

# Female Protagonists in the Late Byzantine Romances *Livistros and Rodamni* and *Achilleid* as Seen through Greimas' Actantial Model

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## Abstract

This article deals with the development of the love relationships between the protagonists in the romances *Livistros and Rodamni* and *Byzantine Achilleid*. Focusing on the female protagonists and their characters, it pursues the potential shifts in their demeanours towards their male counterparts. The method used for the analysis of the characters is the actantial model by A. J. Greimas. Firstly, the article shows how the process of courtship transformed from an act of persuading the female protagonist in *Livistros and Rodamni* to the rather straightforward wooing in the *Achilleid*, despite the use of similar courtship methods. Second, it shows that the behaviour of the female protagonists also shifted; the complexity and craftiness of *Rodamni* contrasts with the much more direct and decisive character of *Polyxeni*. The article provides evidence of a shift in the portrayal of the love relationships in erotic fiction as well as a tendency to portray the female protagonists of such works as being more self-reliant and open-hearted.

## Keywords

late Byzantine romance, female protagonist, relationship development, narratology, actantial model

Late Byzantine romances are works of erotic fiction, written between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries in the vernacular Greek in 15-syllable iambic verse. The common storyline of these romances, namely *Livistros and Rodamni*, *Velthandros and Chrysantza*, *Kallimachos and Chrysorroï*, *Byzantine Achilleid*, *Florios and Platzia-Flora*, *Byzantine Iliad*, and *Imberios and Margarona*, is the love story of a noble young couple who must overcome numerous hardships (such as enemies and fate) to live happily ever after. Late Byzantine, or Palaiologan, romances built on a tradition of Greek erotic fiction going back to the first centuries A.D., to the Second Sophistic.<sup>1</sup> In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, educated writers supported by the highest aristocratic circles of Constantinople picked up the threads of this long-dormant genre. Four so-called Komnenian novels have been preserved that in many ways resemble their late ancient ancestors.<sup>2</sup> After another interruption of more than 100 years, not long after 1204 the first of the late Byzantine romances emerged.

The elaborate narrative structure of these works; the mix of Western, Eastern, and Byzantine motifs; and their resemblance to other romances written at that time across Europe began to attract scholarly interest only in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of the questions that has arisen is how social changes emerging at that time in the (former) territory of the Byzantine empire were reflected in these works. Studies of sexuality, gender and masculinity, among other topics, have contributed to a better understanding of such changes.<sup>3</sup> Scholars have wondered about the extent to which the depiction of the protagonists' behaviour corresponds to the conditions in Byzantine society and the extent to which it is the authors' ingenious play with a broad range of literary motifs.<sup>4</sup> In other words, if the romances show physical relationships between the couples before marriage, does that mean that this was acceptable in the Byzantine society of the day as well? If Kallimachos is portrayed as a passive, shy youth, in contrast to the bright and sharp Chrysorroï, does this reveal something about the young people of 14<sup>th</sup> century Byzantium? Is Rodamni really so arrogant and artful to torture Livistros with her constant rejections or is she just naïve and simple-minded?

These and similar questions have been the subject of extensive discussions.<sup>5</sup> Hans G. Beck and Roderick Beaton have argued that the romances are so heavily

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1 Regarding late ancient novels, see Hägg (1991) or Whitmarsh (2008).

2 Regarding the Komnenian novels, see Beaton (1996); regarding the relationship and similarity of late ancient and Komnenian novels, see Roilos (2006).

3 Meyer (2019: 9–10) and Messis – Nilsson (2019: 160). Regarding sexuality and masculinity, see Messis (2006); cf. Beck (1986).

4 Messis – Nilsson (2018: 3).

5 Out of many, see, for example, Agapitos (1990); Smith (1999); Agapitos (1993); Messis – Nilsson (2019); Vassilopoulou (2020); Ainalis (2020).

influenced by Western chivalric romances that all the moral codes of Byzantium and orthodoxy have been forgotten and the works mirror the then-current approach to sexuality.<sup>6</sup> However, this is neither the only nor the prevailing opinion. Panagiotis Agapitos showed that even one of the most erotically charged scenes in the romances, the bath scene in *Kallimachos and Chrysorroï*, is drawn largely from late ancient and Komnenian models.<sup>7</sup> Kostas Yiavis and Kirsty Louisa Stewart have recently pointed out some significant contradictions between the story worlds of the romances and the social reality of the time.<sup>8</sup> All of the late Byzantine romances were probably written within a span of two centuries. Over this time, there were significant differences in the depictions and the developments of the relationship of the main couple as well as in the character of the heroine.

This article aims to contribute to the discussion outlined above. I take up the following questions: Does the behaviour of the protagonists during their courtship differ significantly between each romance? Can we observe different concepts of the female protagonist's chastity, shyness, or even craftiness? I will try to answer these questions with the help of the actantial model proposed by French semiotician A. J. Greimas. I will use his model, which theorizes that a plot can be broken down into six elements, to describe the diverse approach to courtship pursued by the protagonists in each romance. I will build actantial models of several parts of the plots of the romances *Livistros and Rodamni* and *Achilleid* and then compare them.

*Livistros and Rodamni* is the oldest of the late Byzantine romances, showing a remarkable mixture of features typical for both late ancient and Komnenian novels, such as an abundant use of rhetorical figures, references to ancient mythology, and a complex narratological structure, while at the same time adding new features such as folklore and French and even Persian and Arabic motifs. *Livistros and Rodamni*'s significant reliance on the older novelistic motifs makes it an intermediate step between the late Byzantine tradition of erotic fiction and its earlier predecessors. At the same time, the presence of foreign motifs also attests to the author's contact with the non-Byzantine literary traditions.<sup>9</sup> The *Achilleid* combines features typical of other late Byzantine romances with the topics of death and war while mixing together Byzantine and Western court culture and social settings.<sup>10</sup>

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6 Beck (1971: 182–183); Beaton (1996: 106).

7 Agapitos (1990: 268–272).

8 Yiavis (2006: 195, 209–210); Stewart (2015: 91–92).

9 For more about the late ancient, Komnenian and Western motifs in the romance, see Cupane (2016); Cupane – Krönung (2016); Priki (2019); Agapitos (2021: 15–23).

10 Agapitos (2020: 52).

Although the two romances were written more than 100 years apart,<sup>11</sup> they have a lot in common, and so comparing them is likely to reveal possible changes and developments in the behaviour of the protagonists. To mention only a few shared characteristics, in both romances Eros plays an important role at the beginning of the heroes' love awakening, he punishes them because of their mockery of love, and he shoots the princess for whom the hero suffers with an arrow. In addition, the courtship is carried out by an exchange of letters. The characters of the princesses are also similar: they both resist falling in love and show defiance and they both reside in a place they cannot abandon easily – Rodamni dwells in the Silver Castle, while Polyxeni lives in a garden her father built for her.

*Livistros and Rodamni* was probably written around the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, making it the first of the late Byzantine romances.<sup>12</sup> It has been preserved in five manuscripts, which differ in completeness and in the character of the story and the language used, testifying to the long-standing popularity of the work.<sup>13</sup> The work has several specifics concerning its narrative structure that are not to be found in the other romances. It is the only one of the romances where the plot is narrated in the first person, probably imitating the novels of earlier authors, Achilleus Tatios and Eustathios Makrembolites. The story is divided into books and the narrative is structured in sections by time of day. Another unique feature is the "Chinese-box" structure of the narrative. The narration begins with Prince Klitovon, who turns to his audience at court, intending to tell them a wonderful love story. He describes how he accidentally met a miserable young man, Livistros, and gradually persuaded Livistros to tell him the cause of his desperation. Livistros started to narrate his story to the prince, describing how he ridiculed love, then how Eros visited him in his dreams and made him Eros' slave. Eros made him seek Princess Rodamni, his chosen one. He managed to win her over, but, after a time full of happiness, they fell into a trap and Rodamni was abducted. Klitovon's narration gradually reaches the present time, when both friends are on the road trying to find the missing Princess Rodamni. The rest of the story is narrated by Klitovon, who gradually yields the floor to other protagonists (the witch, Princess Rodamni) who tell their

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11 I follow here the chronology proposed by Agapitos (1993). For different opinions suggesting a later composition and a different place of origin of *Livistros and Rodamni*, see Lendari (2007) and, most recently, Cupane (2013).

12 Agapitos (1993).

13 For my analysis, I use the edition of Agapitos (2006). The following year, Lendari published the Vatican version of the romance. Regarding the manuscripts, see Agapitos (1991).

stories in turn. Eventually, Klitovon turns to the original audience and closes his narration.<sup>14</sup>

The *Tale of Achilles*, or the *Byzantine Achilleid*, was probably composed around the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Although its name refers to the Homeric tradition, the story has little in common with the Homeric epics. As far as Homeric motifs are concerned, the romance can be looked at as having two parts. The first resembles other late Byzantine romances, telling a story of love and focusing prominently on romantic motifs.<sup>15</sup> The second part briefly describes the Trojan War and the participation and death of the main hero Achilles in it. In fact, the name of the male protagonist and his friend Pantrouklos is one of the few characteristics in the first part of the story that is in accord with the Homeric tradition.<sup>16</sup> However, not only Homeric motifs are to be found in the romance. The plot shows clear references to romances with Byzantine and other origins. Although the heroine of the *Achilleid* is only named once in the second half of the work, her name, Polyxeni, refers to two works dealing with the Homeric theme – *The Trojan War* by Dictys Cretensis<sup>17</sup> and the Greek adaptation of an originally French romance by Benoît de Sainte-Maure, *The War of Troy*.<sup>18</sup> The fact that the heroine is called by name only in the second half of the romance is another sign of the twofold structure of the work. In addition to the Homeric cycle, the romance also shows certain similarities with *Digenis Akritis*, for example in its strong connection between the garden and the heroine.<sup>19</sup> The *Achilleid* has survived in three manuscripts; for my analysis, I used the most elaborated Naples version.<sup>20</sup> The romance tells a story about the talented versatile prince Achilles, who, despite his physical attractiveness, is indifferent to love and mocks people who yield to its power. However, he falls in love with Polyxeni, the daughter of his enemy, during a war campaign.

She similarly mocks love but is eventually hit by Eros' arrow and falls in love with Achilles. They get married and live happily for six years, after which time the princess dies. Achilles mourns her a great deal. Eventually, he goes to fight for the Greeks in the Trojan War, where he is killed by Paris.

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14 Agapitos (1991: 125–128).

15 Yiavis (2016: 130–132).

16 Smith (1991–1992: 78). Regarding the Homeric motifs in the *Achilleid*, see Goldwyn – Nilsson (2019).

17 Frazer (1966).

18 Papatomopoulos – Jeffreys (1996).

19 Stewart (2015: 75, 84).

20 Regarding the other versions, see Agapitos – Smith (1992). I use the edition of the N manuscript by Smith – Agapitos – Hult (1999).

Narratological studies focusing on the texts of Byzantine erotic fiction date back to the 1970s. In 1979, A. Aleksidze published the very first narratological analysis of the late Byzantine romances, based on the work of Vladimir Propp.<sup>21</sup> The past three decades have seen increasing interest in the application of narratology to novels and romances, as evidenced by several recent studies.<sup>22</sup> Greimas, whose actantial model I am using for my analysis, further developed the approach Propp introduced. The key component in the actantial model is an actant. It is the smallest unit of narration, meaning that every moment within the story where the characters are included can be broken down into actants.<sup>23</sup> The complete actantial model, the one for a specific situation in the plot, consists of a total of six actants: a subject, an object, a sender, a receiver, a helper, and an opponent. An actant can be any living creature participating in this specific instance of the storyline or also a subject or even an abstract concept. Actants can be individual or collective – one person can be assigned as an actant as can an entire kingdom or a mob. The assignment of the actants can change as soon the situation in the story develops. Thus, the elements assigned to each of the actants are not constant. For example, the princess in one situation in the story is assigned the actant of subject, but as soon as the situation changes, she can be in the position of opponent or recipient – or both.<sup>24</sup>

The six actants forming the model can be divided into three pairs: subject-object, sender-receiver, and helper-opponent. The subject is the active performer of the situation, while the object is that action's receiver. The sender is the initiator of the activity, and the receiver is the recipient and target-character of the sender's intentions. The actantial models of the two romances under analysis often feature situations in which the sender and subject, and sometimes the receiver and object as well, are assigned to the same characters. This phenomenon is called actantial syncretism and typically results from a relatively small number of protagonists and a storyline without many branches.<sup>25</sup> For this reason, it is important to distinguish between the roles of sender and subject as well as the roles of receiver vs object. While the sender can be just the originator of an idea carried out by someone else, the character who carries out the proposed action is the subject. Similarly, the receiver may be the recipient of the information of that deed from the sender, but the object is what this action applies to and what will be treated by the subject.

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21 Aleksidze (1979).

22 See especially Agapitos (1991); Nilsson (2001); Cupane (2013).

23 Greimas (1983: 146).

24 *Ibid.*, 210–211.

25 *Ibid.*, 145.

The last pair of actants comprises the helper and the opponent. The helper assists the subject to successfully carry out the action, while the opponent tries to do the opposite and prevent it from happening. Greimas considered these two actants to play a minor role in the overall model, and so they may not always have characters assigned to them.<sup>26</sup> When they do, however, their role in the development of the plot, and thus the development of the protagonists' love relationship, is often essential.

My analysis, in which I observe the development of the heroes' love relationships and their behaviour, will focus on their face-to-face interactions, their communication with other characters about their love counterparts, and those moments when one of the lovers is thinking about their beloved. I will further observe the interactions of these characters as the actants of helper and opponent. For these purposes, it is crucial to focus on the actants of sender and receiver. From those situations when the protagonists or their helpers/opponents appear as these two actants, I will construct the actantial model of the love relationship.

For the sake of brevity, I will discuss actantial models which are substantially reduced, showing only the most important moments at the beginning of the relationship between the heroes.

The chart below shows the distribution of actantial roles starting when Rodamni is hit by an arrow and ending with her meeting with Livistros.

Verse	Subject	Object	Helper	Opponent	Sender	Receiver
1423-1424	Eros	Arrow → Rodamni			Eros	Rodamni
1454-1457	companion	R's refusal to answer the letters			Eunuch + companion	Livistros
1565-1586	Livistros	4 <sup>th</sup> letter, sorrow of unavailing courtship	Eros	Eros	Livistros	Eros/Rodamni
1617-1629	Rodamni	Envy of those not in love, desire			Rodamni	Eunuch
1788-1792	Rodamni	Appeal to show mercy, a letter			Eunuch	Rodamni

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

Verse	Subject	Object	Helper	Opponent	Sender	Receiver
1800–1817	Rodamni	1 <sup>st</sup> letter, compassion			Rodamni	Livistros
1820–1835	Rodamni	7 <sup>th</sup> letter, request for proof of her feelings			Livistros	Rodamni
1883–1889	Rodamni	2 <sup>nd</sup> letter, outrage		Livistros	Rodamni	Livistros
1898–1920	Livistros	8 <sup>th</sup> letter, prayer for at least a letter	Rodamni	Rodamni	Livistros	Rodamni
1925–1940	Rodamni	3 <sup>rd</sup> letter, mercy, forgiveness	Livistros		Rodamni	Livistros
2016–2036	Livistros	10 <sup>th</sup> letter, asking for a meeting	Rodamni		Livistros	Rodamni
2074–2087	Rodamni	4 <sup>th</sup> letter, outrage, purposeful torture of L		Livistros	Rodamni	Livistros
2120	Eunuch + Rodamni	Finding a letter, ignorance			Eunuch + Rodamni	Rodamni
2148–2159	Livistros	13 <sup>th</sup> letter, despair, threat of suicide		Rodamni	Livistros	Rodamni
2162–2185	Rodamni	6 <sup>th</sup> letter, promise of love, a meeting	Eunuch		Rodamni	Livistros
2365–2370	Rodamni	Meeting, giving up on L' insistence			Rodamni	Livistros

The section under discussion begins with Eros hitting Rodamni with an arrow. By the time Rodamni is hit, she has already received two love letters from Livistros. Focusing on the actants of sender and receiver, it is clear that the confidants of the heroes, the companion and the eunuch, are active mainly until Rodamni ceases to resist her feelings and starts to reply to Livistros' letters. Subsequently,

the action is in hands of the lovers. However, once Rodamni is offended by the offer of a meeting proposed by Livistros, the eunuch appears once again, taking Rodamni's side and letting Livistros suffer, without any further contact with him or the companion. In verses 1565–1586, Eros appears as the actants of both helper and opponent, indicating the despair of Livistros and his unsuccessful courtship. After this, only the two heroes show in those actants – mainly because of the anger Livistros provokes in Rodamni by wanting her to send him a proof of her love and to meet him. The eunuch assumes an important role once again in the penultimate line, when Rodamni relies on him to arrange a meeting with Livistros.

As we can see in the column for the actant of object, it is at first difficult for Rodamni to give up her pride and reply to Livistros, although she has already confessed to the eunuch that she has feelings for him. However, even though she shows compassion for what Livistros feels, once he offends her, she lets him beg her for forgiveness. The second time she is outraged by him, Rodamni lets him suffer on purpose and yields only after he threatens to take his own life. Eventually, when they are face-to-face for the first time, she tells him she has submitted to his affection and courtship solely because of his insistence.

With the next chart, we will turn to the part of the *Achilleid* where Achilles writes the first letter to Polyxeni, ending with their meeting.

Verse	Subject	Object	Helper	Opponent	Sender	Receiver
921–939	Achilles	1 <sup>st</sup> letter, love, threat of suicide			Achilles	Polyxeni
948–958	Polyxeni	1 <sup>st</sup> letter, refusal			Polyxeni	Achilles
964–973	Achilles	2 <sup>nd</sup> letter, warning against Eros		Polyxeni	Achilles	Polyxeni
974–977	Achilles	A prayer to Eros to hit Polyxeni	Eros		Achilles	Eros
987–994	Polyxeni	2 <sup>nd</sup> letter, refusal, mockery		Eros, Achilles	Polyxeni	Achilles
995–1006	Achilles	3 <sup>rd</sup> letter, persuasion			Achilles	Polyxeni
1014–1023	Achilles	A prayer to Eros to hit Polyxeni	Eros		Achilles	Eros

Verse	Subject	Object	Helper	Opponent	Sender	Receiver
1063–1089	Eros	Hitting Polyxeni with an arrow			A hawk/ Eros	Polyxeni
1094–1109	Polyxeni	3 <sup>rd</sup> letter – promise of love, a meeting			Polyxeni	Achilles
1156–1162	Achilles	Meeting, kissing Polyxeni			Achilles	Polyxeni

The second actantial model deals with the development of love in the *Achilleid*. At the beginning of the section under analysis, Achilles is already in love with Polyxeni and writes her the first letter. From the actants of sender and receiver, it is evident that their entire courtship until their first meeting takes place exclusively between the protagonists, with exception of Eros as the only helper in their courtship. The only opponent is Polyxeni in the second letter from Achilles, when he warns her against love and its god. Eros and Achilles are mocked by Polyxeni who promises herself not to yield to love. It is apparent from the regular alterations in the sender and receiver that once Achilles starts writing letters to Polyxeni, she replies to him immediately, without ulterior motives or hesitation. In verses 974–977, Achilles begs Eros to help him and hit Polyxeni with an arrow, but it is not until he asks once again, in verses 1014–1023, that Eros does what Achilles begs for. Until then, Achilles' courting does not bear fruit. Once Polyxeni is hit, however, she immediately replies to Achilles' last letter and devotes herself to him, proposing a meeting. When they meet for the first time in the garden where she dwells, Achilles kisses her, but then leaves.

Comparing the actantial models of *Livistros and Rodamni* and the *Achilleid*, there are several differences concerning the development of the love relationship. One major difference can be seen through the correspondence in each story, which is illustrated by the actants of sender and receiver and subject and object. In *Livistros and Rodamni*, the relationship does not start easily, and for quite a time it is only Livistros who writes the letters. The actant of object indicates that Rodamni's reply is preceded by Livistros' despair and persuasion by the eunuch. But even after Rodamni starts to answer and carefully reveals her affection to Livistros, she is very irascible, ignoring Livistros whenever things are not as she pleases. Similarly, when she meets him, she does not want

to lose face and explains her feelings to him as only a result of his insistence and endurance. In contrast, the correspondence of Achilles and Polyxeni in the *Achilleid* is far more straightforward. Once Achilles writes a love letter to her, she replies at once, even though she rejects him. His efforts are fruitless and her mockery continues until Eros intervenes. Immediately after that, Polyxeni writes a letter to Achilles, openly revealing her feelings for him and asking for a meeting.

We can see another difference in the initial phase of the courtship. For *Livistros*, the helpers of both sides are involved. The companion reveals to *Livistros* inside information he has from the eunuch, while the eunuch himself pushes the action further, persuading the princess to answer *Livistros*. At the same time, the eunuch remains loyal to her, letting *Livistros* suffer once his lady decides *Livistros* deserves it. In contrast, the relationship of Achilles and Polyxeni evolves without the intervention of servants or friends. The only helper is Eros. Without his help, Achilles would not achieve what he longs for. Polyxeni does not have any helpers.

This analysis of the actantial models demonstrates that the affinity of the heroine towards her love counterpart develops in a different way in each romance. While both heroes use the same means of courting their lady – writing letters –, the impact it has on *Rodamni* and Polyxeni is quite contrasting. While *Livistros* tries to persuade the princess and finally succeeds in doing so, Achilles needs Eros' help; until he gets it, his love letters have little impact.

In his article *Από το «δράμα» του Έρωτα στο «αφήγημα» της Αγάπης*, Agapitos describes the technique of persuading the heroine used in Komnenian novels, which can be compared to what we have just seen in *Livistros and Rodamni*. In contrast, the love couples in the late Byzantine romances gradually get close to each other by means of a dialogue.<sup>27</sup> I would like to develop this observation, dealing with the evolved approach towards courtship and the behaviour of the protagonists, applying the findings from the actantial models. *Livistros and Rodamni* illustrates the use of persuasion already detected by Agapitos:<sup>28</sup> the strong role of the mighty Eros, who is both the helper and the opponent actant; the important role of the helpers, who act as the heroes' confidants; the extensive process of persuading *Rodamni* (the actants of sender/receiver and subject/object); and her resistance, putting the suitor in the actant of opponent.

The actantial model of the *Achilleid* displays a similarity to *Livistros and Rodamni* in the method of the heroes' courtship: like *Livistros*, Achilles writes

27 Agapitos (2004: 69–70); Priki (2019: 89).

28 Agapitos (2004: 70; 1993: 212).

love letters to his beloved trying to persuade her to reciprocate the affinity, but he is not successful.

However, other stages of the courtship's development differ: unlike Rodamni, Polyxeni writes her lover back immediately, albeit with a negative answer (the actants of object and sender/receiver). Also unlike Rodamni, Polyxeni does not have any helpers, nor does she come up with evasions or intrigues; she acts outspokenly and ingenuously.

In summary, while the actantial model of *Livistros and Rodamni* confirms the suggestions of Agapitos, recognizing in it the same technique of persuasion for the love couple as in the Komnenian novels, the model of the *Achilleid* indicates that the courtship of the heroes in that romance stands somewhere in between the use of persuasion and the gradual dialogue leading to a love union typical of other late Byzantine romances. Thus, while the development of love between the protagonists in *Livistros and Rodamni* and those in the *Achilleid* stands on similar pillars, regarding love correspondence as the means of courtship, the *Achilleid* nevertheless shows signs of love development characteristic of other late Byzantine romances, indicating different ways of dealing with the topic of love typical of the times when the romance was written. The actantial models of *Livistros and Rodamni* and the *Achilleid* thus show us how the development of love in romances changed over the span of 100 years, leading gradually to simpler ways of courtship, the simplification of the character of the heroine, and at the same time the heroine becoming more straightforward and self-reliant.

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