

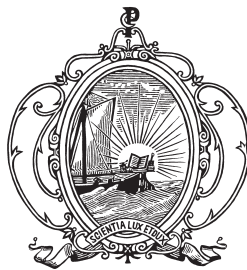
# STUDIA PATRISTICA

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## Eros in Theology of Ioane Petritsi and Shota Rustaveli

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### ABSTRACT

This article discusses the notion of eros in the Neoplatonic philosophy of Ioane Petritsi and his influence on the thought of the epic poet Shota Rustaveli, who holds a similar vision. In both Petritsi and Rustaveli eros represents an anagogic power that leads souls from their self-centeredness towards higher realities and ultimately to God; in both, eros is intimately connected to the notion of conscience (logos/intellect/understanding). Comparisons and influences are sought in the thought of the church fathers, but most importantly, in the thought of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Since eros in Petritsi and Rustaveli is a universal power that permeates all and, thus, by implication, is not restricted to any single culture or religion, those thinkers ran a risk of falling under a censure of the official church, which would deny any salvific or even anagogic activity happening outside her bosom. It will be argued that this explains the hostility of the church officials towards both these authors in Medieval Georgia; especially in the case of Rustaveli, this hostility even has a theoretical/theological basis.

The article will consider the phenomenon of eros in medieval Georgian literature. It will trace attitude towards this phenomenon in the earliest samples of Georgian literature, namely, hagiography and, as a contrast, it will show its novel understanding in the philosophical writings of Ioane Petritsi and the epic poetry of Shota Rustaveli. It will be shown that in both Petritsi and Rustaveli this novelty is influenced by their (Neo)-Platonic background. Rustaveli himself has definitely read Petritsi and is largely influenced by the latter, however this does not imply that the worldview of both is identical. Not the least Rustaveli is influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, whom he even mentions and loosely quotes. Pseudo-Dionysius' opus was translated into Georgian in the 11<sup>th</sup> century by Ephrem Mtsire and Rustaveli must have read it in this translation. Petritsi also had read Dionysius, as is evident from a few important meeting points in their thoughts. However, Petritsi did not need much mediation of Dionysius, since he had direct access to Hellenic philosophic texts. I shall discuss nuances of Petritsi's and Rustaveli's theory of eros and eventually suggest the reason for why their writings were not easily welcomed in the circles of the official Church, even to the point of persecution.

## 1

The original Georgian literature started with hagiography, both martyrdoms and lives of saints. In this early hagiographic literature the phenomenon of eros is depicted in a peculiar way. On the one hand, there is an intimation of a highest, mystical form of it, conveyed in the idea of ‘marriage’ with Jesus Christ as the eternal bridegroom of the human soul. For example, in the Martyrdom of Shushanik, the first original hagiographical monument of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the queen Shushanik makes a symbolic exchange of a bridal jeweled necklaces presented by her earthly husband, Varsken, with prison chains of her benevolent martyrdom for Christ, the chains now featuring as her true adornment for the imminent heavenly wedding with Christ.<sup>1</sup> However, there is not any discussion on earthly eros, only the reference is to the treason of the family by Varsken. Similarly, there is an intimation of heavenly eros in the martyrdom of St Abo the Perfumer of Bagdad. Just before his martyrdom, St Abo anoints himself with oil saying, from now on I will not anoint myself by the earthly oil with its perishable fragrance, but only the heavenly oil of commandments of Christ, whose imperishable fragrance I follow in the manner of a bride of Solomon’s *Song of Songs*.<sup>2</sup> Here again, there is no hint on the earthly side of eros in this hagiographic piece. Life of monks in the grand hagiographic work of Giorgi Merchule, *Life of St Gregory of Khandzta*,<sup>3</sup> is described as a preparation of the assembly of purified souls towards their mystical wedding in eternity, but if there occurs at all any discussion about earthly eros, then it is only in the negative sense as a certain demonic infatuation. For example, eros features as a demonic power that infringes upon nuptial fidelity. Thus, king Ashot Kuropalates had an ‘overflowing love’ towards a certain woman, for whom he abandoned his legal wife,<sup>4</sup> or a sister of future great ascetic Zeno, was ‘inflamed by demon of eros’, because of which she visited every night her beloved.<sup>5</sup> By and large, personal love and erotic sentiment in this literature is either considered as something spiritually perilous or neglected altogether.

## 2

Ioane Petritsi, a philosopher based in the Gelati Monastic school on his return from Constantinople, introduced his students to Neo-Platonic lore. This implied

<sup>1</sup> Jacob the Priest, ‘Martyrdom of Holy Queen Shushanik’, in *The Monuments of Old Georgian Literature* (Tbilisi, 1978), 33.

<sup>2</sup> Ioane Sabanisdze, ‘Martyrdom of the Saint and Blessed Martyr of Christ Abo’, in *The Monuments of Old Georgian Literature* (1978), 76-7.

<sup>3</sup> In *ibid.* (full name: “Deeds and Acts of the Worthy Life of our Saint and Blessed Father Gregory, the Archimandrite of Khandzta”).

<sup>4</sup> In *ibid.* 189-90.

<sup>5</sup> In *ibid.* 144.

also a novel attitude towards eros, for it plays such a crucial role in the metaphysics of Plato and of neo-Platonists. For Petritsi eros is an anagogic cosmic power, that accounts to dynamic cohesion of the entire great chain of being starting from the higher ideal realities down to the material world. As such, it cannot be evil, and there is no evil whatsoever in the universe. Eros can turn evil, in Petritsi's vision, only if improperly applied and improperly considered. To wit, the true eros for Petritsi is that towards immaterial entities, the Platonic ideal forms, that are sources of all perceptible beauty, the latter having all its reality and dignity grounded in the ideal in which it participates. Petritsi quotes from Plato's '*Symposium*', describing eros as anagogic power that attracts and drives perceptibly towards the ideal, and even the prime matter participates in this erotic upward tension.<sup>6</sup> Earthly sexual eros too is positive and entails a notion of self transcendence, for procreation is a means of participation in eternity through continuity of oneself in one's offspring; yet men can participate in eternity also without it. However, if somebody forgets the invisible and considers perceptible appetites as the aim in itself, and the only source of happiness and satisfaction, then only such a forgetful eros can turn evil.<sup>7</sup> However there is nothing bad or sinful in the earthly love, that accounts for human procreation, if set within proper limits; be it only that man does not forget the true values in the invisible world. The love of invisible beauty of perfect ideas is described in almost crude sensual and sexual terms like tasting and having an intercourse with.<sup>8</sup> Those ideas are metaphorically rendered in the *Genesis* as 'trees of paradise' which pure souls beheld there before the fall.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps, Petritsi believes that all sexual differences will be abolished in the realm of the ideal forms, since the earthly eros will be sublimated or transformed into a heavenly eros towards divine forms. It may be the reason for why Petritsi never mentions Eve, but only Adam.

Moreover, distinct from Platonic mysticism of eros and with a specifically Christian twist, Petritsi adds that in the most elevated sense eros even transcends the ideal forms, for desire for something that has structure and limit is itself in a way limited and can achieve satisfaction and stop; however, highest desire is that which is infinite and insatiable and its object must also be infinite, and such is only the transcendent source of all reality, the ineffable One. Thus, in utter self-transcendence the soul aspires at discarding her own essence and embrace the Infinite in infinite insatiable striving.<sup>10</sup> This much assimilates Petritsi's mysticism that of Gregory of Nyssa (with the latter's idea of

<sup>6</sup> Ioane Petritsi, *Commentaries on Proclus Diadochus' 'Elements of Theology'*, ed. by Sh. Nutsubidze and Simon Kaukchishvili (Tbilisi, 1937), 83-4.

<sup>7</sup> I. Petritsi, *Commentaries on Proclus Diadochus' 'Elements of Theology'* (1937), 214.

<sup>8</sup> I. Petritsi, *Commentaries on Proclus Diadochus' 'Elements of Theology'* (1937), 206. See Plotinus, *Enneads* – (*thigein* VI 9.7); (*epaphe* V 3.10); (*synousia* 9.7).

<sup>9</sup> Petritsi's source might be Origen, who speaks about rational nature of the paradise trees (see Orig., *HomGn* II 4).

<sup>10</sup> I. Petritsi, *Commentaries on Proclus Diadochus' 'Elements of Theology'* (1937), 82 and 84.

*epectasis*)<sup>11</sup> and St Symeon the New Theologian, with his doctrine of insatiable eros. And one more thing, Petritsi speaks about eros of higher terms towards lower ones, which differentiates him from the Plotinian theory of eros while assimilating Proclian<sup>12</sup> and Pseudo-Dionysian doctrines of providential eros.

To summarize, Petritsi's theory of eros is an altogether positive understanding of this phenomenon, a thoroughgoing vindication of this mysterious power that has different manifestations, but ultimately is deriving from and towards the source of all reality the One.

### 3

Shota Rustaveli is the 13<sup>th</sup> century author of the epic poem *The Knight in Panther's Skin*, that has been embraced as a national epic by Georgians. It takes the lead of Petritsi in the positive attitude to eros, yet 'zooms in' more closely to the notion of earthly eros between man and woman. As was said in the beginning, the earthly eros between man and woman was hardly ever discussed in previous literature, which had distinctly otherworldly accents. If it ever was discussed, it was only in a negative and demonic context as a sinful and perilous deviation from right path. With a sharp distinction, Rustaveli in the very opening stanzas of his poem extols eros: '[O Lord] give us the lovers such a desire that may abide until we die; // Give us the alleviation of sins, that everybody will carry with himself in the world beyond'.<sup>13</sup> It is interesting and intriguing, whether those two sentences are in a logical connection or they convey separate meanings. If the first supposition is correct, then we have a very bold statement that the desire of lovers, if it has gravity enough to last the entire life, accounts for alleviation of sins; this implies, that such a love partakes of the divine, since only the divine can reduce the power of sin. Perhaps, Rustaveli gives a specific romantic twist to the Biblical *logion* 'by love you shall cover many sins', yet as we shall see, the romantic in Rustaveli is not so much a psychological than a mystical and metaphysical phenomenon.

In the prologue Rustaveli sets the reason for his great poetic undertaking, stating that in its most elevated sense 'poetry is a branch of wisdom/philosophy';<sup>14</sup> since his epic poem is dedicated to love, therefore this love also has a philosophical bearing. Indeed, Rustaveli says: 'Love in its initial/primary sense, is of a genus of the heavenly ideas',<sup>15</sup> note that Rustaveli does not say explicitly that love itself is idea, but that it is of the genus of the heavenly ideas, which can be

<sup>11</sup> See *In Canticum canticorum*, hom. 6 (GNO VI, 174,5).

<sup>12</sup> Proclus, *In Alcib.* 54-6; Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite, *DN IV 13* (712 A-B).

<sup>13</sup> Here and elsewhere I refer to the following edition of the Georgian text: Shota Rustaveli, *The Knight in Panther's Skin*, Georgian Literature, v. IV (Tbilisi, 1988), 5.; all English translations are mine.

<sup>14</sup> S. Rustaveli, *The Knight in Panther's Skin* (1988), 7.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 9.

explained as ‘related to’ the heavenly ideas. Perhaps such an interpretation is closer to the logic of the *Symposium*, according to which eros is not itself god but intermediary between humans and gods. But this love, in poet’s words, is ‘difficult to utter by words’, ‘tongue will fatigue and listeners’ ears will be inflicted’, therefore, he ventured to speak about a lesser manifestation of this love, which is ‘earthly madnesses that befall bodies’ (or: ‘are allotted to bodily relationships’). This lesser manifestation of love also partakes of the first, divine eros of soul towards metaphysical perfections, if only the lovers are not adulterous, but ‘long to each other from afar’.<sup>16</sup> Rustaveli posits an unbridgeable gap between ‘adulterous eros’ and the elevated romantic eros that partakes of the divine, first eros and warns his readers most emphatically not to blur the distinction between the two. The adulterous eros relates only to a bodily attraction and therefore is not steady, whereas the true romantic eros should be lifelong, for it relates to the very hidden personality of the beloved and not to her/his mere physical appearance (with a qualification that the physical appearance also reveals the inner, personal dignity in Rustaveli’s poem). If adulterous eros ends, and this quickly, true eros ever grows. ‘I sit here [in this tower of captivity] for increasing the love that I have planted’, says Nestan, the main heroine of the epic poem. Since the earthly eros participates in the divine eros, cultivation of the earthly eros in lover’s heart, and in a reclusive solitude, amounts to lover’s spiritual growth and elevation towards divine. Love in such an elevated sense has a pedagogic and anagogic significance: ‘[This love] is a heavenly deed, which brings about elevations/inspirations’.<sup>17</sup> Since it elevates the soul towards the divine, then it is even a religious activity to cultivate such love and a lover involved in it will have to undergo much sufferings and ascetical toils: ‘Good lover is the one who can abstain from the worldly concerns’.

For such cultivation, aristocratic freedom from everyday labor for existence is necessary; in fact one of the indispensables for Rustaveli’s eros is ‘leisure’, just like the leisure or ‘scholē’ of philosophers. One may say that Rustaveli introduced Georgian nobility, his primary readers, to a culture of erotic-religious activity, ascetic cultivation of elevated romantic eros that is possible only for them, *i.e.* those who have leisure to concentrate on and refine those divinely inspired sentiments. The infatuation of the Rustavelian elevated romantic love ‘makes the unlearned – learned, and the learned – mad’, that is to say, if followed in earnest, this power leads to education, but such a lofty one that its summit verges on the divine realm that evades explanation.

Rustaveli expresses this tenet in many ways. For example, the name of the main heroine of the poem, Nestan Darejan is translated from Persian as ‘someone of whom likeness cannot be found on earth’. Tariel, the main hero, first sees her by accident in a garden where birds are singing ‘sweeter than sirens’. It is not

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 9.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 8.

mere decoration that Rustaveli adduces here this image of Greek mythology: in Pythagorean and Neoplatonic thought the sirens indicate a celestial harmony,<sup>18</sup> thus through vision of Nestan Darejan in the garden with 'sirenic' music, Tariel must partake of divine beauty and wisdom. At a glance of Nestan his heart is pricked by this unusual experience of the divine and he is blinded for three days, a possible allusion to the Apostle Paul's three days blinding after the vision on the road to Damascus.<sup>19</sup> After he comes to his senses, Tariel sees that his previous lifestyle – lax mingling with courtesans, hunting and carousing with company of friends *etc.* – does not satisfy him any longer, for 'immensity of desires instigated him to abandon everyone in solitude';<sup>20</sup> Tariel is, in a way, converted and repented, since a heavenly experience has 'infected' him and no longer can he continue the carefree life as before.

Perhaps some covert anticlerical message is expressed by Rustaveli in an episode, when Tariel, in his romantic sadness and longing for the beloved, is considered as 'possessed by demon' by religious authorities – 'accomplished Mullahs' – who read from the Koran in order to perform an act of exorcism. Tariel ironically, even mockingly says of them: 'I know not what kind of drivel were they mumbling'.<sup>21</sup> It can be said, that Rustaveli sees himself to realize the true value of romantic love that originates from divine reality and leads souls to there, and consciously establishes the value of this love, perhaps with a covert opposition to the stance of the official Church of his time. Before Rustaveli, those two things, 'marriage' and 'falling in love with' were not connected to each other in Georgian literature, while Rustaveli makes this connection emphatic and necessary, considering marriage without love an offence on the divine order of things and a violation of the 'just justice of God'. But this could have been considered as quite a dangerous new tenet, because it opens the horrible path of human private action, subversive to and undermining any authority that may claim its being founded on absolute and once-and-for-all fixed value. For instance, Nestan, in order to save her personal, romantic love and escape the enforced marriage, goes over against her royal father's orders, abandoning simultaneously on the one hand duty of obedience to the father and on the other hand that to the Sovereign, the obedience to love eclipsing both. That is to say, grounding and foundation of former values that claim to be

<sup>18</sup> See Iamblichus, *On the Pythagorean Life* 82.

<sup>19</sup> *Acts* 9:8-9.

<sup>20</sup> S. Rustaveli, *The Knight in Panther's Skin* (1988), 82.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 73. Since the setting of the epic is the Orient (India, Arabia, China), Rustaveli creates an oriental entourage and as part of it the religion of his main heroes is Islam. However, it is only an entourage and decoration, since essentially Rustaveli's theology is not Islamic: his heroes pray in a manner and with terminology that no Muslim would have approved of. Therefore Tariel's irony, directed towards the Mullahs, can indeed covertly express Rustaveli's irony towards the position of Church officials who would consider romantic love and infatuation as something evil and demonic.



absolute and sacrosanct, is shattered by the subversive action of love, the newly introduced and rivaling absolute value. To be sure, before Rustaveli the power of such love was acknowledged but not given to it any dignity of being in touch with God, on the contrary, this power was even demonized, and the faithful were enjoined to flee it. In contrast, Rustaveli provides love a novel philosophic-theoretical grounding through his poem. That is why when the king Parsadan, Nestan's father, learns about his daughter's violating his orders and contriving a cunning and cruel plan for rescuing her love, he is furious and thinks that the reason for Nestan's disobedient behavior is a 'demonic doctrine', the 'snare of devil';<sup>22</sup> yet, the logic of Rustaveli's narrative is to sacralize that, which the King Rostevan disparages as evil and demonic. In fact, this sacralization implies that romantic love towards the beloved outlives the earthly life and continues to the afterlife: the blissful vision of God's 'sunny night' (and Rustaveli's source for this expression must be Pseudo-Dionysius' tenet of 'luminous darkness' in *Mystical Theology*) entails also vision of the beloved for all eternity. That is why marriage that is grounded on divinely inspired personal eros of two beloved persons, brings order to the entire creation. Rustaveli symbolically expresses this by the number of days in which the marriage of the main characters Taniel and Nestan lasts – 8 days: as known in patristic literature both in the east (St Basil the Great, St Gregory of Nyssa<sup>23</sup>) and in the west (St Augustine<sup>24</sup>), eight is the number of resurrection and eternity: 'There was an measureless/infinite feast for 8 days'.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the end of the poem exhibits paradisiacal realm, where, as in *Isaiah*,<sup>26</sup> 'wolves and sheep graze together'.<sup>27</sup>

As was mentioned before, Rustaveli writes about the continuity of the first eros of the philosophic soul towards the divine perfection and the subsequent eros of two loving persons: the second eros is enlightened by the first. Notwithstanding the continuity, there is a clear hierarchy, for the second eros is connected to bodily relationships and therefore is also open to attacks for a perfidious fate, whereas the first eros is immune from all such influences of fate. Rustaveli states that the first and the highest calling is that of wise men or philosophers, who have courage enough to directly love God in a vertical ascent of soul and leave behind all the attractions of the world. However, this is not for everybody, but just for a few elect who can 'disobey yielding to the

<sup>22</sup> S. Rustaveli, *The Knight in Panther's Skin* (1988), 122.

<sup>23</sup> Basil the Great, *De spiritu sancto* 27 (PG 32, 192 B); Gregory of Nyssa, *De beatitudinibus* (PG 44, 1292A-D).

<sup>24</sup> *Sermo 8 in octava Paschae* 1, 4 (PL 46, 838, 841).

<sup>25</sup> Basil the Great, *De spiritu sancto* 27 (PG 32, 302).

<sup>26</sup> *Isa.* 65:25.

<sup>27</sup> Basil the Great, *De spiritu sancto* 27 (PG 32, 326).

tastes of the world',<sup>28</sup> and whose intellect 'flies like a dove'.<sup>29</sup> 'Dove' in this last quotation may refer to the Holy Spirit, that is to say, only those whose intellects are altogether saturated with and led by the Holy Spirit can be happy without ever entangling themselves with earthly love. Yet, even the earthly love with its inner dynamism that entails longing and sadness, self-restriction, loneliness and asceticism, as well as giving up of one's egotism for the sake of the beloved is established by God Himself: 'You gave birth to [romantic] love, You have set its rules'.<sup>30</sup> And again, the hierarchy of love should be strictly held, for if the link between the first and the subsequent loves is abandoned, the latter love can lead even to evil (murder, suicide *etc.*); thus also Rustaveli sees dangers in the earthly love if it falls into a negligence of hierarchy. Besides the mystical love to God, the romantic love is put lower than self-sacrificial love of a friend towards a friend. Rustaveli's heroes achieve such a state of spirit, when they easily give up all personal happiness for that of others. They even cannot consider it possible to be happy through romantic love, if a friend is in distress. They do not do anything else, if it is necessary to sacrifice their lives for a friend. This self-sacrificial love, that reflects the traditional Christian agape ('There is no greater love than when someone lays one's soul for another') fully eclipses the romantic love, which becomes even like a bane for a magnanimous person, unless the duty of self-sacrificial love to a friend is fully performed: 'I am the one who does not accost this world worthier than a rotten cucumber, and for whom to die for a friend is like a jest and play'<sup>31</sup> – says Avtandil with concern of his distressed friend Tariel. 'I cannot merry Nestan' – says Tariel on his turn – 'unless I do everything for Avtandil'. This self-sacrificial love more thoroughly affiliates humans with God, making them partakers of His providential love and partakers of His logic of abandoning 99 sheep for coming forth in search of the one lost.

Rustaveli considered his epic poem to be a 'pearl that may be transmitted from hand to hand', which is a metaphor for claiming that vision of the world through his 'pearl' would benefit all mankind in establishing correct hierarchic relationships between values, among them, between loves.

### Concluding remarks

Both Petritsi and Rustaveli were persecuted by the official Church in the Middle Ages and the logic of this persecution is not difficult to discern. In both thinkers, eros is a positive anagogic power to be found on all levels of reality.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 72.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 244.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 169.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 164.

However, this eros cannot be ascribed to one culture or one religion: although Rustaveli and Petritsi do not say this explicitly, their tenet may entail a danger for the Church's unique salvific role, for one may agree with Rustaveli and Petritsi that philosophic love, as well as romantic love elevates from what is earthly to the divine, but to what extent? Is this path open only to Christians or to all mankind? Neither Petritsi nor Rustaveli have answered those questions explicitly, however they opened a gate for thoughts that may have led Christians who read them to the point of existential and epistemological anguish and trepidation. There were two ways to curb this anguish: first to outright attack Petritsi and Rustaveli as dangerous heretics and do away with them, the second to interpret their strange ideas strictly in the biblical and patristic terms, incarcerating them as it were within the framework of an accepted theological lore. However neither of those attempts gives justice to difficult and uncommon efforts of those two Christian authors to penetrate the mystery of the realm of love and establish an order and hierarchy thereinto.

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