and "terrible and mighty" (*KC* 176: φοβερὸν καὶ μέγα); the *Erotokastron* is described initially as "mighty, vast in appearance" (*VC* 244: μέγα, πολὺν τὴν θέαν). Their boundless height is their primary feature.

These castles also impress by their splendor. At the beginning of the *Drakontokastron* ekphrasis, one reads that its golden beauty "quite outshone all the rays of the sun" (*KC* 180: ἐνίκα πάσας ἐκ παντὸς ἡλιακάς ἀκτῖνας). This castle is not just a bright building with a reflective surface; it is truly a space made of light. It gleams "like a star or like the sun itself at its brightest" (*KC* 868-869: ὅσπερ ἄστρον, / ὅσπερ αὐτὸν τὸν ἥλιον ἐν τῷ

¹⁶ For a brief discussion on σιδήρεον οὐρανόν, see Heubeck – Hoekstra (1990: 253-254).

¹⁷ On *Kallimachos*' narrative space, see Agapitos (1991: 282-297); on *Velthandros*' narrative space, see Agapitos (1991: 297-303). On the *Drakontokastron*, see Cupane (1978: 236-241); on the *Erotokastron*, see Cupane (1978: 242-246). On the narrative function of castles in Palaiologan romances, see also Conca (1986: 37-38).

καὶ τοῦ φέγγους).¹⁸ The *Erotokastron* is “illuminated by lamps and a bright glow” from within (VC 335: φῶτα καὶ φῶς λαμπρόμορφον, ἀγὰς παρέχον ἔσω), its floor is red and “bathed in moonlight” (VC 336: σεληνοβεβαμμένος). The splendor of the castles is also due to the gleaming materials from which they are constructed. The *Drakontokastron* is built entirely of gold and decorated with pearls and precious stones (KC 178-188, 216-217). The gold and the precious stones on the outside (walls, towers, and gates) are also seen on the inside (pool, dome, cornice, couch, table and tableware, chamber). It’s a marvelous golden place presenting an exotic and luxurious beauty, a “golden city,” as Kallimachos calls it (KC 2109: τὴν χρυσοῖν πόλιν). In fact, after the hero slays the dragon, the *Drakontokastron* becomes the *Chrysokastron* – Golden Castle (KC 805, 865, 894, 1380, 1720). The *Erotokastron* is also magnificent, “wonderfully constructed from chiseled sardonyx” (VC 245-246), and has a “shining gate made of diamond” (VC 256). Inside, Velthandros sees remarkable and charming palatial buildings beyond description (VC 320-321); the hall is “of bright stones of sapphire, skillfully hewn” and sumptuously ornamented (VC 328-334).

The castles of these two Palaiologan romances are luxurious buildings, richly decorated with wonderful artwork. However, all this material wealth is said to be harmoniously blended with nature; all the ornamentation made of gold and precious stones is shaped with exceptional skill to resemble living beings as realistically as possible, be they humans, animals, or plants. The most refined art aims to mimic nature. While Alcinous’ palace is guarded by gold and silver dogs and golden boys stand by the altars, the *Drakontokastron* is in fact protected by living beasts, terrifying and supernatural monsters as gatekeepers (KC 189-193). The gleaming *Erotokastron* has golden lion and dragon heads aligned for battlements, and their mouths make such wild and terrifying sounds that they seem to move and roar as if they were alive (VC 246-253). Moreover, inside there are animal sculptures carved with amazing realism: a fountain in the form of a griffin with outstretched wings and water coming from its mouth (VC 299-308), a peacock (VC 369-381), golden birds chirping as though alive (VC 467-472).¹⁹ In the courtyard, next to the beautifully adorned pool, Velthandros sees a statue of Leander carved in stone (VC 456-459). The pool of the *Drakontokastron* is filled with rose water that gushes from the mouth of a golden human head; such was the goldsmith’s skill that the mouth actually seems to belong to a living person (KC 328-332).

One of the most striking aspects in the ekphraseis of these two castles is the harmonization of metals and precious materials with the natural world – the narrator’s desire to intermingle art and nature as closely as possible. The first space that Kallimachos and Velthandros see upon entering their respective castles is the garden. After jumping over the wall, Kallimachos finds himself in the courtyard, where he is met with amazing sights. First he sees “a lovely garden laden with crops of fruit, with charms, with flowers,

¹⁸ Castillo Ramírez (2000: 94) establishes a narrow link between the *Drakontokastron*’s golden color and the sun itself.

¹⁹ Egea (1998: 25) argues that these ornamental birds that seem to move and chirp recall a literary perspective in the description of Digenis Akritis’ castle.

and leaves” (KC 282-283). It’s an astonishingly beautiful garden, empty of people but full of grace. It extends to a pool, becoming a flower garden “with fronds and plants, perfumed beyond nature” (KC 299). The artificial pool is lined with mirrors rather than slabs of marble, so the reflected image of the garden can be seen from the pool’s entrance; the mirrored image gives the impression of seeing the garden a second time with its trees, leaves, and fruit (KC 300-315). Velthandros reaches the *Erotokastron* by following a river with a moving flame in its waters.²⁰ As he enters the castle, the hero continues to follow the course of this flaming river, on whose banks he admires and is amazed by white vines, red narcissus flowers, tall trees bearing beautiful flowers and leaves, a wonderful fountain of fresh water (VC 282-298).

The inner spaces of these two castles are filled with plants and flowers but they also have works of art skillfully carved to resemble plants and flowers. The dome over the *Drakontokastron*’s pool is entirely made of gold, and on its golden surface the artist has sculpted an ornamental tree on which jewels are artistically arranged like fruits (KC 316-318); the cornice is of entwined gold, sculpted to look like a twisted vine (KC 319-322); the curtain of the pool’s inner door is made of flowers, lilies, and roses in perfect harmony with the space of the pool (KC 337-340). The beautiful terrace of the *Erotokastron* is also a perfect example of the most impressive natural motifs, a remarkable space showing how artistic ingenuity can accurately recreate floral elements:

ὅτι τὰ λιθολάξευτα, ἃ εἶχεν γύρου – γύρου,
τὰ λαμπροκαλαμίστυλα, ὀρθομαρμάρωσις τε,
κιττόφυλλα, χρυσάφυλλα ἴων, κρίνων καὶ ρόδων,
μάλαμα νὰ ἴναι καθαρὸν, ὅλα σωστὰ τὰ πάντα,
λαμπρὰν εἶχαν τὴν σύνθεσι τὸ ἓνα πρὸς τὸ ἄλλο·

“The stone carvings that surrounded it, the bright columns, slender as reeds, the marble-clad walls, the leaves of ivy and the golden leaves of violets, lilies and roses – all perfectly formed from pure gold – made a fair scene, one object contrasting with another.” (VC 475-479)

Besides the sculptural works imitating natural landscape, the interior of the castles is also decorated with paintings representing the heavens and the stars. Looking at the ceiling of the dragon’s chamber, Kallimachos marvels at the heavens, the paths of the stars, the planets, and the Greek gods and goddesses represented there (Kronos, Zeus, Aphrodite, Ares, Athena, and the Graces); in the center of the ceiling are painted the constellations (KC 419-438). In the middle of the painting, the artist created a second sky in which Chrysorrhoe appears for the first time, naked and hanging by the hair. We can thus say that although it occurs inside, due to art’s skillful imitation of nature, the meeting of hero and heroine takes place under a starry sky and the gaze of the gods and the lovely Graces. In the *Erotokastron*’s bedroom skillfully constructed of diamonds, Velthandros

²⁰ Cupane (2014: 192) analyzes the marvelous function of the stream that carries a flame in its current, stating that it “marks the boundaries between the real space and the wondrous one”. On *Velthandros* as fantastic literature, see Chelidoni (2007: 169-174).

sees that its four walls do not touch the floor and are in fact suspended in the air, so that “they resembled the heavenly spheres” (VC 451-453). However, the most remarkable ekphrasis in *Velthandros* is the love-themed mural: the almighty Eros subdues all, men and women, carved as if they were in movement (VC 337-356).²¹

These shining castles made of gold, precious metals, and sardonyx, luxuriously adorned within, are in perfect harmony with nature and the surrounding environment. They are also explicitly linked to rivers. Velthandros reaches the *Erotokastron* because he follows the course of a flaming river whose source lies precisely within the castle: inside there is a statue of a man struck in the heart by Love’s arrow, and from that wound comes a blazing flame which mingles with the tears of the stone figure (VC 403-416). The flaming river has its source in the castle but its course goes far beyond the domain of the castle. The hero follows it ten full days before finally reaching the castle; he does so because he wishes to learn its source, to know where the mysterious flame of its waters comes from. The *Drakontokastron*, on the other hand, is surrounded by a river, but more significant than this topographical aspect is Kallimachos’ remark to his two older brothers that the castle is “a fountain of riches”, making it metaphorically “a river of all wealth” (KC 1460: πηγὴ χρημάτων, ποταμὸς τῶν ὅλων πλουτισμάτων).

3. Heroes of iron heart and heroines of floral beauty

The castles are opulent and remarkable spaces presenting works of art in gold and precious metals made to look like living beings. Human characters, on the other hand, are portrayed as if they were works of art, paintings, or statues created by skillful hands. The physical and psychological portrayal of the hero and heroine of Byzantine romance thus often includes both metallurgical and floral elements. However, this sculptural depiction of human characters is not an innovation of the Greek novelists, even though they developed and refined it.²² In the *Odyssey*, for instance, in order to follow his father’s epic model, Telemachus recalls Odysseus’ “iron heart” (*Od.* 4, 293: οὐδ’ εἶ οἱ κραδίη γε σιδηρῆ ἐνδοθεν ἦεν); Eurylochus complains that the “relentless” Odysseus is wholly wrought of iron (*Od.* 12, 280: σχέτλιός [...] ἢ ῥά νυ σοί γε σιδήρεα πάντα τέτυκται); Odysseus stands firm as a rock against Antinous’ attack (*Od.* 17, 463: ὁ δ’ ἐστάθη ἥυτε πέτρῃ) and when he speaks with Penelope, his eyes are unmoved and remain dry as though they were horn or iron (*Od.* 19, 211: ὀφθαλμοὶ δ’ ὡς εἰ κέρα ἔστασαν ἠὲ σίδηρος);²³ Telemachus rebukes his mother for showing a heart harder than stone (*Od.*

²¹ On the wall reliefs presenting allegorical image of Love’s punishments and rewards, see Cupane (2014: 192). On the role of King Eros in *Velthandros*, see Cupane (1974: 283-286).

²² See, for instance, the depiction of Empress Eirene as “a veritable statue of beauty, a breathing monument of grace” in Anna Komnene’s *Alexiad* (3, 3, 4). On the “sculptural style” in the *Alexiad* and its epic influence, see Ljubarskij (2000: 169-185).

²³ Russo, Fernández-Galiano, and Heubeck write: “A paradigmatic example of the power of self-control that has made Odysseus one of literature’s most famous figures. Homer uses horn and iron to represent the hardness of the hero’s will, just as in the simile of the melting snow (204-208) the physical

23, 103: σοὶ δ' αἰεὶ κραδίη στερεωτέρη ἐστὶ λίθοιο); Odysseus also rebukes his wife for her iron heart (*Od.* 23, 172: ἧ γὰρ τῆ γε σιδήρεον ἐν φρεσὶ ἦτορ); and Eurycleia assures Odysseus that she will be as steady “as stone or iron” (*Od.* 19, 494: ἔξω δ' ὡς ὅτε τις στερεὴ λίθος ἢ ἐσίδηρος). In the Homeric epics, metals such as gold and silver are already used as signs of beauty in human and divine characters: there are references to “golden” Aphrodite (*Od.* 8, 337; 8, 342: χρυσέη Ἀφροδίτη), to Penelope resembling Artemis or golden Aphrodite (*Od.* 17, 37; 19, 54: Ἀρτέμιδι ἰκέλη ἢ χρυσέη Ἀφροδίτη), and to “silver-footed” Thetis (*Od.* 24, 92: ἀργυρόπεζα Θέτις).²⁴ Female characters of divine beauty, compared to Aphrodite or Artemis or even the Graces, became a common *topos* in Hellenistic novels. Also significant regarding the portrait of characters is the Homeric simile in which Odysseus is compared to a graceful work of art upon which a cunning craftsman overlays gold with silver (*Od.* 6, 232-235; 23, 159-163).²⁵ Emotions are sometimes related to natural elements, too, as in the case of the raging Antinous whose eyes are like blazing fire (*Od.* 4, 662), and the sorrowful Penelope who weeps flowing rivers of tears like snow melting on a mountain (*Od.* 19, 204-209).²⁶

When Kallimachos enters the dragon's chamber and looks at the ceiling, he finds Chryssorrhoe painted there among the stars, the planets, and the gods and goddesses (*KC* 461-463). She literally appears for the first time in a painting. When he sees her, Kallimachos immediately stands still like a stone (*KC* 459: καὶ παρευθὺς ἀπέμεινεν ὡς λίθος εἰς τὸν τόπον). This is also the reaction of the foreign king the first time he sees Chryssorrhoe leaning over the castle wall: completely overwhelmed by love, he becomes a stone, standing motionless (*KC* 1179: λίθος ἐγένην ἀκίνητος ἐστάθην). These two suitors of the fair maiden are thus presented as lifeless natural entities when they are struck by the pangs of love for the first time. After Kallimachos has slain the dragon and Chryssorrhoe has told her story, she seeks to convince the hero to let her endure her tragic fate alone, so that he should not share the hardships prepared by her envious Fortune. At Kallimachos' insistence on treating her wounds, the maiden accuses him of having an iron heart, a steel soul, and a mind of stone (*KC* 745-746: πρὸς σιδηρᾶν καρδίαν, / πρὸς ἀδαμάντινον ψυχὴν καὶ πρὸς πετρίνην γνώμην), of hardening his unyielding soul (*KC* 748), and states that Fortune has turned his royal heart to iron, having made it pitiless (*KC* 752-753: πῶς μεταπλάττει καὶ τὴν σὴν βασιλικὴν καρδίαν / εἰς πλάσιν ἄλλην σιδηρᾶν, εἰς ἀσπλαχνώδη φύσιν). This is also the portrait of the dragon: a merciless monster with a ruthless heart, iron soul, and temperament of stone (*KC* 505-506: γνώμην σιδηρᾶν, ἀμείλικτον καρδίαν, / πέτρινα σπλάχνα δράκοντος; 513: δράκοντος σκληρὰν γνώμην). The portrayal of male characters with metallurgical and rocky elements serves to underline their relentless and unyielding nature. Regarding the portrait of female

world was used to represent, through externalization, the inner, psychic reality that is normally not accessible to observation” (1992: 88).

²⁴ Silver-footed Thetis also appears in *Il.* 1, 538; 1, 556; 9, 410; 16, 222; 16, 574; 18, 127; 18, 146; 18, 369; 18, 381; 19, 28; 24, 89; 24, 120.

²⁵ On the function of this simile, see De Jong (2004: 164 and 555).

²⁶ For an explanation of this, “One of the *Odyssey*'s unforgettable similes”, see Russo – Fernández-Galiano – Heubeck (1992: 87).

characters, reference to crystal has the function of highlighting Chrysorrhoe's remarkable physical beauty: she has "a noble body and crystal skin" (KC 795: Σῶμα καὶ γὰρ πανεύγενον καὶ κρυσταλλώδης σάρκα), "her body whiter than crystal beguiled the sight with its beauty" (KC 814: Σῶμα λευκὸν ὑπὲρ αὐτὴν τὴν τοῦ κρυστάλλου φύσιν).

While the characterization of humans includes references to stones and metals in order to stress their physical or emotional traits, sometimes stones are also endowed with human properties, as a way of mirroring the characters' emotions. Thus, upon hearing Chrysorrhoe's sad story (after her kidnap from the *Drakontokastron*, she is taken to the foreign king's palace and named his queen) told by a mourning woman in black, Kallimachos says that these woes would move even lifeless stones to tears (KC 1606). Similarly, in *Velthandros* it is also said that rocks are shattered by the young couple's grief and lament over the death of Filarmos, the hero's brother (VC 1279). The landscape can also mirror the happiness of the protagonists: as they approach the kingdom of Velthandros' father, it is said that the glens dance and the hills rejoice at the end of their misfortunes (VC 1302). Thus the natural landscape is also endowed with human features, just as humans are described with organic and inorganic elements.

The hero and heroine of *Velthandros* are described in metallurgical terms in order that their exceptional beauty may stand out: Velthandros' chest is as white as cold marble (VC 35: ἄσπρον ἦτον τὸ στήθος τοῦ μάρμαρον ὥσπερ κρύον); Chrysantza has bright golden hair (VC 688: μαλλία χρυσαφωτά), jet-black eyebrows like bridges, a bronze nose forged by the Graces, pearly teeth (VC 699-702), white and delicate arms (VC 706). The materiality of their physical traits is interwoven with natural colors and floral elements: Chrysantza's bright golden hair matches her figure: its thickness resembling the grass of Paradise or celery in a garden (VC 688-689), while her noble body is as straight as a wand, as lithe as a cypress twig (VC 652-653), her cheeks are rose-red and her lips a natural color (VC 703). Chrysorrhoe's gleaming hair surpasses the golden rays of the sun, her curls tumble like rivers, and her beauty combines the charm and color of roses (KC 811, 813, 816). The portrayal of female characters based on anthomorphic elements is further paralleled by their own behavior and their relationship to the surrounding natural landscape: in the garden of the foreign king's palace, Chrysorrhoe finds the ring token hanging from the orange tree at whose foot she sits troubled by her thoughts (KC 1814-1816); in the garden of her father's palace in Antioch, Chrysantza gives voice to her sufferings and sighs of love lying down under a shady tree (VC 834-835).

Adam Goldwyn (2018) and Kirsty Stewart (2019: 272-298) have recently analyzed the Komnenian novels and the Palaiologan romances from an ecocritical perspective, convincingly showing how the hero is often presented as a hunter and a gardener, and the heroine as a hunted prey and a flower through the metaphorical use of language related to horticulture and dendrology. Hunting is crucial to the medieval hero's manly identity and his place in the social elite. The hunting of wild beasts is also practically a prerequisite for his success in love. Thus natural imagery (involving trees, plants, flowers, and animals) suggests the savagery of the hero as a hunter and lover on the one hand, and the modesty and chastity of the young girl on the other. In medieval romance, the hero's

‘autopoietic’ world, manifest in his violent behavior against men, nature, and women, contrasts with the heroine’s ‘sympoietic’ world, restricted to the walled garden and marked by harmony between human, animal, and nature. In the garden, floral and botanical elements, and even artistic ornaments such as statues, are often anthropomorphized, and heroines are described in anthomorphic terms and in communion with the natural space: “the garden, its delicate balance of natural and artificial, human and non-human, organic and inorganic, represents a model of sympoietic worlding” (Goldwyn, 2018: 220).²⁷

The characterization of Chrysorrhoe and Chrysantza includes, as shown above, the combination of artistic (metallurgical) and natural (floral) traits, following the standard rhetorical practice in medieval romance. As for the heroes, Kallimachos is seen by the foreign king as the lord of the *Drakontokastron* and the (metaphorical) gardener of the fair lady who stands beside him on his castle wall; Kallimachos actually becomes a gardener in the foreign king’s palace (this is his disguise to try to get close to his kidnapped beloved); and finally he is presented by Chrysorrhoe as a (figurative) vineyard in her trial speech before the king. Velthandros is portrayed as hunter and bowman at the beginning of the narrative (VC 32 and 100), and he puts his exceptional skills into practice by wielding the bow in the hunting scene with the King of Antioch (VC 768 ff.).

Since Byzantine romances show an androcentric world in which the power and violence of man prevails over nature and others, male figures’ behavior is described as animal and they are depicted with the features of wild animals. Kallimachos runs swift as an eagle (KC 640: ὡς ἀετός) to set the corpse of the dragon on fire; he enters the royal pavilion and approaches Chrysorrhoe as if suspended on wings (KC 1955: ὡς ὑπόπτρερος); the foreign king and his men quickly snatch Chrysorrhoe like wolves (KC 1790: ὡσπερ λύκοι); the three eunuchs are “sons of vipers” (KC 2335: οἱ τῆς ἐχίδνης παῖδες) showing themselves subservient to Chrysorrhoe after they have imprisoned her lover; and Velthandros returns to his homeland like a lost hawk, in the words of his father, King Rodofilos (VC 1340: ἠὺρηκα τὸ γεράκι μου, τὸ εἶχ’ ἀπολυμένον). Similes are used to relate unrelated entities of opposing natures. Through this rhetorical device, humans can be compared to animals and plants. Noteworthy is the simile in *Kallimachos* in which animals are compared to daily objects: the dragon “immediately gulped down all the animals [...] as though they were but a cup of water” (KC 666-667: καὶ πάντα τὰ τετράποδα [...] / εἰς ὄραν ἐξερρόφησεν ὡς ὕδωρ κοτυλαῖον). This simile emphasizes the wildness and voracious appetite of the anthropomorphized dragon, by relating animal and inorganic elements.

The drowning scene in *Velthandros* shows the young couple’s privileged relationship with the natural world, particularly with animals. As they cross the river, Chrysantza’s maid Fedrokaza drowns on the mule, Velthandros’ three squires drown with their horses, but the hero and heroine are saved thanks to the aid of two turtledoves. Chrysantza is actually revived by a turtledove that brings her water on its wings (VC 1184-1185). The

²⁷ On Byzantine gardens, women and the walled garden, nature and artifice among other topics, see Littlewood (1979: 95-114), Barber (1992: 1-19), Nilsson (2013: 15-29).

rescue by the two turtledoves itself is striking, but so too is the way the two similes are presented, for hero and heroine are not invested with bird-like features, rather the two birds are endowed with human ones, joining the grief of the couple and bewailing their misfortune as if they were human (VC 1135-1136, 1141-1143). In *Kallimachos*, there is also an animal simile that distinguishes the female protagonist from other women. Chrysorrhoe's beauty is exceptional, such that comparing the beauty of all other women to hers is like comparing a monkey to Aphrodite (KC 824-826). Her beauty is the theme of a further simile with floral imagery. Near the palace of the foreign king, a mourning woman tells the wandering Kallimachos how the beauty of the queen withers from weeping and grief, like a rose in summer; but though she dries out and wilts, her charms bloom anew due to a device that brings her water (KC 1590-1600). Metaphorically, Chrysorrhoe is a flower that blooms when watered.

Floral imagery and anthomorphic metaphors are most often used in the characterization of heroines, but also in love scenes. In Kallimachos and Chrysorrhoe's reunion scene, he, as the gardener's helper, rushes to bring roses to her, the queen. He kisses her passionately holding the roses, and her lips are said to be "fairer than a rose" (KC 1916: χεῖλη ῥόδου χρεῖττονα). Next, at their nighttime meeting, a new simile compares kisses to a river, underlining the latter's life-giving power:

Ἀπὸ γὰρ τοῦ φιλήματος ἀνέκφραστος γλυκύτης
ὡς ποταμὸς ἐπότιζε καλὰς, νεκρὰς καρδίας.
Ὡς γὰρ ποτίζει ποταμὸς δένδρη καταψυγμένα,
οὕτω καὶ φίλημα νεκρὰν παρηγορεῖ καρδίαν.

"The ineffable sweetness of their kiss watered their fair but dead hearts like a river. Just as a river waters dry trees, so a kiss revives a dead heart." (KC 1960-1963)

The setting of this meeting fits the natural imagery of the simile: the two find themselves in the royal pavilion in the palace's garden, by the water and under the trees. The kissing, the sexual union, and the natural setting of the garden allow their hearts, once distressed and dying due to their long separation, to be reborn. The image of the river is once again put to metaphorical use to express their happiness:

Ἐκεῖ καὶ βρύσης ὄχετοὶ ἀπὸ χαρᾶς δακρύων
ἔδραμον τότε καὶ καλὴν ὁ ποταμὸς τὴν χάριν
εἶχεν, πολλὴν ἀπὸ πηγῆς δακρύων ἐνηδόνων.

"Streams of a fountain of joyful tears poured down. They derived much pleasure from this flood that rose from a spring of happy weeping." (KC 1975-1977)

However, the image of the river is most often related to tears in scenes of weeping and sadness. The weeping of the heroines (and the heroes too) is described in terms similar to Penelope's, insofar as their tears flow like rivers from their eyes:

Chrysorrhoe – "A river of tears, alas, flowed from her eyes" (KC 603: ἐκίνησεν ἐξ ὀφθαλμῶν, φεῦ, ποταμὸς δακρύων);

Kallimachos – “I shall [...] shed a mighty torrent and rivers of tears” (*KC* 1448: κινήσω βρύσιν φοβερὰν καὶ ποταμοὺς δακρῶν); “His eyes were running like a river” (*KC* 1694: ἐτρέχασιν τὰ ὀμμάτια τοῦ ὡς τρέχει τὸ ποτάμιν);

Chrysantza – “The lady’s tears flowed like a river” (*VC* 836: ὡς ποταμὸς τὰ δάκρυα τῆς ἐτρέχασιν τῆς κόρης); “tears poured from her eyes like a river” (*VC* 1212: καὶ δάκρυα δίκη ποταμοῦ ἐκχέει τῶν ὀμμάτων).

Velthandros’ crying befits his portrait as hunter in a simile that compares him to a wingless bird: “He cried like a bird at losing its feathers” (*VC* 1128: ἐκλαιεν ὡσπερ ὄρνειον νὰ ρίπτῃ τὰ πτερά του).²⁸

4. Final remarks

In the Palaiologan romances, castles and characters are artfully described as hybrid products in order to give them the appearance of a nature different from their own: castles are built of precious metals but decorated with very naturalistic floral and animal motifs; heroes and heroines are beautiful and virtuous but presented in metallurgical terms, as if they were skillfully made lifeless works of art, or described with floral imagery, as if they were part of the natural world. The rhetorical skill of the Byzantine romance writers who imitated the ancient models, like the Homeric, and developed and adapted them to the medieval context, goes further, combining art and nature to create hybrid entities. The Palaiologan castles and characters are woven with diverse elements (human, floral, animal, and metallurgical). Castles only exist to serve their handsome young lords, since hero and heroine only begin their love affairs in them. The beauty of the former is reflected in the beauty of the latter and vice versa. The *Drakontokastron* and *Erotokastron* are wonderful, supernatural spaces. Kallimachos and Velthandros are amazed when they behold them. The remarkably beautiful *Erotokastron* offers Velthandros the most beautiful of maidens, chosen by the hero himself from a group of 40 girls.²⁹ At the impressive golden *Drakontokastron* Kallimachos rescues the princess, whose beauty enhances the grace and charm of the pool (*KC* 796)³⁰ and couches (*KC* 802). The shining buildings are made even more beautiful by the young couple living in them; and the naturally beautiful hero and heroine assimilate something of the elemental metal character of the castles. Kallimachos and Chrysorrhoe are portrayed as golden both inside and outside the *Drakontokastron* (golden Chrysorrhoe – *KC* 518, 1511, 2011, 2293, 2338; golden Kallimachos – *KC* 1275, 1785, 1786, 2379), and it is in this space entirely made

²⁸ Among the natural elements, water is the one most often used in the similes and metaphorical language of these two Palaiologan romances. Although less frequent, earth and fire are also used for the description or action of some characters: in *Kallimachos*, the foreign king’s army “could as easily be counted as sand” (*KC* 848) and the three eunuchs “fled from the lady’s harlotry as though from fire” (*KC* 2243).

²⁹ On the beauty contest in *Velthandros*, see Cupane (1983: 221-248), Garland (1989: 87-95), and Egea (1998: 25, 27-28). Hesselings speaks of Velthandros as a “Paris judicieux et sévère, mais chaste” (1938: 376).

³⁰ On the meaning of *KC* 796, see Cupane (1995: 107, n. 64).

of gold that they meet for the first time and live happily ever after. This intertwining of art, human, and nature in perfect symbiosis may be the clearest example of the Byzantine romance writers' rhetorical skill.

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