

STUDIES: RUSTVELOLOGY

კვლევები: რუსთველოლოგია

Shota Rustaveli's Theory of Friendship

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Shota Rustaveli wrote his approximately 6,000 line epic poem “The Man in the Panther Skin,” in Georgia, in the Caucasus, around 1200 AD. The title is usually translated as e.g.: “The Man in the Panther Skin” but literally is: “In the Leopard Skin”. *The Man in the Panther Skin*, henceforth MPS, is an important work that has in Georgia the position that the Bible and Shakespeare’s works have in English-speaking countries: it is a source of proverbs, quotations, and role models. The poem resembles works of Courtly Literature and e. g. *Tristan and Isolde* but there are substantial differences.

First, while in most courtly works we find two heroes – the husband of the admired lady and her admirer – in the MPS we also find two admired ladies: Tinatin, the crown princess and eventually the Queen of Arabia, and Nestan-Darejan, the crown princess of India. The presence of two admired ladies, two heroines, makes it possible that the heroes need not compete but can become friends and help each other.

Second, in the MPS, as in many courtly works, a noble lady sends her less noble admirer on a quest. In the MPS she does so to find the identity of a mysterious man in a panther skin who appeared and then disappeared. After the heroine had succeeded her father, her lover, Avtandil, also the commander in chief of Arabia, organized a hunt to cheer up Tinatin’s father, the former King, and it is during the festivities after the hunt that the mysterious stranger appears. Eventually Tinatin sends her lover Avtandil on a quest to find him. But, unlike most courtly works, after Avtandil has fulfilled the quest and found the stranger, he modifies the original quest and now goes on a quest that seems like a correction, extension or improvement of the original quest. Such a modified quest is not typical for courtly works.

Avtandil finds the mysterious stranger; he is an Indian prince whose beloved, Nestan-Darejan, has disappeared. Tariel had been trying to find her for a long time and is now in a deep depression, from which Avtandil tries to cure him. Eventually Avtandil is successful, he locates Nestan-Darejan, she is freed, she and Tariel marry, as do Avtandil and Tinatin, and everybody lives happily ever after.

It is then Avtandil’s friendship for Tariel that drives most of the action of the poem: Avtandil finds Tariel, locates Nestan-Darejan, and participates in her liberation. Still, the love between Tariel

and Nestan-Darejan is so intense, that some scholars argue that the poem is about love while others claim it is about friendship[3, 101&105; 5, p. 276].

The love we find in the MPS is different from the love in other courtly works, and Khintibidze has argued that it is so all-encompassing that it includes friendship[3, p. 162]. Given that love in the MPS is so unique, the question arises whether friendship may also be unique in the MPS.

The present study of Avtandil's friendship begins by analyzing how he tries to help Tariel. First he tries to cheer Tariel up with arguments. In 910 (references in Latin numerals will refer to the stanzas in Wardrop's translation) he claims that God would not have created Tariel and Nestan-Darejan if He had not intended to eventually unite them. This is not a strong argument but at least Avtandil shows that he believes - for a strong or weak reason - that Nestan-Darejan will be found. Next he says that problems exist to be solved, and that he, personally, always brings to a good end whatever he has started. Then, in 913, he points out that Tinatin had ordered him to help Tariel - though actually he had only been told to find Tariel - and that he therefore has to help find Nestan-Darejan. And, lastly, in 914, Avtandil tells Tariel that he only does what he is supposed to do: "If thou art no longer of any use to thyself, be of use to me". In other words: shape up for my sake, if not for yours, behave like a brother to me. Rather than telling Tariel to accept his help, Avtandil asks Tariel to help him to carry out the task that has been assigned to him. This is an interesting argument: Avtandil tells Tariel to live not for his, Tariel's, own goals in life - and a depressed person has very few such goals - but for Avtandil's goals. And if one agrees that one's goals in life determine one's personality, then Avtandil is telling Tariel to become like himself, like Avtandil. There are also some remarks on friendship in 758, but they are too short to be part of a serious analysis.

Tariel ignores the first two arguments and then answers in 919: "If a friend will not follow thee, follow him": telling himself to accept Avtandil's advice, according to Wardrop's interpretation [10, p. 147- footnote 2].

Avtandil then leaves Tariel who will recuperate during Avtandil's absence. Together they plan her liberation; first Avtandil comes up with a plan to free her but Tariel submits the better, and winning, plan. It is significant that Tariel submits the final plan; this proves that he is now intellectually Avtandil's equal or even superior.

Avtandil's proposal to Tariel to: "...be of use to me...", an admonition to take over the goals that Avtandil has set for his life, is similar to what one scholar has called Aristotle's "most arresting pronouncement":[11, p. 11] his statement that a friend is another self[1, p. 565].

We in the 21st century may criticize this definition of friendship, and Pangle gives us an overview of what philosophers think of friendship nowadays[8, pp. 1-6]. We may object, e.g., that a true friend will tell his friend that what he wants is not good for him, that a friend is an advisor, an admirer, a critic, or a helper. It may even be impractical to have an identical twin around as a friend and make the same mistakes, have the same goals and hobbies. But Aristotle's definition fits the MPS well: Avtandil does not tell Tariel, for example, that after so many years, finding Nestan-Darejan is hopeless and that he should give up on finding her, that he should reconcile with her father, King Parsadan, that he should try a little harder, or that he should try to get the kingdom back that his father gave away. No, whatever Tariel wants, that is what Avtandil goes after.

Hence in the MPS Avtandil *is* another self. They have the same goal: free Nestan-Darejan. But Avtandil is, so to say, an improved edition of Tariel. When Tariel is incapacitated by a depression and cannot continue his search for his beloved, Avtandil takes over and becomes "another Tariel", and actually a better one.

Unusual is that Tariel changes as well, eventually, and becomes like Avtandil. Aristotle did not consider such a possibility; he did not see friendship as a means to self-improvement. On the contrary, contemporary scholars like Gregory Vlastos characterize Plato's and Aristotle's approach to love and friendship as elitist: only superior beings, who are almost perfect anyhow, can love or befriend each other. Aristotle saw a need to reach one's potential but no need for self-improvement [13, p. 31].

Rustaveli describes here replacement: one friend replaces the other. This is rare in literature; one example is the Middle Dutch poem *Beatrice*, where a nun gets seduced by an evil man, leaves her convent for him, but before leaving gives her gardening equipment to Mary, the mother of Jesus, with a prayer to take care of her, Beatrice's, job. Years later the former nun repents but when she sneaks back into the convent, she finds her belongings where she had left them years ago. Moreover, no-one has noticed her absence since Mary had replaced Beatrice [7, pp. 20-1].

In the MPS Tariel acquires a quality from Avtandil: the ability to plan ahead. There is no indication as to how Tariel gets this quality. It is almost like osmosis: one moment only Avtandil knows how to plan ahead, the next moment Tariel does too and then comes up with a better plan to liberate Nestan-Darejan.

In Neoplatonism we can observe a similar process. Neoplatonism saw reality as a chain of beings, entities, where the higher entity positively influenced a lower one, by giving it some of the higher entity's essence in a kind of osmosis-like process called "procession" [14, pp. 66-7]. How procession takes place, however, is nowhere described. But this is what we see in the MPS: Avtandil transfers his planning ability to Tariel. In Neoplatonism, though, the receiving entity always stays inferior, which is not the case in the MPS; in the MPS Tariel eventually surpasses Avtandil in planning ability, when he delivers the better plan to free Nestan-Darejan.

Again, it is not clear at all how Tariel receives Avtandil's goal-directed behavior. But at least there is a similar process in Neoplatonism, where higher entities somehow transfer their essence to lower entities, just like Avtandil transferred his problem solving ability to Tariel. There is still a difference: in Neoplatonism the lower entity always stays lower.

The story of Tariel's change into a person like Avtandil is an important part in the MPS: this change results in the liberation of Nestan-Darejan because the change in Tariel's character enables him to come up with the right plan to free her. But Tariel is not unique: in the first part of the MPS he is impulsive and does not anticipate the results of his actions. But that is how all Indians are, although they stay impulsive: King Saridan, King Parsadan and Parsadan's wife, and Nestan-Darejan all act impulsively, with disastrous results. The exception is Asmat, Nestan-Darejan's maid. Arabians, on the other hand – e.g. Avtandil and Tinatin – are rational human beings who anticipate the consequences of their actions. The names of the Indians and Arabians are arbitrary: they do not refer to any actual people. Instead, the Indians and Arabians are illustrations of what Aristotle, and before him Alcmaeon, considered to be the difference between human and animal cognition: animals think based on perception only: they perceive something, and then decide to want it, flee from it, or ignore it, on the basis of their instincts, not logical thinking. Humans think logically: they establish causal relations in accord with discursive logic. Humans perceive something and then establish causal relations. The Indians are what are considered "animals" in Greek philosophy while the Arabians are "humans" [12, pp. 77-8].

Important is that "animals" can become "humans" in the MPS. That is what happens at the end of the MPS: Tariel – an Indian and an "animal" hero – logically analyzes the plan that Avtandil,

an Arabian and initially the “human” hero, has proposed for the liberation of Nestan-Darejan. Tariel improves on Avtandil’s plan and comes up with one with better results, thereby showing that from an “animal” he has now become a “human.”

Whereas the idea of the impulsiveness of animal thinking and the logicity of human thinking is widespread in Greek philosophy, it is rare to find: 1) these two types of cognition attributed to population groups – Arabians and Indians, in this case – and, 2) the idea that members of one group can move to a different one: that Indians can become Arabians or that animals can become humans. However, that is what we find in the works of the Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, henceforth Dionysius: he classifies the cognitive beings into four groups: the One or Supreme Being, the Angels, the Humans and the Animals. While Dionysius has his own conception of the cognition of the One and the Angels, he agrees with most Greek philosophers in their conception of human and animal cognition. He adds, however, that members of one group, Humans, can move into a higher group, Angels, usually by philosophical or theological studies and activities. While the MPS shares with most Greek philosophers the idea that human cognition is based on perception and logical or discursive thinking while animal cognition is based on perception only, we find both in the works of Dionysius and in the MPS the idea that members of one group can move into a different other one. Dionysius concentrates on how Humans can become Angels, which he sees happening in the case of some philosophers and theologians[9, p. 83]. In the MPS we see that an Indian, Tariel, an impulsive “animal”, becomes a “human” who thinks logically. This idea of changing group membership is unique to both Dionysius and the MPS.

We see then, to put it in Dionysian terms, that Tariel changes from an animal into a human. Dionysius tells us how humans can change into Angels: through theological and philosophical study. It is not clear how Tariel changes. Aristotle[2, p. 243] sees emulation as a cause of change: people strive to acquire the characteristics of others which they think should be their characteristics as well, and which they think are within their reach. Rustaveli has a different approach to Tariel’s change.

When Tariel first appears, he clearly is in a deep depression, to put it anachronistically, and he does not think about changing his character, although to readers of the MPS it might be clear that he needs to learn to make and evaluate plans. Tariel then changes because Tinatin noticed him. Of course, all participants in the hunt noticed Tariel because of his rude behavior, but they noticed him with “disinterested contemplation”, to use Levinas’ terms. Tinatin, on the other hand, understands Tariel’s behavior, appropriates it and there by frees it from its Otherness, again using Levinas’ terms [6, p. 124]. The appearance of Tariel, who is the Other, settles Tinatin with a “guiltless responsibility”: now she will see to it that Tariel’s problems will be taken care of[6, p. 131]. She then transfers her responsibility to Avtandil, who eventually will free Tariel from his Otherness.

Avtandil then tracks Tariel down and Tariel realizes that someone is interested in him. Rustaveli does not describe how Tariel changes but merely states the facts: Avtandil finds him, listens to him and finally identifies with him: he will do what Tariel should have done in the first place: locate Nestan-Darejan. Rustaveli implies that friendship plays a role: Tariel changes after someone has noticed him because of the friendship between them, even though Tariel’s change takes place in Avtandil’s absence.

Aristotle’s definition of a friend as “another self” is especially fitting where it describes that Avtandil replaces Tariel completely. We might have expected that they would have cooperated and, for example, that one would search the countries east of a certain place, let’s say Gulansharo while

the other would search west of Gulansharo. Instead, Avtandil takes over the entire search for Nestan-Darejan while Tariel recuperates.

Although initially Shota adheres to Aristotle's conception of friendship, towards the end of the MPS we find a conception that is closer to conceptions of the 21st century: the two heroes cooperate, discuss various plans and decide which is best. We see here a general pattern: the MPS begins like a traditional courtly work: a noble lady sends her lover on a quest. But then the lover becomes a more modern person: after having fulfilled his quest, he goes on a quest of his own: find Nestan-Darejan for Tariel. Avtandil, at the end of the MPS, acts like a modern person with his own priorities, his friendship for Tariel, and not like a courtly lover anymore. Similarly, the friendship between Avtandil and Tariel begins like an Aristotelian friendship where Avtandil becomes another Tariel, and Tariel becomes another Avtandil. But then their relation becomes modern: each contributes to the plan to liberate Nestan-Darejan and they work like a team, with Tariel eventually doing the better planning.

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