The Kim Văn Kieu of Nguyen Du (1765–1820)

A translation by Vladislav Zhukov
Pandanus Online Publications, found at the Pandanus Books web site, presents additional material relating to this book.

www.pandanussbooks.com.au
The Kim Văn Kieu of Nguyen Du (1765–1820)

A translation by

VLADISLAV ZHUKOV

PANDANUS BOOKS
Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies
THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY
Nguyen Du was a Vietnamese official displaced in a dynastic shift and sent into provincial exile in the service of his new overlord. There, his duties appear not to have been too burdensome, allowing him to pursue literary work, among which the most notable product was *Kim Vân Kieu*. Throughout the remainder of his life after the overthrow of the ruling house of his youth he pined for his former state, never ceasing to hold in private to his original loyalty, and a convention has grown which sees in Kieu’s saga of wanderings and travail Du’s own identification with her. Since I would have the reader move as quickly as possible to the poem itself I offer no more than this fragment of background, but further information about the man should be found nowadays in reasonably-sized libraries and data bases. As for other English renderings of the work, which readers may want to contrast with mine, I direct them especially to the annotated translation by Le Xuan Thuy and that of Huynh Sanh Thong, this last being a parallel version, the English face set out in blank iambic pentameter.

Those familiar with the Vietnamese original or with the above translations may like to view this present offering, by comparison, as rather more of a paraphrase. It had in fact been in my mind to do a stricter translation, but one that would strike a balance between scholarly absorption in the material being presented and concern with meeting the minds of the public to
whom it is presented—a balance not quite attained, it seemed to me, in the above versions. In their case, the literary effort made to engage readers appeared far too secondary to a literal delivery of the work, even allowing for the endeavour in format made in the instance of Huynh Sanh Thong. Considering that English was not the first language of those translators, their labours may well be described as heroic, but they have not been—I stress, to me—ultimately satisfying. My initially limited intention altered over time, through the stimulus of the poem itself, into a desire to produce an expansive interpretation—although restrained in its wanderings by constant reference back to each successive line of the original number in Du, in the manner of a parallel translation. Some liberties of exposition and expression have therefore been taken, and the justifications for those are as follows. Firstly, I want per se—that is, from a simple desire to share an enjoyment—to attract as wide as possible an English-reading public to this excellent and relatively little-known melodrama (Verdi and Puccini, had it been available to them, would have found much matter for operatic realism in it). Secondly, I have hoped to present the work—intellectually, morally, socially—as both exotic and usefully insightful in the broad. For beyond the philosophic mullings on the exhilarations and—unfortunately more so—the sorrows of the temporal experience that it represents to its own country, and which make it further revelatory of that interesting country, *Kim Vân Kieu* deals with identifiable and acceptable universalities. Finally and procedurally, those ambitions have entailed keeping an eye and an ear attentive to what normally literate Anglophone readers might take pleasure in—making the story as palatable as possible principally by treating the imaginative propensities of such readers (in as much as I know them from my own) as less of a tabula rasa than appears to have been done by the esteemed predecessors referred to.

Notations, front, back or foot, though often unavoidable in normal translations, can at times be used to prop up insensitive
exposition, and it became a challenge to produce something that was comprehensible and comprehensive while devoid of those accretions—which would also have tended to suggest less entertainment than I would want perceived in my version and more scholarship than it warranted. Yet I soon became convinced, while developing the first drafts, that little would be lost or be confusing if the work were to dispense with marginal elucidations, as long as its environment was—I hesitate to use the word—‘poetic’: that is to say, one naturally stimulating imaginative cooperation. Well, without losing sight of what centuries of genuine poetry have produced, I have done my best to create that environment; not hesitating in the process, additionally, to incorporate in it bits of extraneous cultural information, touchings-up where there have been discerned tendencies towards illogicality or discontinuity in Du (acceptable in their time and milieu, perhaps, but liable to bother modern readers), nor to make minor technical contributions which I thought would assist readers in following the development of the story, add to characterisation, give the appropriate colour to dialogue, and so on, all hopefully unobtrusive. There should be no chance of mistaking those for Du’s own commentary, usually didactic, scattered throughout the work. While claiming that such contributions have been made with discipline and utmost respect for the original, I might also remark that one need not be excessively apologetic when straying from Du, in view of his own example; for he was fairly ruthless when converting the Chinese tale of two centuries earlier whilst establishing his perception of its dynamics. Be that as it may, my attempts at forbearance, the occasional limitations on exposition imposed by the rhyme-metre format used here, and, finally, Du’s allusiveness—he is credited with some 500 references to Chinese works, totally beyond my power to reproduce—all mean, however, that the reader will still have need, will have free scope in fact, for the imaginative exercises referred to. And if unresolved obscurities should prompt
him to investigate the work nearer its source, that would be all to the good anyway.

I so far thought to present the tale in its sufficient attractiveness without the above-mentioned accretions, that I had hoped also to be able to do away with this Preface; but the needs of publishing convention may as well serve here to make a couple of points immediately that would have become self-evident sooner or later in the course of reading the text. The first is this humble offering, perhaps still useful in a multicultural age to those without specific Asian interests: Vietnamese is a monosyllabic language, and no matter the combination of letters, or however many vowels a word or name presents, that word or name remains an irreducible formal unit and for purposes of versification has one beat. The unwary are thus enjoined to guard against mentally dividing unusual combinations such as ‘Kieu’ or ‘Tuyen’. It may help to remind English-speakers that common familiar diphthongs such as ‘Kew’ and the first part of ‘twen-ty’ (to roughly approximate the Vietnamese examples) each contain two tied vowel-sounds, which are nevertheless accepted as forming monosyllables. Vietnamese has simply gone further, to three-vowel units. The second matter, and still on a linguistic bent, is that Vietnamese diacritical marks have been largely avoided here, principally because they would have little meaning for the generality of readers to whom this version of *Kim Vân Kieu* is offered, and who would, indeed, possibly find them an annoyance. The ‘hat’-mark has been retained in two cases (â and ô) where rhyming precision is involved, and it was thought best to use it everywhere else those sounds occurred, for the sake of consistency. Removal of diacritics has created the minor peculiarity that two of the story’s characters are apparently left with the same name: ‘Tu’. The choice was one of either arraying both with their complement of marks—again presenting no elucidation for most readers—or rendering one of the names phonetically to produce ‘Too’, an excessively radical change, it
was thought. However, Vietnamese names, one often hears, belong to the class of those especially unvarying, so, hopefully, there will be an acceptance of the situation presented here, particularly as the two figures barely cross paths. Wherever practicable, I have translated name-difficulties away, either literally or suggestively.

Turning from the nomenclature of the protagonists to that of the work itself, it may be of interest to those who will decide to seek out further information on the poem, that there have been recent tendencies to give it some such title as The Tale of Kieu, in the case of translations, and the Vietnamese equivalent of that form, in modern re-publications in Vietnam. This is understandable, for it cannot be denied that Kieu is the central character in the story, and her adventures occupy exclusively the middle third of it. However, on considering why traditionally the title has been a construct of three names—Kieu’s, that of her beloved (Kim), and that of her sister (Vân), the last two figures of the trio remaining physically absent from much of the story—it seemed inescapable to me that the others are very much borne along by Kieu as affective mental presences that impinge in episode after episode on her moods and thoughts, and, therefore, must also on our perception of the story as we read along. The reality of the past, her family, her youthful hopes, are all a significant constant in Kieu’s varied situations, and comprise an influence that has the power to materially steer the course of events—as it most clearly does in one spectacular and tragic instance in the latter part of the poem. Kim and Vân are centrally located in that reality, in Kieu’s mind, and surely an important psychological determinant is missed, and both Kieu as a character and the story as a whole are diminished or skewed by the misunderstanding implied in a narrower title.

Finally, this is the spot where dedications and thanks for help rendered are located. I offer the following pages as a small contribution to the honourable tradition of amateur work done by
ex-soldiers who, to use an effective description by George Bernard Shaw, have ’reforged their muskets into microscopes’, investigating in the leisure of their retirement—hopefully for wider utility and enjoyment—things first glimpsed in the furores of service. My wife Anne has been the amused muse behind this most unlikely foray into letters by her husband, deriving from some germ planted those years ago. She knows my thoughts.

The
Kim Vân Kieu
of Nguyen Du (1765–1820)
Were full five-score the years allotted to born man,
How oft his qualities might yield within that span
to fate forlorn!
In time the mulberry reclama the sunk sea-bourn,
And what the gliding eye may first find fair weighs mournful
on the heart.
Uncanny? Nay—lack ever proved glut's counterpart,
And minded are the gods on rosy cheeks to dart
celestial spite…

On fragrant parchments, old and leafed by candlelight,
Or scribed upon bound bamboo tiles, a tale bedight
in romance states
That at Gia-Tinh's ascent, the Minh then potentates,
When peace blest all four zones, both capitals with gates and
wards entire,
There dwelt the household of one Vuong, a certain squire
Of such content degree as might fair grants that sire his heirs
allot.
He had a son, in line of birth the last begot:
Vuong-Quan. It was intended that a scholar's slot from him
progress.
Two daughters too there were, of ken and comeliness:
Thuy-Kieu, the elder girl, who with Thuy-Vân, the less, in lissom show
Folk likened to twin apricots, in virtue snow;
Each bearing unalike as like their graces though, the annals say.
And joy it is to read the lauds that Vân portray:
A gaze as mild as moonlight from beneath a splay of brows silk-laid,
Her smile a bud, speech native and confirmed as jade,
Complexion, lilies; hair—sun’s sheen on clouds, the shade of midmost night!
But flourished these delights besides those yet more bright
In one who might have lent her brilliant sister light for looks and skills.
Kieu’s eyes autumnal waters were; brows, lowland hills
In silhouette! The very willows glassed in rills her lines might rue,
Her limber pass a throne or citadel undo!
Beyond those charms she matchless talents teeming-drew from wits possessed
Of sympathies oft said to overbear that breast.
Her noble brush!—none better dipped to manifest in paint a tale.
Her euphonies!—a mistress of the classic scale
Was she, whose bò-câm lute to high Ngai Truong might vail but no bard more:
As when she set to fireside chaunts an ode of yore
That thereby grew to be the desperate and foregone Love and Chance.
She trumped the red-silk-trousered sex in elegance,
That green spring of her years when nubile maids enhance with arts their hair …
Behind chaste screens the girls live closed in peace.
Out there,
Across the east-wall, swains—bees, butterflies—pose, flare,
unheeded flit,
The days fly swallow-like, like shuttles interknit,
And of that season’s radiant ninety sixty’s writ has wound to end,
The grasses, verdant, fresh, horizonward extend
And late-flushed pear trees full have fused their independent specks of white.
Befalls the third moon month, the Festival of Light,
A time for solemn laving of the graves, of sprightly meadow strolls
And merry mill of throngs, like swallows, orioles …
And here our youngsters come, in garb whose grace extols returned glad spring,
There, notables parade, blades blushing beauties ring,
Sedans wend, horses, silks of varied cut and cling … the air abounds
With incense smoke above the tumuli and mounds,
Cash-paper for the needy dead flares, skips, gilds grounds, floats ashes round …
But waxing post-noon shadows trace at last
east-bound,
And, linked, the brother and the maids, three hearts
compounded, amble back.
In time a runnel-bank provides a dipping track
That draws their eyes to contemplating with each tack
the vale’s tableau:

The rivulet repeatedly recurved below,
Which froths then stills where stands a tiny pontal
bow superimposed.

Beside the path a burial mound sags, scarce disclosed
Beneath drooped grasses coarse and sere, their seed
scale-hosed, stems faded green.
Exclaims Kieu: ‘Why! were not the tombs today made clean?
Yet here no tending, no oblative smoke hath been! Can such
prevail?’
At that Vuong-Quan unfolds from first to last this tale:
‘Dam-Tien, a courtesan and lauded nightingale of yore,
lies there,
Renowned a span for graces free and debonair —
No lack of orioles and swallow-flights of fair youths found
that door!

But beauty’s prospects ever garner meagre store:
Mid-May the blooming branch that such sweet
perfumes bore—abrupt was rent.
One came to call, in distant climes a resident,
Who yon had heard the lady’s fame, now thought to venture
her delights.
But as the suitor from his bark her strand first sights

E’en then the pin hath snapped, the vase with sharded mites
bestars the floor,
The chill of chantries to the dead of heretofore
Enfolds her courts, and prints of hoof and wheel,
moss-o’erlaid, grow now faint.
“What mystifying thing is this!” resounds his plaint, “Sure some opprobrious god this rendezvous hath tainted! …

But mark! though,

Predestination—karma—notwithstanding, lo!
Our union in another life, let heaven know, I here attest!”
He bought a casket, carried her bewept to rest
By jewelled wain … Yet wreaths but briefly graced yond crest of heaped red dust.
The lunar hare hath sought its cove since that gale’s gust,

The sun’s crow plunged—how oft? None notes the grave nor musters due lament.’

From Kieu’s responsive heart a ready dole gives vent,
Interrogating fate and, first, fate’s unattentive God-of-all:
‘O wayward, O perverse be woman’s antient thrall;
These sagas of misfortune echo themes appalling to our kind;

Say, Great Creator, must blights ever bud-days find
To blast spring verdancy? frosts render soon repined the summer’s rouse?
Alive, she took the very world for lusty spouse;
Alas, where be the beaux of old, to call love-dousing death a sham,

Who once cock-phoenix-like attended on Madame?

Where be the bards to cherish fresh that face,
enamoured of its rose,
Their lyred recall before oblivion interpose?
Gone—then shall I this incense light in lieu of those; and too in point

Of venerating token for this chance conjoint;
It may be those that ’neath the Yellow Springs anointed lie can know.’

She whispers soft a prayer and makes discreet kou-tou,
Strews herb about the grave, then backs with movements slow and musing mind.
As on that withered sward the shadows grew long-lined
And under nearby banks blurred grey and undefined
the fluvial cane,
Withdraw Kieu forth a hairpin from her late-dressed mane,
And on a tree effusions strange by Duong-quatrain and
stopped-rhyme scribed:
Old haunting imagery that youth and dreaming gibed,
Induced by brutal doubts her soul had new-imbibed
and hence must heed;
And blanched her floral features from that novel need,
While consternation welled unchecked, now borne
on beaded drops, now streams …

Speaks Vân, perturbed: ‘O sister mine, it pity seems
To thus misspend thy tears in mourning lost esteems
and long-dead days …’
But Kieu: ‘Doth not the classic rose incur essays
Of spoil and virulence as never overlays the eglantine?
Do I but ponder on such metaphors I pine,
And call to yond sunk dust: Then time to this decline
distinction brings?’
Thus Quan: ‘O worthy sister, strange that language rings;
To so deflect upon thyself such jarring things offends the ear;
The dreary air grows burdensomely heavy here
And darkness stoops; the homeward path a fraught
arrear of time entails …’
Still Kieu replies: ‘When those of talented avails
Pass on, their bodies only die, their soul-pareils
unbound abide;
Who knows but sympathies ’twixt us and such ghosts glide:
Remain, for haply these surrounds will yet provide
some mystic deed!’
Ere word in answer might the others intercede,
Blasts wake the ragged flags on that funereal mead to flared
display,