KYRA FROSSINI

by Aristotelis Valaoritis

Kyra Frossini is a historical poem based on real events, which took place in 1801 in the city of Ioannina in Greece, when the country was still under Ottoman rule. It is a great drama with all the elements for a great opera: love, passion, betrayal, repentance, and murder.

The last of plays in verse by poet-authors of the Ionian Islands and Crete since the seventeenth century, the poem is written in the more simple oral form of vernacular Greek. This marks a break both with local Greek and with the erudite tradition of writing in a form of archaic, or purist language, written but not really spoken at the time except in academic and official rhetoric. Deeply rooted in folklore, the characters of the story participate in a sequence of profoundly grim events, with good and evil incessantly alternating.

ARISTOTELIS VALAORITIS (1824–1879), a leading Ionian poet, was a lyrical voice and a crucial link in the development of modern Greek literature. He studied but never practiced law. Instead, his passionate disposition led him to politics and poetry. Through these he worked tirelessly for all national movements of his time and for the promotion of patriotic ideals.

One of his poems, commissioned for the unveiling of the statue of Patriarch Gregory V in Athens, was so enthusiastically received that it secured official recognition of the demotic as the language of poetry.

PANAGIOTIS A. TSONIS is professor of biology at the University of Dayton, where he holds the Leonard A. Mann, S.M. Chair in the Sciences and is director of the Center for Tissue Regeneration and Engineering at Dayton (TREND). A prolific author, Tsonis is also the recipient of several awards.

ANASTASIOS A. TSONIS is distinguished professor in the Department of Mathematical Sciences at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where he has taught since 1985. The author of half a dozen books, he was one of the pioneers in the application of Chaos theory and nonlinear data analysis in Atmospheric Sciences.

NANOS VALAORITIS, the great grandson of Aristotelis Valaoritis, is considered one of the most distinguished writers in Greece today and has been described as the most important poet of the Hellenic Diaspora since Constantine Cavafy. He has published widely as a poet, novelist, and essayist. Raised in a cosmopolitan family, Valaoritis has lived in Greece, England, France, where he participated in the activities of Andre Breton’s Surrealist group, and the United States, where he taught most of his academic career. Since his retirement from San Francisco State University, he has been living in Greece.

NOSTOS BOOKS
Box 10086
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55449
ARISTOTELIS VALAORITIS (1824–1879), one of the leading Ionian poets, was a crucial link in the development of modern Greek literature. Although his name is still readily recognizable in Greece, his work is not sufficiently known in English.

The story depicted in this poem is based on real events. It took place in 1801 in the city of Ioannina (also known as Yannina or Yanina) in northwestern Greece, when the country was still under Ottoman rule. It is a great drama with all the elements for a great opera: love, passion, betrayal, repentance, and murder.

The main character of the story is Kyra (Lady) Frossini, who was from a proud family and very beautiful. Frossini was married to a merchant, who at the time was in Venice on business. Ali Pasha, the vizier and ruler of the region, fell in love with her and wanted her to be his mistress. But there was one complication. Frossini was romantically involved with Ali’s son, Mouchtar. To take Mouchtar out of the picture, Ali sent him to war, to help an ally who had asked for help. Undeterred, Ali pursues Frossini, who, after Mouchtar’s departure, realizes her great sin and repents. Frossini rejects Ali’s proposals and promises for riches and power. When Ali threatens her with assault, she injures him. Furious, Ali demands revenge. In order to show his great authority and also in the hope of persuading Frossini to change her mind, he orders her and sixteen other young women to be drowned in Lake Ioannina. Frossini stands firm, finding strength in her Christian faith, and does not give in. As she is being escorted to the lake, she faints and dies. The other sixteen women also die, by drowning. Until the very end, Ali hopes to hear that Frossini showed some weakness, so that his ego would be satisfied, but to no avail.

Another version of the story has Ali killing Frossini at the request of Mouchtar’s wife, who was angry because of her affair with her husband. Valaoritis, however, discounts this version. He believes that Ali spread this story on purpose in order to clear himself of his diabolic manipulations against his son and Frossini.

The poem, written in 1859, is considered a landmark in modern Greek literature. It is a historical poem, deeply rooted in folklore, whose characters participate in a sequence of profoundly grim events, with good and evil incessantly alternating.

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Every translation is a challenge. This is more evident in translating literature where, in addition to being faithful to the original story, the translator must strive to accommodate cultural elements embedded in the work. This challenge is even more pronounced when dealing with a poem written some 150 years ago and staged in a historical setting with rich folklore.

One of the most important and at the same time beautiful aspects of Valaoritis’s writing is the passion with which he portrays his major characters. In so doing, he freely interchanges tenses even in the same sentence. While in the Greek language this serves him greatly, when such a sentence is translated into English it might sound incorrect or awkward. In the present translation, we attempted to conserve this uniqueness.

But at the same time, when deemed necessary, we translated his verses quite freely, without altering the meaning the poet intended. In a few cases, we considered it appropriate to discount a line or two from the original. Omissions are marked in the Greek text with an asterisk.

This translation was based on the 1961 publication of Valaoritis’s work by Filologiki, Thessaloniki, Greece.
INTRODUCTION

AT A TIME when the Greeks were beginning to act with the encouragement of the Russians to regain their freedom and independence, an event took place in the city of Ioannina in Epirus, ruled then by Ali Pasha, a tyrant of Albanian origin born in the village of Tepeleni and the great enemy of the Greeks. The event in question was the drowning of a beautiful Greek woman and sixteen of her companions in the lake of the city. This event was sung by an anonymous folkloric song—which was the motivation of the poet Aristotelis Vlahouris to compose a historic drama in verse, following the example of other Romantic poets of the period such as Byron and Victor Hugo. This is the last of plays in verse composed by poet-authors of the Ionian Islands and Crete since the seventeenth century. Vlahouris, certainly familiar with some of them, whose baroque nature and characteristics were evident both in the plot and versification, attempted to write a drama in the more simple oral form of vernacular Greek which distinguishes it from the other plays written in a dialectical form of Greek, used in the Ionian Islands and Crete. The novelty is important, because it marked a break both with local Greek and with the erudite tradition of writing in a form of archaic or purist language, written but not really spoken at the time except in academic and official rhetoric.

The play, entitled with the name of the heroine, was a success in its published form and became very popular reading in the nineteenth century. Yet the critics, mainly poets like Palamas, underestimated it, considering it a youthful venture, which it was, but of an extraordinary maturity in the use of dramatic verse. Often lines, paragraphs, and whole passages can be compared to Elizabethan drama, especially close to the analyses of these plays by T. S. Eliot. The flexibility of the verse, with its enjambments and rhyming patterns, is clearly an innovation of the poet. The fifteen-syllable verse of the oral demotic poems is adapted to dramatic speech in an astonishing manner, and for the first time.

The story is adapted from information the poet had from historical sources. The liaison of Euphrosyne (Frossini), the married Greek woman, with Monchitar, the son of Ali Pasha, transgressing all the norms of behavior of Christian women toward their Muslim conquers, was subject for a dramatic confrontation of a Romantic kind. This, complicated by the attempt of the aging Ali to seduce his son’s mistress and lover, and her vigorous resistance to his advances, turns her from a simple sinner into a national heroine, of the faith and integrity of Greek women, whom the pasha vengefully punished with death by drowning, including her female companions.

Ali Pasha is shown as an atheist, influenced by the ideology of the free thinkers of the French Revolution whose representatives he courted, in an inner struggle between his superstitious fears and the conflicting faiths of Christian Orthodoxy and Islam.

The same conflict occurs in the heroine, whose transgression is love, set against her moral beliefs and causing the inner struggle she undergoes. In this respect, the drama is not merely a simplistic clash of different faiths and ethnicities, but a sophisticated attempt at individual characterization of the heroes.

Vlahouris, following his romantic and nationalistic feelings, uses this legendary event in order to demonstrate how the demotic Greek language can express complicated psychological conflicts within and without the person, in the fifteen-syllable verse, and in eleven-syllable verse, a lyrical passage recited by Monchitar. That too seems unusual, to put beautiful lines in the mouth of a Turk. Vlahouris desired to underline the romantic character of the liaison between Frossini and Monchitar, to give more relief to the horrible father’s designs.
The popularity of the dramatic poem, which circulated widely, contradicts the critics’ opinion of the work, and shows that the public’s taste is not always off the mark.

I am happy that the English-language version will give an opportunity to the American public to get to know this dramatic poem of my ancestor, whose memory I cherish—and whose reputation as a poet I defend, even if his cult as a national poet has largely overshadowed it.

Nanos Valeroritis

Athens

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