

Stuart Robson and Hadi Sidomulyo (trans.): *Kidung Pañji Margasmara: A Middle Javanese Romance, by Kĕmuling Rat Dyah Atapĕng Rajĕ*

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Brill's Bibliotheca Indonesica's latest addition is a translation of and introduction to the Middle Javanese *Kidung Pañji Margasmara*, the product of a felicitous collaboration of Stuart Robson, laureate of the A.L. Becker Southeast Asian Literature in Translation Prize for his 2015 translation of the Javanese Ramayana, and Hadi Sidomulyo, expert in Old Javanese geography and topography. Robson authored the Introduction and an edition of the Javanese text with an English translation, while Hadi Sidomulyo contributed notes on topographical features mentioned in the text and discusses the historical background of the events unfolding in the poem.

The *Pañji Margasmara* is a *kidung*, a poetic genre of Middle Javanese literature, made up of 20 Cantos in a *tĕmbang tĕngahan* meter. It narrates the story of Pañji Margasmara, a prince of Majapahit, who leaves home to roam the countryside out of sadness following the death of his wife after just two months of marriage. On his journey, he meets Ken Candrasari, a princess of Singhasari, immediately falls in love with her, and sets out to make her his own. But Ken Candrasari is betrothed to Jaran Warida, the nephew of her father, the Adipati of Singhasari. Without disclosing his royal identity to Ken Candrasari, Pañji Margasmara enlists the help of the princess's nursemaid to facilitate sexual encounters. Soon after, he takes his leave and preparations for the princess's marriage to Jaran Warida continue. Ken Candrasari, initially unwilling and averse to his sexual advances, now longs for Pañji Margasmara and refuses to marry Jaran Warida, especially after learning about the former's true identity. The couple elopes and travel to Majapahit, where they are welcomed by the prince's family. Ken Candrasari soon becomes pregnant and the couple return to Singhasari to reconcile with her family. They are warmly welcomed and wed; only Jaran Warida, the unsuccessful suitor, escapes to the hills out of shame, but is retrieved, given a position at court and a wife, Ken Candrasari's distant cousin Ken Brajawati. The offspring of both marriages, in turn, marry – this union representing the restoration of the harmony and happiness of all.

The *kidung* genre, as Robson notes, and Middle Javanese literature more broadly, has received insufficient attention from scholars (p. 4), which makes this work all the more welcome. Beyond its core narrative, the poem is full of scenes that beautifully depict the setting and lifeworld of this Middle Javanese text. It is replete with scenes giving us a glimpse not only of male sociality with its gambling and cockfights (with their explicit undertones of sexual competition) and hermitages, but also of female friendship and intimacy, especially between Ken Candrasari and her young cousin Ken Brajawati. We also encounter remarkable depictions of the scenery and landscape in which the story is set and through which our protagonists travel. Space and movement play significant roles in the *kidung's* plot, and Hadi Sidomulyo's study, which maps the plot onto the Eastern Javanese geography, provides an important resource for better understanding the poem's spatial imagination.



Not being an expert in Middle Javanese poetry (my own field is modern Javanese), I would not presume to find fault with the accuracy of Robson's translation. I did, however, find that at times he demanded rather a lot from his non-specialist readers by leaving quite so many terms untranslated and unexplained. On one random page (p. 129) I counted no fewer than 30 Javanese terms, some of which were unfamiliar even to a scholar of an adjacent field like me. I understand the difficulty of finding accurate translations for terms that have no equivalent in English. Yet here, the sheer number of untranslated Javanese terms makes the text difficult to understand for anyone who is not already an expert in Middle Javanese literature. Some terms are flagged in the introduction (p. 37–8), but having to flip back and forth makes the reading experience rather cumbersome. This is unfortunate because these terms are especially frequent in atmospheric depictions of the beauty of flowers, plants, or the protagonists' garments. As a result, the a newcomer to this field will likely fail to appreciate many of the aesthetic qualities the text so praises.

As Robson states, the purpose of translating and introducing this text is to rescue this neglected literary tradition and make it accessible to a wider audience. As is the case for many other books in Brill's *Bibliotheca Indonesica*, the Introduction primarily focuses on dating, authorship, meter, textual references, and literary context, but does not especially deal with scholarly contextualizations that would situate the text in the wider discussions and appeal to a broader readership. As a pioneer in the field of the Middle Javanese *kidung*, Robson could have drawn on his previous studies to make this text more approachable to non-specialists. It is to be hoped that others can build on Robson's translation and address the many fascinating questions opened up by the *kidung*, especially related to the aesthetic, religious, and ethical values expressed by the author, against the background of the poem's historical context. What, for example, is the spiritual and moral significance of travel in the story, also in comparison to its well-documented role in other Hindu environments as well as modern Islamic Java? What is the moral quality of force, especially in relation to the remarkable conclusion of the story, where Pañji Margasmara is forgiven and justified for his appropriation of the engaged Ken Candrasari, simply because he was successful? And finally, what kind of understanding of romantic love is expressed here, given that women are explicitly portrayed as unwilling and forced?

This final question is, in my opinion, especially urgent. Many of the "romantic" sexual encounters in the story would be considered rapes by contemporary standards. Of course, it takes no Foucault to know that sexual violence is not a stable category and that women's resistance may have meant something very different to the (likely male) author and his intended audience. The scenes are, however, depicted in such graphic detail — Pañji Margasmara "hurting her breasts" and leaving her "broken and at her wits' end" in a puddle of blood (p. 89), to just give one brief sample — that I would not assign this text to my students without a content warning. Perhaps we are unable to recover the woman's perspective because we simply have no way of knowing it. At the very least — and this is a task not only for Robson and Sidomulyo, but for all of us working on Javanese literature — it is to be hoped that future studies could make visible the historical and cultural contingencies and their associated religious and moral values that produced such scenes, so as not to reinscribe and naturalize masculinist understandings of Java's past.

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