

Shota Rustaveli *The Knight in the Panther Skin* (Lyn Coffin, translator; Poezia Press, 2015)

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As the 12th century came to an end, the Kingdom of Georgia was one of the most powerful states at the frontier between the Christian West and the Islamic East. Ruling over this multi-ethnic, multi-confessional realm was a woman, Tamar, who as sovereign bore the title “King of Kings”. Of the works dedicated to her by the poets at her court, Shota Rustaveli’s epic *Knight in the Panther’s Skin* (*KPS*; Georgian title *Vepkhist’q’aosani*) is undoubtedly the best known.

The *KPS* comprises around 1600 quatrains (depending on the edition), each containing four sixteen-syllable rhymed lines. Its plot is as old as the hills: boy loves girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back. (The boy in this case is the title character, Tariel, whose beloved princess has been imprisoned in a fortress. Bracketing this tale is the story of Prince Avtandil, who goes on a quest to find Tariel in order to win the hand of the newly-crowned sovereign Tinatin — a character based on Tamar herself).

What makes the *KPS* a monument of world literature is the rich blend of tropes, images and philosophical references imbedded in its 300 pages of text, and the astonishing linguistic virtuosity of its author. Georgia had been situated for centuries at the crossroads of the Byzantine and Iranian cultural spheres; in its academies and at the court, the philosophic currents of Neoplatonism and Sufism mingled with the teachings of the Church Fathers. Rustaveli’s aphorisms and non-Trinitarian references to God are a reflection of this milieu, as is his development of the theme of courtly love — leading to speculation about possible links between Rustaveli’s world and that of the nearly contemporaneous troubadours of Occitania. His cosmopolitan worldview has also stimulated vigorous debate in Georgian intellectual circles about its compatibility with Orthodox Christianity, and on occasion aroused the hostility of churchmen.

Rustaveli's Georgian has been likened to Shakespeare's English, and with good reason. Both writers came into possession of their literary languages at a time of transition, when a recognizably modern form of the language was emerging even as older words and grammatical devices remained in use. Both drew upon extensive vocabularies, further enriched by neologisms. Rustaveli's most striking coinages are nonce formations fashioned to fill out the rhyme scheme, such as the minimalist gem *ie* 'be a violet!' (an imperative verb formed from *ia* 'violet'). Rustaveli was a masterful sound-painter, exploiting to the fullest the phonetic resources of medieval Georgian, including its penchant for consonant clustering (*ktsevita vepxebr mk'rchxalita* 'moving like a sharp-clawed panther').

R. H. Stevenson declared Rustaveli's language 'all but impossible to translate'; but that did not stop him from trying. M.-F. Brosset, one of the first West European students of Georgian literature and history, undertook a French translation (never completed) nearly two centuries ago. Since then, the KPS has been translated multiple times into Russian, German, French and English, and at least once in languages from Abkhaz to Yiddish. Marjory Wardrop's 1912 prose translation was followed by Urushadze's unrhymed hexameters, and two further prose versions (Stevenson and Vivian, both of 1977). In such a crowded field, what does this new Englishing of the KPS have to offer?

Although only the name of Lyn Coffin appears on the cover, the actual translating was done by Georgian scholars, principally Dodona Kiziria. Coffin reworked the English gloss into 1654 quatrains of 16-syllable rhymed lines, thereby partially adopting Rustaveli's metrical scheme. Verse translations inevitably sacrifice accuracy for music. A handful of settings are judged to have come out ahead in the exchange, such as Bal'mont's Russian Rustaveli in the metre of Poe's *The Raven*. How does the new translation fare? Here is quatrain 154 in the Georgian Academy edition:

*Vart umoq'wresni me da shen /q'ovelta p'at'ron-q'matasa,
amistwis gnuq'ev smenasa / shen ama chemta qmatasa:
chem ts'il dagagdeb p'at'ronad, / tavadad chemta sp'atasa,
ama sakmesa vera vik / me gandobasa sxwatasa.*

Wardrop provides an accurate prose rendering: *Of all lords and vassals thou and I are most friendly; therefore I entreat thee to hear this from mine own mouth; in my stead I appoint thee lord and chief over mine armies, I could not entrust this matter to others.*

Here is Coffin:

*Of all lords and vassals you and I are as close as we can be.
Therefore I have come that you may hear the news directly from me:
As temporary lord and chief of my armies, I appoint thee:
There's no one else to whom I could give this responsibility.*

In order to maintain syllabic quantity and rhyme, Coffin is forced into questionable choices of wording, especially in the second half of her quatrains. The pronoun 'thee' is repeatedly used as a line-final equivalent of 'you', regardless of speech register or even number.

Readers can assess for themselves the metrical felicity of 'responsibility'. Quite often, extraneous words are added to fill out the line length. It is especially unfortunate that Coffin did not divide her lines into 8-syllable segments with a caesura, as did Rustaveli himself and as was done in German, French and Russian syllabic settings. In conclusion, I would advise interested readers to choose among the existing prose renderings.