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*Cultural Mobility and Exchange in the Vernacular Byzantine Romance*

Some of the most exciting comparative studies in vernacular Byzantine romances in the last thirty years have shown that Greek literature of the late Middle Ages (as well as Early Modernity) was not insular. These studies have established, contrary to public perceptions, and beyond any shred of doubt, that the vernacular romances absorbed compelling influences from the West. Research has focused on specific sources, motifs and traditions, namely Italian and French, courtly and composite. We now know which Western sources vernacular writers employed and how they achieved this.

Beyond confirming the ties with the West, there is now enough evidence to qualify the approach of exclusive Byzantine indebtedness to Hesperia. This paper suggests two caveats. First, it is impossible to ban Eastern literature from a pool of possible influences. Both Arabic and Persian were thriving cultures with which the Byzantines were in contact. There emerges a sizeable amount of sources in these languages featuring intriguing similarities with the later Greek romances. Hellenists have paid less attention than they should to works such as the Persian *Heft peikar*, *Iskandar-nāmeḥ*, a story of Alexander the Great; *Khusraw va Shīrīn*, a love narrative; and the epic *Shahn-nāmeḥ*, all by Niẓāmī Ganjavī. On the Arabic side, we stand to benefit tremendously by studying the common ground with the masterful *Kitāb Alf laylah wa-laylah*, and even lesser-discussed works such as Ibn Zydūn's *Nūmiyya*. The second aim of my paper is to challenge the assumption that the vernacular Byzantine poets focused on single sources which they treated "theologically" as precious origins. Medievalists are becoming increasingly aware that the culture of late poetry was one of free-floating exchanges across language divisions. Multiple and simultaneous interactions were the norm. Vernacular Byzantine literature, particularly "low", popular literature, seems to be fascinatingly open-ended.