

Romadur and Kümme

» PHILIP MEAD

Somehow the story survives, from a mostly lost Occitan tradition that was trashed by a bunch of spiteful Cathars. They're on record as saying the whole nest of texts it belonged to was *ünter*-complex and not living their values, especially the giants. Too much underground, too old, and fake news about hell. Only a few fragments of a unique manuscript survive, in a dialect that is way out of area, and that code-switches mordantly from high to low. What would you expect. At the same time every line seems to emit ions of anxiety as if the author was under some kind of threat, or personally involved in some way, a hand under the table. The *Geist* is totally pre-bourgeois, but it's difficult to say exactly how far he or she was looking back. Scholars have been shamefully self-regarding in their readings, as if lives – and language – aren't beyond imagining. It's kind of diglossic, but there's no way it's mainstream. And like all art it's unbelieving about the present, seriously slanted.

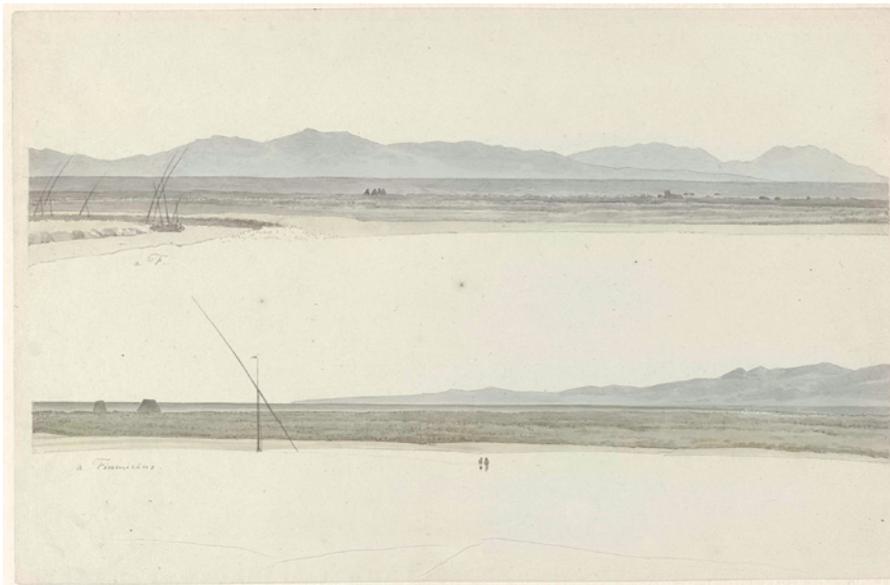
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Probably near the beginning a tattered knight returns one day
from the Holy Land with his Persian bride. That much is certainly legend.
It's been decades since the battles, since the pen on the map.
There's a hint that something has turned him vegetarian. She was bitten
by an adder while pregnant, but survived. It seems a pipe-playing deity,
a god she brought with her, was her guardian. But the child is a worry.
Why does the author spend so many lines on the way her hair is braided
on the back of her neck? As a couple they seem defeated, bad hosts,
forever haunted by the trauma of their flight, the time they plunged into the sea.
It feels like a blighted world, although there's no mention of pestilence.
Romadur's brother, one of those damaged by his fantasies, was thrown into
the dexter prison at Montalban five years previously, a matrix of loss,
living on bread and marrow. But he's been allowed to write his narrative,
some fragments of which are embedded. Something allegorical going on here,
something alien. Ironically his story is a kind of treatise on how everyone
in the world is on the move, from Roman times on, companions leaning over
the ship's rails, peering into the Tyrrhenean, oblivious to the Saracens watching them,
barges sliding down the cloudy Rhine, a Cretan in exile remembering the fires of August
and setting off for home, the winter treks of vagabond clerks, the smoky horse stages
on the trade route to Lübeck. Here he has a long excursus on amber, pine needles and
casks of herrings, which seems a bit folksy. But it's definitely a different voice,
with some interesting details about commerce. We don't have the ending,
if there was one, so it's impossible to tell where the tale was heading,
which fork it was going to take, but nothing would seem to suggest
a simple romance, or anything foreseeable. Like the young couple going outside
for a cigarette, or suddenly the girl with a dog in Rudolfplatz, who can tell?

Zanzibar Light (Sydney and Tokyo: Vagabond, 2018)

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(above)

The Tiber at
Fiumicino,
Josephus Augustus
Knip, c. 1809 —
c. 1812

IMAGE: RIJKSMUSEUM,
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