Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies 40 (1) 82–88

The Renaissance literature of Crete and Cyprus: looking back over forty years

David Holton
Selwyn College, Cambridge,
dwh11@cam.ac.uk

My subject is the relatively small body of literary texts written on the islands of Crete and Cyprus, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, under the influence of the Italian Renaissance. As a matter of fact, the two articles I published in *BMGS* during the first ten years of its existence had nothing to do with Renaissance literature. My delayed appearance in my chosen field offers me a personal angle to comment on one of the ways the subject has changed since the mid-1970s.

From my undergraduate days I was strongly attracted to this period and in particular to the works of Vitsentzos Kornaros, Georgios Chortatsis and the other Cretan playwrights. Although I was deflected by my doctoral supervisor into a slightly earlier period and to a rather different kind of text, I never lost my fascination for the Cretan works, which I taught to students, but at that time – the mid-1970s – I did not venture to engage in research on them. The field was widely regarded as the fiefdom of a small number of mainly Greek scholars, who were primarily (even exclusively) interested in traditional philological issues – authorship, dating, sources, textual problems – with a few very distinguished exceptions. There were also a few non-Greek scholars of the post-war generation who had ventured into this field; notable among them was Gareth Morgan, whose pioneering Oxford DPhil ('The sources and inspiration of Cretan poetry under the Venetians') had been serialized in *Κρητικά Χρονικά* in 1960, and who had also published an article on 'French and Italian elements in the *Erotokritos*' in the same journal in 1953. And in the 1970s two young British scholars, Alfred Vincent and Rosemary Bancroft-Marcus, completed doctoral theses on the Cretan playwrights Foskolos and Chortatsis respectively, and started to publish their own major contributions to research on Cretan drama. They were the brave exceptions, who had probably also benefited from the encouragement of an enlightened supervisor, and who tackled texts on which previous research was dominated by the likes of Stefanos Xanthoudidis and Emmanouil Kriaras, not to mention august 19th-century figures like Konstantinos Sathas and Émile Legrand.

DOI: 10.1017/byz.2015.9

At precisely the time *BMGS* was getting underway, the University of Birmingham had become an important focus of research on the Cretan Renaissance, thanks to the inspired leadership of Margaret Alexiou and Alfred Vincent and the committed support of Anthony Bryer. The University Library had acquired the best extant manuscript of the tragedy *Erofili* in 1970. Postgraduate research on the text of the manuscript was initiated, Cretan literature figured prominently in one of the annual symposia of Byzantine Studies held at Birmingham, and there was even an abridged performance of the Cretan comedy *Fortounatos*. When Vincent left for Australia in 1974, to take up a lectureship at the University of Sydney, it was difficult to sustain the momentum and there was, inevitably, some reduction in activity, though scholars such as Margaret Alexiou, Christos Alexiou and Raphaelle Collins continued to research and teach Cretan texts.

There was, perhaps surprisingly (or perhaps not), nothing comparable happening at Greek universities. It is remarkable that the Greek academics in post in the 1950s, '60s and '70s produced very few graduates who went on to specialize in Cretan (or Cypriot) literary studies of the Renaissance period. Apart from Kriaras's student Komnini Pidonia, the only case that comes to mind is the great Nikos Panagiotakis (1935-97), who supervised the theses of two scholars, Stefanos Kaklamanis and Yannis Mavromatis, who have since become leading figures in Cretan literary studies in Greece and beyond. Perhaps it's unfair to depict the Greek scene in the 1970s as moribund, presided over by a small number of ageing academics, some of whom had indeed given much of value in their own research, but who were not handing the torch on to a new generation. But that's the way it appeared to a young foreign researcher who was passionately interested in Cretan literature but saw it as forbidden territory for the likes of him. So it was not until 1986 that I plucked up the courage to give a paper in Greece on a Cretan topic, at the 6th International Congress of Cretan Studies, which took place that year in Chania. I need not have worried. The 'old guard' responded favourably to my contribution and I published the paper in the first issue of the new journal *Cretan Studies* in 1988 – rather than wait the customary five years for it to appear in the official conference proceedings.

The contrast between the '70s and the present is considerable, then, firstly in terms of the opportunities for younger scholars to present their work and to have novel approaches taken seriously by the 'establishment': we have become more democratic and more open to new ideas. At the same time – and perhaps not unrelatedly – the volume of research, measured in terms of published books, articles and conference papers, has increased hugely. Some illustrative numbers, based just on *Erotokritos*, can be culled from a bibliography compiled by Stefanos Kaklamanis which goes up to 2005. In the ten years 1950–9, some twenty-seven items appeared (editions and translations are not included); the figure for the 1960s was not dissimilar: twenty-six. The 1970s saw an increase to thirty-seven publications, which then doubled to seventy-four in the 1980s. A further rise to ninety-three is observed in the 1990s, and in the six years to 2005 (when the bibliography was compiled) there were already fifty-two publications in print. Admittedly, *Erotokritos* has become a particular growth industry, but I have no doubt that a significant expansion of research on other Cretan texts and literary topics

https://doi.org/10.1017/byz.2015.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

has also taken place, in part due to the increasing number of conferences and to the establishment of new academic journals, such as *Παράβασις*.

Research on Cretan drama has been matched by an increase in theatrical productions, with which we can also link adaptations of *Erotokritos* for the stage, as well as a great variety of musical settings. All this indicates a greater public awareness of these works and their literary significance in Greece and Cyprus, which is a further factor leading to the greater prominence of Renaissance literature in research and publication. Of course there has been a general growth in academic research, including Modern Greek studies, over the past four decades, for reasons that it is not necessary to discuss here. My impression, however, is that the expansion has been more marked in the field I'm focusing on than in, say, late-medieval or even twentieth-century Greek literary studies, though it is true that the nineteenth century, and particularly literature written in *katharevousa*, has also emerged from neglect in recent decades. But quantity is only one aspect, and we need more qualitative assessments to give a clearer picture of how the field has changed.

The analysis, critical evaluation and interpretation of works of literature depends on the availability of reliable critical editions of the texts. Forty years ago it was necessary to go back to the editions of Xanthoudidis for *Erotokritos* (1915), *Fortounatos* (1922) and *Erofili* (1928), all of which had various shortcomings. Even where a more recent edition existed, for example *The Sacrifice of Abraham* by Megas (1954), it needed to be used with caution. Things started to change in the 1960s and 1970s with the publication of several new or improved editions: *The Shepherdess* (Stylianos Alexiou 1963), *Katzourbos* (Linos Politis 1964), *Panoria* (Kriaras 1975), *Stathis* (Martini 1976), and then in 1980 two editions of great significance: Vincent's *Fortounatos* and the landmark *Erotokritos* by Stylianos Alexiou. In the course of the next fifteen years there followed a number of so-called χρηστικές εκδόσεις, without critical apparatus but accompanied by authoritative introductions and intended to appeal to a wider readership. We owe these editions, which include the lengthy historical poem of Bounialis as well as works of Cretan and Heptanesian drama, to Stylianos Alexiou and Martha Aposkiti. There is no doubt that this editorial activity provided a vital stimulus to research, as well as theatrical performances, and to the inclusion of several of these works in school and university curricula. This is not to say that the task of producing critical editions is now done. Far from it. We still lack modern scholarly editions, based on all extant witnesses, for a number of texts, of which the most important is the tragedy *Erofili*. However, there is now an awareness that different kinds of edition may be appropriate for different purposes and different audiences, but perhaps not yet an acceptance that editions made thirty or forty years ago may need to be updated or replaced – something which is the norm in other literatures.

Related to the issue of editions is the development and use of technological aids. The academic world has yet to benefit fully from the application of new technologies to the analysis and study of Cretan Renaissance literature, but some useful advances have been made. Concordances and rhyme-tables in particular have been utilized for stylistic

analysis (thanks to the enlightened initiative of Dia Philippides), while other applications (e.g. as research tools for critical editions or linguistic analyses) are still quite rare. One of the pioneers in this area, Rosemary Bancroft-Marcus, was already producing machine-readable texts for her research on Chortatsis in the 1970s. There are indications that quite a few editors and critics are now making use of digitized texts, or even producing their own texts, but remarkably little has been placed in the public domain.

It is not, then, the application of technology that radically distinguishes the scholarly output of the present decade from that of the 1970s, nor even the adoption of 'theory' (though that has left its imprint and we will come to it shortly). In my view, the way in which Cretan and Cypriot Renaissance studies have changed most noticeably over four decades can be summed up in one word: contextualization. In place of the old preoccupation with tracking down 'sources', whether of whole plots or story lines, or smaller elements such as imagery and motifs, the key words are now intertextuality and poetics. We have become much more interested in situating the Greek texts in relation to wider cultural phenomena, particularly of course the Italian Renaissance. This has taken various forms. One springs from the realization that Cretan authors were not merely adapting specific models but were actually well versed in the literary theory of their day and indeed current controversies. It is now possible, for example, not just to compare the styles of Kornaros and Chortatsis but to relate them to opposing sides in the ongoing debate between the Ancients and the Moderns. The concept of decorum has been used to analyse the Cretan comedies, and tragedy has been situated in relation to manneristic and baroque tendencies of the time. The pervading influence of Petrarch and his followers on imagery, particularly in relation to love themes, has been explored in relation to Cretan and Cypriot texts, most notably by the late Michalis Lassithiotakis. Furthermore, we have discovered the relevance of works such as *The Courtier* of Baldassar Castiglione and *The Prince* of Niccolò Machiavelli to the depiction of social mores, courtly behaviour and political power in the Cretan texts, while Massimo Peri has shown how contemporary medical knowledge underlies the representation of physical and emotional states in *Erotokritos*.

Systematic research on the historical background and the social, political and cultural institutions of Crete in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has been of enormous benefit to literary scholars who seek to situate Cretan literature in the context of contemporary society (something which – it must be acknowledged – Alexiou was already attempting in his seminal studies from the 1950s onwards). Forty years ago there was considerable uncertainty about the dating of several of the Cretan texts (*Erotokritos*, *The Sacrifice of Abraham*, the plays of Chortatsis). Now, thanks to the researches of Panagiotakis, Mavromatis and others, we can be more confident about when the texts were composed (though not all the issues have been satisfactorily resolved), and as a consequence contextual approaches can be more fruitfully pursued.

The relatively new field of Comparative Literature has encouraged fertile comparative research on Cretan texts together with works written in French, Spanish, Italian and English (especially Shakespeare) in roughly the same period. Comparison of plots

https://doi.org/10.1017/byz.2015.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press

or characterization is not a new thing, but now the focus is much more on the social and political context in which the texts were composed, with an emphasis on issues such as gender, race, social class and power. Such theoretically informed comparative work, often undertaken for Masters and PhD dissertations (particularly but not exclusively in Britain and the USA), has served to introduce Cretan literature to a wider audience, and it is to be hoped that this trend will continue. Particular mention should be made of comparisons between Cretan and other South-East European literatures, particularly theatrical works in the Dalmatian coastal area, which have been pioneered by Walter Puchner. Forty years ago it is unlikely that anyone would have thought of making such comparisons, or considered them relevant. Since we are now much more aware of 'reception' aspects of the field, it makes sense to compare how different regions that came into contact with Italian Renaissance literature and culture, particularly those regions that shared a Venetian connection, assimilated and reacted to those contacts.

The other side of the coin is the investigation of how Cretan works have been received, interpreted and revamped in later centuries. Again, the main case study tends to be *Erotokritos*, largely because of its wide circulation as a printed text from 1713 onwards. Bibliographical research remains important, but reception studies have vastly enlarged the scope of research to include areas that would scarcely have been thought appropriate for an academic philologist to study in the 1970s, for example, in relation to the visual arts and the comic book. Oddly, the much-vaunted oral tradition of *Erotokritos* has not been the subject of specific investigation, as far as I am aware. Nonetheless, a more sophisticated engagement with the reception of this and other Cretan texts is one of the more striking changes in the field over the past four decades.

A preoccupation with theory *per se* has not, however, marked this field of research to the same extent as other periods of Greek literature, but this does not mean that theoretical approaches developed since the 1970s have passed it by – far from it. In fact there is a good deal of work that makes use of, for example, narratological, feminist, post-structuralist and other approaches, sensitively and with illuminating results; indeed, this is another way in which younger scholars, with a sound training in theory and methodology, have been able to make their mark.

Comparative and contextual studies have also led to a clearer understanding of the place these 'early modern' texts occupy in the history of post-medieval Greek literature. One very welcome development is the explicit connection of the Cretan Renaissance texts with the Cypriot lyric poems found in the unique Venice manuscript, edited by Themis Siapkaras-Pitsillides (1952 and 1975). The edition and its introduction provided a sound basis for further research, which, however, was slow to take off. The Petrarchan character of (many though not all of) these poems was well established, and specific models had been identified. Work on their metrics, and later their style, appeared from time to time. But it was the analytical studies of Elsie Mathiopoulou-Tornaritou that cast doubt on the editor's assumption that the poems were all the work of a single Cypriot poet. She has argued for multiple authorship across a time-span of perhaps seven decades, up to ca. 1571. Her use of the term *canzoniere* for the collection has been

widely accepted. The Petrarchistic imagery has been fruitfully studied by other scholars in comparison with various Cretan works and, in general, there has been an upsurge of interest in this extremely varied collection of poems, over the past two decades. At the same time a more positive picture of the period of Venetian rule in Cyprus has emerged from the work of political, economic and social historians.

If the Cypriot *canzoniere* has now been brought into a closer relationship with study of the Cretan Renaissance (not least because this kind of lyric poetry has, tantalizingly, not survived from Crete – though it must have existed), something similar has also happened with literary works written in Crete, or by Cretans, in Italian. Recent editions of such Italo-Cretan plays and narrative poems, but also historical works and memoirs, have considerably enhanced our knowledge of Cretan society and cultural activity. It was, after all, a bilingual society, at least in the urban areas, and it is a fact that some Cretans, for all their pride in their place of birth, chose to write in Italian. This is not so different, perhaps, from the adoption of Renaissance styles in painting or music by other native-born Cretans.

The corpus of Cretan literature, in terms of the number of surviving texts, remains virtually unchanged from forty years ago, but I would argue that the way it is viewed, by both scholars and the 'general public', has undergone far-reaching change. Partly, as suggested earlier, this is due to the sheer quantity of research and publication. The 'Neograeca Medii Aevi' conference series, for example, has since its establishment in 1986 provided an international forum for research and scholarly interaction, attested by the seven substantial volumes of proceedings from six conferences (held in Germany, Italy, Spain, Cyprus, the United Kingdom and Greece). Four other conferences have focused on a single text, *Erotokritos*, beginning with the ground-breaking conference on the poem's poetics, held in Heraklion in 2003. In 2015 alone two smaller events devoted to *Erotokritos* have taken place: one in Thessaloniki, one in Siteia. Conferences and collective volumes covering the broader field of Cretan Renaissance studies add to the picture. Translation of Cretan literary works into the main European languages has made progress, though many gaps still exist. As far as English is concerned, we have recently acquired excellent translations of all the known works of Chortatsis by Rosemary Bancroft-Marcus, accompanied by new editions of the texts (2013), and a reliable prose rendering of *Erotokritos*, published in Australia (Betts, Gauntlett and Spilias, 2004). This is a far cry from the situation in 1975, when the only available translations of major Cretan works were done, in stilted English, in the 1920s.

Much has changed, then, over the past four decades. It's not just the amount of research on Cretan literature, measured crudely in terms of publications, theses and conferences, that marks the difference, but the actual questions that are asked of the texts and the contextual information that is brought into the analysis and interpretation. The questions have certainly changed, though naturally there are still thorny issues that come in for repeated debate. We have largely got beyond the wearying and repetitive arguments about authorship, dating and sources. Instead, we debate questions such as how appropriate the label 'Renaissance' is to Cretan literature of the late sixteenth and

seventeenth centuries, and whether vernacular Greek played any part in the activities of the Cretan academies. The field has grown (and grown up), it has an impressive international outreach, and it continues to recruit young researchers who recognize not only the intrinsic merits of the texts, but also their lasting impact on modern Greek literature and culture.

https://doi.org/10.1017/byz.2015.9 Published online by Cambridge University Press