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For the Establishment of Correct Variant Reading of One Passage of Shota Rustaveli's *The Knight in Panther's Skin*: Theory of Deification

The oldest surviving manuscript of Shota Rustaveli's entire poem - *The Knight in Panther's Skin* (the manuscript H - 2074) dates from XVI century.¹ The manuscript was commissioned by the Patriarch Ioane (John) Avalishvili. The commissioner himself was not of a high opinion as to the epic poem's theological significance and utility. Moreover, the Patriarch John even warned the readers concerning the perils of this secular, as he calls it, text that, in his opinion, does not praise God in a dogmatically correct way as Trinity in one essence and will fail to transform the Pauline fleshly Adam to the spiritual Adam.

However, Rustaveli himself was perhaps much more imbued with the tradition of the Christian patristics than the Patriarch John Avalishvili thought. To be sure, this was not the only tradition from which Rustaveli drew his theological inspirations, for his other important sources are (Neo)-Platonic philosophy and Sufi mysticism (although the latter's role can be more ornamental than essential). However, in the poem there is a definite presence of one very special Christian theologian, whom Rustaveli directly quotes, unlike anonymous allusions to ideas of other theologians that can also be discerned. This theologian is Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, who in Rustaveli's time of course was regarded as the real Dionysius, the disciple of St. Paul. Pseudo-Dionysius quite matched intellectual-spiritual taste and proclivities of Rustaveli's creative genius, for like this six century Christian, so also Rustaveli had a strong synthetic drive

¹ Shota Rustaveli, *The Knight in Panther's Skin*, Nekeri, Tbilisi 2005 (in Georgian).

towards linking different traditions and presenting them as a uniform whole. Rustaveli quotes Pseudo-Dionysius when he writes about the doctrine of insubstantiality of evil:

Wise Dionysius reveals this hidden wisdom:
God brings forth good and does not generate evil.²

However, this paper will show that the mysterious pseudonymous theologian is present in *The Knight in a Panther's Skin* also in his doctrine of deification, that had become the central point of Eastern Christian theology and mysticism and spread also to the Latin West through such thinkers as John Scottus Eriugena, whose theology draws heavily from this Byzantine source. It will be shown, that the manuscript reading that in the earliest surviving manuscript mentioned above is written at a margin of the text is in fact the correct version not seen as such by a copyist or a censor, who interpolated a substitution that smoothens and even nullifies the theological significance of the passage.

The dramatic setting of the passage is the following. Tariel, the very knight in panther's skin, the main protagonist of the poem, is in a desperate search of his lost beloved Nestan Darejan.³ Tariel's friend, Avtandil, an Arab general, who upon benign whim of the Providence befriended him in the time of utmost despair, succeeds in finding Nestan's whereabouts: she is kept prisoner in a tower of Kadjs – tribe of sorcerers who intend to coerce Nestan to a marriage with a Kadj prince. After knowing that Tariel is alive and fearful lest he comes in rescue of her with next to unavoidable outcome of perishing at the hands of the sorcerer Kadjs, Nestan sends impassioned letter to Tariel, urging him not to come to her aid. At the same time she assures Tariel that she will not be wife of anybody but him, and if this was not possible in this life, then the entire eternity of the afterlife awaits their marriage. Thus, she promises her beloved that she will sooner die rather than marry anybody else. In throes of romantic love sublimated to theological visions she speaks about the inseparability of her desire towards Tariel with her desire towards contemplation of divine illuminations. Here I quote two stanzas from Nestan's letter which are the focus of the present discussion; the second stanza includes the scribal substitution I spoke above:

² Ibid., 208. Here and elsewhere I provide my own translations.

³ As noticed by scholars since Niko Marr, the name is descriptive and derives from Persian "nest andare dajan", meaning "not to be found in the world", i. e. possessing supra-mundane beauty.

Commend me to God by your prayers, that He may deliver me from toils of the
world:

From the movements in the realm of the elements – fire, water, earth and air;
That He may give me wings and I may fly up, reaching my desired aim:
To contemplate, days and nights, twinklings of the lightnings of the Sun.

The Sun cannot be without you, for you are allotted to Him,
Definitely you will approximate Him, being His worthy zodiac,
I will see you There, identifying you with Him⁴ and you will illumine my darkened
heart,

So that if my life has been bitter, at least my death will be sweet.⁵

The third line of the second stanza is changed by a scribe in this way: “I will see you there, I will project you there, you will illumine my darkened heart.” Now, the difference in Georgian is only in one letter, the “n”. In the version which I consider as authentic the Georgian word is მადვე “madve” [“just as Him”], whereas a scribe or censor substitutes it with the word მანდვე “mandve” [“in the same place”] thus creating a tautology, quite mismatching with the poetic principle of Rustaveli “to say long things shortly”. What could be the reason for the scribe or the censor to change the word? I think the reason could be that the word “madve” sounded scandalous and even sacrilegious for the uninitiated person, who understood the passage in terms of Nestan identifying the beloved with God Himself, thus substituting the latter with the former and falling into a blatant idolatry. However for the initiate into the doctrine of deification a la Pseudo-Dionysius the passage conveys an insight totally compatible with the Christian theology. In fact, Nestan speaks of Tariel as deified through becoming allotted to God, or participating in the divine Light, thus becoming God, in a way that he becomes also a channel of divine illumination for Nestan. What is specifically Rustavelian in this passage is to sublimate the earthly romantic love of the unique object, of the unique person of the beloved to the divine love, in which process not only love gets purified and divinized but also the object of love; thus, unlike the logic of Plato’s *Symposium*, according to which in the course of the erotic ascent the concrete is to be abandoned for the higher, the general and universal, in Rustaveli the concrete itself or him/herself is elevated to the realm of divine universality becoming inseparable from the latter. Moreover, rising the earthly, romantic love to such a lofty status, so as to root it in the very divine eternity makes Rustaveli a pioneering thinker in Georgia. One can call Rustaveli’s vision a “divine sublimation of ro-

⁴ Or: “I will project you as Him.”

⁵ *The Knight in Panther’s Skin*, 184.

matic", according to which the earthly romantic eros both emanates from and ascends to the divine Source.

Rustaveli's other inspiration and source for developing this vision could have been Ioane Petritsi, who also makes a creative elaboration upon Proclus' system and constructs a tenet of "divinized gods", or "gods in virtue of participation [in God]". Those divinized gods can well be humans who ascend to the divine through contemplation and ascetic toils and thus in Petritsi's words are "divinezed in their souls". Thus, in Petritsi's system Proclian uncreated henadic gods, whom Proclus identifies with the gods of the Greek pantheon become created entities who get deified or divinized through participation in the God proper. This matches well to Rustaveli's above metaphor of calling Taniel the "zodiac of the Sun": as the zodiac receives the sun, so Taniel will receive the Eternal Sun and be divinized through Him.

Now, what remains to be answered, is why did the copyist or censor put the authentic word "madve" on the margin, why did not he omit it altogether? I have no answer but only can offer a surmise: evidently the copyist felt some unease of changing the text, attested in this form in all or majority of codices available for him and this unease coupled with respect towards the author urged him to put the true version on the margin. A more elaborate surmise would be that perhaps the copyist, himself initiated and well understanding the importance of the term left it on the margin for those of his kin who would not be scandalized by it, while putting less provocative term for the uninitiated in the main body. However the true motivation remains a mystery, as does the true identity of the sixth century promoter of the doctrine of divine eros and deification in Christian theology.