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Mirrors in 19th-century Greek Prose Fiction: *The King of Hades* (Constantinople, 1882)

Anastasia Tsapanidou

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Abstract

In 19th-century Modern Greek life, the most common written word that means 'mirror' was 'katoptron'. It is well-known that during this period katoptron as a material object still indicated luxury and welfare. Many 19th-century Modern Greek writers, just like their colleagues in Europe, used 'katoptron' as a means of mirroring in metaphorical and symbolic ways: it mirrors the body but reflects the soul, it tells truths or lies, it reveals the future or the past, it provokes feelings and emotions, joy or despair, self-complacency or remorse. A widespread use of katoptron during the same period made the mirror equivalent to a means that provides a wide periscopic or panoramic point of view, a full inspection of an issue discussed by the writer. But it appears that there was a wider spread of the use of katoptron/mirror as a synonym of profound (and meant to be scientific) research on social and individual morality.

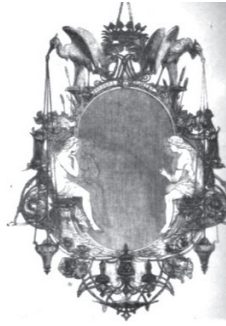
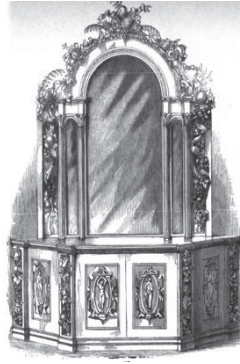
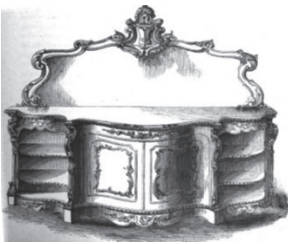
Some of these meanings of katoptron can be found in the three-volume Modern Greek novel *The King of Hades* published in Constantinople in 1882, written by Konstantinos Megarefs and obviously inspired by the famous *The Count of Monte Cristo (1844)* by *Alexandre Dumas*. The present paper examines the role of the mirror in this novel in the context of the aforementioned meanings. Subsequently it focuses on a very special use of a mirror as a secret key-mechanism and invisible door/passage leading to an underground space used for escape, hiding, and punishment, and it discusses this particular use of the mirror as a constructive element in the mystery novel.

Keywords

Mystery novel, 19th-century Greek novel, 19th-century Greek short story, mirror, katoptron

An oral, abbreviated version of this paper has been presented in the International Workshop *Mirrors and Mirroring. From Antiquity to the Early Modern Period*, organized by Lilia Diamantopoulou (University of Vienna) and Maria Gerolemou (University of Cyprus), University of Vienna, Department of Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, Vienna, 6-7/10/2017.

The 1st World's Fair, also known as the Great Exhibition, held in the newly-built Crystal Palace in London on May 1st 1851 was an event unique for its time with significant international impact. Thoroughly detailed descriptions concerning the exhibition reached Greece through the reports of Stefanos Xenos, reports that appeared in newspapers of the time and were published a year later in a special richly-illustrated issue on the topic.¹ Among the illustrations there were some of the extravagant mirrors which were displayed in the exhibition.



1 Xenos (1852).

These illustrations, undoubtedly noteworthy for Xenos's contemporaries, nowadays remind us of two things we tend to forget: firstly, that in the 19th century not all houses had mirrors which were worth noting; secondly, that the kind of mirror, the quality of its glass, its size, the decoration of its frame as well as its placement in a residence can serve as a distinct indicator of the financial standing of the owner as well as of his predisposition to show off his wealth, his taste or his cosmopolitanism. How affluent someone was could thus be reflected on the mirrors used to decorate his house.

This 19th-century mentality enters the world of both European and Greek fiction when writers describe a hero's possessions. In this paper I will mainly focus on cases across Modern Greek fiction that employ the mirror motif. While studying approximately 600 Greek short stories and novels from the 19th and from the beginnings of the 20th century, written by 96 novelists, some well-known and some forgotten today, I found out that the use of the mirror as a token of wealth is one of the most common and most consistently repeated motifs.²

Mirrors constitute one of the credentials for riches in both occidental and oriental fictional contexts. More often than not, they are Venetian; however, they can also at times be English. They may be placed on an item of furniture or they may stand on the ground; they can be as big as one of the walls or even cover all the walls of a room. At times they are elaborately decorated and have a golden frame. In most cases they are placed next to candlesticks, big candles or other sources of light, bathing the room in light and thus creating the illusion of a light shower and evoking a magical atmosphere as the light is multiplied and reflected in various directions across the room. Lacking the comfort of electricity we enjoy today, it is no wonder that the 19th century viewed this extravagance in light as another emblem of luxury and wealth.

This last case, of rooms bathed in light thanks to mirrors, takes on oriental characteristics when found in plots representing the ottoman way of living and demonstrates the eroticism and hedonism traditionally connected with the Orient. On the other hand, in Greek and European literary context of this sort, the luxurious mirror functions as an intrinsic element of urbanity. Interestingly, the same motif works the other way around as well: the complete

2 My research on mirror and mirroring in the 19th-century Greek prose fiction is a work in progress. Here I present in a summary manner only some of the principal roles that mirror has in literature, according to my initial research based on the above-mentioned literary corpus. The authors and the literary works that I have studied prior to writing this paper are listed in the Appendix.

lack of mirrors, the absence of a decent mirror, the presence of an old one or its placement among poor-quality, kitsch items indicate a lower social status. Mirrors, therefore, constitute a desirable commodity: a woman would want to receive one as a wedding present from her husband or, when she is lucky enough to already have her own, she proudly includes it in the public display of her trousseau, as narrated by Alexandros Papadiamantis in two of his short stories, *Kokkona thalassa* [Κοκκώνα θάλασσα]³ and *To tyflo sokaki* [Το τυφλό σοκάκι].⁴

The positioning of mirrors in rooms can be such that the images reflected are intentionally multiplied. For example, the panorama of Venice painted on the ceiling of a super luxurious residence is through mirrors transmitted and multiplied on the walls of the room;⁵ in the Sultan's palace in Istanbul the mirrors infinitely reproduce the image of a group of drunkards dancing frantically;⁶ in Ali Pasha's palace in the city of Ioannina the so-called 'Room of Mirrors' serves to satisfy his lust as – due to the reflections of its mirrors – the Pasha can watch from every angle possible the half-naked women dancing for his pleasure.⁷

However, the basic role of a mirror in a room is to reflect people's images for practical reasons: it is used by men and, mainly, women for their daily toilette or when they want to disguise themselves in order to achieve some secret goals. Mirrors are also used to confirm or to contradict the heroes' beauty or ugliness, their youth, their age or their physical defects. In such cases the mirror reinforces human vanity or hope, self-pity or desperation. Therefore, it becomes respectively a friend, a trustworthy advisor, a comforter or an enemy, an indisputable witness of cruel truth, a nightmare. Very often the mirror brings to the surface a hero's and especially a heroine's vanity, her narcissistic predisposition as well as her inclination towards immorality and liberal erotic behavior.

Occasionally in 19th-century fiction we come across some other practical uses of mirrors deriving from real life, some of which have – we could say – a scene setting function: if there are traces of human breathing on a mirror's surface, for example, any doubts whether the person lying unconscious is still alive or dead are immediately dispelled; if a mirror is covered with black veils,

3 Triantafyllopoulos (ed.) (2005a: 3, 287). *Κ' εσύ δεν έστελεις ούτε μισή ντουζίνα κουταλάκια του γλυκού της γυναίκας σου, και δεν της ψώνισες ποτέ σου μιαν ασημένια κούπα, έναν καλόν καθρέφτη, ένα σκρίνι, ένα λαχουρί, ένα τίποτες.*

4 Triantafyllopoulos (ed.) (2005b: 4, 115). [...] *μετεκομίσθησαν την παραμονή [του γάμου], κατά την τάξιν, εκτεθειμένα επί δύο αμαξών τα προικιά της νύφης – καθρέπται και κομά και μεταξωτά παπλώματα απλωμένα επί της αμάξης [...].*

5 Leventis (1858: 128–129).

6 Kyriakidis (1881–1883: 15/11/1881).

7 Ramfos (1862: 5–6).

it denotes a family's mourning; if held appropriately, a mirror becomes a means of spying on the unsuspected whereas if it stands in the right position the hero is able to see who enters the room or who is watching him behind his back.

Less frequently we come across other more unusual functions of mirrors in narratives: a mirror can serve as a hiding place for important documents or as a means to lure larks when hunting; as an ideal decorative frame for a wreath or as an ornament on a donkey's saddle. We can also find references to a flower known to Ottomans as 'Aphrodite's Mirror'. Magical mirrors appear as well; they are mostly in the hands of women reminding us of fairy-tale witches, but even in the hands of barbers. Mirrors of this kind show the past, the present or the future and at times become a means of skillful treachery. A category per se is the large three-dimensional and visionary mirror in *I gynaika tis Zakythos* [*Η γυναίκα της Ζάκυθος*] by Dionysios Solomos.⁸ The mirror in question reproduces images on both sides: on the front shiny side it reflects real facts as well as transcendental truths, whereas the space created between the reverse side of the mirror and the wall that supports it gives birth to some of the visions of monk Dionysios, as well as to the final delirium and the suicide of the main 'dark' female character.

This list of the actual uses of mirrors in 19th-century literature becomes much longer when we include the metaphorical, in other words, the cases where the mirror in a narration is not a tangible object found in a room but an imaginative and symbolic construct adopting the characteristics and the abilities of the real object. The cases where mirrors are compared to elements of nature will be presented here briefly and time effectively. These kinds of similes are repeatedly found in the descriptions of landscapes: the sea, a lake, the sky, the moon, the sun, the icy ground, an active volcano, the sand in a desert look like or accordingly become either huge natural mirrors or themselves images reflected on mirrors. In several other cases the glossiness and the shining of a mirror are compared to natural or artificial materials of the same qualities deriving from the metaphoric use of everyday language. Another common motif used in narration is when the face of heroes or the changes in their expressions reflect or do not reflect their character, emotions or soul: the 'arrogant' high forehead and the long, thin and pointed nose may be mirrors of immense stubbornness and fraudulent shrewdness, a hero's figure may reflect his past happiness, his eyes may reveal his bliss, or his lips the depths of his soul. Accordingly, a hero's actions may become at times the mirror of his inner world: his well-kept garden

8 Tsantsanoglou (ed.) (2017).

may reflect his diligence or his purity, his love the nobility of his soul, whereas his writings can serve as the clearest mirror of his sincerity or a lively mirror of his pretense. We may also come across a system of two mirrors: two persons (or groups of people) act as a mirror to each other and through this counter-reflection their thoughts and emotions become more clearly understood; this interaction is at times fruitful and at times not, whereas in some cases it can also remain unresolved.⁹ There are also more unusual, more 'literal' comparisons like that between the fragile glass of a mirror and the fragile chastity of a maiden or between a woman's cold kiss and the reflection of a flame on the mirror that has everything but warmth and passion.

I would now like to concentrate on the variations of the mirror motif as a tool for obtaining panoramic control or as a means of seeing or gaining truth, wisdom and self-knowledge. This latter type of mirror motif is frequently found in various kinds of non-fictional texts addressing all sorts of audiences. Staying within the 19th century – though the history of the motif goes back a long way before that – we can see, for instance, the expressive titles of three French journalistic editions in which the word 'mirror' is used almost as a synonym for the image coming from an expanded view point or from a panoramic viewing of issues concerning arts and letters, commerce or women's fashion.¹⁰ As far as Greek publications are concerned, the same use of the mirror motif appears in texts with political¹¹ or educational content;¹² it also shows up in an encyclopedia listing of prominent Greeks entitled *Ellinikos kathreptis* [Ελληνικός καθρέπτης]¹³ and in a treatise concerning the way bandit gangs were organized and functioned in Greece at the time.¹⁴

There are two assumptions underlying these above symbolic nuances of the mirror concept: firstly, that the mirror is not distorting but exact, thus offering well-defined and precise details of what it reflects. Secondly, and as a result of the first assumption, that it does not reflect false realities but truths. In parenthesis it should be noted that there are also intentionally distorting mirrors found in 19th-century satirical texts which wish to tell the truth, but in a purposefully-enlarged and excessively-presented way. One such example is *Katoptron tou 1845 etous* [Κάτοπτρον του 1845 έτους] by Alexandros Soutsos,

9 E.g. Damvergis (1904: 175, 219, 258) and Triantafyllopoulos (ed.) (2005: 1, 249).

10 *Le Miroir des spectacles* (1821–1823); *Le Miroir de Paris* (1835); *Le Miroir parisien* (1860–1870).

11 E.g. Georgiou (1880); *Katoptron* (1878).

12 E.g. *Katoptron* (1885).

13 Alexandridis (1806).

14 Moschonios (1869).

a poetic satire against all those who plundered Greece after Independence;¹⁵ another one is *O Kathreptis* [*Ο Καθρέπτης*] (1872–1873), the ‘satirical-political’ newspaper of Corfu¹⁶ that turned against Iakovos Polyas and his own newspaper named *Kodon* [*Κώδων*].



O Kathreptis (1872–1873)

A more specific version of an imaginary and precise, non-distorting mirror reflecting the truth of things is that which reveals the vices and virtues of people and society in general.¹⁷ Let us not forget that the 19th century lends itself to such moral didacticism, particularly in the newly-founded Greek state, a state desperately seeking its modern Greek and European identity, delicately balancing itself on the geographical and ideological borders between East and West. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that these moral-didactic reflections gradually spread in Greek literature although through more disguised or fragmented phrasing: the narrative depicts individual human stories that more or less indirectly lead the reader to general conclusions about human morality.

The motif of moral-didactic reflections was already in use during the Enlightenment, in works like Dapontes’s *Kathreptis gynaiikon* [*Καθρέπτης γυναικῶν*],¹⁸ rhymed stories of moral and immoral women in the Old Testament. Such cases in their turn constitute a development of the instructive type of texts from the

15 Soutsos (1845).

16 *O Kathreptis* (1872–1873).

17 Levadefts (c.1880). See also the satirical edition of Varveris (1868).

18 Dapontes (1766).

Middle Ages known as ‘mirrors of princes’ or ‘speculum principis’. Now, in the 19th century, the novel in particular is built upon these kinds of reflections (which become a basic element of the fiction) and at the same time it repeatedly calls on them to justify its existence (which is at the time widely questioned). For example, a review on *Polypathis* [Ο Πολυπαθής] by Grigorios Palaiologos, one of the first Greek novels of the 19th century, highly praises the book for “showing like a mirror the numerous adventures of human life in order to decry vice and exalt virtue”.¹⁹ In the mid-19th century, the aforementioned author Stefanos Xenos, while promoting his first novel entitled *O diavolos en Tourkia* [Ο διάβολος εν Τουρκία], assures his readers that it contains no excesses and no unreal events, being the most sincere and yet unbelievable mirror of, to quote the author, the “muslim yoke” which has spread corruption and inertia among the Greeks.²⁰ Similarly, a prolific writer of the end of the same century, Epameinontas K. Kyriakidis, notes that the novel is a mirror of society; it therefore records everything, including the human weaknesses we refuse to admit to ourselves.²¹ The critics of the genre, however, turn these arguments upside down, arguing that the mirroring of vices in novels has a negative influence, especially on female readers, who are supposedly more susceptible to moral corruption than men.²² In any case, however, both parties agree that novels are mirrors that offer examples to follow or to avoid.

This debate apparently underlies a small part of the diachronic theoretical discussion about what exactly can be or should be a literary representation. As Bakhtin explains, the mirror is crucial to human’s perception;²³ thus, even from the Plato’s epoch the notion of the mirror is very often implicated in this kind of theoretical discussion as a means of understanding, of reflection and, consequently, as a means of representation. Even though “it is difficult to gauge the extent to which the characteristic preoccupations and discoveries of aesthetic theory have been fostered by the conceptual model of the reflector, whether this has been explicitly or covertly effective in determining the focus and terms of critical analysis”,²⁴ still the conception of literature as a mirror/reflector, no matter what and how it mirrors/reflects, penetrates the aesthetics of writers and literary criticism through time.²⁵ As far as it concerns Realism,

19 Angelou (ed.) (1997: 250).

20 Xenos (1862: iii).

21 Kyriakidis (1883–1884: 23/10/1883) and Kyriakidis (1890: 1, 102).

22 E.g. Sarantidis (1891: vii).

23 Todorov (1995: 132).

24 Abrams (1953: 34).

25 *Ibid.*, 31–69. For mirrors as real objects and as metaphors in Greek and Roman antiquity see Taylor (2008). For additional noteworthy approaches to mirror’s functions

'mirror' becomes a convenient metaphor for the writer who wants to assert his readers that his fiction is based on truth and offers to them a precise representation of social life. This idea of a novel accurately reflecting the reality can be found early enough, during the years of Romanticism, for example in Stendhal's comparison of the novel to a mirror taking a walk along a highway.²⁶ Stendhal's point of view corresponds with the ones adopted by some of the 19th century Greek novelists. No matter whether they built their fiction into a mixed romantic-realistic context (like Stendhal does) or they stay considerably closer to the aesthetics of 'pure' Realism, and no matter if they imply or they directly refer to the mirror as a reliable witness of reality, 19th century Greek novelists use to point out how useful and didactic their novel-mirror/reflector can be for the individual and public modern Greek morality.²⁷

Let us now move on to examine a specific mirror found in *The King of Hades* [Ο βασιλεύς του Άδου], the three-volume novel written by Konstantinos Megarefs and published in Constantinople in 1882. The main hero of the book, Mavronikos, is unfairly sent to prison in Russia for political reasons. When, in desperation, he realizes that he will never again see his wife and two kids who live in Constantinople, he helps a fellow prisoner escape and hands him some precious secret documents which financially secure the family's future. Needless to say, our hero falls victim of fraud: in order to appropriate Mavronikos's fortune and to find a treasure the latter had hidden on someone else's behalf, his fellow prisoner attempts to kill him, murders his wife and son, becomes the legal guardian of his daughter and tries to marry her to his main accomplice so as to take control of her fortune. The two criminals, with the assistance of a number of scoundrels, will commit murders, thefts and other illegal acts in Constantinople in an attempt to obtain the hidden treasure. However, after an incredible escape from Siberia in a hot-air balloon, Mavronikos, whom everybody thinks dead, comes back as an avenger; with the aid of people who share his ideas, he will bring order back: justice and ethics will triumph, mysteries will be solved, lost

see, for example, Benjamin (1978), Eco (1999: 365–370), Melchior-Bonnet (2001) and Pendergrast (2003).

26 Stendhal in his *Red and Black* (1830) compares a novel to a mirror taking a walk along a highway: at times, he writes, it reflects the blue of the sky whereas at others the mire in the puddles of the road; if you want to blame someone for the puddles, Stendhal argues, blame the road or the road inspector, not the mirror; see Dickstein (2005: 7). For the special Stendhal's point of view that relates him in some ways with the Realism, see Auerbach (2005: 600–616).

27 E.g. Melissopoulos (1897: 157–158).

children will be recognized, family relations will be restored and most of the villains in the story will pay for their wrong-doings with their own death, imprisonment or harsh punishment. However, some of the issues in the plot will remain open, issues that – as the writer informs us – will be dealt with in his following novel entitled *The Heir of the Treasure* [Ο κληρονόμος του θησαυρού], not known to have been published.

The case of the Greek Mavronikos immediately brings to mind that of the *Count of Monte Cristo* by Alexandre Dumas, who also comes back home after years of unjust imprisonment due to political reasons to take revenge on those who have tried to destroy him. Megarefs who writes a mystery novel borrows from Dumas a ‘recipe’ bound to become a success both in popular novel and its special sub-category called ‘mystery novel’:²⁸ the recipe is a hero who possesses almost supernatural powers; he is a small god on earth, a superhuman – as Gramsci and Eco have called him²⁹ – who comes back to restore justice and moral order.³⁰

Apart from *Monte Cristo*, it seems that *The King of Hades* also borrows from other famous French heroes of popular novels for the making of its characters. The main influence comes from Rodolphe and his companions in *Mysteries of Paris* by Eugène Sue – a novel that in a way gave birth to the persona of Monte Cristo;³¹ it also borrows from Rocambole, the famous hero of Ponson du Terrail.³² Since, however, our topic is the mirror, I would prefer to have a closer look at how the use of the mirror in *The King of Hades* confirms the first similarity observed between this Greek novel and *Mysteries of Paris*: the fact that both novels belong to the genre known as the ‘mystery novels’. In the case of Eugène Sue we have, of course, the pioneer of the kind, the one who essentially developed the motif of mystery originally found in gothic novels by setting the action in the large urban milieu of Paris, whereas in the case of Konstantinos Megarefs we have a late imitator in Greek literature – there have been others before him.³³

28 For the relations between the 19th-century popular novel and mystery novel in a European context, see Knight (2012). The same topic in a Greek context is discussed by Gkotsi (forthcoming).

29 Eco (1989).

30 The story of *Monte Cristo* was very famous among Greeks and it was translated into Greek several times during the 19th century (first translation: Constantinople, 1845).

31 It seems that *Monte Cristo* came to publication as a special request of Dumas’s publishers when they realized that their rivals gained a “runaway success” with Sue’s *Mysteries of Paris*; see Wren (1997: viii).

32 Tonnet (2009: 260–296).

33 The most well-known of them is Stefanos Xenos, who tried to give an Ottoman mystery novel (*O diavolos en Tourkia*) and Christoforos Samartsidis who wrote

In *The King of Hades* we come across some uses of the mirror like the ones mentioned above, let us call them ‘conventional’ ones. These are the following: a) the mirror is used as a unique element of an interior’s furniture and decoration; b) the mirror serves as an expression of the hero’s male or female vanity, with different moral connotations, however, depending on the gender: when the moral hero views himself proudly in the mirror it stresses the justification of his honest efforts whereas the reflection of the immoral hero highlights the corruption of his character and his profligacy; c) the mirror functions as a reflection of elements of nature: the Bosphorus reflects in its waves the shores of Constantinople and thus contributes to the creation of a magical, indescribable spectacle; and d) an inexplicable force causes a father’s affection for his daughter to reflect in him, like a mirror, all the emotions his daughter feels, even the ones she has not realized herself.

The mirror that interests us here, however, has a totally different function: it is grandiose, adapted on a wall in the pavilion found on Mavronikos’s farm; when pressing a secret spring, the mirror in question creaks open to reveal the entrance of a secret basement:

Αίφνης ηκούσθη ελαφρὺς τις τριγμός ἐπὶ τῆς δεξιᾶς πλευρᾶς τοῦ δωματίου, ὅπισθεν μεγαλοπρεποῦς τινός κατοπτροῦ. Μετὰ παρέλευσιν δευτερολέπτων τινῶν ὁ τριγμός ἐπανελήφθη ἐντονώτερος· τὸ κάτοπτρον τότε ἐκινήθη βραδέως ὡς διὰ μαγείας ἐν εἰδει μυστικῆς θυρίδος, καὶ ἀφῆκε νὰ διέλθωσιν ἀλληλοδιαδόχως ἄνδρες δύο, ὁ τελευταῖος τῶν ὁποίων ὠθήσῃ τὸ κάτοπτρον, ὅπερ προσηρμόσθη εἰς τὴν θέσιν τοῦ ἐκπέμψαν τὸν αὐτὸν τριγμὸν τοῦ ἐλατηρίου τοῦ. [...] Ὁ γέρων τότε ἐπλησίασεν εἰς τὸ κάτοπτρον, ἔθετο τὸν λιχανὸν εἰς τὸ μέσον τοῦ δεξιῶ πλαισίου αὐτοῦ ὡς νὰ ἐπίεζεν ἐλατήριον τι· ηκούσθη μόνονος τριγμός καὶ τὸ κάτοπτρον ἐκινήθη καθὼς καὶ πρότερον. Παραμερίσας δε ὅπως διέλθωσιν οἱ δύο ἀλληλοκρατούμενοι ἄνδρες, – Θὰ καταβῆς εἴκοσι πέντε βαθμίδας, εἶπε. Ὁ Φαίδων οὐδεμίαν ἐδείξεν συγκίνησιν πρὸς τὴν ἀπόκρυφον ταύτην διέξοδον τοῦ περιπτέρου, ἣν πρώτη φορά ἐβλεπε.³⁴

Ταυτοχρόνως τὸ ἐπὶ τῆς πλευρᾶς μυστηριώδες τοῦ δωματίου ἐκείνου κάτοπτρον ἐξήνεγκεν τὸν γνωστὸν υμῖν τριγμὸν τοῦ ἐλατηρίου τοῦ. Εἰς τὰ ὅτα τοῦ κατέφθασεν ὁ ἦχος τοῦ τριγμοῦ τούτου. Οἱ τρομαλέοι ὀφθαλμοὶ τοῦ προσειλικύσθησαν ἐπὶ τοῦ κατοπτροῦ, ὅπερ εἶδε κινούμενον. Τότε ἐκυρίευσεν αὐτὸν

about the mysteries concerning the Greek society of Constantinople (*Apokryfa Konstantinoupoleos*). A revised list of 19th-century Greek mystery novels is given recently by Gkotsi (forthcoming).

34 Megarefs (1882: 2, 60; 2, 65).

παραλογισμός απερίγραπτος, η καρδιά του έπαυσε πάλλουσα, και ουδέν άλλο ή περί της εαυτού σωτηρίας σκεπτόμενος ο φρικώδης άνθρωπος ανεζήτησεν αλλαχού θύρα.³⁵

Mavronikos's mirror could be labeled a 'key-mirror', both in a literal and a metaphorical sense: literally, because in the plot it functions as a kind of mystic key that exclusively permits the transportation of heroes from the ground to the depths of the earth;³⁶ metaphorically, because due to this use in the narrative, the mirror-motif contributes to the creation of that special atmosphere that characterizes the genre of mystery novels. By 'special atmosphere', it is meant the one that is created from the various ways the writers of mystery novels employ to evoke the notion of the mystery, the hidden and the occult in their stories: a) the first of these ways is the continuous repetition of specific vocabulary that evokes this mystic 'air'; b) the second, the use of motifs connected with the notion of mystery, like hidden secrets, buried treasures, missing family members, secret gangs or actions that need to remain secret; c) finally, the third and most important technique is the use of fictional places that can evoke a sense of mystery and make revelation more difficult for the heroes to achieve. There is interplay between the mirror in *The King of Hades* and all of these three elements: it is called 'mysterious mirror', its real function remains secret to everyone apart from Mavronikos and his close partner and it also constitutes a kind of 'secret gate', a 'mystic exit' to an underground space controlled exclusively by Mavronikos himself.

What is interesting about the mirror in question is that it plays a significant role in the unfolding of the story: not only because the narrator often refers to it or because it is repeatedly used by the heroes who share its secret as a means to escape, to trap or to attack their enemies, but also because when opening with its characteristic creaking sound, it acts as a threshold for the emergence of heroes from a secret underworld or for diving back into it. This underworld is not known to most heroes, it hides a secret treasure, it bears the bones of those who died unfairly, it has funeral monuments and in the course of the story it becomes the prison and the place of torture of the main bad guy; last but not least, this underworld constitutes the dark kingdom of Hades for the protagonist.

35 Ibid., 3, 176.

36 In *Monte Christo* we can find subterranean passages and a glass door that makes spying easy, but none of them has similar connotations with the secret door mirror described in Megarefs's fiction. Mirrors in Dumas's novel are smaller, simpler and of practical use.

Of course, this dark kingdom of Hades is also an underground labyrinth, a maze. The motif of the labyrinth is most popular in mystery novels, mainly because it creates the sense of a mysterious, unknown, uncontrollable and unsafe space. The mystery novel writers love setting the action in the chaotic web of the large urban spaces, which in the 19th century still retain their complicated maze-like structure, either above or below the ground.³⁷ In Megarefs's Constantinople there are two basic above-ground labyrinths: the narrow alleys of Galatas and Stavrodromi (i.e. the two most urbanized areas of the city) and the paths in Mavronikos's farm in the suburban countryside, both turning into death-traps at night. As for the underground ones, the most important is the tenebrous basement with the mirror-gate in Mavronikos's farmhouse and a second basement in a coffee shop in the area of Stavrodromi which serves as a secret prison.

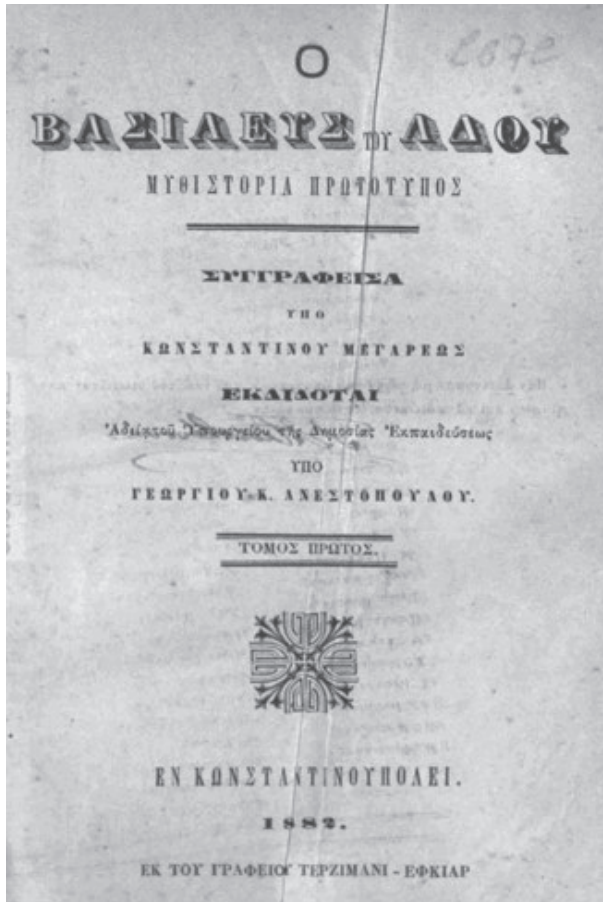
The maze below the coffee shop in *The King of Hades* extends a long way and ends at the basement of Mavronikos's farmhouse. This means that in the story, along with the actual road leading from Stavrodromi to the suburban countryside of Constantinople, there is also an underground web of roads that link the same inner-city and suburban areas. At the coffee shop the entrance to this secret web is through an iron trapdoor whereas at the other end one can enter by pressing the secret spring on the back of Mavronikos's mirror. A mirror which, after all, is of use only when its function as a mirror is negated – that is when all the roles mirrors normally have in 19th-century fiction are rejected. Only once in the story the mirror in question is used to reflect: when it reveals to one of the wicked heroes the effect of a secret poison Mavronikos had used on him.³⁸ But even then the act of reflection is instantaneous and produces no information about what the hero saw on the mirror's surface that made him desperate.³⁹ This unexpected role of Mavronikos's mirror is actually what makes it an interesting device in Megarefs's work.

It is true that like many other Greek novels of its time, *The King of Hades* builds its story into a mixed romantic-realistic context. By pointing out the miseries and the evil of the Constantinopolitan society, it seems to aim to

37 James (2005).

38 Considering that poisons of all sorts (and in particular exotic, hard-to-find poisons like that of Mavronikos) constitute a favorite 19th-century theme both in popular literature and mystery novels, the narrative connection between the poison's effects and the mirror multiplies the latter's key role in Megarefs's fiction.

39 Megarefs (1882: 2, 64): *Ο Ζώης αφήκεν εαυτόν να οδηγηθή προ του κατόπτρου κλονούμενος. Κραυγήν απελπισίας έρριξε εσωπτρισθείς και ωπισθοδρόμησεν κίνησιν αποστροφής των χειρών του πώισαας.*



Konstantinos Megarefs, *The King of Hades* (Constantinople, 1882)

Realism; in fact, it is superficial Realism full of old-fashioned romantic tropes, very well known in mystery novels and in popular literature in general. If we keep in mind this mixed romantic-realistic context, then we have to consider Mavronikos's mirror as a simple variation of the recurrent narrative motif of invisible wall doors leading to secret passages.⁴⁰ On the other hand, if we disregard the doubtful realistic result and stay focused on Megarefs's intention to write a realistic novel, then we realize that the key-mirror's contribution to Realism derives from its function as a gate, not as a mirror. In other words,

40 As far as it concerns the 19th-century Greek novel, see, for example, Samartsidis (1868) and Goussopoulos (1888).

Mavronikos's mirror is not a commonly expected symbol of Realism; it leads to the real vision when it uncovers, and it uncovers when it opens, not when it reflects, that is when its glass surface is not used as a means of mirroring on it but as a means of covering/revealing behind it. If it was meant to mirror, it would be connected with life, but as a gate leading to the subterranean Hades it is actually related to death. Besides, mirror's fragility unrealistically substitutes the supposedly rigid surface of a common gate. Thus, although the mirror is not distorting but exact, it still leads the heroes to a distortion, to an illusive assumption about its usefulness. If it did not intend to distort, it could be placed with the glass side facing the wall, but it does not. So it intends to mislead about its real use and simultaneously to reveal it at the right time. In my opinion, these tricky transitions from the real to the apparent and *vice versa*, in correlation with the literal and symbolic connotations of the 'Hades' to which this mirror-gate leads, are in fact the most genuine parts of Megarefs's narrative technique and maybe they could save his novel from the oblivion.

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