

Digenis Akritis
The Grottaferrata and Escorial
versions

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all redolent of musk in his gaze.

255 The house of the great general was on their road
and as he came close, Digenis uttered this cry,
"When a boy loves a very beautiful girl,
when he comes there and sees her beauty,
his poor heart is tamed, he does not wish to live in the world."

260 When those present in the house heard this sound,
they were amazed as the famous Odysseus once was
when he heard the Sirens' song on his ship.
But the girl too did not remain deaf to the young man,
that very lovely maiden, famed and renowned,
whose beauty was incredible, whose family was remarkable
265 and whose possessions and goods and other wealth
it was impossible to count or conjecture at all.
Even her house no one will be able to praise,
for it was all of gold and marble, entirely covered with mosaics.
The solitary chamber where the girl dwelt
270 was all of gold on the outside, entirely covered with mosaics,
and it was called the Girl's Chamber.

And so when the very rich and very beautiful girl
saw the young man, as I am relating,
her heart was enflamed, she did not wish to live in the world.
275 Pain was lit within her, as is right,
for beauty wounds deeper than an arrow

253 After this line the compiler of Z draws from E624-701 the episode where Digenis first met the guerrillas. Little in G here suggests that a section has fallen out at this point, except a sense that the transition from the *rite de passage* of hunting to courtship is sudden (a reaction which may say less about the poem than about our reception of it). When Digenis does meet the guerrillas in G6, there is no sign of a previous meeting (but G4.33-4 refers to independent circulation of material on the guerrilla chiefs). It is almost certain that the episode was never included in the G version (Eideneier, 1970, 307-8; MacAlister, 1984, 551-74), in spite of Mavrogordato's assumption of a lacuna and his attempt to fill it.

254 Οἶκος is marked in G with a large capital O, though not the ornamental form used for book-divisions. Such capitals occur elsewhere (e.g., a T at the beginning of the hunt scene at G4.102), perhaps marking an informal (and unsystematic) division into episodes.

258 Several songs such as this exist in *Digenis* (e.g., G4.401-4, 432-5) and also in contemporary and subsequent romances. Their relationship to songs then circulating orally can only be guessed at on the basis of linguistic prejudice since we have no idea of the scope of twelfth-century song.

261 A more substantial Homeric reference than G4.27, but still no proof of direct knowledge.

273 The first trace of an authorial presence, which - interestingly - appears shortly after the introduction of a new, and easily separable, topic.

- and penetrates the soul through the eyes themselves.
 She wanted to take her eyes away from the young man,
 but then again she did not wish to be parted from his beauty,
 280 but dragged her eyes there, clearly defeated,
 and she said softly to her serving-girl, in her ear:
 "Peer out, my maid-servant, see the graceful young man,
 see his quite marvellous beauty and wondrous appearance;
 if my father wished to take him as a son-in-law,
 285 he would have – believe me – a son-in-law like no one else's."
 She stayed looking out of the peep-hole at the boy;
 but the young man asked, truly in ignorance,
 "This fearsome and great house – whose is it?
 Might this belong to the renowned general of whom they speak?
 290 And does that most estimable girl live here?"
 "Yes, my sweetest child," his father replied,
 "she for whom many high-born Romans have perished."
 "And how, father, did they perish?" asked the boy again.
 "They wanted, my child, to abduct the girl
 295 because of the delightful beauty which she has, so they say.
 And when the general, the girl's father, heard of them,
 he set ambushes and caught them all;
 some he beheaded, others he blinded,
 for he has great might and reputation in the land."
 300 Sighing, Digenis said to his father:
 "Pray, father, that I do not decide to abduct her,
 because ambushes never frighten me.
 I make this prayer only that, if it is acceptable to you,
 you send messages to the general about becoming fellow
 parents-in-law,
 305 so that if perhaps it pleases him to take me as a son-in-law,
 I may have him as my father-in-law of his own volition;
 but if not, my father, you will discover the consequences later."
 "I have often sent messages to him, my sweetest son,
 but in no way does he agree to consent to this."
 310 As the father was saying this to the boy,
 the young man caught sight of the girl through the peep-hole.
 And having seen her he took no further step forward,

299 The traditional motif of the well-guarded daughter and punished suitors (e.g. Thompson, 1946, 100, 482: Type 310). Note that these major new characters are presented as known to the emir (see G4.308–9) and even Digenis, though without any previous mention in the text – a sign of unsophisticated narrative technique.

but astonishment came over him and his heart began to tremble.

He urged his horse on, he approached the girl

315 and spoke these words to her calmly:

"Let me know, girl, if you have me in your mind,

and if you desire very much that I should take you as my wife;

if you have your mind elsewhere, I shall not importune you."

The girl requested her serving-girl:

320 "Go down, my lovely maid, tell the lad:

'By God, I inform you that you have found your way into my soul,
but I do not know, young man, from what family you are.

If you are Basil Digenis Akritis, the Frontiersman of Double Descent,
you are from a noble and very wealthy background

325 and are our kinsman through the Doukas family.

But my father the general has set guards because of you,

for he has heard a great deal about your brave deeds.

Take care, young man, lest you run into danger because of me

and are deprived of your very beautiful youthfulness,

330 for my pitiless father will in no way spare you."

And once more the young man replied to the girl:

"Peer out, my darling, let me see your beauty,

let boundless love for you enter my heart.

For I am young, as you see, I do not know what desire is,

335 nor do I have the least knowledge of the paths of love,

and if desire for you enters my soul,

your father the general and his kinsmen

and all those with him, even if they turn into weapons

and flashing swords, are not able to harm me."

340 No end could ever be seen to their words.

Then passion urged them to an immodest act,

for when passion is the master it enslaves good sense

and subjugates reasoning, as a charioteer subjugates a horse.

And because of this, he who desires has no sense of propriety,

345 he is not ashamed before his kinsmen, he has no fear of his neighbours

but is completely shameless and a slave to affection,

325 See the genealogy in Table 2 (Introduction, p. xxxvi). From the twelfth century onwards, the preference of aristocratic clans for marriage between kin frequently flouted church rulings (Laiou, 1992, 21-58).

331 The maid, carefully established as a go-between, vanishes and the principals speak directly to each other.

341-2 Once again it is hard to be sure whether this is an abstract passion or the personalised Eros of G3.1-8; G4.345-7 are repeated at 4.528-30.

just as the very high-born girl was then
when she peered a little way out of the golden window.

The beauty of her face inhibited his eyes
350 and he could not see the sun-born girl clearly,
for a ray seemed to shine out from the middle of her face.
The girl was truly as if painted in a picture,
with a swift, joyful eye and fair curly hair;
she had deep black eyebrows, the black undiluted;
355 her face was like snow, with a tint at the centre
like the choice purple which emperors honour.

Seeing her thus that marvellous youth
was immediately wounded in his soul, he was struck to the heart
and felt boundless pain, he stood in anguish.

360 When the very high-born girl saw him in this state,
she could not allow him to remain for long in pain
but quickly conveyed to him her love,
which was full of great joy and mixed with pleasure;
she gave him her ring, saying to him:

365 "Go on your way joyfully, youngster, and do not forget me."

He put it into his pouch

and immediately replied: "Expect me tomorrow."

And completely full of joy he went on his way with all his companions.

When they reached the house, he immediately began to be
concerned

370 and prayed to God with all his heart;
"Lord God," he said, "hear my prayer
and make the sun set for me and the moon rise,
so that it can help me in this task,
since I plan to set out entirely alone."

375 And he said privately to his protostrator,
"Unsaddle my horse for me and saddle the black;
gird on for me two saddle-girths and two martingales,
and hang my handsome sword-stick from my saddle,
and put on the heavy bit so that he turns quickly."

380 And when he was summoned to the evening meal,
he took no food, not wishing to taste drink at all,

356 Another portrait within the physiognomic tradition. The range of colours covered by imperial purple included the red of healthy cheeks.

375-9 The secret instructions must mean that the double harness is unusual and connected with Digenis' plans, though whether for fighting or for carrying the girl, or both, is hard to say.

turning the girl over in his mind, picturing her beauty.
 And at one moment in despair he wanted nothing to do with her,
 at another he imagined he had good expectations,

385 while to everyone he seemed to be staring as if in a dream.

His mother in great bewilderment stood and asked him:

"What has happened to you, my child, for you to grieve my soul?

Did a wild beast strike you and has fear shaken you?

Has some evil spirit bewitched you, seeing your bravery?

390 Tell me quickly, do not distress my soul,

for he who conceals the disease is consumed by it."

"No wild beast has struck me," the young man replied,

"nor, again, has panic shaken my soul.

If some one has bewitched me, do not curse her,

395 since she has done no wrong, for I am in good health."

Then rising from there he went up to his chamber,

and taking off his sandals, he picked up his kithara too,

first strumming the strings with his slender hands

(for he had been well instructed in musical instruments),

400 and tuned it and played, murmuring:

"Anyone who has his love close by loses no sleep,

but he who loves at a distance should not neglect nights.

I love from far away, and let me set off quickly,

so that I do not distress the soul that is lying awake for me."

405 When the sun had set and the moon had risen,

he rode off alone, holding his kithara.

His black horse was swift, the moonlight like day

and at dawn he reached the girl's chamber.

Since she had stayed awake and waited for him all night,

410 at dawn she was tired and turned to sleep.

When the high-born boy did not see her,

he was very upset, he was extremely disturbed,

dreadful thoughts cut him to the heart,

he felt unbearable grief and the greatest pain.

415 For he said to himself: "Has she changed her mind?

Is she afraid that her parents might find her out?

What plan shall I make about this? How can I find out for certain?

My mind is bewildered, I don't know what to do.

If I call out, others will hear me shouting,

- 420 those who are keeping watch here will attack, they will notice me,
and I shall be discovered before my deed, not winning my dearest,
not even having a chance to see the one I desire.
What is the use of my living in this life?"

Saying these things to himself in his great puzzlement,

- 425 he decided it was right to play his kithara,
to try out the things about which he was mystified.
"To spare myself as I test the girl," he said,
"I shall make this kithara my helpful go-between,
and God's wish will certainly take its course."

- 430 And tuning it and plucking it with the plectrum,
he performed this very sweet tune, murmuring:
"How, my most delightful girl, could you forget our new love
and sleep sweetly without a care and contentedly?
Rise up, my most delightful rose and perfumed apple.

- 435 The morning star has risen, come, let us stroll a while."

When the girl heard the sound of the kithara,
she jumped out of bed, did up her belt,
and leaning out low she said to the lad:

- "I blamed you, sweetheart, because you were very late;
440 am I always to be blaming you for being hesitant and lethargic?
As for the kithara you are playing, you seem not to know where
you are.

My fine one, if my lord father catches sight of you,
he will punish you and you will die for me – alas for the lawlessness!
For God who is aware of secrets knows

- 445 that desire for you is rooted in my heart
and that I consider it a disaster if you fail.

Make your escape then, my soul, before the light comes,
and forever remember me, one who desires you greatly.

For, my fine young man, I do not wish to come with you.

- 450 I know that desire and an extraordinary love enflame you,
that reason is persuading you to die for me.

But if you lead me astray and I come with you,

427-9 It is unclear why a musical approach is preferable to conventional speech. Does it expose Digenis less if the girl has changed her mind, or is it more likely to be missed by the guards?

435 On the many manifestations of the genre of lovers' songs at dawn, see Hatto, 1965, and Pring, *ibid.*, 264-70 on Greek versions.

and my brothers and my kinsmen learn of this,
and my father with his troops catches you,

455 how can you extricate me and save your life?"

And the marvellous youth replied in grief to the girl:
"I praise your opposition, my most high-born girl.
For you consider the opposite of what is going to happen
and choose the best solution by making clear calculations,

460 but you do not know anything at all about me.

For if you had any knowledge of my brave deeds,
you would not say that your brothers and your kinsmen
will catch me and hurl me down and that you will grieve because of
me.

But let this be understood and certain to you, my soul,

465 that I expect to crush armies on my own
and to defeat divisions and subdue states.

Your father and his youngsters

and likewise your brothers with your kinsmen

I reckon as complete babes-in-arms and as nothing at all.

470 This only I seek to learn from your lips,

whether you are very eager to follow me,

so that we might be through the narrow passes before daybreak.

For alleyways and passes are death to brave men

while on the plains cowards become bold.

475 If perhaps you have changed your mind and have chosen another

and because of this are putting forward excuses such as these,

by the Saints Theodore, the holy martyrs of Christ,

no one else while I am alive shall be called your husband."

Again the sun-lovely girl said to the youngster:

480 "And so you, my beloved, are untried in this your first
experience of all love and affection, as you said.

Now you are suffering because of me, and perhaps you are telling
the truth,

to judge this myself from similar feelings.

For even if it is most unseemly for me to talk to you about myself,

485 nevertheless I, enslaved as I am to desire, will tell you everything.

Many from among the high-born, lords and magnates,

have wooed me, and also kinsmen and children of emperors

with imperial retinues and robes,

and in their desire to gaze on my features

- 490 they used quite frequently to pass close by my house,
 but my father was not completely satisfied with anyone;
 no one was deemed worthy to see my shadow,
 no one heard my voice or conversation at all,
 no hint of laughter, no sound of footsteps.
- 495 I never put my head out of the window,
 I kept myself unseen by others.
 Apart from my kinsmen and close friends,
 no one ever saw the features of my face
 as I observed carefully the role that is appropriate to unmarried girls.
- 500 I have gone beyond these bounds and I have broken the rules
 and I have become shameless for love of you.
 And I who have never been seen by a strange man
 am now engaging in conversation without the least shame,
 and the truly free mind of the unwedded state
- 505 I see becoming a slave and totally shameless.
 From the moment I saw your face, young man,
 a kind of fire immediately enflamed my chaste soul,
 it transformed my reasoning and likewise my nature,
 it enslaved my mind and made me shameless.
- 510 To you alone, beloved, and to my love for you
 I am now obedient, and I want to journey with you,
 for whom I renounce my kinsmen, I deprive myself of parents,
 I make myself a stranger to my brothers and our boundless wealth
 and with you I journey wherever you command,
- 515 taking as my witness God, who helps all
 and is the fairest avenger, that you will not lead me astray.
 As for you, love enflames you, love drives you on
 and reason persuades you to die for me,
 which I pray never to see nor to hear with my ears."
- 520 As the most beautiful girl uttered this,
 tears fell from her eyes, she sighed deeply
 and reproached herself for her great immodesty,

492-9 No doubt an exaggerated picture of ideal behaviour for a Byzantine girl, since stress here is on pressures which are making her break the rules, but the general sentiment is correct; cf. Kekavmenos' advice (*Strategikon* 102, 121) on the care to be taken of wives and daughters.

505-11 A passage contrasting the official Byzantine view of sex as a probably necessary evil with a recognition of its force; this is more often expressed in Byzantine texts from the male point of view (Galatariotou, 1989). Such issues are more canvassed in twelfth-century Byzantium, in the courtly romances as well as *Digenis*, than in previous or subsequent centuries (Beck, 1984, 112-28).

- and although she wished very much to change her mind,
the boundless desire within her would not permit this.
- 525 For the power of passion is desire and affection,
and anyone who attempts to keep strictly to his proper role
desire overcomes him, though his mind be chaste.
And because of this, he who desires has no sense of propriety,
he is not ashamed before his kinsmen, he has no fear of his neighbours
- 530 but is completely shameless and a slave to affection.
And this is what happened to these beautiful young people.
Then the marvellous young man, seeing the girl weeping,
responded thus to her, also with tears:
"I, most beautiful girl, know about you.
- 535 The boundless wealth which your father has acquired
and because of which many of the high-born desire to marry you,
I know all about after detailed enquiries.
But I, dearest soul, do not yearn for wealth,
I do not crave for possessions, I do not aspire to fame,
- 540 I count all things grass as I delight in your beauty.
From the moment, dark-eyed one, that we saw each other,
you have not been absent from my soul for one moment.
For you are rooted within me and entwined there
and I imagine you all the time and I can see you even when you
are not present.
- 545 For I have never been in love with any kind of beauty,
nor do I have the least knowledge of the paths of love.
Come, my sweet light, follow your lover.
Reveal the love which you have within,
for a sure demonstration comes from actions,
- 550 and we will both live together joyfully with God's consent.
And may your parents be delighted at this
when they become aware what sort of son-in-law they have acquired.
And no one will reproach you, but rather will congratulate you."
- Saying this and many other things, the young man
- 555 went on: "In you is my every beginning and my end
that had its beginning with God, until my death;

and if ever I should wish to grieve you, my soul,
 and if I do not preserve untroubled your love for me
 and your most pure desire until my death,
 560 may I not die a Christian, may I not prosper,
 may I not win my parents' blessings;
 and may you, high-born girl, preserve the same feelings."

The girl, with these words resounding in her ears, said:
 "Even if it was quite against the law to betray myself
 565 (for true propriety is called high birth,
 which I have set aside, experiencing I know not what),
 nevertheless your innocent desire and your true love
 have made you fairest love preferable."

Then the girl pronounced this oath of passion:
 "Leaving parents, brothers and household,
 I entrust myself to you, youngster, with God;
 grant me him as a witness that you will not grieve me
 but make me your lawful wife till the end.
 For many lovers have set aside their words,
 575 despite having previously shown themselves passionate to the girls
 they desire."

When he heard this, the boy was amazed and admired
 the girl's good sense; nevertheless he swore:
 "By the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,
 I will never grieve you, highest-born of girls,
 580 but I will make you mistress of my possessions and my lady,
 my wife and spouse until the end of my life,
 if you keep your desire for me pure,
 as I said to you before, my dearest soul."

And when they had bound each other well through their oaths,
 585 the girl leaned out of the golden window,
 the boy raised himself upright on his horse and took her:
 the partridge had flown away, the hawk had taken her.
 And they embraced each other delectably, as was fitting,
 rejoicing inexpressibly and both weeping,
 590 for they immediately achieved the greatest happiness,

557-60 Digenis' vows almost suggest that he is promising the girl's faithfulness, not his own.

574-5 Cynicism owing more to hard-headed negotiation than to romantic or Christian idealism.

582-3 If the reference is back to 557-62, there is a significant change of expression here.

and they shed hot tears in their pleasure.

Then the boy, moved by joy and bravery,

stood in front of the house and shouted out, saying:

"Give me your blessing, my lord father-in-law, and your daughter too,

595 and give thanks to God for having such a son-in-law."

When the general's watch-men heard the shout,

they cried out for all to mount their horses.

Immediately, when the general heard this sudden cry,

he was beside himself, not knowing what to do,

600 and he shouted in despair: "I have lost my light,

my only daughter has been snatched from my sight."

When the general's lady heard this, she wailed and cried out:

"My only daughter has gone, my darling has been abducted."

Her brothers for their part lamented and shouted:

605 "Who has dared to do this lawless deed?

Who has torn our sister away from us so suddenly?"

The women of the household wept, they wailed loudly.

Uncontrollable lamentation spread everywhere.

A great armed force set off in pursuit of the young man

610 and behind them came the general with his two sons.

But not even the general's lady was left behind in the house,

being quite unable to bear separation from her daughter,

for, collecting a host of household women with her,

she followed on foot, with her hair loose, mourning:

615 "Dearest soul," she cried out, "where you are going I do not know."

There remained no one, old or young,

who did not ride out in pursuit of the young man,

all grieving excessively over the girl's abduction,

so that it was not possible to count the host precisely.

620 And just as the light of day was dawning,

they caught up with them there on the shadowy plains.

The most beautiful girl saw them from a distance

(for she was looking behind, keeping a sharp watch

from the arms of her best beloved)

625 and she said to him, holding him tightly:

"Strive, my dear soul, not to let them part us;

be very strong and urge on your black horse.

605 See Laiou, 1993, 200-11 on the ecclesiastical and legal implications of Digenis' pursuit of the girl; it should be classed as consensual elopement, which can be rectified by marriage, rather than abduction, which incurs severe penalties.

for look – the pursuers are about to catch up with us.”

As the marvellous young man heard this,

630 he was immediately filled with courage, and swerving off the road,

he found a forked tree with two branches

and put the girl between these two branches:

“Sit there, my loveliest, and watch your dearest.”

And he immediately armed himself for war,

635 and then the sun-born girl cried out to the youngster:

“Take care that you do not harm my brothers.”

An extraordinary deed was seen by those present there,

how he on his own dared to clash with thousands.

And in a short time he killed countless soldiers

640 in full armour, on horseback, trained for war,

and he began to counsel them to turn back

and not to test his bravery.

But they were ashamed to be defeated by one man

and chose death rather than to be put to flight by him.

645 So he urged on his horse, he drew his sword-stick

and before the general arrived not one remained.

And when the boy had come to the end of the battle

he returned joyfully to the girl as victor

and dismounting from his horse he kissed her a thousand times:

650 “You have me, my delightful girl, as proof of my deeds.”

The girl, honouring the youngster further,

sweetly accepted his resounding kisses

and addressed the youngster calmly thus:

“Do not, my soul, harm my brothers,

655 for the men whom you see coming towards us

I can guess from their horses are my brothers,

and the third man with them is my father.

Grant these to me in safety, preserve them unharmed.”

“What you ask shall be done,” the boy said to the girl,

660 “unless something unexpected happens,

for he who spares enemies in time of battle

is often attacked by them mercilessly.”

Saying this he leaped onto his own horse

and swiftly attacked the general's companions.

- 665 The girl's brothers were full of energy
and told their own youngsters to destroy him,
expecting the killing to be done by others.
The boy, following his dearest's instructions,
set about these skilfully and cleverly destroyed them all.
- 670 Then the brothers rushed on him in a frenzy
but he circled them and threw them off their horses,
in such a way that they were not seriously hurt or wounded at all.
And turning towards the general, he dismounted at a distance
and, clasping his hands tightly and making a deep obeisance,
675 he began to address him with a confident air:
"Forgive me, my lord, do not blame me;
your army was uncouth in giving and receiving blows,
and because of that most of them have gone to Hades.
For I am not one of those of low birth or cowardly disposition,
680 and if ever you command me to do you service,
then indeed you will be certain what kind of son-in-law you have
acquired.
And if you test me strictly by my deeds,
you will frequently congratulate yourself on your good fortune."
The general straight away raised his hands on high
685 and turned his eyes to the east and gave thanks to God,
"Thanks be to you," he said, "God, who arranges all our affairs
in his ineffable wisdom to our advantage,
for I have been granted a son-in-law such as I wished,
handsome and high-born, sensible and brave,
690 of a kind that no one has ever found in the world."
Giving thanks to God for this with all his soul,
he pronounced these mild words to the boy:
"Thanks be to God, my golden son-in-law, for all things,
for he arranges well what is to our advantage.
- 695 Take, handsome youth, the girl whom you seized out of desire.
For if you were not certain in feeling boundless desire for her,
you would not have dared single-handed to set upon thousands.
Come, therefore, let us go into my house
and do not think of experiencing anything distressing at our hands,
700 but it is so that we can draw up the agreed marriage contract
in writing with your father present;
for as soon as he has been informed, he will come to us