

Maria Iordanidou, *Loxandra*, translated by Norma Aynsley Sourmeli. Limni, Evia: Denise Harvey (Publisher), 2017. Pp. 252.
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Maria Iordanidou's novel, first published in 1963 and much acclaimed in Greece, has only now appeared in English. (It has previously been translated into at least seven other languages.) Based on Iordanidou's memories of her maternal grandmother, it spans the period from 1874 to the eve of the First World War, evoking the sights and sounds of Constantinople/Istanbul, and, in particular the tastes and textures of food and fabrics, the rhythms of calendar customs and the atmosphere of daily life in a very particular time and milieu. This is a world of pashas and eunuchs, ferries and sedan chairs, itinerant vendors, night watchmen, street dogs and household cats: above all, family lore, feuds and feasts. The biggest excitement, long to be remembered and re-told, is a fire in the narrow streets; apart from the murder of an Armenian neighbour, political events and rumours of wars and massacres beyond the boundaries of her community remain for *Loxandra* irrelevant and remote. Her response to news from the outside world (as so often for minorities in host communities) is: 'Is it good for us?'

The seemingly-artless narrative is in fact skilfully organised round a series of New Year celebrations. It is divided into three parts corresponding roughly to the life of *Loxandra* in her contented, expansive years in a seaside town on the outskirts of the City, the move to a darker, more hemmed-in house in Pera and a temporary uprooting to an unfamiliar Athens. As she ages, her granddaughter Anna (a version of Iordanidou herself) increasingly takes over as the centre of consciousness and narrative voice. It is this voice that sounds the elegiac note inseparable from any account of a vanished way of life: 'To the Kaiser's comings and goings *Loxandra* paid no attention ... they believed that Constantinople would always have the aroma of Romiosyni'. Yet Anna learns everything from *Loxandra*, including the ways of thinking and feeling that make possible the writing of the book.

Loxandra's kitchen is at the centre of her world. All her relationships are sustained by it; not only with her husband and offspring but with neighbours and servants (Turkish and Armenian), the egg-man, water-seller and butcher—even God and the saints: 'Glory be to God! Today, what shall I cook?' The Greek cemetery is a cheerful place to stroll on a sunny morning, visiting long-dead relatives and talking to the local Virgin Mary while munching communion bread along with snacks from her capacious pockets.

At the same time, language and speech is at the heart of the book. *Loxandra* (the Constantinopolitan form of Roxana) is illiterate but irrepressibly vocal. Just as her sturdy body in its many-layered finery promises a 'cornucopia' of abundance, her larger-than-life voice runs through the book, exhorting, lamenting, storytelling, singing or praying. She speaks both Greek and Turkish: with Ali the night watchman she converses 'half in Turkish, half in Greek'; later she will have recourse to Turkish as a private language which her granddaughter will not understand (a maddening but common habit of older relatives in multilingual families). Other languages, however,

she regards as outlandish, if not indecent (she is incredulous when told what a good Greek word such as ‘elpis’ sounds like in French). The everyday spoken language of the Greek community of the City, which even in the original book required footnotes, is a fascinating challenge for the translator, replete as it is with dialect forms, loan words, codeswitching and bilingualism. The publisher’s approach, as with the Papadiamantis stories in the same series, is to encourage each translator to find his or her own solution for a particular text—which is surely wise. Norma Aynsley Sourmeli’s ‘Translator’s Note’ to *Loxandra* describes how she drew on the speech of her own Northumbrian grandparents to suggest the ‘immediacy and verve and banter’ of the Greek. The resulting verbal style is engaging and expressive, absorbing idiomatic rhythms and flavours while avoiding the linguistic and cultural incongruities of an ‘equivalent’ variety of English. (There is no equivalent.) This translation has a few footnotes (different from those in the original, but equally useful): they gloss Turkish words and explain cookery, gesture, religious customs, folk remedies and other social details. There are also explanatory endnotes, filling in the broader historical and cultural context, and a glossary. One interesting endnote concerns the meaning of ‘romiosýni’—a significant aspect of *Loxandra*’s identity and outlook. (It is fitting that this translation should be published in Denise Harvey’s *Romiosyni Series*.)

The moment is ripe for a re-consideration of Maria Iordanidou herself, who has never fitted neatly into a chronological history of Greek literature; born in 1897, she should by rights belong to the generation of the 30s, but she wrote *Loxandra*, her first book, when she was already sixty-five. Her work also challenges ideas of genre. *Loxandra* is part fictionalised autobiography and part family memoir, but can also be seen as a variation on a specifically Greek literary mode: ‘ithografía’, but in an urban setting. Its mode, though seemingly oral, is crafted and ‘literary’.

Since the book was adapted for television in 1980, Greek interest in Constantinople, and other ‘lost lands’, has grown dramatically, with memoirs, exhibitions, concerts, themed restaurants and escorted tours; both Greek and international audiences responded enthusiastically to the film *Polítiki Kouzína* (distributed in the UK as *A Touch of Spice*). It would be good to think that English-language readers can now enjoy *Loxandra*, as they have recently embraced other, far lesser, books with a Greek theme.

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Commentary on the seemingly endless ‘Greek crisis’ and the irrepressible spectre of ‘Grexit’ must surely have by now exhausted all possible permutations of explanation