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A Romanian Manuscript from the 18th Century: *Joseph and Aseneth*

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ABSTRACT

The first chapter of this paper, *In Search of Models. The Pre-Modern Erotic Novel*, aims at an analysis of the compositional techniques proper to the late antique and medieval novel. In the Romanian cultural space, *Aethiopica* circulated under the title *Iliodor*, alluding to its author. Although the process of copying and diffusing the popular books stimulates an imaginative reading and allows the scribe textual interventions, the marginal notes show that *Aethiopica* was regarded as a word of knowledge, too. Since the story has in its centre the regaining of the heroine's status, the subject is constructed by means of thorough gradation of information regarding Chariclea's identity, so that the details add up towards a *recognition* scene that would deceive, however, the reader's expectations. The *in medias res* incipit, the first-person confessions and the value conferred to marginal detail are the techniques used by the author in order to gradate the information and endow it with new meanings. Suspense is reached by manipulative use of storytelling, a large number of secondary narratives and a slowdown of rhythm. The compositional complexity offers Heliodorus a place in the Renaissance literary canon; however, the Byzantine audience reads the text within a moral frame and sees the adventures of the couple as the perpetual tension between love and destiny. The moral meaning of the story is compatible to the sensibility of the Romanian 18th century, which is still indebted to extra-literary criteria.

For the analysis of the medieval romance we selected *Pierre de Provence et la belle Maguelonne*, the model for the popular book *Imberie i Margarona*. We traced the episodes where the young lovers are protagonists of recognitions, those moments when light is cast upon their identities. The medieval novel and the ancient one share the platonic conception of the soul, so the idea that love is born out of contemplation of the similar one (in Marsilio Ficino) or out of limitless seeing and reflection (in Andreas Capellanus) offers continuity to the commentaries on love in the ancient novel. The couple is essentially modelled by the same roles, the protagonists need only a brief exchange of looks to rapidly recognize the chosen one. The contamination with courtesy elements can be found in the attitude of secondary characters: the girl's father notices the manners of the knight errant and guesses his nobility, while the nurse needs to hear his discourse. The heroic quality is tested by the rules of sociability.

The second chapter, *Erotic Mysticism in the Medieval Romance*, analyses the codes of a spiritualized love, setting a goal in identifying the symbolic meanings contained in the themes of love and conversion. The first analysis takes the apocryphal story of *Joseph and Aseneth* for its

object and retraces the text's history of reception in a mystical light. The text was introduced as a Christian legend by its first editor, the French scholar P. Batiffol. It is only with Marc Philonenko's monograph that the idea of an influence of Jewish mysticism is issued – a thesis that would be adopted by most of the studies of the apocryphal legend. Philonenko advances three levels of interpretation: astrological allegory (the Sun-Moon hierogamy), gnostic drama (Logos and Pistis-Sophia), initiation to Jewish mysteries. Of all them, the last interpretation is the most grounded in the text proper, offering the central episode the signification of a magical practice. Even leaving beside the initiatic dimension, Aseneth's meeting with the angel followed by her conversion keeps the general tone of Jewish mysticism: the trust in good and in the possibility of salvation (an idea brought forth by Philon of Alexandria among others) and the preference for the allegorized image of the woman as a city, when Aseneth's name is changed to City of Salvation. Erotic mysticism is noted in a way similar to the imaginary of the *Song of Songs*, in a composition valorizing wisdom (associated to honey), the conflicting emotions, the search for the lost lover and especially the image of a tangible divinity. Our text is thus related to apocalyptic writings such as *Iezechiel* or *The Apocalypse of Abraham*.

In the analysis of *Hysmine and Hysminias* (Eumathios Makrembolites, 12th/13th century), we compared the French version to the Romanian translation, pointing to the eventual differences that could appear due to the adaptation process. The Orthodox mysticism spread in the Byzantine milieu does not seem to have much influence on the story; the text obeys lay codes and puts forth the image of a distressing love, in which divinity is replaced by god Eros. The text, conceived as a first-person confession glorifying the almighty of love, is at the same time a Bildungsroman. The protagonist discovers love and acknowledges its tumult (for the Byzantine novel starts to look towards the individual's interior). Mystical suggestions may be found in a love full of suffering, the complementarity of names and the expiatory meaning of the desire fueled by absence.

The Appendices contain the transcription of the two texts analyzed in the chapter dedicated to the popular books: *Iosif i Asinetha* (full text, Romanian Manuscript 1338 in the Library of Romanian Academy) and *Ismine* (f 1^r-19^v, Romanian Manuscript 2116 in the Library of Romanian Academy).