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Abstract

Der Aufstieg der Komnenen-Dynastie ging im 12. Jahrhundert am byzantinischen Hof mit einem wachsenden Interesse an Literatur einher. Viele Autoren verfassten Texte zu diversen Anlässen für die kaiserliche Familie, wie zum Beispiel im Zusammenhang von militärischen Expeditionen und Erfolgen, Hochzeiten und Kaiserkrönungen. Andere Autoren schrieben sogar lange erzählende Werke, wie Romane und Chroniken, die diversen Mitgliedern der kaiserlichen Familie gewidmet waren. Dadurch wurde die Beziehung zwischen Mäzen*innen und Autoren noch enger als in den vorangegangenen Jahrhunderten.

Das literarische Mäzenatentum wurde somit zu einem integralen Bestandteil der verschiedenen Bereiche der Textproduktion und des Textkonsums. Am Hof richteten viele Autoren zeremonielle Texte an den Kaiser und andere Mitglieder der kaiserlichen Familie. In den so genannten rhetorischen Theatern trugen Autoren ihre literarischen Werke vor einer Gruppe von Mäzenen*innen und anderen Gleichgesinnten vor.

Es ist bemerkenswert, dass die bedeutendsten von diesen literarischen Zirkeln von mächtigen Frauen des kaiserlichen Hofes organisiert wurden. Irene Doukaina, Eirene Sebastokratorissa und Anna Komnene sind nur drei Beispiele für die gravierende Rolle, die Frauen in der Blütezeit der byzantinischen Literatur im zwölften Jahrhundert einnahmen. Durch ihr Mäzenatentum wurden verschiedene Autoren wie zum Beispiel Konstantinos Manasses, Theodoros Prodromos, Johannes Tzetzes und Manganeios Prodromos gefördert, die literarische Werke in diversen Formen und Gattungen verfassten. Viele Autoren des zwölften Jahrhunderts waren in hohem Maße von diesen Frauen abhängig. Die vorliegende Masterarbeit fokussiert auf jene Autoren und ihre Werke.

Es soll untersucht werden, wie sich die Beziehungen zwischen den Mäzen*innen und Autoren auf deren Werke auswirkten. Dabei sollen sowohl der Inhalt als auch die literarischen Merkmale der Werke untersucht werden. Schließlich soll einer genaueren Betrachtung unterzogen werden, welche Art von literarischen Themen, Bildern und Motiven die Autoren in ihren Werken verwendeten. Des Weiteren wird in der Arbeit erörtert, welche literarischen Gattungen von diesen Autoren am häufigsten verwendet wurden, um eine weibliche Leserschaft zu erreichen. Im Wesentlichen geht es darum, die Beziehung zwischen den Autoren und ihren weiblichen

Auftraggeberinnen zu erforschen und zu untersuchen, wie diese Beziehung in den literarischen Werken der Autoren zum Ausdruck kam.

Der erste Teil der Arbeit richtet seine Aufmerksamkeit auf die literarischen Quellen aus dem zwölften Jahrhundert, die an Frauen gerichtet sind oder deren Hauptthema die Rolle der Frau ist. Dabei werden verschiedene Arten von Quellen (z.B. Briefe, Reden, Gedichte, Epigramme) herangezogen, unter anderem ehezog an Frauen gerichtete literarische Quellen aus dem 12. Jahrhundert. Diese Quellen stammen von den berühmtesten byzantinischen Autoren des zwölften Jahrhunderts, darunter Theodoros Prodromos, Michael Italikos, Johannes Tzetzes und vielen anderen. Durch eine Diskursanalyse und den Vergleich der Quellen untereinander soll ein differenzierteres Bild der Beziehung zwischen den Autoren und ihren weiblichen Auftraggebern entstehen. Außerdem soll ein besseres Verständnis der literarischen Themen vermittelt werden, durch die Frauen sowohl positiv als auch negativ dargestellt werden. Der zweite Teil der Arbeit wird sich auf das Werk „Alexias“ von Anna Komnene konzentrieren. Die „Alexias“ gilt als das beste Beispiel für Frauenliteratur in der gesamten byzantinischen Zeit. In diesem Teil wird auch ein unbekannter Brief untersucht von einer Mutter an ihren Sohn aus der Handschrift Par.gr.400 zum ersten Mal editiert und untersucht.

In dieser Arbeit wird sowohl die Frau als Mäzenin als auch ihre Beziehung zu zeitgenössischen AutorInnen in den Mittelpunkt gerückt. Damit leistet die vorliegende Arbeit einen Beitrag zum besseren Verständnis der Literatur des zwölften Jahrhunderts.

Acknowledgements

Four years ago I came to Austria as an Erasmus student from Belgium to finish my master degree in Early Modern History at my Alma Mater, KU Leuven. Even given the historical link between my hometown Mechelen, Margaret of Flanders and Austria, I could never have imagined that I would call the city of Vienna and the Institute of Byzantinistik und Neogräzistik my home, yet both of them have become just that, my home away from home.

After three years of working on my masters in Byzantine history, I would like to take this occasion to thank some people without whom I would never have gotten this far.

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1. Introduction

Ἀλαμανία, χόρευε καὶ σκίρτα καὶ λαμπρύνου·
τοῦ γὰρ σεβαστοκράτορος τῇ παγκαλλίστῃ κόρῃ
ὁ δοῦξ ὁ μεγαλόδοξος πανευτυχῶς ἐνοῦται,
καὶ γίνεται λαμπρότερος ἀπὸ τῆς λαμπροτέρας,
καὶ μεγαλοδοξότερος ἐκ τῆς ἐνδοξοτέρας.¹

So writes Manganeios Prodromos in a poem, addressed to Theodora Comnene, the daughter of the Sebastokrator Andronikos and Eirene Sebastokratorissa, on the occasion of her marriage with Henry II, the duke of Austria. The poem was written around 1147/1148 and consists of 96 verses.

Literature has always been an important part of Byzantine society, including religious hagiographical works, personal letter collections, and historical chronicles. Literature served many purposes and was part of every level in Byzantine society. During the twelfth-century, Byzantine literary production grew exponentially. The main reason for this rise was the system of patronage. Authors were requested by members of the ruling class to compose literary works. Literature was used for different reasons in Byzantine society; education and religion were the two main reasons behind the production of literary works.

Because of this rise in patronage, there was a change in the literary tradition, with various new genres emerging. An example of these new genres are the begging poems of Theodoros Prodromos. Older genres, that used to be popular during the Late Antiquity but had lost their importance during the Byzantine period regained their popularity, an example of this change is the resurgence of the novels. The renewed interest in literature started at the new imperial court of the Comnenian dynasty. While the Comnenian court still put emphasis on military aspects it also extended considerable attention to more literary inclined enterprises, unlike the court of Basil II.²

¹ Manganeios Prodromos, *Poem 22*, Jeffreys E. ed. & transl. unpublished, 1-5.

Translation:

Alamania, dance and leap and shine brilliantly,
for the sebastokrator's most beautiful daughter
is being united to the glorious duke, to his great good fortune,
and he is becoming more brilliant from her greater brilliance
and much more glorious from her greater glory.

² Lauxtermann M., 'Byzantine Poetry and the Paradox of Basil II's Reign', *Byzantium in the Year 1000*, Magdalino P. ed., Boston, 2003, 212.

The names that are deeply connected with Byzantine patronage during the twelfth century are women who were part of the imperial court. Eirene Doukaina, Anna Comnene and Eirene Sebastokratorissa were all affiliated with the authors that produced the most important literary works of the twelfth century. Theodoros Prodromos and Manganeios Prodromos produced poems for all these women and dedicated their works to them. Constantinos Manasses dedicated his chronicle to Eirene Sebastokratorissa. The literary patronage of these women during the twelfth century has greatly influenced the literary community during this period and the following centuries. Because of their patronage, literature in the twelfth century flourished.

The literary works that were addressed to women differ from the works that were addressed to men. One of the differences concerns the use of literary *topoi*. Poems addressed to women include imageries inspired by nature. Mythological, religious and familial themes were also very popular in works addressed to women, especially in poetry. These imageries are inherently connected to women in Byzantine literature because of the female ideal that authors put forward in their literature. Nature and beauty are closely connected with each other in Byzantine literature. The descriptions of the female leads in novels or the descriptions that Anna Comnene gives of her mother Eirene Doukaina and Mary of Alania are examples of this literary tradition. These women are compared to fresh snow (the colour of their skins), roses (the colour of their lips and cheeks) and willows (their lithe body build).³ By looking at the imagery that is used in literature addressed to women, it is possible to gain an idea on what Byzantine society identified as the ideal female image.

This thesis does take into consideration works which were written by men and were addressed to women, but also literary works written by women, since they provide us with insights into the literary themes they were interested in. The *Alexiad* by Anna Comnene is a good example, constituting the most famous literary piece written by a woman. By taking a closer look at the descriptions of women by Anna Comnene it is possible to see what women themselves placed importance on in the representation of their own gender.

1.1 Status Quaestionis

One of the starting points for the study of the literary culture of twelfth-century Byzantium remains *Die Byzantinische Literatur der Komnenenzeit Versuch einer Neubewertung* published

³ Barber C., 'Reading the Garden in Byzantium: Nature and Sexuality', *BMGS*, Vol. 16, 1992, 15.

by Herbert Hunger in 1968.⁴ Even so, this study is a bit outdated, since it appeared over fifty years ago. Elizabeth Jeffreys published a short essay titled *Imperial Patronage in the Twelfth Century* in 1982.⁵ It is a good starting point for imperial patronage, however, considering the publication date of the essay and the length (only two pages long), makes the essay outdated. A second study by Elizabeth Jeffreys is *The Novels of Mid-twelfth Century Constantinople* from 1998.⁶ The arguments made by Jeffreys on the socio-cultural terms for the resurgence of novels in the twelfth century can be applied to other changes in literature during this century.

Two other relevant works on twelfth-century Byzantine literature were published by Alexander Kazhdan: *Studies on Byzantine Literature of the 11th and 12th Centuries*, (co-written with S. Franklin)⁷ in 1984 and *Change in Byzantine Culture in the Eleventh and Twelfth century* (co-written with A. Wharton Epstein), in 1985.⁸ Both studies are useful starting point on the topic of literature in twelfth-century Byzantium. More recently Ingela Nilssons published her *Raconter Byzance*⁹, which is her first book length study on the literature of this period. Margaret Mullet's *Letter, Literacy and Literature in Byzantium* from 2007, while it does not focus on the gender question, it does focus on the importance of literature in Byzantium.¹⁰ Mullet's arguments on the relationship between senders and addressees in letters provide an interesting viewpoint on literacy in Byzantium. The letters were not only a communication device for Byzantine society, but also a form of art. A more recent article of Elizabeth Jeffreys, *The Sebastokratorissa Irene as Patron*, 2012 presents a more extensive portrayal of the Sebastokratorissa Irene, a historical figure who has close ties to the literary circles of the twelfth century in Byzantium.¹¹ The article is an excellent starting point in the research on Eirene Sebastokratorissa and the literary circle around her.

A volume co-edited by Michael Grünbart, Margaret Mullet and Lioba Theis, which is particularly interesting is *Female Founders in Byzantium and Beyond* in 2014.¹² This work

⁴ Hunger H., *Die byzantinische Literatur der Komnenenzeit: Versuch einer Neubewertung*, Vienna, 1968.

⁵ Jeffreys E., 'Imperial Patronage in the Twelfth Century', *Byzantine Studies in Australia*, Vol.10, 1982, 7-8.

⁶ Jeffreys E., 'The Novels of Mid-Twelfth Century Constantinople: the literary and social context', *Aetos: Studies in Honour of Cyril Mango; Presented to Him on April 14, 1998*, Sevckenko I. & Hutter I. eds., Stuttgart, 1998, 191-199.

⁷ Kazhdan A.P. & Franklin S., *Studies on Byzantine Literature of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*, Cambridge, 1984.

⁸ Kazhdan A.P. & Epstein A.W., *Change in Byzantine Culture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*, Berkeley, 1990.

⁹ Nilsson I., *Raconter Byzance: la littérature au XIIe siècle*, Paris, 2014.

¹⁰ Mullet M. ed., *Letters, Literacy and Literature in Byzantium*, Aldershot, 2007.

¹¹ Jeffreys E., 'The Sebastokratorissa Irene as Patron: the Monk Iakovos', *JÖB*, Vol. 32 (3), 1982, 177-194.

¹² Theis L. & Mullet M. & Grünbart M., *Female Founders in Byzantium and Beyond*, Vienna, 2014.

focusses on female patronage in Byzantium and the art that was created through this. Another focus point for the studies is the political and economic power of women in Byzantine society. This study, in comparison to the studies of Garland and Hill shows the power that women had through their position in society.

During the 1990's there appeared a growing interest in gender history of the Byzantine studies. Barbara Hill's work *The Ideal Imperial Komnenian Woman* from 1996 is very helpful regarding the subject of imperial women of Byzantium.¹³ The same scholar expanded on this topic in her book *Imperial Women in Byzantium 1025-1204: Power, Patronage and Ideology* published in 1999.¹⁴ The arguments presented by Barbara Hill in this book pertaining to the relationship of patronage and women of nobility helped me in my research. Her viewpoint of women using patronage to gain power and influence became a starting point for my own research. The article of Lynda Garland, *The Eye of the Beholder: Byzantine Imperial Women* from 1994, focusses on the portrayal of imperial women in literary sources.¹⁵ The study of Lynda Garland pays attention to the way in which authors portrayed women in their literary works, focusing on the literary tradition behind these descriptions. The studies of Garland and Hill combined, while focussing on different aspects, create a good overview of the patronage relationship between women and authors.

In the past twenty years the interest of Byzantinists in gender history has continued to grow. The study of Sarah T. Brooks *Poetry and Female Patronage in Late Byzantine Tomb Decoration: Two Epigrams by Manuel Philes* from 2006 discusses the literary patronage of the Late Byzantine period.¹⁶ Even though the article focusses on a later period than the subject of this thesis, the ideas presented by Brooks on epigrams and patronage in Late Byzantium provide an interesting viewpoint on the patronage relationship of women and authors on the basis of epigrammatic poetry. A second study by Lynda Garland *Byzantine Women: Varieties of Experience* appeared in 2006.¹⁷ This study gives an overview of the lives and positions of women in Byzantine society. In comparison to the article by Garland which I mentioned earlier, this particular study focuses on the perspective of the women in different layers of Byzantine

¹³ Hill B., 'The Ideal Imperial Komnenian Woman', *Revised Papers that Were Originally Read at the Session Entitled Komnenian Culture*, Carr A.W. ed. Amsterdam, 1996, 45-53.

¹⁴ Hill B., *Imperial Women in Byzantium: Power, Patronage and Ideology*, Edinburgh, 1999.

¹⁵ Garland L., "'The Eye of the Beholder': Byzantine Imperial Women and Their Public Image from Zoe Porphyrogenita to Euphrosyne Kamaterissa Doukaina (1028-1203)", *Byzantion*, Vol. 64 (2), 1994, 261-313.

¹⁶ Brooks S.T., 'Poetry and Female Patronage in Late Byzantine Tomb Decoration', *DOP*, Vol. 60, 2006, 223-248.

¹⁷ Garland L. ed. *Byzantine Women: Varieties of Experience [AD] 800-1200*, Aldershot, 2006.

society. Providing a starting point for research on women in Byzantium. A third study by Lynda Garland (co-written with Bronwen Neil) *Questions of Gender in Byzantine Society* from 2013 adds to her earlier study from 2006.¹⁸ In this book, Garland explores the concept of gender in Byzantine society, treating the entire Byzantine millennium. This study focusses mostly on female gender patterns, but also on some male gender patterns. The comparative research of this study presents a new viewpoint in gender studies for the Byzantine society. Lastly, the volume *Women and Monasticism in the Medieval Eastern Mediterranean*¹⁹ co-edited by Eleonora Kountoura Galakte and Ekaterini Mitsiou, from 2019 provides an overview of the role of women in Byzantine society. The volume focusses on the gender norms of the women and their roles in the political, economic and religious fields.

There are three studies on Anna Comnene published in the past ten years which are particularly interesting for the purposes of this thesis. The studies focus not only on the *Alexiad* itself, but also on the social-cultural background of Anna Comnene.²⁰ The first is a study edited by Thalia Gouma-Peterson, *Anna Komnene and Her Times* from 2000. The study addresses different topics connected to the research surrounding Anna Comnene and her activities. It is a starting point for the historical research concerning Anna Comnene and the researchers who collaborated on this study put forward arguments concerning the relationships of Anna and the people in her milieu. A second study concerning Anna Comnene was published by Leonora Neville, *Anna Komnene, the Life and Work of a Medieval Historian*, in 2016.²¹ This study, as the title suggests, focuses on Anna Comnene as a historian. This is an interesting approach, since other studies concerning Anna Comnene focus on her life and family background. Neville argues that Anna Comnene approached history in a way that both follows the literary traditions set by predecessors but at the same time changes these traditions to fit her own writing style. Larissa Vilimonovic's study, *Structure and Features of Anna Komnene's Alexiad: Emergence of a Personal History*, from 2019 focusses on the particularities of the family connections of Anna Comnene.²² Her arguments on the relationships of Anna Comnene with her family present a different interpretation of the family members described in the *Alexiad* by Anna.

¹⁸ Bronwen N. & Garland L., *Questions of Gender in Byzantine Society*, Farnham, 2013.

¹⁹ Kountoura-Galaki E. & Mitsiou E eds. *Women and Monasticism in the Medieval Eastern Mediterranean: Decoding a Cultural Map*, Athens, 2019.

²⁰ Gouma-Peterson T. ed., *Anna Komnene and Her Times*, New York, 2000.

²¹ Neville L.A., *Anna Komnene, the Life and Work of a Medieval Historian*, Oxford, 2016.

²² Vilimonovic L., *Structure and Features of Anna Komnene's Alexiad: Emergence of a Personal History*, Amsterdam, 2019.

1.2 Research Question

This thesis will take a closer look at literary works written during the twelfth century. There are three main categories of works: 1) works addressed to women; 2) works written about women and 3) works written by women. It must be said that the borderlines between these three categories were often blurred. Works addressed to women were often also works that were written about women, for example the *Synopsis Chronike* by Constantine Manasses. The *Alexiad*, while written by a woman is also a work that can be put in the second category. This research aims to contribute to our better understanding of literature written for women and the ways authors presented them. It will address the following questions: which characteristics of the women were elevated and which ones were degraded by the authors in their literary works? What were the themes or the genres that were most often used in literature for women during the twelfth century? How did women themselves write about other women? Did female authors use the same literary *topoi* in their works as the male authors? What was important for these women to write about in their own literary works?

As noted above, there has been an increase in studies on the place of women in Byzantine society, mainly by Lynda Garland, Barbara Hill and Elizabeth Jeffreys. This thesis seeks to contribute to this extensive research field. The focus of my research will be at the intersection of patronage and literature to demonstrate how the gender of the patron, or the subject of the literary work influenced their content. I will also take a closer look at literature written by women to explore how they were influenced to write about their own gender in their literary works. With this part I hope to contribute to studies focusing on the female world in Byzantium.

1.3 Research Method and Corpus

1.3.1 Research method

The thesis explores on how the content of the literary sources was influenced by the context of their creation. I will first divide the textual sources that I found in different categories. This separation of my source corpus in smaller groups makes it easier to compare textual sources with each other. I will make use of a close reading of the textual sources. During this reading I will pay attention to both the physical as well as the character description of the women given by the authors. Through this close reading of the different literary genres I will investigate

which literary traditions were used to describe women during the twelfth-century and how these presentations fit in the literary tradition of Byzantium.

Through a comparative study of the textual sources I will find differences and similarities in these portrayals of women throughout the different textual sources. Through this comparative study I will also present how the literary traditions differentiated from each other in the presentations of women.

The structure of my thesis will be as following: the first chapter will be an introduction to Byzantium in the twelfth-century. The chapter will briefly touch on the socio-cultural history and the literary changes that occurred during this period. The second chapter will give an overview of the different literary genres that will be used during my research, their particularities and popularity during this century. The third chapter will focus on the literary sources that portray women in a positive way. In this chapter, I will take a closer look at the *topoi* which were used by Byzantine authors for these type of depictions and where they fit in the literary tradition of Byzantium. The fourth chapter will focus on the portrayals of women in a negative way. Just as in the third chapter, the focus will be on the *topoi* used by the authors to portray the women and its literary tradition. In the fifth chapter, I will put focus on the texts written by women in the twelfth-century. I will take a closer look at how female authors described their own gender in their literary texts and how they differentiate, or are similar, to their male counterparts.

1.3.2 Corpus

The present corpus includes works exclusively from the twelfth century, which are 1) addressed to women, 2) written about women and 3) authored by women. I will perform a literary analysis of the texts that I have gathered and compare them according to their literary theme. Since there is a large number of literary texts from the twelfth century, the thesis does not discuss the entire corpus of literary texts written about, for and by women of this century.

I will divide the literary works according to genres to offer a preliminary picture about the amount of literary works from each genre. Dividing the literary works by genre, it will also enable me to draw comparisons between the literary texts of the same genre to demonstrate the shared literary *topoi* that the authors used to describe the women. In so doing, it will become apparent that different genres use different *topoi*. I will also look at the origin of these *topoi*, what are the recurring themes for these authors. I will take a closer look at the *Alexiad* of Anna

Comnene, the most well-known example of literature written by women in twelfth-century Byzantium. I will explore how she describes the women in the *Alexiad*, if she follows the Byzantine literary tradition, or if she creates a new way of depicting women in the *Alexiad*. Lastly, I will make a transcript of and will take a closer look at a letter in manuscript Parisinus. gr. 400 fol. 171-173 directed from a mother addressed to her child.

1.4 Byzantium in the Twelfth-Century

1.4.1 Sociohistorical Context

Just like other aristocratic families (e.g. the Doukai and the Phokades) the Comnenoi family gained a substantial amount of power and influence at the imperial court during the 11th century. This at the cost of the stability of the Byzantine Empire.²³ By gaining more power for the nobility and their families, they undermined the power of the emperor, leaving him with not enough power to effectively influence the Byzantine society or government. The Comnenoi family mainly flourished under the reign of Emperor Romanos Diogenes, who ruled from 1068 until 1071. Romanos surrounded himself with members of the aristocracy, but also administrative and legal experts, whom he thought would be loyal to the emperor.²⁴ The sudden death of Romanos in 1071 and the subsequent coronation of Michael VII Doukas meant that the Comnenoi family lost a lot of influence at the imperial court, a loss that they would work hard for to regain.

Anna Dalassene, the matriarch of the family made sure that the men of her family, namely her sons, were put in positions where they could gain fame and power. Over the years, this plan would prove very fruitful, especially concerning her third son Alexios, who became a rising star at the Imperial Byzantine court.²⁵ Alexios would show his military bravery during the revolt of Roussel de Bailleul (1073-1075).²⁶

The reign of Michael VII Doukas appeared to be disastrous for the Byzantine Empire and destabilised it even more, hastening the decline of the empire during the 11th century. The unity in the Byzantine Empire, that had previously existed, ended. One revolt after the other occurred and one of the men that Michael VII send out on military campaigns to try to stop

²³ Stephenson P., *The Byzantine World*, London/New York, 2011, 23.

²⁴ Angold M., *The Byzantine Empire 1025 - 1204: a Political History*, London, 1984, 115.

²⁵ Malamut E., *Alexis Ier Comnène*, Paris, 2007, 41–42.

²⁶ Malamut, *Alexis Ier Comnène*, 43.

them was Alexios Comnenos.²⁷ Alexios' victories on these campaigns and the favouritism that was bestowed upon him, together with the political thinking of his mother Anna Dalassene, would help him gain the imperial throne during the Comnenoi revolt. The incompetence of Michael VII Doukas became even more apparent when he appointed Nikephoritzes, a eunuch, as his financial minister and left him to rule the Byzantine empire in his name.

After the loss of Antioch the reign of emperor Michael VII came to an end, many different revolts spread out over the Byzantine territory forced Michael VII to abdicate the Byzantine throne in favour of Botaneiates, who became emperor Nikephoros III Botaneiates, on 7th January 1084.²⁸

Nikephoros III tried to rescue the empire after the disastrous reign of his predecessor. He very quickly gained the reputation of being a generous emperor. He placated the senate by agreeing to the law that the decisions of the emperor would only have legal power when they had the full consent of the senate. To placate the imperial court, and the Byzantine people, Nikephoros married the previous empress Mary of Alania, the wife of Michael VII who had entered a monastery, and declared her son with the previous emperor, Constantine Doukas, as his heir.²⁹

The Comnenoi family, under the reign of Nikephoros III, gained more political power through marital and adoptive connections, all orchestrated by Alexios' mother Anna Dalassene; the marriage between Alexios Comnenos and Eirene Doukaina, the granddaughter of emperor John, as well as the adoption of Alexios Comnenos by Mary of Alania, were all part of Anna's political plans, aiming to give Comnenoi family a connection to other aristocratic families (e.g. The Doukai, Palaiologoi and the Melissenoi).³⁰ Alexios further enhanced his own political position and popularity by his military victories. One of which was his victory over the rebel Nicephoros Bryennios the Elder in 1078.³¹

The reign of Nikephoros III did not stabilise the Byzantine Empire. The state was bankrupt, leaving the emperor unable to pay the army. Voices of dissent rose up in the empire, saying that Nikephoros was too old to rule and asking questions about the succession, Nikephoros did not have a son and he had eventually stripped Constantine Doukas of his role

²⁷ Malamut, *Alexis Ier Comnène*, 42.

²⁸ Angold, *The Byzantine Empire 1025-1204*, 124.

²⁹ Angold, *The Byzantine Empire 1025-1204*, 125.

³⁰ Angold, *The Byzantine Empire 1025-1204*, 128.

³¹ Angold, *The Byzantine Empire 1025-1204*, 125.

as heir. This dissent in the empire and among the courtiers in Constantinople opened up the opportunity for the Comnenoi to rise up in rebellion and gain the imperial throne. The connections arranged by Anna Dalassene proved fruitful and gave her son the imperial throne. The marriage arrangement between Alexios Comnenos and Eirene Doukai would be very important. It was John Doukas, Eirene's grandfather who supported the revolt financially and allowed Alexios to enter Constantinople on the 1st of April 1081 with his army and take over the throne in a peaceful manner.³²

1.5 Byzantine Women during the Twelfth-Century

The position of women during the twelfth-century was not as constricted as depicted in the literary sources, in fact women in the twelfth century had a lot of freedom. The historiographical sources, like chronicles, present women as chaste and not being permitted to leave their house. This portrayal is far from the truth. Women enjoyed a basic education, which aided them in economical but also cultural endeavours. Though it must be said that the education of these women especially concerning the literary aspect of it was minimal and put more focus on religious texts. The idea behind this was that women should know how to regulate the household. Women were able to regulate family businesses when needed and also had the rights to found religious institutions, for example monasteries or hospitals, in their own name.³³

Before the twelfth-century, women of the nobility became gradually more and more segregated from the men. This resulted in the idea that unmarried women were not allowed to be in the company of men who were not part of their family. However, during the twelfth century, this idea of segregation diminished, and women were able to gain their own influence, especially concerning political topics. Anna Dalassene, Mary of Alania and Eirene Doukaina, through their connections were able to influence the political field in Byzantium and founded a new dynasty.³⁴

For the cultural field, women from the imperial court became the pivotal figure around whom the literary circles were formed. It is through these literary circles that authors from twelfth-century Byzantium were able to present their works. Women from the imperial family,

³² Angold, *The Byzantine Empire 1025-1204*, 129.

³³ Neville L.A., 'Taxing Sophronia's Son-In-Law', *Byzantine Women: Varieties of Experience [AD] 800-1200*, Aldershot, 2006, 77.

³⁴ Garland L., 'Mary of Alania', *Byzantine Women: Varieties of Experience [AD] 800-1200*, Aldershot, 2006, 91.

like Eirene Sebastokratorissa, were able to provide patronage for authors like for example Manganeios Prodromos. Aiding the literary flourishing of Byzantine culture in the twelfth-century.

1.6 Literary Changes during the Comnenian Restoration

1.6.1 Language

The first change that happened in the literature of the twelfth century is the change in the language of the literary works. Before the twelfth century, literary works were written in a highbrow linguistic style, this was either Atticizing Greek or Koine. In order to be able to write in Atticizing Greek or Koine, many of these authors had to undergo an extensive education.³⁵ For these authors, the use of these two linguistic styles was a sign of their elite attitude. In particular, literary Koine gained ground during the eleventh and twelfth centuries for texts addressed to women. The reason behind the popularity of this linguistic framework is that many women did not manage to climb the steep hill of Byzantine education, which would have enabled them to understand the otherwise often used Atticizing language.³⁶

The vernacular Greek made an appearance for the first time in works of the twelfth century.³⁷ During this century authors would play with the idea of expressing their thoughts in a formal way using the vernacular language. The *Ptochoprodromika* are the most important literary works of this period written in this linguistic register. In his book, Browning uses the term “macaronic” to describe the linguistic register in the *Ptochoprodromika*.³⁸ However, the introduction of the vernacular did not instigate a complete change of the literary linguistic tradition.³⁹ The linguistic attitude in literature still favoured the ornate languages like Atticizing Greek and Koine. The use of vernacular Greek in literary works during the twelfth century was mainly a “tour de force” of the author, showing that they were able to write in this linguistic register.⁴⁰ According to Krumbacher, the use of the vernacular Greek in the literary production

³⁵ Browning R., *Studies on Byzantine History, Literature and Education*, London, 1997, 64.

³⁶ Browning R., *Greek Literature in the Byzantine Period*, Routledge, 2001, 122.

³⁷ Agapitos P.A., ‘Greek’, *Literary Beginnings in the European Middle Ages*, Chinka M. & Young C. eds., Cambridge, 2022, 256.

³⁸ Browning, *Greek Literature in the Byzantine Period*, 123.

³⁹ Alexiou M., ‘The Poverty of Ecriture and the Craft of Writing: Towards a Reappraisal of the Prodromic Poems’, *Greek Literature in the Byzantine Period: Greek Literature*, Nagy G. ed., Vol. 9, New York, 2001, 331.

⁴⁰ Browning, *Greek Literature in the Byzantine Period*, 123.

was more of a “demokratische Reaktion” against the elite.⁴¹ The use of the language also indicated that the textual material was probably meant to be enjoyed through an oral presentation, instead of reading it.⁴² However, it was not only short poetical literary works that were written down in the vernacular, longer texts, like the *Digenis Akritis*, were also composed in the vernacular,⁴³ indicating the popularity, of this linguistic form during this century.

1.6.2 Re-emergence of the interest in Ancient Greek Literature

During Byzantine times, there was always an inherent interest in literature of the ancient times. The works of many ancient authors were used to teach young students grammar and syntax, as well as the art of rhetoric. The use, and often imitation, of the ancient texts was an integral part of the Byzantine education.⁴⁴ A good example of this imitations are the *schede*, which will be discussed later on.

However, during the twelfth century, there was a change in the attitude towards ancient Greek literature. Manolis Bourbouhakis suggests that Psellos’ work on rhetoric was the starting point for this change by combining his teaching concerning literature with philosophical ideas.⁴⁵ This strategy was used to gather more students for his school, but it also had the effect that in the next century people would look at ancient texts from a new perspective.

Basil of Caesarea already defended the idea of using the ancient Greek texts as a stepping stone to learn the Christian doctrines during the fourth century.⁴⁶ His ideas and arguments were used during the twelfth century, when the idea of using ancient texts as sources of wisdom for all spheres of social and intellectual life gained in popularity. There had always been knowledge of the ancient texts, but now people would take greater interest in what these texts had to say. For example, religious texts were not the only ones to discuss morality. Socrates had been one of the first philosophers to discuss this topic. It is this kind of thinking

⁴¹ Krumbacher K., *Geschichte der byzantinischen Litteratur: von Justinian bis zum Ende des oströmischen Reiches (527-1453)*, Munich, 1897, 17.

⁴² Agapitos, ‘Greek’, 258.

⁴³ Agapitos, ‘Greek’, 260.

⁴⁴ Nilsson I., “‘The Same Story but Another’: A Reappraisal of Literary Imitation in Byzantium”, *Imitatio-Aemulatio-Variatio (Veröffentlichungen zur Byzanzforschung 21)*, Vienna, 2010, 189.

⁴⁵ Bourbouhakis M., ‘Byzantine Literary Criticism and the Classical Heritage’, *The Cambridge Intellectual History of Byzantium*, Kaldellis A. & Siniosoglou N. eds., Cambridge, 2017, 120.

⁴⁶ Bourbouhakis, ‘Byzantine Literary Criticism and the Classical Heritage’, 121.

that started to gain ground during the twelfth century. The so-called pagan texts could be used as stepping stones to understand the philosophical and religious texts.

During the twelfth century, there was also a growing interest in poetry, especially in the epic poems of Homer.⁴⁷ Examples of this are the *Allegories of the Iliad*⁴⁸ and the *Odyssey*⁴⁹ of John Tzetzes. In his work Tzetzes tried to paraphrase these epic poems for the modern Byzantine reader and show the underlying meaning of the poems by offering an interpretation of these epics to their medieval readers. These allegories were not just part of the long history of Homeric poetry and its reception in Byzantine society, they had their own merit as independent works written during the twelfth century.⁵⁰

A last example of the renewed interest of the Byzantine society in the literature of ancient times is the copying or sequel writing of classical texts. An example of this is the *Katomyomachia* of Theodoros Prodromos, written in the second quarter of the twelfth century. The poem was written as a sequel to the anonymous *Batrachomachia*, a work that is usually attested to have been written during the time of Alexander the Great and describes a battle between mice and frogs. The *Katomyomachia* concerns the battle between a cat and mice and has references to the *Batrachomachia*. At some point during the poem the leader of the mice mentions how they used to fight against frogs and weasels. Prodromos tried to imitate the epic poem of the *Batrachomachia* and write his own poem in the tradition of the mock epic. By connecting his work with its predecessor, the integration of his work with the ancient text would be complete. These epic poems are not the only genre from the time of antiquity that receive a renewed interest during the twelfth century.

⁴⁷ Van de Berg & Manolova, *Byzantine Commentaries on Ancient Greek Texts, 12th–15th Centuries*, Cambridge, 2022, 5.

⁴⁸ John Tzetzes, *La leggenda Troiana (Carmina Iliaca)*, Leone P.L. ed., Lecce, 2015.

⁴⁹ John Tzetzes, ‘Johannes Tzetzes, Allegorien zur Odyssee Buch 1-12’, Hunger H. ed., *BZ*, Vol. 49, 1956, 253-304.

John Tzetzes, ‘Johannes Tzetzes, Allegorien zur Odyssee Buch 12-24’, Hunger H. ed., *BZ*, Vol. 48, 1955, 11-38. John Tzetzes, *Allegories of the “Odyssey”*; *Allegoriae in Homeri Odysseam*, Goldwyn A.J. & Kokkini D. eds. & transl., Harvard, 2019.

⁵⁰ Kaldellis A.M., *Hellenism in Byzantium: the Transformations of Greek Identity and the Reception of the Classical Tradition*, Cambridge, 2009, 29–30.

1.6.3 Literary genres

a) The novel

During the 12th century, there was a renewed interest in the genre of the novel. While the last ancient novel was written by Heliodoros around the fourth century, the practice of novel writing did not disappear from the literary scene in Byzantium. In fact, they had been continuously used in other literary genres or discussed by Byzantine authors.⁵¹

The overall plot of the novel during the twelfth century is set during ancient times. This is indicated by the fact that the society described in the novels is still pagan. For example, in the novel of Eustathios Makrembolites *Hysmine and Hysminias*, the hero, Hysminias, is sent to the city of Aulikom as a herald of Zeus.⁵² The pair of lovers are often from noble families and meet each other by chance, when the two lovers meet it is love at first sight. This love often needs to be kept secret, Hysmine and Hysminias meet each other at night without the knowledge of Hysmine's parents and need to keep their love secret since Hysmine is engaged to be married to another man.⁵³ This forbidden love affair leads the main characters to run away together, as we read in Prodhomos' *Rhodanthe and Dosicles* and Makrembolites' *Hysmine and Hysminias*. It is during this escape that the pair is separated through different cataclysmic events, either through a storm or through being captured by pirates. In other novels, like *Drosilla and Charikles*, the lovers are abducted in their hometown by pirates, to be sold into slavery and separated. It is then that dramatic events unfold for both male and female protagonists. In particular, the female protagonist is often brought into difficult situations that threaten her life, her virginity and faithfulness to her lover. Gobryas tries to court *Rhodanthe* and when she does not respond to his feelings, he tries to rape her, but he fails.⁵⁴ Another recurring theme in the novel is that a character of minor importance usually falls in love with one of the main characters. In *Hysmine and Hysminias*, *Rhodope*, the mistress of Hysmine, who has been enslaved, falls in love with Hysminias.⁵⁵ This secondary character tries to court the main characters without success. In the end the main characters always return to the safety of their

⁵¹ Nilsson I. & Zagklas N., "“Hurry Up, Reap Every Flower of the Logoi!” The Use of Greek Novels in Byzantium", *GRBS*, Vol. 57 (4), 2017, 1120.

⁵² Eumathios Macrembolites, *De Hysminies et Hysminiae amoribus libri XI*, Marcovich M. ed., Munich-Leipzig, 2001, Book I, 2 verse 1.

⁵³ Eumathios Macrembolites, *De Hysmine and Hysminias*, (ed. by Marcovich), Book VI, 2 verse 9.

⁵⁴ Theodoros Prodhomos, *De Rhodanthe et Dosiclis amoribus libri ix*, Marcovich M. ed., Stuttgart, 1992, Book III, 265-278.

⁵⁵ Eustathios Makrembolites, *De Hysmine and Hysminias*, (ed. by Marcovich), Book XV, 15 verse 5-10.

parents, who had been looking for their lost children, and marry each other, ending the novels with a large wedding celebration.

We have the full text of five ancient and late antique novels: *Chaireas and Callirhoe* by Chariton of Aphrodisias (1st century), *Ephesiaka* by Xenophon of Ephesos (1st century), *Daphnis and Chloe* by Longos (2nd century), *Leukippe and Kleitophon* by Achilleus Tatios (2nd century) and lastly *Aithiopika* by Heliodoros (4th century). Because of its loss in popularity there were no novels written between the Late Antiquity and the 12th century.

Four novels were written during the twelfth century: *Rhodanthe & Dosicles* by Theodoros Prodromos⁵⁶, *Hysmine & Hysminias* by Eustathios/Eumathios Makrembolites⁵⁷, *Aristandros & Kallithea* by Constantine Manasses⁵⁸ and *Drosilla & Charikles* by Niketas Eugenianos.⁵⁹ The four authors of these novels were all associated with the Comnenian imperial court in Constantinople, indicating that it is very likely that they would have been aware of each other's novels, and they would have been influenced by each other's work. Eirene Sebastokratorissa, a known patron of the literary arts, was the patron of both Theodoros Prodromos and Constantine Manasses.⁶⁰ Niketas Eugenianos knew Theodoros Prodromos personally, either as a friend or as his pupil.⁶¹ This connection is put forward in the novels written by the two authors, since both start *in medias res* with pirates or slavers attacking the city where the main characters are situated.⁶² An exact chronological overview of when the novels were written, considering which order and year they were written, is still the topic of an ongoing discussion. An example of this is the timing of the novel of Makrembolites: Magdalino has argued that the novel of Hysmine and Hysminias was written during the early years of Emperor Manuel I his reign,⁶³ while Macalister has noted that the novel of Hysmine and Hysminias is the earliest Comnenian novel.⁶⁴ Even so, there is an consensus between scholars that all four novels must have been written around the mid-twelfth century.

⁵⁶ Theodoros Prodromos, *De Rhodanthe et Dosiclis*, (ed. by Marcovich), Stuttgart, 1992.

⁵⁷ Eustathios Macrembolites, *De Hysmine et Hysminiae amoribus* (ed. by Marcovich), Munich/Leipzig, 2001.

⁵⁸ Constantine Manasses, 'Aristandros & Kallithea', *Il romanzo bizantino del XII. Secolo*, Conca F. ed., Amsterdam, 1990, 684-777.

⁵⁹ Niketas Eugenaios, *Drosilla & Chariklis*, *Il romanzo bizantino del XII. Secolo*, Conca F. ed., Amsterdam, 1990, 305-497.

⁶⁰ Nikētas Eugenaios, *Drosilla and Charikles*, (ed. by Conca) xii.

⁶¹ Kazhdan A.P., *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, Oxford, 1992-1997.

⁶² Nikētas Eugenaios, *Drosilla and Charikles*, (ed. by Conca), xvii.

⁶³ Magdalino P., 'Eros the King and the King of Amours', *DOP*, Vol.46, 1992, 199.

⁶⁴ Macalister S., 'Byzantine Twelfth-Century Romances: a Relative Chronology', *BMGS*, Vol. 15, 1991, 182.

All four authors of the twelfth century novels were inspired by novels of the Second Sophistic movement.⁶⁵ The novels by Heliodoros and Achilles Tatius were inspirations for the authors of the twelfth century.⁶⁶ Many themes of the twelfth-century novels are borrowed from the ancient novels. A good example are the dream sequences that are found in both Makrembolites and Prodromos' novels. These dream sequences have been taken from Tatius' novel *Leukippe and Kleitophon*.⁶⁷ In all three novels, the characters receive dreams at important turning points of the story, especially when the situation looks dire. For example, Hysminias receives a dream when he is thinking about ending his relationship with Hysmine; the mother of Leukippe receives a dream that her daughter loses her virginity, waking up to interrupt the couple just in time.⁶⁸

The novels of the twelfth century provided a new image for women in literature. The main female characters in the novels were presented as intelligent and educated women, who were able to make use of these attributes to save themselves the dire situations they found themselves in. This representation is in contrast to the earlier novels of late antiquity where the female heroine did not have agency and undergoes the troubles that are set in her way in the novel. This change in presentation in the novels was part of a greater literary movement where women had the agency, at least in literature, to act on their own.⁶⁹ This can be seen, I believe as a result of the growing emancipation and influence of women during the twelfth century at the Comnenian imperial court. As a result, the female heroines were presented in a better light in the twelfth century novel compared to their male counterparts.

b) Begging poems

A new literary genre that emerged during the twelfth century were the begging poems. Authors used these poems to ask for financial aid from their patrons in Byzantine society. The increase in literary patronage created the opportunity for authors to write literary texts at the request of patrons. However, this meant that the authors were financially depended on their patrons. These patrons sometimes did not pay the authors for the literary services that they provided, creating a financially difficult situation for the authors by lack of payment from their patrons. In these

⁶⁵ Jeffreys E., *Four Byzantine Novels*, Liverpool, 2012, IX.

⁶⁶ Nilsson & Zagklas, 'Hurry up, Reap Every Flower of the Logoi', 1122-1123.

⁶⁷ Macalister, 'Byzantine Twelfth-Century Romances', 185.

⁶⁸ Macalister, 'Byzantine Twelfth-Century Romances', 185-186.

⁶⁹ Jouanno C., 'Women in Byzantine Novels of the Twelfth Century: an Interplay Between Norm and Fantasy', *Byzantine Women: Varieties of Experience [AD] 800-1200*, Garland L. ed., Aldershot, 2006, 143.

poems the authors refer to the fact that the patrons need their literary productions for their own public image. If the author dies, then his literary works will vanish and the patron would lose his influence over his own public image.⁷⁰ Many scholars have argued that these works constitute self-contained literary genres, mainly because they cannot be placed within other (mainly comedic) literary genres like satires or parodies. Therefore, they are usually designated as “Begging Poems”.⁷¹ Begging poems are thematically connected to folklore elements of the Byzantine society.⁷² The main characters of these poems are people of the lower classes who describe, in a highly rhetorical way, their situation. These poems include classical elements and rhetoric, showing the knowledge of the author, frequently combined with irony (in describing the situation of the main character) and folkloristic elements.⁷³ These diverse elements is what made the Begging Poems a new poetic genre during the twelfth century.

The most famous example of this genre are the *Ptochoprodromika*. Most of the scholars attribute these four poems to the famous twelfth century author Theodoros Prodromos. The first attribution of the poems to Prodromos occurred during the fourteenth century, two centuries after their composition.⁷⁴ However, there are arguments that not all *Ptochoprodromika* poems were written by Theodoros Prodromos. Margaret Alexiou, for example, argued that poems III and IV were not written by Theodoros Prodromos, since they include historical information which indicates a dating between 1160 and 1200. Theodoros Prodromos, however, died around 1156.⁷⁵

The title given to these poems is a reference to Prodromos, *ptochoprodromos* translates roughly to “poor Prodromos”.⁷⁶ The adjective of “poor” has a double meaning, it’s first meaning is meant to be a comic play, since the author is not exactly poor in a financial sense. It is meant to express sympathy for the author.⁷⁷ On the other hand, the meaning of the adjective can also be understood in a literal sense. Theodoros Prodromos was not a wealthy man, even though he

⁷⁰ Agapitos P.A., ‘New Genres in the Twelfth Century: The Schedourgia of Theodore Prodromos’, *Medioevo Greco*, Vol. 15, 2015, 41.

⁷¹ Eideneier H., ‘Tou Ptochoprodromou’, *Byzantinische Sprachkunst*, Hinterberger M. & Schiffer E. eds. Vol. 20, Berlin/New York, 2007, 63–64.

⁷² Kulhánková M., ‘Die byzantinische Betteldichtung. Verbindung des Klassischen mit dem Volkstümlichen’, *Imitatio Aemulatio Variato. Akten des internationalen wissenschaftlichen Symposions zur byzantinischen Sprache und Literatur*, Rhoby A. ed., Vienna, 2008, 175.

⁷³ Kulhánková, ‘Die Byzantinische Betteldichtung’, 175.

⁷⁴ Eideneier, ‘Tou Ptochoprodromou’, 57.

⁷⁵ Alexiou, ‘The Poverty of Ecriture and the Craft of Writing’, 301–340.

⁷⁶ Janssen M.C. & Lauxtermann M.D., ‘Authorship Revisited: Language and Metre in the *Ptochoprodromika*’, *Reading in the Byzantine Empire and Beyond*, Shawcross T. & Toth I. eds., Cambridge, 2018, 560.

⁷⁷ Janssen & Lauxtermann, ‘Language and Metre in the *Ptochoprodromika*’, 562.

was one of the most prolific writers of the twelfth century, which means that the “poor Prodromos” can also be a reference to the financial situation of the author.

The *Ptochoprodromika* are written in the vernacular language, which means that in terms of language and style they belong to the same category with other twelfth-century literary works, such as the “epic” of Digenis Akritis.⁷⁸ With this particular characteristic they differ from other important literary works of the twelfth century, which were written in the Koine or Atticizing Greek. The author was not uneducated;⁷⁹ the grammatical and literary style of the poems are too complicated to have come from an uneducated author. The choice of the political verse, combined with the vernacular language, adds to the assumption that the poems were performed orally, since this metre was mostly used for oral poetry.⁸⁰

The *Ptochoprodromika* consist of four different poems, all of which have different themes and are addressed to a different person, often a member of the imperial court. Poem I is addressed to the emperor John II Comnenos, poem II is addressed to an anonymous sebastokrator, Poem III and IV to emperor Manuel I, son of emperor John II.

The narrator in the four poems is different. Poem I is narrated by a husband who married above his station and is now suffering from the mistreatment enacted by his wife. Poem II has a destitute writer as narrator, complaining about his financial status. A monk, being abused by the abbot and complaining of the poor treatment of the younger monks by the elder ones is speaking in Poem III. In poem IV the father of an impoverished family of 13 members is speaking. The narrators presented in each poem, who can be interpreted as satires of the citizens in Constantinople or any other big city, lend to the assumption that the poems were possibly read aloud in front of an audience, turning the poems in a sort theatrical play.⁸¹ The fact that the poems are written in the vernacular gives the presentation an extra dimension of realism.

These poems were probably read aloud in the literary circles that were centred around the female patrons, like Eirene Sebastokratorissa and Irene Doukaina. There have also been textual sources of letters addressed to female members of the Comnenian court which bare resemblance to the begging poems. An example of this is the letter of Theodoros Prodromos addressed to Anna Comnene.⁸² This shows that women at the imperial court also came into

⁷⁸ Agapitos, ‘New genres in the Twelfth Century’, 23.

⁷⁹ Alexiou, ‘The Poverty of Ecriture and the Craft of Writing’, 321.

⁸⁰ Eideneier, ‘Tou Ptochoprodromou’, 64.

⁸¹ Janssen & Lauxtermann, ‘Language and Metre in the Ptochoprodromika’, 559

⁸² Theodoros Prodromos, ‘Letter 38’, *Historische Gedichte*, Hörandner ed., Vienna, 1974, 337-381.

contact with these poems, both as part of a literary presentation and in their communications with the authors. It shows that not only the men were important patrons of literature but that women also played a role in literary patronage, and also had trouble when it comes to the payment for said authors.

c) Schede

A third and last genre that became popular during the Comnenian period are the *schede*. *Schede*, translated to sketches or improvisations, are text compositions used to train the students to recognise and correct the grammar and syntax of ancient Greek.⁸³ The first time the term *schede* is attested to in Byzantine manuscripts is around 1035. The *schedos* was written in a, for the students, puzzling form by the *γραμματικός*. Afterwards the students had to decode the *schedos* and rewrite it in a correct manner, showing that they understood the grammar and syntax.⁸⁴ These puzzles were made out of antistoichic words, meaning that the words would sound very similar to each other. The *schedos* was usually written in prose or in the iambic twelve-syllable metre.⁸⁵ Most of the *schede* that we have today are from the twelfth century, indicating the popularity of these textual sources during this particular century. There were even contests organised in the Byzantine empire between the students to solve these *schede* or compose these themselves. The *schede* became popular during the twelfth-century and continued to be so in the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century.⁸⁶ We have *schedes* of important authors from the twelfth century, examples of these authors are Nicholas Callicles and Theodoros Prodromos, one of the most famous authors of this century who produced *schede*.⁸⁷ The *schede* by Prodromos brought change to the genre. His use of humour and vernacular Greek were a new trend in schedography.⁸⁸ The *schede* of Theodoros Prodromos were composed out of two parts, the first part was written in prose and ended with a statement of the moralising kind. The second part had a person as a subject, this was the person that the *schede* was dedicated to, often a patron.⁸⁹ It was through Prodromos, who had the function of being both a teacher and a writer, and other

⁸³ Nilsson and Zagklas, 'Hurry Up, Reap Every Flower of the Logoi', 1134.

⁸⁴ Agapitos P.A., 'Grammar, Genre and Patronage in the Twelfth Century: A Scientific Paradigm and Its Implications', *JÖB*, Vol. 64, 2014, 5-6.

⁸⁵ Agapitos, 'Grammar, Genre and Patronage in the Twelfth Century', 6.

⁸⁶ Vassis I., 'Graeca sunt, non leguntur, Zu den Schedographischen Spielereien des Theodoros Prodromos', *BZ*, Vol. 86-87 (1), Berlin, 1994, 3.

⁸⁷ Vassis, 'Graeca Sunt Non Leguntur', 11.

⁸⁸ Agapitos, 'New Genres in the Twelfth Century', 5.

⁸⁹ Agapitos, 'New Genres in the Twelfth Century', 5.

authors like him, that made it possible for *schede* to become a performative genre and not only an educational one.⁹⁰

Women, in their role as patrons of the literary circles were part of the public for whom *schede* were performed, this is in contrast to the original purpose of *schedes*. The extensive education where the *schede* were part of was not meant for women, in this sense women did not have to “solve” the *schede* and instead could enjoy their grammatical innovativeness as a new literary genre that was being performed in the literary circles at the Comnenian court during the twelfth-century.

⁹⁰ Zagklas N., *Theodore Prodromos: the Neglected Poems and Epigrams (Edition, Commentary and Translation)*, Hochschulschrift, Vienna, 2014, 86.

2. Literary genres for female patrons

Over the course of the twelfth century, many literary works have been written that were addressed to women. These different genres have different literary characteristics. The difference in characteristics between the literary texts is because of the purpose of the texts. In this chapter, I will offer an overview of the different literary genres. In addition to a general overview of each genre, I will provide an example of a text addressed to a woman or where a woman is the main topic. With these overviews and examples I hope to show how the characteristics of each genre came to be and influences the way in which women are being described in the different literary genres. I want to show a first point of influence for the authors when they describe women. Whereas in chapters three and four I will focus on the tone of the description, be it positive or negative, in this chapter the focus will be how the purpose of the literary texts influence the authors in their descriptions of women. In the second part of this chapter, I will take a closer look at which genre can be considered the most popular concerning literature for women. Through the research on the popularity of various genres I want to focus on the difference between literary texts that are commonly used because of their purpose, such as funerary texts, and literary texts that are produced in large quantities because the public asks for them, like poetry. By focusing on these differences in popularity I want to show the connection between the popularity of texts and the use of these particular texts. In doing so, I aim to provide new insights into the popularity of literary genres in Byzantine society for women.

2.1 Chronicles

Chronicles are historiographical texts describing the history of the world from the time of the creation until the contemporary time of the author himself.⁹¹ They were often an amalgamation of excerpts taken from older histories and chronicles. The origin of the chronicle can be traced back to the ancient period. The first Christian chronicle is that of Julianus Africanus.⁹² Many characteristics of this chronicle were re-used in the Byzantine chronicles. For example, the

⁹¹ Nilsson I. & Nyström E., 'To Compose, Read and Use a Byzantine Text: Aspects of the Chronicle of Constantine Manasses', *BMGS*, Vol. 33 (1), 2009, 44.

⁹² Gelzer H., *Sextus Julius Africanus und die Byzantinische Chronographie*, Vol. 1: *Die Chronographie des Julius Africanus*, Leipzig, 1880, 19.

beginning of a chronicle from the creation of Adam and Eve can be found for the first time in Africanus' work.⁹³

The first chronicle of the twelfth century is that by Johannes Zonaras. This particular chronicle was very popular during the twelfth and following centuries. The content of the chronicle starts with the creation of the world by God, according to the Bible and ends in the year 1118 with the death of emperor Alexios I and the rise of his son John II as emperor.⁹⁴ It is one of the largest historiographical sources in the Greek language. The author made use of both secular and religious sources, including Jewish, Ancient Greek, Near Eastern, Roman and Byzantine history. Because of this extensive historiography the chronicle was often used as a source in later Byzantine historiographical texts.⁹⁵

The second chronicle of the twelfth century is the *Synopsis Chronike* by Constantine Manasses which contains the history from creation until the reign of emperor Nikephoros Bryennios. This chronicle is of particular interest for my research because it was dedicated to a woman, Eirene Sebastokratorissa. Manasses was active as a writer at the court of Manuel Comnenos. He was part of the literary circle of Eirene Sebastokratorissa, the widow of the Sebastokrator Andronikos and sister-in-law of emperor Manuel Comnenos.⁹⁶ He dedicated the *Synopsis Chronike* to his patroness, which becomes clear in two places of the dedicatory epigram attached to the chronicle.⁹⁷ A bit further on he describes her as the wife of the Sebastokrator Adronikos.⁹⁸

During the Comnenian era, attention was given to a more poetic and romantic verse narrative. The story itself was more important than its historical or political worth, which runs counter to the tradition set by previous chronicles.⁹⁹ Usually, chronicles were written in prose. An exception to this tradition is the *Synopsis Chronike*, which was written in a 15-syllable line. Eirene Sebastokratorissa probably requested that Manasses write down the chronicle in the

⁹³ Mariev S., 'Byzantinische Chronistik', *Handbuch Chroniken des Mittelalters*, Wolf G. & Ott N.H. eds., Berlin, 2016, 840-841.

⁹⁴ Kampianaki T., *John Zonaras' Epitome of Histories: A Compendium of Jewish-Roman History and its Reception*, Oxford, 1.

⁹⁵ Kampianaki, *John Zonaras' Epitome of Histories*, 1.

⁹⁶ Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike*, Yuretich L. transl., Liverpool, 2018, 1-2.

⁹⁷ Constantine Manasses, 'Constantini Manassis Breviarum Chronicum', Lampsides O. ed., *Historiae Byzantina*, Vol., 36.1, 1996, 1n,t.

Στίχοι ἡρώοι πρὸς τὴν σεβαστοκρατόρισσαν κυρὰν Εἰρήνην

(see translation of the complete epigram on page 60)

⁹⁸ Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike*, (ed. by Lampsides), 7n-8n.

Ἀνδρόνικος μεγάλθυμος, ἐὺμμελὴς πολεμιστὴς, ὃ γέρε πρῶτα σεβαστοκρατορίης νεῖμ' ὁ φυτεύσας.

⁹⁹ Nilsson & Nyström, 'To Compose, Read and Use a Byzantine Text', 43.

verse line.¹⁰⁰ Women were often not as educated as the men, which resulted in female patrons requesting a simpler language or even verse metre, as is shown in the *Synopsis Chronike* of Manasses.¹⁰¹ The description of women in the chronicle focuses on their beauty and piousness. Manasses gives a description on the sister of Emperor Theodosius, Pulcheria, and within just a few lines gives the reader the image of a pious woman whose beauty shines from within and from without.¹⁰²

The description of Pulcheria is different from the descriptions of women in other literary works, in the sense that the use of elements of nature are infrequent. The only reference connected to nature is the word λειμῶνα, which should be translated as “meadow”. This word does not describe a physical aspect of the princess but refers to her “virginity”. Manasses focusses more on her virtue and how this virtuous lifestyle makes her beautiful. The depiction of Pulcheria in other Byzantine sources has always been more focused on these particular characteristics instead of her physical beauty. An example of this is the chronicle of Malalas, where it is stated that Pulcheria is a virgin and has only ever kissed her brother and no other man.¹⁰³ Manasses thus follows literary tradition in this instance. It is also possible that Manasses focused more on the virtue of the women in his work because of his patron. Eirene Sebastokratorissa was a widow when Constantine Manasses became part of her literary circle. When reading about the lives of women in the past she would not have been interested in their beauty or youth, rather, she would have been more interested in the description of virtuous women. By stressing these virtues in the work, addressed to a woman, it is possible that Constantine Manasses referenced to the virtuous life of his patron. However, it is also important to remember that Manasses follows a literary tradition in his depictions of women in the

¹⁰⁰ Yuretich L., *The Chronicle of Constantine Manasses*, Liverpool, 2018, 3.

¹⁰¹ Browning, *The Language of Byzantine Literature*, 122.

¹⁰² Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike*, (ed. by Lampsides), 2533-2541.

Ἦν δ' ἀδελφὴ τῷ βασιλεῖ τούτῳ Θεοδοσίῳ
σεμνότροπος, σεμνόβιος, τὴν κλῆσιν Πουλχερία,
καὶ κάλλει διαλάμπουσα σώματος εὐπροσώπου (2535)
καὶ στίλβουσα ταῖς χάρισι τῆς ἑνδον εὐπρεπείας·
ἥ τις παρθένον συντηρεῖν αὐτὴν προελομένη
καὶ τῆς ἀγνείας ἄσυχον φυλάττειν τὸν λειμῶνα,
ἀρρένων μὲν ἀπέσχετο καθάπαξ ὁμιλίας,
τῷ καθαρῷ δ' ἐπέχαιρε καὶ τῷ κοσμίῳ βίῳ (2540)
καὶ ζέσιν ἐπεδείκνυτο πρὸς πᾶσαν χρηστουργίαν.

Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike*, (transl. By Yuretich), 2533-2541:

This Theodosios had a sister. She was decorous and led a pure life. Her name was Pulcheria/ She gleamed with the loveliness of her fair-faced body and shone with the graces of inner beauty. Pulcheria was determined to safeguard her virginity and to preserve inviolate the meadow of her chastity. She abstained entirely from the company of males and rejoiced in her pure and proper life. She exhibited warmth towards every good deed.

¹⁰³ John Malalas, *Chronographia*, Thurn I. ed., Berlin, 2000, 14.352.

chronicle. This however does not distract Manasses from focussing on the physical beauty of women in his chronicle. As will be discussed in the next chapter, Manasses pays attention to the beauty of women, often mythological and biblical, like for example Helen of Troy and Sarah the wife of Abraham. In comparison to the paragraph of Pulcheria, Manasses makes use of references to nature in his depictions of the physical beauty of women. This is a contrast to his depiction of virtuous women, like Pulcheria, where he uses vocabulary more focused or connected to light.

2.2 Poems

Authors wrote poems for special occasions in the lives of their patrons. The topics of these poems were connected to the immediate family of the patrons, for example the death of a child or spouse. Another favourable topic of the twelfth-century occasional poetry was connected to state occasions like the expeditions and victories of the Comnenoi dynasty.¹⁰⁴ Poetry has always been a popular literary genre in Byzantine society. It is however during the twelfth century that the production of poetry grew exponentially.¹⁰⁵ Different genres of poetry had been present before the twelfth-century, but poets did not confine themselves to just one genre of poetry. Authors would write liturgical, vernacular and secular poetry.¹⁰⁶

In earlier decades, occasional poetry was seen as inferior to lyrical poetry, this because of the lack of spontaneity in literature in comparison to other genres of poetry. The author is forced to conform and fit the content of the poem to the occasion for which the poem is written, halting the literary freedom of the author. In the past few decades, this idea has changed however and there is more interest in occasional literature/poetry. Ingela Nilsson argues that during the twelfth century all written texts were a form of occasional literature.¹⁰⁷

In Byzantine literary tradition, occasional poetry for state affairs became popular during the twelfth century. The Comnenian court was more interested in literary culture than previous dynasties. This gave rise to a patronage culture, where members of the Imperial court requested

¹⁰⁴ Zagklas N., “‘How Many Verses Shall I Write and Say?’: Poetry in the Komnenian Period (1081-1204)”, *A Companion to Byzantine Poetry*, Hörandner W. & Rhoby A. & Zagklas N. eds, Leiden, 2019, 243.

¹⁰⁵ Jeffreys E., ‘Why Produce Verse in Twelfth-century Constantinople?’, “*Doux remède...*”. *Poésie et poétique à Byzance ; actes du I^{er} Colloque International Philologique « Hermeneia » Paris, 23-24-25 février 2006*, Odorico P.ed., Paris, 2009, 222-223.

¹⁰⁶ Bernard F., *Writing and Reading Byzantine Secular Poetry, 1025-1081*, Oxford, 2014, 18.

¹⁰⁷ Nilsson I., *Writer and Occasion in Twelfth-Century Byzantium: the Authorial Voice of Constantine Manasses*, Cambridge, 2020, 3-6.

poetry to be written, often for stately or familial occasions. Theodoros Prodromos, a well-known writer of the twelfth century wrote many occasional poems.¹⁰⁸

Another important author of occasional poetry from the twelfth-century is Manganeios Prodromos. The following is a poem that he wrote on the occasion of the marriage between Henry II Jasomirgott, duke of Austria and Theodora Comnene, the daughter of Eirene Sebastokratorissa. In this poem, the author praises Henry II and Austria for having gained a Byzantine princess as his wife and its duchess, focusing on the joy of the marriage.¹⁰⁹ The country of Alamania is addressed in this poem and asked to participate in the celebrations for the marriage between Theodora and Henry II. Manganeios notes that the celebrations should not end when the feast comes to an end. They should be continued, since the country and its duke have gained the daughter of the Sebastokrator. The author also refers to the physical appearance of Theodora by calling her the “most beautiful” *παγκαλλίστη*. It is also through Theodora’s brilliance (*λαμπρότερας*) and glory (*ένδοξότερας*) that the duke gains more brilliance and glory. The poem, while celebrating the marriage, aims to emphasize the merits of Theodora. By portraying Theodora in this way, Manganeios not only aims to strengthen the positive image of the imperial princess, but also to enhance the status of the Byzantine empire more broadly. Byzantium offers a great princess, whose merits and qualities will enhance the status of other states. In this poem, Theodora, is thus used as a symbol for the Byzantine state. She represents not only herself, but the whole empire which she comes from. Women and their beauty were often used to gain more honour and status for their family by marrying well. Byzantine literature often makes use of the physical appearance of women not only for their own merit, but also for that of their family. I suggest that Theodora is used in this poem to strengthen the image and status of the Byzantine empire, her “family” so to speak. It is not Jasomirgott who brings glory into the marriage, it is Theodora by virtue of her being a Byzantine princess.

¹⁰⁸ Zagklas, ‘Poetry in the Komnenian Period (1081-1204)’, 243.

¹⁰⁹ Manganeios Prodromos, *Poem 22 On the Marriage between Henry II Jasomirgott and Theodora Comnene*, (ed & transl. by Jeffreys), 1-5.

Άλαμανία, χόρευε καὶ σκίρτα καὶ λαμπρύνου·
τοῦ γὰρ σεβαστοκράτορος τῇ παγκαλλίστῃ κόρῃ
ὁ δοῦξ ὁ μεγαλόδοξος πανευτυχῶς ἐνοῦται,
καὶ γίνεται λαμπρότερος ἀπὸ τῆς λαμπρότερας,
καὶ μεγαλοδοξότερος ἐκ τῆς ἐνδοξότερας.

Translation:

Alamania, dance and leap and shine brilliantly,
for the Sebastokrator’s most beautiful daughter
is being united to the glorious duke, to his great good fortune,
and he is becoming more brilliant from her greater brilliance
and much more glorious from her greater glory.

2.3 Letters

Letters have always been popular and a broad collection of sources for historians. They were the only mode of communication over a long distance for most of human history. In Byzantium, these letters were collected; there are approximately 150 large letter collections, which include ca. 15000 letters.¹¹⁰ Because of the widespread use of letters both in Byzantine society as outside, the popularity of this particular literary source comes as no surprise. Byzantine society used letters not only as a means to communicate, but also as a form of art. There was the idea among historians of byzantine research that people in Byzantine society did not write about their everyday lives in their letters.¹¹¹ This thesis however has been proven wrong, since in recent times it has been indicated that many letters teem with information about daily themes.

Nevertheless, letter writing was one of the highest forms of literature in Byzantine society. Letters had a polished grammatical and vocabulary style, exchanging compliments and other forms to show the close relationship between the sender and the addressee.¹¹² An example of this is a letter from Theophylact of Ohrid to Mary of Alania from 1094.¹¹³ The letter is meant to thank Mary of Alania for visiting Theophylact while he was bedridden because of an illness. He refers to her goodness, comparing it to that of God. Theophylact hints at the divine status of Mary of Alania by saying that she deigned to visit a man who is of the earth, which gives the reader the impression that Mary of Alania is of a higher status. This divine status that he is referring to can be a result of his gratitude towards Mary, but it could also be a result of her position as the empress of the Byzantine empire. This is, in my view, a reference to the idea that Byzantine society considered the emperor as the ἄρχων τῆς οἰκουμένης and the χριστὸς

¹¹⁰ Mullet M., 'The Classical Tradition in the Byzantine Letter', *Letters, Literacy and Literature in Byzantium*, Mullet M. ed., Aldershot, 2004, 75.

¹¹¹ Kolovou P., *Die Briefe des Eustathios von Thessalonike: Einleitung Regesten, Text, Indizes*, Munich, 2006, 11.

¹¹² Mullet, 'The Classical Tradition in the Byzantine Letter', 78-79.

¹¹³ Theophylact of Ochrid, 'Lettre 107 A la despoina, qui lui a rendu visite pendant sa maladie', *Théophylact d'Achrida Lettres*, Gautier P. ed. & transl., Thessalonike, 1986, 524-525.

Ἐγκαινίζεις αἰεὶ τοῖς ἔργοις τὴν τοῦ Θεοῦ ἐνανθρώπησιν καὶ δεικνύεις ἐν σοὶ μὲν ἐκεῖνον ἀνθρωπιζόμενον, ἐν ἐκείνῳ δὲ τὸν σὸν θεούμενον ἄνθρωπον, ἧ γε πᾶσι συγκαταβαίνουσα κάμει τὸν αὐτόχρημα γῆν εὐδόκησας ἐπισκέψασθαι καὶ μεθύσαι τῆς σῆς χρηστότητος καί, τὸ σὸν ἴδιον, τὸν ἄλλως νεκρὸν ἀνεζώωσας καὶ ἀνέστησας. Ἀνθ' ὧν τί ἂν σοὶ ἐπευξαίμην μείζον ἢ τὸ μὴ ληξαί ποτε ἐν σαυτῇ δεικνύσαν τὸ θεῖον μυστήριον, ἵν' ἢ σοὶ τὸ αὐτὸ κατόρθωμά τε καὶ μίσθωμα.

Translation :

You never cease to renew by your conduct the incarnation of God and to show that God becomes incarnate in you and that your inner man becomes divine in Him. For you, who condescend to all, have deigned to visit me, who am really earth, and intoxicate me with your goodness and, as far as you are concerned, you have revived and resurrected him who would otherwise have died. In return for this, what better could I wish for you than that you never cease to reveal the divine mystery in yourself, so that you may experience the same success and the same reward.

Κυρίου.¹¹⁴ By 1094 Mary of Alania was not the ruling empress anymore because of the Comnenian revolt, but she still had a high position at court as the old empress and mother of Constantine Doukas, the betrothed of Anna Comnene. Theophylact honoured her imperial status by referring to her etherealness. The other references to her virtuousness and the reincarnation of God in her conduct is a reference to her monastic patronage. She was the patron of Theophylact of Ochrid since he was her son's tutor.¹¹⁵ Her role as a patron of literature and monasteries is a result of the overall image of women in Byzantine society, who were supposed to be virtuous and religious. It was also a way to enhance her own image in the eyes of Byzantine society. In 1094, Constantine Doukas, her son, had died and Mary of Alania her influence had dwindled. Her monastic and literary patronage helped her to have some form of influence. By praising her faith in his letter Theophylact of Ochrid enhances her image as a religious woman.

2.4 Dedicatory epigrams

The Byzantines defined epigrams as a metrical inscription that was placed on monuments, objects or next to a piece of literature.¹¹⁶ During the Middle and Late Byzantine period the epigram gained an immense popularity that it had lost during the early Byzantine period. Most epigrams during the twelfth century were written in the dodecasyllable verse.¹¹⁷ Most of the dedicatory epigrams that we have today were written on devotional offerings.¹¹⁸ These were addressed to holy figures for example: Christ, Mary or the saints. The goal of these offerings were to gain favour from the holy person, forgiving the sins of the donor or making sure the donor would receive a place in heaven. Another goal of these offerings is to thank the holy person for a service they had performed, for example the healing of the donor or a family member. In these dedicatory epigrams, the reason why the offering was made, by whom as well as the dedicatee are included in the poem.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ Papagiannis G. & Tziatzi-Papagianni M. & Kollias V.A. & Nikolaou A., 'Observations on the Portrayal of the Ruler in the Novels of Leo VI', *Stud. Ceranea*, Vol. 11, 2021, 348.

¹¹⁵ Garland L. and Rapp S., 'Mary of Alania', *Byzantine Women: Varieties of Experience [AD] 800-1200*, Aldershot, 2006, 112.

¹¹⁶ Rhoby A., 'The Epigram in Byzantium and Beyond', *A Companion to Ancient Epigram*, Henriksen C. ed, Hoboken, 2019, 679.

¹¹⁷ Rhoby, 'The Epigram in Byzantium and Beyond', 681.

¹¹⁸ Drpić I., *Epigram, Art and Devotion in Later Byzantium*, Cambridge, 2016, 246.

¹¹⁹ Drpić I., *Epigram, Art and Devotion in Later Byzantium*, 246.

The following dedicatory epigram was written by Theodoros Prodromos in name of empress Irene, wife of the emperor Manuel. The occasion for the votive offering was the healing of emperor after a heavy sickness. Empress Eirene thanks the Mother of God and asks her and the martyrs to keep watch over the emperor and her family.¹²⁰

The devotional offering on which the dedicatory epigram was inscribed was a silver object of art. In his edition Hörandner describes that the offering is a dove¹²¹ but considering the Greek text, it could also be possible that the offering had the form of a silver lamb. These type of offerings were a representation of the Holy Spirit.¹²² In Christian art, the Holy Spirit has been represented as both a dove and a lamb, constituting a reference to Bible. All four gospels (Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22 and John 1:32) mention that the Holy Spirit descended from the heavens to Jesus in the form of a dove when Jesus was baptised. It is only in the gospel of John and Revelations that the Holy Spirit is connected to the image of a lamb (John 1:29 and 1:36). The image of the lamb in art has also been the symbol both Christ as the sacrificial lamb for humanity or as a member of the flock of Christ.¹²³ These types of offerings were popular during the Byzantine period. This indicates, I believe, that already in the sixth or either seventh century there was a tradition of gifting images of doves as a votive offering.

The fact that the votive offering in the dedicatory epigram above is golden is a sign of wealth from the person who gives away the votive. The expensive material of the votive offering showcases to the public, who would be able to see this offering, that the imperial family has the financial means to donate such an expensive gift to the church. In Byzantine society, it would stand both for the piety and the wealth of the imperial family. The person, in this case

¹²⁰ Theodoros Prodromos, *Poem 34*, (ed. by Hörandner), 1-14.

Καὶ βασιλεῖς πρὶν ἄλλα Περσίδος μόνης,
ἐδεξιούντο χρυσίῳ σε, παρθένε,
τὸν ἄσπορον τίκτουσαν ἐν φάτνῃ τόκον:
καὶ νῦν ἄνασσα, πλὴν ὅλης νέας Ῥώμης,
δάμαρ Μανουὴλ αὐτάνακτος Εἰρήνη
Κομνηνοφουῶς πορφύρας διπλῆς κλάδου
τῇ παντανάσσει σοὶ φέρω τὸ χρυσίον
ὡς ἰαθεῖσα σῶστρον, ὡς δούλη φόρον
περιστερὰν σοὶ τὴν κατηργωμένην
χρυσούσα πᾶσαν, οὐ μετάρπρον μόνον.
ἀλλ' εἰσέτι φρούρει με, τῶν νόσων ῥύου,
τῷ βασιλεῖ μου καὶ συνεύνῳ συγκρότει
τοὺς μάρτυρας πέμπουσα τοῦτ' ἀντιμάχου,
κάκει δὲ κοινὴν τὴν τροφὴν ἀμφοῖν δίδου.

¹²¹ Hörandner, *Theodoros Prodromos Historische Gedichte*, 371.

¹²² McNall J. 'Shrinking pigeon, Brooding Dove: the Holy Spirit in Recent Works by Sarah Coakley and N.T. Wright', *Scott. J. Theol.*, Vol. 69 (3), 2016, 295.

¹²³ Maguire H., *Nectar and Illusion: Nature in Byzantine Art and Literature*, New York, 2012, 78.

the empress, who offers this expensive votive, in the hope that the saints will appreciate the offering and return the favour.

The empress thanks the Mother of God for healing the emperor and asks her and the martyrs to keep protecting them. The Mother of God was the most popular holy figure in Byzantium and was considered the protector of Constantinople. The hodegetria was one of the more popular iconographical depictions of Mary. A famous virgin hodegetria icon could be found in the monastery of the Panaghia Hodegetria in Constantinople and was widely considered as the original iconographical depiction of this style.¹²⁴ It is not only this connection that plays a role. Women throughout Christian history had a preference to Mary Mother of God, calling unto her in prayers and votive offerings.

I would say that there are different possible reasons why empress Irene dedicated this offering to the Virgin Mary. The first one is the connection and popularity of the Theotokos in the city of Constantinople, both as a popular saint in the iconographical tradition and as the protector of the city. A second reason is the favouritism that women have shown to the Virgin in their religious practice throughout the years. A third possible reason is that Mary has been connected, in her role as the mother of Christ, as a protector of family life and the votive offering is made to ask for protection of the imperial family.

2.5 Orations

The imperial orations became a popular literary genre during the middle to late Byzantine period.¹²⁵ Orations often carried political messages. For example, the orations of Niketas Choniates written after 1204 revolve around themes of imperial ideology, in an attempt to shape the identity of the new Nicaean State after the sack of Constantinople by the Latins¹²⁶ Orations during the twelfth century became part of the occasional literature by being read on various ceremonies, including the crowning of a new emperor or the marriage of a member of the imperial family. Orations are often filled with historical and mythological references, so as to show off the knowledge of the rhetor to his public. An example of an oration addressed to a

¹²⁴ Cormack R., *Painting the Soul: Icons, Death Masks, and Shrouds*, London, 1997, 58.

¹²⁵ Toth I., 'Rhetorical Theatron in Late Byzantium: The Example of Palaiologan Imperial Orations', *Theatron*, Grünbart M. ed. Vol. 13, Berlin, 2021, 431.

¹²⁶ Chrissis N., *The Emperor in the Byzantine World*, Routledge, 2019, 250.

woman is the funerary oration of Georgios Tornikes addressed to Anna Comnene. I will discuss a small piece of the oration here.¹²⁷

In this small passage Tornikes praises Anna Comnene in different aspects, he praises her intellect and her beauty (Τὸ γὰρ γυναῖκα, τὴν φύσιν τοῦ ἀπαλοῦ τούτου φύλου καὶ μαλακοῦ καὶ μόνον σοφοῦ πρὸς ἰστουργίαν καὶ ἡλακάτην καὶ ἄτρακτον lines 22-23 & lines 23-24), putting emphasis on the fact that these characteristics are the result of her imperial background and the education of her parents. The mention of her intellect and beauty is not uncommon. What is different from other texts praising women is that Tornikes only mentions her beauty in a passing sense: ὡς κάλλει σώματος. Other texts contain detailed description of the women, with numerous comparisons to nature (as we will see in the *Alexiad*). Tornikes puts more emphasis in this passage, and in other parts of the oration, on the intellectual dexterity of Anna Comnene. It is possible that he focused more on her intellectual skills because of her literary exploits, her authorship of the *Alexiad* immediately comes to mind, but also because of her patronage of authors present at the Byzantine court.

Tornikes makes many references to Anna's parents throughout the oration, describing how through the grace of her parents Anna was able to grow in such a wise and powerful woman. However, Tornikes never mentions their names. In all probability, Alexios and Eirene Doukaina are not named in the oration since it would have been common knowledge in Byzantine society that Anna was the daughter of the imperial pair. It could also be a way of Tornikes to keep the attention of the oration on Anna Comnene and not divert this to her parents. The obvious reason for Tornikes to keep the focus of the oration of Anna Comnene is that she

¹²⁷ Georgios Tornikes, Oration for Anna Comnene, *Georges et Démétrios Tornikes Lettres et Discours*, Darrouzès J. ed. & transl, Paris, 1970, 229-231.

Τὸ γὰρ γυναῖκα, τὴν φύσιν τοῦ ἀπαλοῦ τούτου φύλου καὶ μαλακοῦ καὶ μόνον σοφοῦ πρὸς ἰστουργίαν καὶ ἡλακάτην καὶ ἄτρακτον, βασιλικοῖς μὲν σπαργανωθεῖσαν πρῶτα σπαργάνοις, εἶτα δὲ ὡς πρωτότοκον, ὡς ἀστείαν, ὡς κάλλει σώματος οὐχ ἥττον δὲ καὶ ψυχῆς, ἐκ βρέφους ὥραιότητι διαλάμπουσιν—ἀ δὴ καὶ πόθον τῶν γεννητόρων καὶ φίλτρον αὐξοῦσι— (25) μετὰ τρυφῆς τρεφομένην καὶ μετὰ βασιλείου χλιδῆς κορίζουσιν, ἄρτι δὲ τὴν ἡβὴν εἰσελθοῦσαν στέφανόν τε γάμου καὶ βασιλείου ὁμοῦ περιθεμένην τῇ κεφαλῇ στέφανον καὶ ὅσα τῆς βασιλείας παράσημα, ἐσθήματα περιμάργαρα καὶ διάλιθα χρυσοῦ καὶ ἀργύρου συνεξυφαινόμενα νήμασι, ψέλιά τε καὶ περιδέραια, πλῆθος εὐνούχων, ὑπηρετῶν ὁπόσων, οἱ καὶ τὰς ἐπιθυμίας ὡς ἐπίπαν ταῖς κόραις ἀνάπτουσιν, ἄλλος ἄλλο τι καινότερον πρὸς κάλλος ἀπαγγέλλοντες ἢ κομίζοντες.

Translation:

Here was a woman belonging by nature to this fragile and delicate sex, good only for weaving, the distaff and the spindle, wrapped at first in imperial swaddling clothes, then shining from childhood by her title of eldest child, by her charm, by the beauty of her body no less than her soul - which precisely increased the love and tenderness of her parents - nurtured with delicacy and brought up in imperial luxury, barely into puberty, girding her head at the same time with the crown of marriage and the imperial crown, with all the imperial insignia, clothes adorned with pearls and gems, woven with threads of gold and silver, bracelets and necklaces, eunuchs galore, servants in abundance : these are the people who most often arouse the lust of young girls, each in turn offering or procuring some new beauty product.

is the subject or the text, not her relatives. Her societal roles as daughter, wife and mother are mentioned, to present her as a role model of Byzantine societal norms, but to whom these relationships correlate is not addressed in the text. The author assumes that the audience of the oration already knows Anna Comnene's family.

By not mentioning the relatives of Anna Comene and focusing on her intellectual capacities Tornikes emphasises that Anna's achievements are her own, and not the result of her imperial status. He puts Anna forward as unique, not only in her role as a woman and the connected societal roles, but also in her capacity as an intellectual bringing forth an important historiographical work. The idea put forward is that the Byzantine empire has lost an important member of its society. I would like to suggest that Tornikes is presenting the image to the Byzantine empire that they lost a potential great empress. A woman who possessed great intellectual capabilities, making her an exception among women who were usually barred from the intellectual education. At the same time she is also a woman that can serve as a great example to other women in the empire on how to fulfil their own rules as daughter, wife and mother. So, while she may be exceptional in intellectual terms, she completely complies with the traditional role of women in Byzantium.

2.6 Epitaphs

Epitaphs are short poetic texts inscribed on tomb stones, aiming to commemorate the deceased.¹²⁸ They describe the life of the dead and offer a comforting word to the loved ones left behind. Epitaphs are often written from the view point of the deceased, addressing visitors of the grave, as my example will show. They give the sense as if the deceased person was still alive, speaking to passers-by.¹²⁹ The tradition of the epitaphs is a long one, stretching back to the time of antiquity. Hundreds of epitaphs have survived. However, the problem is that most of these epitaphs have been taken out of their context, since they are not to be found next to tombs. Many of these epitaphs are solely transmitted in Byzantine manuscripts or other textual sources.¹³⁰ Epitaphs were often short texts, but there are a few lengthy epitaphs. Stephen Potthoff proposes that this is to elicit the idea that the dead are indeed resting within their tombs,

¹²⁸ De Jong L., *The Archaeology of Death in Roman Syria: Burial, Commemoration, and Empire*, New York, 2017, 104.

¹²⁹ Potthoff S., *The Afterlife in Early-Christian Carthage: Near-Death Experience, Ancestor Cult, and the Archaeology of Paradise*, New York, 2017, 102.

¹³⁰ De Jong, *The Archaeology of Death in Roman Syria*, 104.

and thus do not have the time or energy for a long epitaph.¹³¹ There is a difference between the amount of epitaphs during late antiquity and the Byzantine period. In late antiquity everyone received an epitaph on their tombs, even individuals from the lower classes. However, this custom changed in the Byzantine empire after the seventh century.¹³²

During the Byzantine period, only the aristocracy received epitaphs for their tombs. Since epitaphs became only available to the nobility, the content of the epitaphs changed. A first change is that the epitaph focused on the family background of the deceased.¹³³ A second change is the length of the epitaphs. As mentioned earlier, during the late antiquity the texts of the epitaphs were relatively short. However, during the twelfth century the length of the epitaph texts became noticeably longer, possibly under the influence of the theatre.¹³⁴

As an example for these literary sources, I will present the epitaph of the burial mount of empress Eirene of Hungary wife of Emperor John II, written by Theodoros Prodromos around 1134. This particular epitaph counts 30 verses.¹³⁵

¹³¹ Potthoff, *The Afterlife in Early-Christian Carthage*, 102.

¹³² Mango C., 'Some Lessons of Byzantine Epigraphy', *Inscriptions in Byzantium and Beyond : Methofs-Project-Case Studies*, Rhoby Andreas ed., Vienna, 2015, 34.

¹³³ Mango C., 'Sépultures et épitaphes aristocratiques à Byzance', *Epigrafia medievale greca e latina: ideologia e funzione : atti del Seminario di Erice, 12-18 settembre 1991*, Cavallo C & Mango C. eds., Spoleto, 1995, 101.

¹³⁴ Mango, 'Sépultures et épitaphes à Byzance', 108.

¹³⁵ Theodoros Prodromos, *Poem 7*, (ed. by Hörandner), 1-30.

Εἴ τις νόμος δίδωσι καὶ νεκροῖς λέγειν, (1)
ἰδοὺ βοῆν πέμψασα κἀγὼ τυμβόθεν
τὰ κατ' ἐμαυτὴν ἐκδιδάξω σε, ξένε.
ἐγὼ προῆλθον εὐτυχῶν προπατόρων,
ἀρχῆς ἀπάσης δυσμικῆς βασιλέων· (5)
Ἰούλιοι Καίσαρες ἐθρέψαντό με
καὶ καλλονῆς χάριτες ἐστέψαντό με.
Ῥώμης δ' ἄναξ κράτιστος Ἀλεξιάδης
πορφυρογεννῆς εὐτυχῆς Ἰωάννης,
ὄρπηξ Κομνηνῶν, εὐθαλῆς Δουκῶν κλάδος, (10)
πάσης διώκτης ἐθνικῆς φυλαρχίας,
εἰς ἔννομον σύζευξιν ἡρμόσατό με.
ὦ καὶ συνεξάρξασα τῆς γῆς Αὐσόνων
εἰς φῶς προΐσχω τέτταρας μὲν νιέας
τῆς πατρογεννοῦς ἐκφυέντας πορφύρας, (15)
ἰδεῖν ἀγαθοῦς, πῦρ πνέοντας εἰς μάχην,
καὶ τέτταρας δὲ κοσμίας θυγατέρας.
ὁρῶ δὲ λαμπρὰ τὰ κράτη τοῦ συζύγου,
νίκας πρὸς αὐγὴν ἡλίου καὶ πρὸς δύσιν,
νίκας πρὸς ἄρκτον καὶ νότου θερμὸν κλίμα. (20)
τέλος λιποῦσα τὸ στέφος, τὴν πορφύραν,
τὸ βύσσινον πόρπημα, τὴν ἀλουργίδα,
τὸ τῶν μοναστῶν ἐνδιδύσκομαι ῥάκος.
θνήσκω δ' ἐπ' αὐτῆς Βιθυνῶν ἐπαρχίας
ἄποικος ἐκ γῆς Αὐσόνων βασιλίδος. (25)
κομίζομαι δὲ ναυστολουμένη πάλιν

This is a typical epitaph, including many of the characteristics of the genre. It begins with the deceased person addressing the passer-by (ξένε v.3), offering information about her life. The deceased assumes the role of the narrator to offer an exposition on her family background and her husband. The text describes how Irene came from an imperial family, thus showing her worthiness to become a bride for the crown prince of the Byzantine empire (Ἰούλιοι Καίσαρες ἐθρέψαντό με v.6). The epitaph goes on to explain the life of Eirene; she did her duty as a wife by providing her husband with many children (εἰς φῶς προΐσχω τέτταρας μὲν υἱέας vv.14 & 17) she reports the victories of her husband in the battlefield (vv. 18-20) and later on became a nun (vv.21-23). Irene talks about her grief when her husband died, leading to her decision to join a religious order. The epitaph relates how she died in Bythinia (vv. 24) and her body was brought back to Constantinople. The text ends with a prayer to God, asking him to take her soul to heaven.

The presentation of the family background is a way of Theodoros Prodromos to focus on the aristocratic lineage of the deceased, and to present her as a very important person. Hörandner expressed some doubts about the fact that Eirene of Hungary was a descendant of the emperors of the West.¹³⁶ The focus on her devotion to her husband, by giving him many children and following him on his campaigns, shapes the picture of a very virtuous woman whose husband was the most important person in her life. This is a presentation of the perfect Byzantine woman, as seen in other literary Byzantine sources. Of course, epitaphs mainly focus on the positive characteristics of the deceased individuals. So it does not come as a surprise that Theodoros Prodromos delineates a perfect picture of empress Eirene, but it is interesting to see that the idea of the virtuous Byzantine woman continues to constitute the main characteristic of epitaphs. It shows how deep this idea was rooted in the Byzantine thought of that century. Note that there is no mention of Irene's beauty or any reference to her physical appearance. The only noteworthy parts of her person are her characteristics. I assume this comes forward out of the fact that the physical body is left behind and loses its importance after death and the Christian idea that only the soul survives and goes to the afterlife. In comparison to the epitaphs of men, in which the focus is mainly on their military deeds and the positions in society that they held, the epitaphs of women are more family oriented. Since Prodromos in his epitaph accentuates the family background of the deceased woman it is insinuated that she had brought honour to

καὶ τὴν ἐμὴν ἐνταῦθα πιστεύω κόνιν.
 ἀλλ' ὦ πλάσας με καὶ μεταπλάσας πάλιν,
 ὁ τὴν κάτω δόξιν κοσμικὴν ἐξουσίαν
 καὶ τὴν ἄνω δόξιν οὐρανῶν κληρουχίαν.

¹³⁶ Hörandner, *Theodoros Prodromos: Historische Gedichte*, 231.

her birth family as a daughter. The message in the epitaphs for women is thus filled with references to the prescribed gender roles of women in Byzantine society. They are praised for their caregiving characteristics and their commitment to the family. The contrast to the men who are praised for their prowess in battle or their political astuteness enhances the gender-role patterns that were present in the Byzantine society. Prodromos' text for the empress Irene is a typical example of the tradition of twelfth-century epitaphs, by following the traditional imagery provided for this particular literary genre.

2.7 Popularity of different genres

It is difficult to pinpoint one certain textual genre or one particular group of literary sources as the most popular ones written for women. First of all, it should be emphasized that many of the texts written during this century were lost, resulting into a limited picture of the literary sources that female readers and patrons preferred. On the basis of the surviving material, there are three groups that contain a large number of texts addressed to women: epitaphs, letters and poems. In particular the group of letters and epitaphs contain most of the literary sources from twelfth-century Byzantium.

Letters are outliers when it comes to literature addressed to patrons by the authors. This is because letters are literary texts with an every-day use. The existence of letters does not come from a need of the patrons, but as Leonte has noted from "a basic need of the sender".¹³⁷ Even considering the Byzantine societal idea of letters as a literary artwork with their own rhetorical techniques, combining the oral with the written art, the letters were not seen as literary works like poems or chronicles, that the patron had to pay for.¹³⁸ Instead, I would argue that they are part of the personal relationship between author and patron. The letter that I have discussed earlier in this chapter, written by Theophylact of Ochrid and addressed to Mary of Alania, is an example of this personal aspect. The focus was not on the literary works presented to the old empress by Theophylact but rather her visit to the man when he was ill. Because of the nature of letters I would argue that the popularity for this literary genre does not come from the artistic status that Byzantine gave to them, but from their widespread use as a communication tool.

¹³⁷ Leonte F., 'The Letters of Demetrios Kydones', *A Companion to Byzantine Epistolography*, Riehle A. ed., Leiden, 2020, 154.

¹³⁸ Kotzabassi S., 'Epistolography and Rhetoric', *A Companion to Byzantine Epistolography*, Riehle A. ed., Leiden, 2020, 177.

The same could be argued for the literary genre of the epitaphs. Epitaphs have a widespread use over Byzantine society. As discussed earlier, during late antiquity the use of epitaphs was also for members of the lower classes, while in the later Byzantine period, like the twelfth-century, only high society was able to commission epitaphs for their tomb stones. The relationship between the author and the person commissioning the epitaph is business-like and not personal. However, the widespread use of epitaphs lends itself to the popularity of the genre, just as is the case with the letters. The use of epitaphs was common in Byzantine society; there was no difference between the use of epitaphs for women or for men (though the themes of the epitaphs between men and women differ). The widespread use of epitaphs is the main reason for the popularity of the literary genre during the Byzantine period. However, it is not possible to argue that epitaphs were more or less popular for women than for men during this time since both genders received epitaphs on their tomb stones.

Poems are the third and last group of popular literary genres in twelfth-century Byzantium. The renewed interest of the Comnenian court in literature and art is usually linked to the growing popularity of poetry and other genres, during the twelfth century.¹³⁹ This resulted into more manifestations of the literary patronage during the twelfth century. The literary circles (such as the one by Eirene Sebastokratorissa) had a central place in literary patronage at the Comnenian during this period. The growing literary patronage gave way to a growing dependence of the authors on their patrons for income.¹⁴⁰ Poems were written for every occasion, making them part of the occasional poetry, and the fact that poems are relatively short texts (at least in comparison to chronicles or grammars), means that authors could write more poems in a shorter amount of time, gaining more money.

I believe that the popularity of poetry can also be ascribed to the presence of the literary circles that formed at the imperial court during the twelfth century, most notably being those formed by women who were part of the imperial family. The three women whose names are connected to the literary circles of the twelfth century are: Eirene Doukaina, Anna Comnene and Eirene Sebastokratorissa. These are also the women who have the most literary works dedicated to them throughout the century. The *theatra* were important for the production of literary texts during the twelfth century, usually formed around one patron. Through these circles the patrons could influence their own image in the writings of the authors. Emperor Manuel for example used these circles for his own political gain. Not only did they praise the

¹³⁹ Zagklas, 'Poetry in the Komnenian Period (1081-1204)', 243.

¹⁴⁰ Bernard F., *Writing and Reading Byzantine Secular Poetry, 1025-1081*, 209-251.

emperor in this writings, they also had influence over other important members of the court through their family connections. It is possible that the authors within the literary circles of the imperial women tried to write texts that these women preferred, so as to gain favour and more patronage. Due to these changes in patronage and literature during this century, poetry as a literary genre became closely connected to patronage. These factors all contributed to the popularity of poetry as a whole. I would argue that women like poetry in the political verse, because they have an easier rhythm and grammatical structure than other texts. That said, poetry was popular both among men and women.

3. Positive depictions of women

Since many works that present women or were addressed to them came about through patronage from women, mainly those of the Imperial family, I will take a closer look at how authors portray these women in a positive light.

Since there are so many literary sources addressed to or written about women, I will focus mainly on works addressed to three different women, Eirene Sebastokratorissa, Anna Comnene and Irene Doukaina. There will be some literary texts, like the epitaph of Theodoros Prodromos that is addressed to Theodora, the daughter-in-law of Nikephoros Bryennios, but the main source corpus will be texts addressed to the three above mentioned women. In this chapter I will take a closer look at the sources which give a positive description of women. The purpose of this chapter is to find which literary themes or metaphors were used to describe women in a positive way. I want to find out what were important qualities according to the authors for women to possess and how they bring these to the forefront in their texts. The sources will be discussed per author in this chapter, as to give a better overview as to how different authors possibly used different literary themes or metaphors to describe women. I will discuss the authors in a chronological order, starting with Michael Italikos since he was born first out of all the authors and ending with Georgios Tornikes.

3.1 Michael Italikos

3.1.1 Oration addressed to Anna Comnene

Michael Italikos addressed an oration to Anna Comnene while she was still alive. As will be shown with Tornikes, Italikos places an emphasis on the wide knowledge of Anna and her relationship with her parents. This adds to the idea that contemporary authors, while describing Anna Comnene focussed on her intellectual abilities, making her an exceptional case of woman.¹⁴¹

In these lines, Italikos refers to the intellect of Anna Comnene and how she is very wise in comparison to the Sophists (can also be interpreted as philosophers in this context). He seeks to find an appropriate way to praise Anna. Because of her unusual intellect, contemporary

¹⁴¹ Michael Italikos, '8. Πρόλογος εἰς τὴν διάταξιν τῆς καισαρίσσης κυρᾶς Ἄννης ὡς παρ' ἐκείνης' ἐκδοθεῖς', *Michel Italikos. Lettres et Discours*, Gautier P. ed., Paris, 1972, p.106, 7-8.

Ἐνθεν τοι καὶ τὸ πρὸς τοῦτον σοφίζεσθαι σοφὸν εἰς ὑπερβολὴν καὶ παντάπασιν συμφορώτατον·

authors found it difficult to portray Anna in a way that was customary for Byzantine women. This is the reason why in this oration and the one by Tornikes, the authors mainly speak about Anna's unparalleled learning.

In the following lines Michael Italikos puts emphasis on the relationship between Anna Comnene and her parents.¹⁴² Using the voice of Anna Comnene, Italikos claims that Anna never disobeyed her parents (vv.11-13). As we will see in the oration addressed to Anna Comnene by Georgios Tornikes, the relationship between Anna and her parents is a second *topos* that the authors use to describe the princess in a positive way. In Byzantine society, children had to be obedient to their parents and show their gratitude and respect for the care and effort that their parents took in raising in their children.¹⁴³ In her own work the *Alexiad* Anna presents herself als a dutiful daughter towards her parents, a point of view which could become an obstacle for her role as the author of a historiographical work. In the tradition of historiographical works the author was assumed to be impartial to the events that they describe. However, Anna is the daughter of Alexios the subject of the *Alexiad* and could not present her father in a bad way.¹⁴⁴ Italikos has taken the image that Anna presented of herself in the *Alexiad* and used it for his own oration. By focusing on the obedience of Anna for her parents, Italikos makes use of a literary *topoi* used in Byzantine society to present the virtuous character of women.¹⁴⁵

As will be discussed with Tornikes, Italikos is trying to find ways to praise Anna Comnene in the oration. However, this proves to be a difficult task, since the only thing he could mention about the Byzantine princess is her intelligence and the relationship between Anna and her parents. The normal literary *topoi* that were used by authors in works addressed to women could not be applied to for Anna Comnene, so they employ different *topoi* and refer more to her intellectual capacities.

¹⁴² Michael Italikos, Oration 8, (ed. by Gautier), p.107, 9-15.

ἐπιμαρτυραμένη τὸν ἀλάθητον ὀφθαλμόν, ὡς λίαν ὑπερφιλουμένη τοῖς γονεῦσι καὶ αὐτοκράτορσι καί, τοῦτο δὴ τὸ τοῦ Σολομῶντος, ἐν προσώπῳ πατρὸς καὶ μητρὸς ἀγαπωμένη, οὐκ οἶδά ποτε τὸν ἅπαντα τοῦ βίου μοι χρόνον ὄν τοῖς γονεῦσι συμβεβίωκα παρακούσασα τῶν γονέων καὶ ἄλλο τι διαπραξαμένη παρὰ τὸ τούτων θέλημά τε καὶ βούλημα, καθάπερ τινὲς παῖδες τοκέων ὑπὸ τοῦ σφόδρα φιλεῖσθαι κολακευόμενοι περὶ τὰ τοῖς πατράσι δοκοῦντα ὡς τὰ πολλὰ διαπράττουσιν·

¹⁴³ Leidholm N., 'Parents and Children, Servants and Masters: Slaves, Freedmen, and the Family in Byzantium', *The Routledge Handbook on Identity in Byzantium*, Stewart M. & Parnell D. & Whately C. eds., London, 2022, 269.

¹⁴⁴ Kambylis A., 'Zum Programm der byzantinischen Historikerin Anna Komnene', *Dōrēma : Hans Diller zum 70. Geburtstag ; Dauer und Überleben des antiken Geistes*, Vourveres K. & Skiadas A.D. eds., Athens, 1975, 138.

¹⁴⁵ Stewart M.E., *Courageous and Wicked Women: Procopius' Biographic Sketches of Theodora, Antonina, and Amalasuintha*, unpublished graduate paper, Queensland, 2015, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/264787893_Courageous_and_Wicked_Women_Procopius'_Biographic_Sketches_of_Theodora_Antonina_and_Amalasuinha, retrieved on 17 May 2023, 5.

3.2 Theodoros Prodromos

Theodoros Prodromos was a very prolific writer. The collection of his work contains literary texts of different genres. In this part of the chapter I will take a closer look at the works written by this particular author. In the previous chapter, I have already taken a closer look at a dedicatory epigram from Prodromos, addressed to the Theotokos from the empress Irene of Hungary and an epitaph of the same woman. In what follows I will look at a poem written by Theodoros Prodromos that is addressed to the empress Irene on the occasion of the death of her son. I will also take a closer look at a second epitaph written by Prodromos that was addressed to the princess Theodora.

3.2.1 Poem

The following poem was addressed to the empress Irene Doukaina on the occasion of the death of her son Andronikos during battle. The poem extends to 98 verses. While addressing the grieving empress, Prodromos mainly focusses on the deeds of her deceased son and all the other family losses she has suffered. In the following verses, Prodromos addresses the empress using mythological imagery to describe the debt of the grief of the empress.¹⁴⁶

In this part of the poem Theodoros Prodromos compares the empress to the women of the Homeric and mythological tradition that have been associated with great tragedy: namely, Niobe (Νιόβην v.70) who lost all her children. They were killed by Apollo and Artemis after Niobe had insulted the mother of the godly twins by boasting to have brought forth more children than Leto. Jocasta (Ἰοκάστην v. 70) is connected to tragedy since she unbeknownst married her own biological son Oedipus and gave birth to his children. She killed herself after learning the truth by hanging. Hecuba (Ἑκάβην v.71), the queen of Troy, lost everything after the Greeks: conquered her city, killed her husband and children; she even lost her position as a queen and free woman. She became a slave to the Greeks. These figures were meant to evoke the image of tragedy in Byzantine literature. One of the most important tragedies of antiquity, *Hecuba*, is an example of this connection between the figure of the mythological queen of Troy and tragedy.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ Theodoros Prodromos, *Poem 2*, (ed. by Hörandner), 69-71.

Τίς τοι ἄρ' εἰκάσῃ παλειγενέας βασιλίσσας,
Τίς Νιόβην πολυπενθέα καὶ οἰκτρὴν Ἰοκάστην,
Τίς δ' Ἑκάβην παράθοιτο κακοπραγέα τεισάλαστον;

¹⁴⁷ Gelie G., 'Hecuba and Tragedy', *Antichthon*, Vol. 14, 1980, 31.

The use of these mythological women in the poem lamenting Andronikos is, I presume a play on the hymnographic tradition of the Early Byzantine period. In these hymns biblical characters were often used to express their grief and mourning over the loss of a loved one.¹⁴⁸ While this poem is not a religious text in strict sense, it still aims to convey this message of mourning to the audience. For this purpose, Prodromos chose to use non-biblical figures with a connection to tragedy and the loss of children. By the use of mythological figures Prodromos shows that it is not a religious text that he is presenting, but rather an occasional one, written to commemorate the death of a member of the imperial family. In using these figures, Prodromos seeks to show his compassion for Irene's grief. It must also be noted that, crying and lamenting in literature was something usually reserved for women.¹⁴⁹

3.2.2 Epitaph addressed to Theodora the wife of Ioannes, son of Nikephoros Bryennios

This epitaph is longer in comparison to the one that I have discussed in the previous chapter. It consists of 191 verses. Prodromos describes the tragedies that have befallen the Comnenian family in the past few years, not focusing solely on the death of Theodora. The following verses refer to a garden (κήποις v. 31 & 32) filled with flowers (κρίνον v.33). The context surrounding them is the marriage of Theodora to Ioannes the son of Nikephoros Bryennios.¹⁵⁰

In this passage we encounter the idea of the empire and imperial family being presented as a garden to the reader. By becoming part of the imperial family through marriage Theodora had to take on her part in taking care of this garden. Prodromos then provides examples of previous empresses, such as Irene Doukaina and Anna Comnene (vv.38 & 44). I would like to suggest that Theodoros Prodromos sees the imperial court perhaps as the garden of Eden. The literary theme of the garden has always been connected to the biblical garden of Eden. The idea on the garden is that it was beautiful because it was orderly and enclosed.¹⁵¹ A reference to this orderly state of the imperial court would be *The Book of Ceremonies* written by Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos. A second reference to the comparison between the enclosed garden of

¹⁴⁸ Harvey S.A., 'Guiding Grief Liturgical Poetry and Ritual Lamentation in Early Byzantium', *Greek Laughter and Tears*, Alexiou M. & Cairn D., eds., Edinburgh, 2017, 206.

¹⁴⁹ Mullett, 'Do Brothers Weep?', *Greek Laughter and Tears*, Alexiou M. & Cairn D. eds., Edinburgh, 2017, 314.

¹⁵⁰ Theodoros Prodromos, *Poem 39*, (ed. by Hörandner), 30-36.

ἐξ εὐτυχῶς γῆς εἰς τρισευτυχέστεραν (30)
κήποις τε χρυσοῖς ἐγκατερρίζωσέ σε,
κήποις ἐκείνοις τοῖς βασιλικωτάτοις,
ἐν οἷς ὑπήνθει μυρίον μὲν τὸ κρίνον,
ἀπείριτος δὲ τῶν ῥόδων ἡ λευκότης,
πολὺς δ' ὁ κιττὸς εἶπεν, ὁ σμίλαξ δ' ὅσος· (35)
καὶ τὰς φυτουργοὺς ὡς καλὰς δέδωκέ σοι

¹⁵¹ Della Dora V., *Landscape, Nature, and the Sacred in Byzantium*, Cambridge, 2016, 93.

Eden and the imperial court is how the imperial court was closed off to most of Byzantine society. It was a smaller society enclosed within a larger Byzantine society. Another explanation for the literary image of the garden in this poem is that Prodhomos wants to present the garden of heaven, where the deceased reside after their death. Since this is an epitaph the idea of the garden as heaven is the most likely explanation for the use of the garden imagery in this poem. It is possible to interpret these lines as either Theodora whom by marrying into the family was thus called upon to take care of this garden of Eden, which is a symbol for the imperial family, because of her marriage to Ioannes, the son of Nikephoros Bryennios. Or by her death she called upon by God to take care of the heavenly garden, the actual garden of Eden.

The mention of the numerous lilies both in red and white colour (μυρίον μὲν τὸ κρίνον v.33.) is a reference to the numerous members of the imperial court. This fact, combined with the abovementioned similarities between the characteristics of the court and the garden of Eden, may suggest that Prodhomos sees the imperial court as the biblical garden in this text. Lilies have a long-standing tradition of being the symbol for the rule of kings.¹⁵² For example, the crest of the French kings was a golden lily on a blue field. The roses (ἀπείριτος δὲ τῶν ῥόδων ἢ λευκότης v.34) could stand for the marriage and relationship between Theodora and Ioannes, since roses have been connected to the different forms of love and relationships.¹⁵³

The next passage continues with the theme of the imperial family as a garden.¹⁵⁴ In this paragraph Prodhomos compares Theodora to a gardener (πεφυτούργησο v.53). The word ὄρπηξ (v.54) can be interpreted in two ways; as “young sapling” or “descendant”. It makes clear to the reader that Prodhomos compares the Comnenian family to a garden and Theodora a new gardener, making sure that the saplings (her descendants) grow.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² Kandeler R. & Ullrich W.R., ‘Symbolism of Plants: Examples from European-Mediterranean culture Presented with Biology and History of Art: JUNE: Lilies’, *J. Exp. Bot.*, Vol. 60 (7), 2009, 1893.

¹⁵³ Nilsson I. *Erotic Pathos, Rhetorical Pleasure: Narrative Technique and Mimesis in Eumathios Makrembolites’ Hysmine & Hysminias*, Upsala, 2001, 115.

¹⁵⁴ Theodoros Prodhomos, *Poem 39*, (ed. by Hörandner), 52-59.

καὶ προστιθεῖσα τὴν μίμησιν τῇ φύσει
καλῶς πεφυτούργησο καὶ συνηξάνου,
ὄρπηξ νεαρὸς ἀκλινῶς ἀνατρέχων,
ὥς ἀναδενδράς, ὥς κυπάριστος νέα, (55)
καὶ τῷ παρ’ αὐτῶν φύντι παγκάλῳ κλάδῳ,
τῷ πάντοθεν βρύοντι πολλὴν τὴν χάριν
ἐκ κλήσεως εἶδους τε καὶ σεμνοῦ τρόπου,
δεσμοῖς γαμικῶν συνεκεντρίσθης νόμων.

¹⁵⁵ Theodoros Prodhomos, *Poem 39*, (ed. by Hörandner), 145-160.

αὐτῷ ξυνάπτῃ τῷ νοητῷ νυμφίῳ (145)
καινὴν συναφὴν μυστικῆς κοινωνίας.
Εἴπω τὸ μεῖζον; Οὐδὲ μέχρι γούν θέας
ἔρχῃ πρὸς αὐτὸν τὸν κάτω ξυνευέτην,

This paragraph focuses on the deathbed scene of Theodora. She has become a nun, a bride of Christ at the last moment and as such will be accompanied by her heavenly husband when she leaves this earthly life. This idea of becoming part of the monastic society at the deathbed is a common practice in Byzantine society.¹⁵⁶ The Byzantines believed that there was a higher chance to receive a place in heaven by dying as a monk or nun.

What is interesting about this passage is that the deathbed scene of Theodora is close to hagiographical motives. The description of her marriage to God and her subsequent death are described as if befitting a saint. These hagiographical elements also impose on Theodora a sense of sanctity. By becoming a nun before her death Theodora also becomes part of a tradition seen with other women of the Comnenian family, of becoming part of a religious order at the end of their lives. The epitaph of empress Irene of Hungary shows the same idea of an empress who became a nun after the death of her husband. This was traditional for Byzantine women to join a religious order after the death of their husbands.¹⁵⁷ The reference to Theodora living a life according to the angels (v.158) follows the monastic *topos* of referring to someone who lived a virtuous life.¹⁵⁸ The next verses (vv.159-160) describe how Theodora is accompanied by angels into the afterlife; once again Prodromos puts emphasis on her virtuousness and devotion. By using these hagiographical and monastic *topoi* Prodromos enhances the image of Theodora as a devotional and virtuous woman. This is a characteristic attributed to women in Byzantium. He wants to end the epitaph by giving a positive description of Theodora. She has lived a devotional life, fulfilling the role of a woman set by Byzantine society, and now she is being rewarded for her virtuous behaviour by God himself. By using these *topoi* Prodromos also dramatizes the passing of Theodora, adding to the already overall feeling of sadness and loss in the *epitaph*.

ὥς ἂν φυλάξης ἀμιάντους εἰς τέλος
τὸν σαρκικόν τε καὶ τὸν ἐν Θεῷ γάμον· (150)
καὶ τὸ φρικτῶδες· ἱερῶν ψαλμῶν μέσον
τὸ πνεῦμα δίδως τῷ Θεῷ καὶ νυμφίῳ,
αὐτὴ μύσασα τὰς πτύχας τῶν ὀμμάτων,
αὐτὴ περιστείλασα σεμνῶς τὰς χέρας·
μᾶλλον δέ, πρῶτα τὴν πνοὴν ἐρυγγάνεις,
σιγᾷ δ' ἔπειτα τοῦ λαλεῖν σοὶ τὸ στόμα.
Ὡ μακαριστοῦ καὶ σεβασμίου τέλους·
κατ' ἀγγέλους ἔζησας ἐν τῷ νῦν βίῳ,
κατ' ἀγγέλους ἐξῆλθες ἐκ τοῦ νῦν βίου,
σὺν ἀγγέλοις νῦν τὴν κατοίκησιν φέρεις..

¹⁵⁶ Talbot A.M., 'An Introduction to Byzantine Monasticism', *ICS*, Vol. 12 (2), 1987, 229.

¹⁵⁷ Talbot, 'An Introduction to Byzantine Monasticism', 229.

¹⁵⁸ Peers G., *Subtle Bodies: Representing Angels in Byzantium*, Berkeley, 2001, 126.

3.3 Manganeios Prodromos

3.3.1 Poem 41

The first poem addressed to Eirene Sebastokratorissa, was written around 1150.¹⁵⁹ The text consists of 490 verses. For this reason, I will only discuss parts of the text that contain descriptions of Eirene Sebastokratorissa or explicitly refer to her. The topic of the poem are the children of the Sebastokratorissa, comparing them to both trees (v.11-17) as well as birds (v. 26-33 & 37-43). The poem contains a particular reference to Theodora, the daughter of Eirene who married Henry II the duke of Austria and as a result of this marriage moved away from Byzantium.¹⁶⁰

The description given by Manganeios Prodromos on Theodora in the poem continues with this allegory of nature and birds. The use of the nightingale for Theodora comes from the mythological tradition of the antiquity, connected to the myth of Procne and Philomena. Philomena, after being raped by her sister's husband, had her tongue cut out so she would not tell of what was done to her. In the end Philomena was turned into a nightingale by Zeus. In classical literature, the nightingale became a symbol of grieve. The figure of Philomena is a symbol to the loss of the place of the woman in her own family. Jenni Williams compares the mythical figure of Philomena as someone who loses her individual and social identity by the gruesome act that she undergoes.¹⁶¹ I would like to suggest that this same idea can be found in Manganeios' poem regarding Theodora, the daughter of Eirene Sebastokratorissa. By being married to Henry II and following him to Austria, Theodora loses the social and family connections that she had in Constantinople in the form of her family and her identity as a princess of the Comnenian dynasty.

The poem itself is full of allegories to nature; in the following passage Eirene herself is the subject of these allegories.¹⁶² V. 20 is highly interesting because it constitutes a reference to

¹⁵⁹ Jeffreys, *Notes on poem 41*, 1.

¹⁶⁰ Manganeios Prodromos, *Poem 41*, (ed. & transl. by Jeffreys), 41-43.

μόνη πλανήτις ἀηδὼν ἐν τόποις ἐρημίας,
ἄδουσα θρήνους γοερῶς χάριν τῆς ξενιτείας,
καὶ μυρομένη λιγυρῶς ὕμῳ τὴν ἀπουσίαν.

Translation:

Only a wandering nightingale in lands of desolation,
woefully singing laments because of her exile,
weeps shrilly over her distance from you

¹⁶¹ Williams J., *Interpreting Nightingales: Gender, Class and Histories*, Sheffield, 1997, 17.

¹⁶² Manganeios Prodromos, *Poem 41*, (ed. & transl. by Jeffreys), v 19-24.

ὦ Ξερξικὴ περίφημε καὶ περικαλουμένη,
πεπλατυσμένη πλάτανε ταῖς γλώσσαις τῶν ῥητόρων,

the literary interests of Eirene Sebastokratorissa, a theme which appears regularly in Manganeios' works addressed to the sebastokratorissa.¹⁶³ In this passage, Eirene is addressed as the the Xerxian plane tree (v. 19). According to the myth, Xerxes, during his campaign against Greece, saw a plane tree. He was so struck by its beauty that he decorated it with gold and appointed someone to take care of the tree.¹⁶⁴ Because of this myth, the image of this particular mythological tree has been identified with great beauty. By addressing her in this way, Manganeios comments on the physical beauty of Eirene Sebastokratorissa.

The images used in the poem evoke that of a garden. The garden was a common image for ekphrasis in Byzantine literature,¹⁶⁵ especially connected to women or erotic connotations. While we can find the *ekphrasis* of the garden in novels of the twelfth-century, I would argue that the use of the garden in this poems has a specific meaning. It aims to express the love of a mother for her children, instead of the usual erotical love meaning that is given to the garden in novels.

3.3.2 Poem 55

A second poem from Manganeios Prodhromos' oeuvre, also addressed to Eirene Sebastokratorissa and written in late 1148¹⁶⁶, celebrates the return of Theodora to Constantinople. The practice of Manganeios to compare the sebastokratorissa to mythological trees continues in this poem. In the following verses he compares her again to the golden Xerxian plane tree.¹⁶⁷

It is interesting that Manganeios uses the same mythological reference in two different poems to address the beauty of Eirene Sebastokratorissa. This is a self-reference in the poems

πεφυτευμένη ψαλμικῶς παρὰ τὰς διεξόδους
τῶν ἄρδευόντων τὰς ψυχὰς ὑδάτων τῆς σοφίας.
Κλεινὰ σου τὰ ῥιζώματα, περικαλλεῖς οἱ πρέμνοι,
περιφανέστερος αὐτῶν ὁ χρυσαυγῆς σου φοῖνιξ.

Translation :

oh Xerxian plane-tree, famous and renowned,
widely celebrated by the tongues of rhetors,
planted as in the psalm by the outlets
of the waters of wisdom which refresh souls.
Your roots are renowned, your trunks are beautiful;
more conspicuous than them is your gleaming golden palm.

¹⁶³ Jeffreys, *notes on poem 41*, 2.

¹⁶⁴ Stubbings F.H., 'Xerxes and the Plane-Tree', *GR*, Vol. 15 (44), 1946, 63.

¹⁶⁵ Krieger M., *Ekphrasis*, Maryland, 2019, 32.

¹⁶⁶ The order of the poems is presented by Elizabeth Jeffreys.

¹⁶⁷ Manganeios Prodhromos, *Poem 55*, (ed. & transl. by Jeffreys), 68-69.

χαῖρε, τῆς φοῖνικος καρπέ, τῆς κυπαρίττου κλάδε,
χαῖρε, πλατάνου Ξερξικῆς αὐτόχρυσον στρουθίον
Translation:

hail, fruit of the palm, branch of the cypress,
hail, all-golden sparrow of Xerxes' plane-tree;

of Manganeios Prodromos, he is re-using his own literary *topoi*. Kuttner-Homs has published a study on this literary phenomenon using the example of Niketas Choniates. He argues that self-reference was part of the aesthetic and literary traditions from the Byzantine empire that they inherited from antiquity.¹⁶⁸ Next to this theme being a popular literary allegory or comparison for beauty, both the fact that it is the mythological plane tree of Xerxes and the theme of a woman's figure being compared to a tree, it appears that this is also a literary trend for Manganeios Prodromos to address his patron.¹⁶⁹

In these two verses Eirene is the garden (κῆπε v.7) that receives its plant and the bud (κάλυξ v.7) that becomes a rose. She is also the garden (κληματίδα v.7) where the branch is growing. The two verses are a reference to the happy reunion of mother and daughter after Theodora had left Constantinople after her marriage to Henry II of Austria. The complete image of the garden in these two verses is connected to female literature in Byzantium. As already noted, the imagery of the garden became an important part of the *ekphrasis* in novels and the connection between plants, animals and women in Byzantine literature became of particular interest for female readership.¹⁷⁰ The use of the rose in this text is also interesting, because of its literary connotation, since it is connected with love.¹⁷¹ The rose in these verses represents Theodora, standing for her youth and the love she receives. While the rose normally symbolises sexual or romantic love, in this poem Manganeios uses the rose as a symbol for the parental love of Eirene for her daughter Theodora. The bud, a symbol for Eirene, gives way to the rose; that is Theodora. Thus it should be interpreted as the love of a mother allowing her daughter to thrive.¹⁷²

In these verses, Eirene and Theodora are presented as heifer. Eirene the mother heifer (τὴν δάμαλιν ῥυσθεῖσα v. 12) and Theodora the calf (ἡ μόσχος v. 11). The image of the heifer

¹⁶⁸ Kuttner-Homs, L' héritage de la littérature antique autoréférentielle dans l'oeuvre de Nicéas Chôniatès, Paris, 2016, 584.

¹⁶⁹ Manganeios Prodromos, *Poem 55*, (ed. & transl. by Jeffreys), 7-8.

Ἔχεις, ὦ κῆπε, τὸ φυτόν, ἔχεις τὸ ρόδον, κάλυξ,
ἄμπελε, πάλιν εὐθηνεῖς, ἔχεις τὴν κληματίδα,
translation:

Oh garden, you have your plant, bud, you have your rose,
vine, you are flourishing again, you have your branch;

¹⁷⁰ Della Dora, *Landscape, Nature and the Sacred in Byzantium*, 109.

¹⁷¹ Nilsson, *Erotic Pathos, Rhetorical Pleasure*, 114-117.

¹⁷² Manganeios Prodromos, *Poem 55*, (ed. & transl. by Jeffreys), 11-12.

ἡ μόσχος τῆς δαμάλεως ἡ πρὶν ἀποσπασθεῖσα
σκιρτᾷ παρὰ τὴν δάμαλιν ῥυσθεῖσα τοῦ θηρίου.

Translation:

the heifer's calf which was snatched away,
now saved from the wild beast, frolics by her mother heifer.

and her calf in the poem is part of the literary and mythological tradition of connecting the heifer with motherhood and fertility. For example, the ancient Egyptian goddess Isis was connected to the heifer and the ancient Greek goddess Hera also had the same animal as her symbol.¹⁷³ The relationship between mother and daughter is brought to the forefront with this symbolism.

In this poem there are also references to the garden the animal kingdom. These references have a more mythological meaning, especially the comparison of Theodora to a nightingale. Again the theme of the garden can be seen as a symbol for the love of Eirene Sebastokratorissa for her daughter. The mythological elements that prevail in this poem are part of a literary tradition which existed long before the twelfth century. Manganeios seems to favour these mythological elements in his poems, including references to the Xerxian plane tree, the nightingale and the heifer imagery.

3.4 John Tzetzes

3.4.1 Letter 56 addressed to Eirene Sebastokratorissa

The following letter was written by John Tzetzes and addressed to the Sebastokratorissa Eirene. The topic of this text is the patronage relationship between Tzetzes and the Sebastokratorissa. It must be said that there are very few descriptions of Eirene in the text itself, since Tzetzes mainly writes about himself. I will take a look at the ways in which Tzetzes addresses the sebastokratorissa in this letter.¹⁷⁴

Tzetzes starts his letter by greeting the sebastokratorissa and complimenting her through her divine power (θεσπέσιον κράτος v.1) and calling her his divine mistress (ἁγία μου δέσποινα v1-2). These are traditional ways to address a woman of the imperial court in letters. Another example of this can be found in a letter by Tzetzes addressed to Anna Comnene: Δέσποινά μου ἁγία.¹⁷⁵ The idea of the divine power (v.1) that he attributes to Eirene is also a literary tradition

¹⁷³ Brugsch-Bey H., 'On Hera Boöpis', *Ilios The city and Country of the Trojans*, Schliemann H. ed., Cambridge, 1880, 740-744.

¹⁷⁴ John Tzetzes, 'Letter 56', *Ioannis Tzetzae Epistulae*, Leone P.A.M. ed., Berlin, 1972, 1-2.

Τὸ μὲν θεσπέσιον κράτος τῆς σῆς βασιλείας, ἁγία μου δέσποινα

John Tzetzes, *Letter 56*, (transl. by Verbiest), 1-2.

The most excellent power of your sovereignty, my holy mistress

¹⁷⁵ John Tzetzes, 'Letter 55', (ed. by Leone), 1.

used in Byzantine letters that were addressed to the imperial family. This comes from the idea of the imperial family, and especially the emperor being the representative of God on earth.¹⁷⁶

This short line alludes to the intellect of Eirene Sebastokratorissa.¹⁷⁷ As seen in the poems of Manganeios Prodromos, the authors that wrote works addressed to Eirene often include mentions of her intellect and love of learning. In these particular lines the intellect of Eirene is connected to that of the biblical figure of Jacob, who cheated his older brother Esau out of his birth right as the oldest son. The praise of the female intellect in literary works is typical for the Comnenian court. The ladies of the Comnenian court had a lot of freedom and were able to visit scholars and philosophers, expanding their own knowledge.¹⁷⁸ It is a particular characteristic of the works addressed to Eirene Sebastokratorissa and the authors that were in her literary circle to make mention of her intellectual abilities. The only other woman that receives similar praises about her intellectual dexterity is Anna Comnene.

3.5 Constantine Manasses

3.1.1 Synopsis Chronike

One of the longest texts that was addressed to a woman during the twelfth-century in Byzantium was the chronicle of Constantine Manasses, the *Synopsis Chronike*. This extensive historiographical work was addressed to Eirene Sebasokratorissa, the wife of the Sebastokrator Andronikos. Constantine was part of her extensive literary circle. Eirene is only mentioned once in the chronicle, in the dedicatory epigram, which will be discussed after the chronicle.

The first woman that is being depicted with positive characteristics in the *Synopsis Chronike* is Sarah, the wife of Abraham. Constantine does not mention anything about her character or background, but he describes her beauty. The religious theme and subsequent connection with the Bible in this part of the chronicle is clear, but it is important to remember

¹⁷⁶ Angelov A., 'In Search of God's Only Emperor: Basileus in Byzantine and Modern Historiography', *J. Mediev. Hist.*, Vol. 40 (2), 2014, 123.

¹⁷⁷ John Tzetzes, 'Letter 56', (ed. by Leone), 10-13.

ἁγία μου δέσποινα, πῶς ὁ τῆς σῆς βασιλείας διορατικώτατος νοῦς Ἰακώβ οὐκ ἐπέγνων τὸ τυρευόμενον παρ' αὐτοῦ καὶ πρὸς τὸν ἑρμηνέα εἶρηκεν

John Tzetzes, *Letter 56*, (transl. by Verbiest), 10-13.

my holy mistress, I am wondering how the insightful mind of your power, comparable to that of Jacob, did not notice the trickery of this man and said nothing to the interpreter of peace.

¹⁷⁸ Garland L., 'The Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women: A Further note on Conventions of Behaviour and Social Reality as Reflected in Eleventh and Twelfth Century Historical Sources', *Byzantion*, Vol. 58 (2), 1988, 381-382.

that Byzantine chronicles often included the religious history from the Bible in their historiographical narratives.¹⁷⁹ The focus on the beauty of Sarah implicates that Manasses thought that for women their appearance was one of the most important characteristics. In this respect Manasses follows a Byzantine literary tradition since the topic of the physical beauty of women is something that occurs in almost every literary genre of Byzantine literature.¹⁸⁰ Manasses compares Sarah to the rose¹⁸¹ the rose was the most important of all the flowers in Byzantine literature.¹⁸² During the twelfth century the rose, especially in connection with the novels, gained the connotation of being the flower of virginity, but at the same time it also had a very erotic connotation.¹⁸³ These two aspects can be attributed to Sarah. She is the object of the erotical love of the pharaoh, but she is also a figure connected to virginity in the Bible. By using the rose as an allegory for Sarah, Manasses also suggests through his work that Sarah should be seen as separate from the other women in Egypt: she is superior due to the virtue of her beauty. The tradition of Sarah as being better than the other women that surround her come from her religious image. Meyer has presented Sarah as being part of the tradition of the Marian conception. Just like the Theotokos, she miraculously gave birth to a child, while at the same times she is also embodying the virginal-spiritual aspect.¹⁸⁴ It is this virginal aspect of Sarah, together with her image as the loyal wife of Abraham that give her such a high standing in the Byzantine Christian literary tradition, since she combines two aspects of the ideal Christian woman. What is more the conjugal loyalty of Sarah is implied in the text. The pharaoh wants Sarah as his wife, but she stays loyal to her husband Abraham.

¹⁷⁹ Mariev, *Byzantinische Chronistik*, 840-841.

¹⁸⁰ Hatzaki M., 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly', *A Companion to Byzantium*, James L. ed., Chichester, 2010, 94.

¹⁸¹ Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike*, (ed. by Lamspides), 523-529.

Σάρρα χαριτοπρόσωπος καὶ περικαλλεστάτη.

οἱ τοίνυν θεραπεύοντες ἐκεῖ τὸν βασιλέα

(ἦν δ' Ἀβιμέλεχ βασιλεὺς τότε τῶν Αἰγυπτίων) (525)

ιδόντες κάλλει λάμπουσιν τὴν Σάρραν ἀσυγκρίτῳ

καὶ τόσον ὑπερέχουσιν γυναῖων Αἰγυπτίων

ὅσον ἀπάντων τῶν ἀνθῶν τὸ ρόδον ὑπερφέρει,

τῷ βασιλεὶ προσήνεγκαν ἐρωτοληπτουμένῳ

Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike*, (Transl. by Yuretitch), 523-529.

Sarah, whose face was graceful and most beautiful, was summoned to the foreign land and joined him there. The emperor's servants (Abimelech was then emperor of the Egyptians), observed Sarah's incomparable, radiant beauty, which exceeded that of Egyptian women as much as the rose surpasses all flowers. They brought her to the emperor, who was subject to lust.

¹⁸² Theodoros Prodromos, *Amarantos*, by Migliorini ed. & transl., *MEG*, 2007, 195.

¹⁸³ Nilsson, *Erotic Pathos, Rhetorical Pleasure*, 115.

¹⁸⁴ Meyer M., 'Refracting Christian Truths Through the Prism of the Biblical Female in Byzantine Illuminated Manuscripts, *Jews in Byzantium. Dialectics of Minority and Majority Cultures*, Bonfil R. & Irshai O. & Stroumsa G.G & Talgam R. eds., Leiden, 2012, 979.

The description of Sarah by Constantine Manasses in this paragraph is also a reference to the theme of the garden. Like the rose is the master of all the flowers, so is Sarah the mistress of all the women in Egypt concerning beauty. This reference to the garden is something that regularly comes up in Byzantine literature in connection to women. The tradition of connecting elements of nature to women comes from the connection with the virgin Mary. Both in literary and visual arts Mary has been depicted together with animals or with themes of the garden.¹⁸⁵ This idea of connecting femininity with nature in art and literature gained influence after iconoclasm, which might explain the abundance of this theme in literature that is connected to women in the twelfth-century.

The next woman that receives a full description in the Synopsis is the mythological Helen of Troy.¹⁸⁶ Manasses puts emphasis on her beauty through the many references to her pale skin. Her skin is snow white, she is white armed, white as ivory (λευκοβραχίων v. 1160 and τὴν λευκότητα ροδόχροια πυρσίνη v. 1164). This idea of someone having pale, almost white skin was a sign of beauty in Byzantine society.¹⁸⁷ This idea of paleness of skin as the ideal beauty image is something that has been present in other literary works.¹⁸⁸ Manasses gives the typical beauty standards of Byzantine society to Helen, the most beautiful woman according to mythology. Her position as the wife of Menelaos is mentioned in passing.¹⁸⁹ The focus point

¹⁸⁵ Maguire, *Nectar and Illusion*, 81.

¹⁸⁶ Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike*, (ed. by Lampsides), 1157-1167.

ἦν ἡ γυνὴ περικαλλής, εὖοφρος, εὖχρυστάτη,
εὐπάρειος, εὐπρόσωπος, βοῶπις, χιονόχρους,
ἐλικοβλέφαρος, ἀβρά, χαρίτων γέμον ἄλσος,
λευκοβραχίων, τρυφερά, κάλλος ἄντικρυς ἔμπνουν, (1160)
τὸ πρόσωπον κατάλευκον, ἡ παρειὰ ροδόχρους,
τὸ πρόσωπον ἐπίχαρι, τὸ βλέφαρον ὠραῖον,
κάλλος ἀνεπιτήδευτον, αὐτόβαπτον, αὐτόχρουν·
ἔβαπτε τὴν λευκότητα ροδόχροια πυρσίνη,
ὥς εἴ τις τὸν ἐλέφαντα βάψει λαμπρᾷ πορφύρᾳ, (1165)
δειρὴ μακρά, κατάλευκος, ὅθεν ἐμυθουργήθη
κυκνογενὴ τὴν εὖοπτον Ἑλένην χρηματίζειν

Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike*, (transl. Yuretitch), 1157-1167.

She was very beautiful, had fine eyebrows, good colouring, beautiful cheeks, a splendid countenance and large eyes. Helen was snow-white, with flirtatious eyes, delicate, a grove full of graces, white-armed, tender and with an inspirational beauty. Her face was quite white and her cheeks were rosy. She had a pleasing face and beautiful eyes. Her beauty was simple, enhanced by her natural colouring. A reddish hue tinted her white skin, as if someone had painted ivory a brilliant crimson. Her neck was long and entirely white. This gave rise to the myth that the delightful Helen had been born of a swan.

¹⁸⁷ Hatzaki M., *Beauty and the Male Body in Byzantium: Perceptions and Representations in Art and Text*, Hampshire, 2009, 10.

¹⁸⁸ Hatzaki, 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly', 95.

¹⁸⁹ Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike*, (ed. by Lampsides), 1156.

τὴν Μενελάου γαμετὴν κατὰ τὸν οἶκον βλέπε.

Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike*, (transl. By Yuretitch), 1156
He saw Menelaus' wife in her house.

is her beauty, which is in full agreement with the literary tradition that has always accompanied Helen of Troy. Another interesting fact of this description of Helen's beauty is that Manasses describes her beauty in an ekphrasis.¹⁹⁰ An ekphrasis gives a great deal of details on the described subject. In the Byzantine court, where texts were often read aloud in front of a public, the ekphrasis is meant to give the public an opportunity to picture the described object in their minds-eye.¹⁹¹ I presume that Helen of Troy is thus presented as a sculpture of art by Manasses through the use of *ekphrasis* to describe her physical appearance. In a sense she is presented not as just a normal woman, but as an artwork that has come to life just like Galatea coming to live out of a stonework.

The following paragraph focuses on the wife and sister of Emperor Theodosius, Pulcheria and Eudokia. I have already discussed Pulcheria in the previous chapter, but here I will discuss her next to her sister-in-law Eudokia.¹⁹² The depiction of Eudokia in this paragraph is only in two verses and like previous presentations of women in the *Synopsis Chronike* Manasses focuses on issues of beauty. It is said that she has great beauty (τὴν κάλλεσιν ἀστράπτουσιν παντοίοις Εὐδοκίαν v.2546). This description, while focusing on her beauty, pales in comparison with the description that her sister-in-law receives. What is interesting is that the beauty of both women is rendered with the word meadow (λειμῶνα v. 2538 & 2547). For Pulcheria the word “meadow” is connected to her chastity (καὶ τῆς ἀγνείας ἄστυλον

¹⁹⁰ Nilsson I., 'From Homer to Hermoniakos: Some Considerations of Troy Matter in Byzantine Literature', *TROIA* Vol. 4, 2004, 21.

¹⁹¹ Krieger, *Ekphrasis*, 30.

¹⁹² Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike*, (ed. by Lampsides), 2535-2549.

καὶ κάλλει διαλάμπουσα σώματος εὐπροσώπου (2535)

καὶ στίλβουσα ταῖς χάρισι τῆς ἔνδον εὐπρεπείας·

ἥτις παρθένον συντηρεῖν αὐτὴν προελομένη

καὶ τῆς ἀγνείας ἄστυλον φυλάττειν τὸν λειμῶνα,

ἄρρένων μὲν ἀπέσχετο καθάπαξ ὁμιλίας,

τῷ καθαρῷ δ' ἐπέχαιρε καὶ τῷ κοσμίῳ βίῳ (2540)

καὶ ζέσιν ἐπεδείκνυτο πρὸς πᾶσαν χρηστουργίαν.

οὐ μόνον δὲ τὸν ἑαυτῆς οὕτως ἐκόσμει βίον,

ἀλλὰ γε καὶ τὸν ἀδελφὸν παντοίοις ἐπινοίαις

εἰς ἀρετὴν ἐρρύθμιζε καὶ τρόπους φιλοκάλους·

ἣ καὶ συνώκισεν αὐτῷ πρὸς γάμου κοινωνίαν (2545)

τὴν κάλλεσιν ἀστράπτουσιν παντοίοις Εὐδοκίαν,

ἥτις λειμῶνα φέρουσα κάλλους ἐν τῷ προσώπῳ

ὥρματο μὲν ἐξ Ἀθηνῶν τῶν περιλαλουμένων,

πρὸς δὲ τὴν Βύζαντος λαμπρὰν ἀφικομένη πόλιν,

Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike*, (transl. Yuretich), 2535-2549.

This Theodosios had a sister. She was decorous and led a pure life. Her name was Pulcheria. She gleamed with the loveliness of her fair-faced body and shone with the graces of inner beauty. Pulcheria was determined to safeguard her virginity and to preserve inviolate the meadow of her chastity. She abstained entirely from the company of males and rejoiced in her pure and proper life. She exhibited warmth towards every good deed. Not only did she set her own life in order, but also regulated her brother with all kinds of designs towards virtue and fondness for good habits. She arranged for him to marry Eudokia, who shone with all kinds of beauties, and whose face was a meadow of loveliness. She was from renowned Athens and had come to the splendid city of Byzas.

φυλάττειν τὸν λειμῶνα v.2538), for Eudokia the word is connected to her physical beauty and her chastity before her marriage to the emperor (ἥτις λειμῶνα φέρουσα κάλλους v.2547). The term “λειμῶνα” has been broadly connected in Byzantine literature with religion.¹⁹³ In the case of Pulcheria the connection with her own religious virtue is clear. The characteristic that is brought to the forefront in her depiction is her religious fervour and the chastity that results from this. However, with Eudokia there is not the obvious religious connection with the term “λειμῶνα”, since Manasses does not talk about her religious virtues. “λειμῶνα”, however, is inherently connected with religion and the idea of the Garden of Eden.¹⁹⁴ It is especially the last connotation that becomes interesting from a literary perspective. The image of the garden is connected to female beauty in Byzantine literature.¹⁹⁵ The beauty of Eudokia had always been emphasized in the Byzantine literary tradition and Manasses clearly follows this in his short description of the woman. I would like to argue that by using the word “λειμῶνα” Manasses draws a comparison between Pulcheria and Eudokia and seeks to present them as complete opposites. While the beauty of Pulcheria comes from the inside because of her religious zeal, for Eudokia it comes from her outward appearance.

The following short texts snippets are on three different Byzantine empresses: Theodora wife of emperor Justinian (ca. 500-548), empress Sophia (530-601) and a second empress Theodora (815-867). While these texts are only two or five verses long, they give an idea on what Constantine Manasses thought was important to mention in his chronicle when it comes to empresses. For the empress Theodora, wife of emperor Justinian, Manasses says the following things.

Τούτῳ συνῆν τῷ βασιλεῖ σύζυγος Θεοδώρα, (3235)
ταυτόζηλος, ταυτότροπος, μεγαλοπρεπεστάτη

The emperor had a wife named Theodora, who shared her husband's zeal and character, and was most magnificent.¹⁹⁶

Manasses, in just two verses, gives a short description of the empress Theodora. What is interesting here is that she is being compared to her own husband the emperor Justinian (ταυτόζηλος, ταυτότροπος v. 3236). Theodora, while being a woman, is in essence being put on the same level as a man when it comes to zeal and character. This is a comparison that is not

¹⁹³ Wilson J. 'A Meadow that Lifts the Soul: Originality as Anthologizing in the Byzantine Church Interior', *JHI*, Vol. 81 (1), Pennsylvania, 2020, 4.

¹⁹⁴ Wilson, 'A Meadow that Lifts the Soul', 5.

¹⁹⁵ Maguire H., *Rhetoric, Nature and Magic in Byzantine Art*, Hampshire, 1998.153.

¹⁹⁶ Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike*, (ed. by Lampsides), 3235-3236.
Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike*, (transl. By Yuretich), 3235-3236.

often presented in a positive way in Byzantine literature. Frequently, when women were attributed male characteristics, it aimed to present either the woman in a negative way¹⁹⁷ or to feminise the men.¹⁹⁸ The fact that Theodora is presented this way shows Manasses' positive regard of the empress. The historiography surrounding Theodora is divided into different categories. Procopius, for example wrote three historiographical texts on Justinian and Theodora during the sixth-century. In his two works *Wars* and *Buildings* he depicts the imperial couple in a positive way, but in *The Secret History* he attacks them and their rule.¹⁹⁹ This is a very interesting historiographical division in the portrayal of the empress. Manasses in his chronicle is following the historiographical tradition that portrays the empress in a more positive way. It is possible that his positive description of Theodora is the result of his patron, the Sebastokratorissa Eirene. Another possible scenario is that the historiographical trend concerning the empress Theodora leaned towards a positive portrayal, because of the growing influence of strong women at the imperial court, including Eirene Doukaina and Anna Comnene. During the twelfth century women who showed manly characteristics were praised for overcoming their femininity in literature.²⁰⁰

The two verses about the empress Sophia, wife of the emperor Justin II, include more feminine characteristics.²⁰¹ In comparison to the empress Theodora, Sophia is being portrayed as courageous (ἀνδρεία v. 3396), magnanimous (μεγαλόψυχος v. 3396) and generous (μεγαλοδωροτάτη). This description follows a more traditional way. The empress occupies herself by taking care of the poor and giving them alms.²⁰² The Byzantine idea of women putting effort in performing good deeds comes from the Christian tradition of their role in society.²⁰³ It

¹⁹⁷ Neville, *Anna Komnena, the Life and Work of a Medieval Historian*, 17-18.

¹⁹⁸ Skinner P., "Halt! Be Men!": Sikelgaita of Salerno, Gender and the Norman Conquest of Southern Italy', *Gender & History*, Vol. 12 (3), 2000, 623.

¹⁹⁹ Betancourt R., *Byzantine Intersectionality: Sexuality, Gender, and Race in the Middle Ages*, Oxford, 2020, 59.

²⁰⁰ Neville, *Anna Komnena, the Life and Work of a Medieval Historian*, 19.

²⁰¹ Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike*, (ed. by Lampsides), 3396-3397.

Τούτῳ συνῆν τῷ βασιλεῖ καὶ σύζυγος Σοφία, (3396)

ἀνδρεία, μεγαλόψυχος, μεγαλοδωροτάτη

Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike*, (transl. by Yuretich), 3396-3397.

This emperor had a wife named Sofia, who was courageous, magnanimous and generous.

²⁰² Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike*, (ed. by Lampsides), 3398-3402.

ἥτις μαθοῦσα τὸ κοινὸν κόπτεσθαι καὶ συγνάζειν

ὥς χρέεσι βαρούμενον οἷα δεσμοῖς ἀφύκτοις,

συναγαγοῦσα τῶν χρεῶν πάντα τὰ γραμματεῖα (3400)

αὐτὰ μὲν ἐπυρπόλησε, τοῖς δὲ χρεωφειλέταις

ἀπέδωκε τὰ δάνεια χρημάτων ἐξ οἰκείων.

Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike*, (transl. Yuretitch), 3398-3400.

She learned that the people were grieving and distressed because they were burdened with debts, like fetters from which one cannot escape. Then she gathered together all of their promissory notes, burned them and gave loans to debtors out of her own money.

²⁰³ Herrin J., *Unrivalled influence: Women and Empire in Byzantium*, Princeton, 2013, 135.

is also an aspect that has been put forward in Byzantine literature.²⁰⁴ However, the representation of the empress Sophia in the *Synopsis Chronike* is different from that in other historiographical sources. Contemporary sources depict her and her husband the emperor Justin II rather negatively.²⁰⁵ The fact that she is portrayed in this positive manner in the work of Manasses could be again a result of the historiographical change that occurred during the twelfth-century.

A last positive description of a woman is of the empress Theodora, wife of the emperor Theophilos.²⁰⁶ The first thing to notice is that Theodora is called “godly” (θείαν v. 4678.) in these verses. According to Garland, this is a reference to the fact the iconoclasm dispute ended during the reign of Theodora and her husband Theophilos.²⁰⁷ Theodora was later also canonised by the church. Considering that the iconophiles triumphed in the end, the literary tradition has portrayed Theodora in a rather favourable light. A second interesting fact on the description of Theodora is that Manasses uses references to the natural world but not the normal mentions of animals and plants. For Theodora he refers to a precious pearl (μάργαρον κατάλευκον v.4679) and an ember (λίθον ἀνθρακίαν v.4679.). The pearl is often connected to goodness and virtue because of its brilliant white colour ²⁰⁸ (which in itself is often connected to virtue and virginity).²⁰⁹ The connection put forward by Manasses of Theodora being a divine and virtuous woman is being brought to the forefront with this reference. He continues his account by clinging to the literary tradition of Theodora as a protector of the faith and a virtuous woman who saved the true faith of Byzantium.

The past three descriptions given on three different empresses focus on their role as wives and empresses. While these descriptions are short compared to others in the chronicle, they demonstrate which characteristics Manasses thought were important for good empresses.

²⁰⁴ Riehle A., ‘Authorship and Gender (and) Identity. Women’s Writing in the Middle Byzantine Period’, *The Author in Middle Byzantine Literature: Modes, Functions and Identities*, Pizzone A. ed., Berlin, 245.

²⁰⁵ Garland L. *Byzantine Empresses. Women and Power in Byzantium AD 527-1204*, London, 1998, 40.

²⁰⁶ Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike*, (ed. by Lampides), 4678-4682.

τὴν πάνσεπτον ἐν γυναιξὶ καὶ θεῖαν Θεοδώραν,
ὡς μάργαρον κατάλευκον, ὡς λίθον ἀνθρακίαν.
ταύτην οὖν σὺν σὺν κοινολεχῇ, ταύτῃ ζυγεῖς εἰς γάμον, (4680)
καὶ παίδων γέγονε πατὴρ ὡς εἰς γονίμην σπείρων
καὶ πλέον ἐπετύχησεν Ἀδὰμ τοῦ πρωτογόνου·

Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike*, (transl. By Yuretitch), 4678-4682.

He found this sole good thing, the godly Theodora, all-revered among women. She was like an all-shining pearl, like a glowing ember. He made her his lawful wife and became the father of her children, since he sowed in a fruitful woman. He was more fortunate than Adam.

²⁰⁷ Garland, *Byzantine Empresses*, 95.

²⁰⁸ Piehler P., *The Visionary Landscape: a Study in Medieval Allegory*, Quebec, 1971, 155.

²⁰⁹ Hönnighausen L., *The Symbolist Tradition in English Literature: a Study of Pre-Raphaelitism and Fin de Siècle*, Hönnighausen G. transl., Cambridge, 1998, 120.

It is not so much their physical appearance that is praiseworthy, but their deeds. Manasses follows the twelfth-century historiographical interpretation of both empress Theodora, wife of Justinian and her successor empress Sophia wife of Justin II. Both had been negatively depicted by contemporary historians, for example by Procopius. During the twelfth century however these empresses were being positively depicted in historiographical sources, indicating that there was a change of attitude towards these women.

What these texts and portrayals of women show is that there are three ways for the Byzantine author to portray women in a flattering way in the historiographical sources: the first and most common one is by focussing on the beauty of the woman, as shown with Helen of Troy. It is often in connection to the beauty of women that the authors make use of references to plants or animals to compare the women.²¹⁰ A second depiction of women is through their religious dedication and chaste behaviour, as shown with Pulcheria. The women are portrayed as being beautiful but not through physical attributes. Instead their beauty comes from within through their faith, in these depictions religious imagery is more often used, like the references to the meadow and the garden of Eden. A third presentation of the women is their intellect or more masculine characteristics. This third option is very interesting, since in earlier literary texts women who portrayed masculine characteristics were often depicted in a negative way. It is only in the hagiographical texts that women were praised when they overcame their own femininity.²¹¹ But this trend changed during the twelfth-century when authors started praising all women for displaying certain masculine traits as we have seen in Manasses' chronicle.

3.4.2 Dedicatory Epigram in the *Synopsis Chronike*

The first dedicatory epigram that I will discuss is the epigram found at the beginning of the *Synopsis Chronike* from Constantine Manasses, addressed to the Sebastokratorissa Eirene.²¹²

²¹⁰ Lung E., 'Depictions of Women in the Works of Early Byzantine Historians and Chroniclers: Between Stereotype and Reality', *Hist. Reflect.*, Vol. 43 (1), 2017, 12.

²¹¹ Neville, *Anna Komnena, the Life and Work of a Medieval Historian*, 19.

²¹² Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike*, (ed. by Lampsides), 1n,t-9n.

Στίχοι ἡρώοι πρὸς τὴν σεβαστοκρατόρισσαν κυρὰν Εἰρήνην 1 n,t

Δέχνησο τοῖον δῶρον ἄφ' ἡμετέριοι πόνοιο,
ὀλβιόδωρε ἄνασσα, κυδίστη, ἀριστοτόκεια,
νυὲ χαριτοπρόσωπε μεγασθενέων βασιλῆων,
ἦν πλέον ἀστράπτουσιν εὐβλεφάροιο σελήνης
εἰς γάμον ὀλβιον ἤρατο νυμφιδίους ἐπὶ λέκτροις 5n
πορφυρόπαις γόνος Αὐσονάνακτος καρτερόχειρος,
Ἀνδρόνικος μεγάλθυμος, εὐμμελὴς πολεμιστής,
ὃ γέρα πρῶτα σεβαστοκρατορίας νεῖμ' ὁ φυτεύσας.

A first important thing to note is that there are no typical contextual characteristics for book epigrams written for women.²¹³ However, there are themes that are recurring for literature addressed to women. The first of these is the beauty of Eirene Sebastokratorissa that is being presented in this dedicatory epigram. *νὺὲ χαριτοπρόσωπε* (v. 3n) and *ἦν πλέον ἀστράπτουσιν ἐϋβλεφάροιο σελήνης* (v. 4n). The use of *χαριτοπρόσωπε*, derived from *χαριτοποιέω*, is often found in poetical texts describing a female figure. Describing women as graceful is a common compliment found in literary texts. Eirene's physical appearance is also compared with the moon, (v. 4n). I would propose that the moon is connected in Byzantium with virtuousness and perhaps even chastity, mainly because of its connection with the ancient Greek goddess Artemis, who was the goddess of the moon, hunt and chastity. By comparing Eirene in this dedicatory epigram to the moon, Manasses does not only focus on her beauty, something which was important for women in Byzantine literature,²¹⁴ but he also puts emphasis on her virtuousness.

The main topic of the epigram seems to be the family connections between Eirene and the Imperial family. The first detail on the life of Eirene that is put forward by the author are her children (*ἀριστοτόκεια* v. 2n). Manasses, and most probably Eirene herself, held her role as the mother of children with imperial blood through their father Andronikos in a very high regard. As I have already discussed in the poems of Manganeios Prodromos²¹⁵, Eirene was very attached to her children. This might be a reason why her role as a mother is one of the first things that is being mentioned in the dedicatory epigram by Manasses. It is also mentioned before her relationship with the emperor. In addition to Eirene's personal interest for an emphasis of her role as mother, there is a long literary tradition. The role of women as a mother in Byzantine society was one of their common roles next to that of a devoted daughter and wife.²¹⁶ By promoting the image of Eirene as a good mother, who brings forth illustrious children, the image of Eirene to the reader of the *Synopsis Chronike* would become even more positive.

εἰς τοῖνον λυκάβαντας ἀπειρεσίους ἐλάσειας. 9n

Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike*, (transl. Yuretitch), 1n,t-9n

Heroic lines for the sebastokratorissa Lady Irene. Accept this gift of our labour, most generous queen, most glorious, bearer of illustrious children, daughter-in-law with a graceful countenance of mighty emperors, giving out more light than the beautiful brows of the moon, whom great-hearted Andronikos, spear-bearing warrior, purpleborn offspring of the well-armed lord of Ausonia, took in blessed marriage upon nuptial couches, on whom his begetter bestowed the foremost rank of sebastokrator. May you now launch forth into endless years.

²¹³ Licciardello F., *Deixis and Frames of Reference in Hellenistic Dedicatory Epigrams*, Berlin, 2022, 9.

²¹⁴ Jouanno, 'Women in Byzantine Novels', 148.

²¹⁵ See pages 48-52.

²¹⁶ Stewart, 'Courageous and Wicked Women', 5.

The second detail about her family life are her connections to the Byzantine imperial family. She is first addressed as a beloved daughter in-law of emperors (νυὲ χαριτοπρόσωπε μεγασθενέων βασιλῆων ν. 3η) and only later on is her husband, the Sebastokrator Andronikos, mentioned (εἰς γάμον ὄλβιον ἤρατο νυμφιδίοις ἐπὶ λέκτροις (...) Ἀνδρόνικος μέγαθυμος ν. 6η-7η). The fact that her relationship to the emperor is mentioned before the one with her husband could be because the emperor was hierarchically the most important person in Byzantine society. However, this does not explain why the children of Eirene are mentioned first in the epigram. It could be possible that Andronikos had already died by the time that this dedicatory epigram had been written, which would explain why her children and then afterwards the emperor were mentioned in the text and her husband as her last familial relationship. Manasses is presenting her living relatives first and her deceased family members second, putting emphasis on the living not on the dead.

It is also interesting that Constantine calls Eirene ἄνασσα, which means queen or lady. This word was commonly used in poetry. This might be connected to the short period of time that Andronikos, her husband, was the heir to the imperial throne. Alexios, the eldest son of emperor John II died in 1142 which made Andronikos, John's second son, the heir apparent to the imperial throne of Byzantium. This in turn made Eirene the future empress of the Byzantine empire. However, Andronikos also died around 1142 shortly after his brother.²¹⁷ I assume that Manasses is referring to this fact when he addresses Eirene as empress in the dedicatory epigram.

Manasses' main focus in the dedicatory epigram is the family relations of Eirene Sebastokratorissa, especially her connections to the imperial family and her role in this. The goal of the text is to present his patroness as positive as possible and for this reason he uses the family gender roles that are attributed to women, that of mother and wife. He portrays her as an excellent mother and daughter-in-law to the emperor, enhancing her representation for the Byzantine reader the reader.

²¹⁷ Varzos K., *Η Γενεαλογία των Κομνηνών*, Thessaloniki, 1984, 359-361.

3.6 Georgios Tornikes

3.6.1 Oration of Anna Comnene by Georgios Tornikes

The funerary oration for Anna Comnene, written by Georgios Tornikes between 1153 and 1155. Throughout the oration, Anna Comnene is portrayed as a unique woman because of her learning and the extensive education she enjoyed when she was younger. The oration was commissioned by the daughter of Anna Comnene. According to Neville, Tornikes found the task of praising Anna Comnene, very challenging, since she did not fit the social standards of a Byzantine woman.²¹⁸ Therefore his focus is mostly on her intellectual achievements, an example of this portrayal can be found in the following paragraph, where Tornikes highlights the education that Anna Comnene enjoyed from a young age, and how this education continued after her marriage.²¹⁹

Just as with Eirene Sebastokratorissa, the learning of Anna Comnene is frequently mentioned. Anna Comnene had a very extensive education for a woman, even compared with the standards of a member of the imperial family during the twelfth-century, when the possibility for a woman to receive an education was higher.²²⁰ However, Tornikes mentions that Anna Comnene received this education because of her husband and her mother (τότε δὲ τῇ φιλομαθίᾳ τοῦ ἀνδρὸς ἐπὶ πλέον αὐξηθέντα v.15 & τὴν τέχνην ταύτην εὐνούχων κατὰ κρίσιν τῆς δεσποίνης μητρὸς ἐπαιδεύετο vv.19-20). Stressing her obedience and piety towards her husband and her mother. At the same time, he also portrays Bryennios and empress Irene Doukaina in a favourable light, since they are allowing Anna to pursue her studies and grow her knowledge. Tornikes also portrays Anna as a prodigy in philosophical debates (ὠμίλει δὲ καὶ φιλοσόφοις οἷς μετὰ λόγου καὶ ἥθος φιλόσοφον καὶ γῆρας ἐνέπρεπε v.19-20). He presents her as someone who was able to participate in discussions with the greatest intellectual minds. The emphasis in this oration is thus clearly modelled around the intellectual excellence of Anna Comnene.

²¹⁸ Neville, *Anna Komnene, the Life and Work of a Medieval Historian*, 113.

²¹⁹ Georgios Tornikes, *Oration 14*, (ed. & transl. by Darrouzès), p.263, 14-20.

καὶ γὰρ ἦν καὶ φύσει σύντονος τοῖς ῥυθμίζουσι καὶ πρὸς τὴν διὰ λόγων ἤδη θεωρίαν ἐχώρει, πολὺν ἐκ βρέφους ταύτης ἔρωτα τρέφουσα, τότε δὲ τῇ φιλομαθίᾳ τοῦ ἀνδρὸς ἐπὶ πλέον αὐξηθέντα καὶ ταῖς τῶν τὰ θεῖα φιλοσοφούντων ὁσημέραι παρὰ τὰ βασίλεια διαλέξεσι. Τοῖνον καὶ τὰ μὲν τῆς γραμματικῆς ἐνὶ τῶν οὐκ ἀγεννῶν τὴν τέχνην ταύτην εὐνούχων κατὰ κρίσιν τῆς δεσποίνης μητρὸς ἐπαιδεύετο· ὠμίλει δὲ καὶ φιλοσόφοις οἷς μετὰ λόγου καὶ ἥθος φιλόσοφον καὶ γῆρας ἐνέπρεπε.

Translation: So polished had she been in the practice of the virtues, for she was also quick by nature to agree with those who set the pace; she immediately came to the study by conversation for which, from childhood, she had nourished a great predilection and which, in due course, progressed further thanks to her husband's taste for study and the daily lectures of those who expounded the divine sciences in the palace.

²²⁰ Garland, 'The Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women', 381-382.

A second characteristic of Anna that has been brought forward by Georgios Tornikes is her close relationship with her parents and her obedience to them. The following passage is very striking concerning this portrayal of Anna Comnene. Tornikes attributes the title of *philopater* and *philomater* to Anna. He then proceeds to explain how Anna took care of both her parents in their old age.²²¹ The terms *philopater* and *philomater* are royal titles often associated with the Ptolemaic dynasty of Egypt.²²² By emphasising Anna's piety and love for her parents in this way (ὅτι φιλοπάτορες μὲν Πτολεμαῖοι καὶ φιλομήτορες ὠνομάσθησαν, line 4), Tornikes tries to place Anna in the gender norms that were attributed to women in Byzantine society.²²³ Because Anna has characteristics that are not typical for women, Tornikes is highlighting the few that did fit the societal norms in Byzantium. Because of this he is putting extra effort in his oration to describe Anna as exceptionally devotional to her parents.

A third and important aspect of the description of Anna Comnene in the oration, by Georgios Tornikes is linked to her beauty. Since Tournikes is describing a woman, it is necessary to say something about her beauty. As we saw in other literary sources, the physical appearance of people, especially beauty, was very important for Byzantine authors.²²⁴

In this section, Tornikes describes the physical appearance of Anna Comnene²²⁵ but even here he includes a reference to her intellectual merits, hidden in her eyes (ψυχῆς

²²¹ Georgios Tornikes, *Oration 14*, (ed. & transl. by Darrouzès), p. 305, 3-12.

Ὁ δὲ διὰ τούτων ἀληθῶς ἐστὶν ἀποφῆνασθαι, ὅτι φιλοπάτορες μὲν Πτολεμαῖοι καὶ φιλομήτορες ὠνομάσθησαν, ἡ δὲ καὶ πολλῷ πλέον ἐκείνων καὶ ἅμφω τούτῳ καλεῖσθαι προσήκουσα τῷ ὀνόματι, οὐ μόνον ὡς πατέρα μὲν νοσοκομοῦσα μεῖραξ ἐν ἀπαλῷ τῷ σώματι, μητέρα δὲ γηροκομοῦσα καὶ τὰς λύπας συμφέρουσα, γυνὴ παιδοτροφοῦσα καὶ συγγηράσκουσα καὶ θεραπεύουσα καὶ ἅμφω χερσὶν αὐταῖς θεραπαινικὰς ὑπηρεσίας ἡ εὐγενὴς καὶ βασίλισσα, ἡδεῖαν ὑπουργίαν ὀφθαλμοῖς τεκόντων ὑπὲρ αὐτὴν ὑγίειαν, ἀλλ' ὅτι καὶ καθάπερ ζῶντες τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς ταύτης συνεχῆς ἦσαν ὄραμα καὶ θεαμάτων ἀπάντων ἥδιστον.

Translation: If the Ptolemies were called philopator and philomator, then she herself deserves to be called both: she cared for her father when she was very young, despite her delicate body; she cared for her mother in old age and shared the burden of her sorrows; she, a woman, with children to care for and who, as she grew old, devoted herself with both hands to the work reserved for servants, as noble and empress as she was: a service more pleasing to Brien's parents than health itself; and not content with that, just as during their lives they were continually under her gaze.

²²² Ellis R., *From Cleopatra to Christ*, Scotts Valley, 2006, 34.

²²³ Neville, *Anna Komnene, the Life and Work of a Medieval Historian*, 121.

²²⁴ Hatzaki, *Beauty and the Male Body in Byzantium*, 10.

²²⁵ Georgios Tournikes, *Oration 14*, (ed. & transl. by Darrouzès), p. 247, 14-26.

Ὁφθαλμοὶ μὲν αὐτῇ ἐν συμμετρίᾳ μεγέθους ὑπαναγάζοντες χαροπὸν, οὐ περιφερόμενοι καὶ περιδονούμενοι, ψυχῆς ἀστατούσης καὶ ρεμβώδους σύμβολα, οὐδὲ στάσιμοι πέραν τοῦ μετρίου καὶ νοχελεῖς, νοθροτέρως ἔξωος σήμαντρα, ἀλλὰ μετὰ γοργοῦ καὶ εὐστρόφου, ὅποτε δέοι περιενεχθῆναι, κινήματος, τὸ πλέον ἐστῶτες καὶ βεβηκότες. Ὀφρύδες ὡς τόξον ἱριδος· ῥίς εὐθεῖα μικρὸν ὑποκυρτουμένη περὶ τῷ χεῖλει, βραχὺ τοῦ προσώπου καὶ σύμμετρα ὑπανέχουσα· χεῖλη καθάπερ ῥόδου κάλυκες συμπτυσσόμενα καὶ ὡς σπαρτίον κατὰ τὴν Αἰσματίζουσιν κόκκινον. Πάντα λευκὰ ὡσεὶ ἔριον· ὄχθους δὲ τῶν μήλων ἐφοίνισσε ῥοδόχρουν ἐρύθημα, ὃ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸ γῆρας τὰς παρειὰς ἔχρωζε. Τὸ πρόσωπον ἅπαν ὡς ἐκ περιήρας περιηγμένον, εὐκυκλον, εὐτορον· κεφαλὴ τραχήλῳ εὐμήκει ἐπὶ σπονδύλῳ εὐπαγής, ὥμοι μὴ ἀτάκτως παλλόμενοι, ἐλαφροὶ πόδες καὶ χεῖρες ὑπερθεῖν· ζύμπαντα μέλη καὶ πρὸς ἑαυτὰ καλὰ καὶ πρὸς ἄλληλα. Ὡς λύρα τις ἦν αὐτῇ τὸ σῶμα ἢ ὡς κιθάρα συνηρμοσμένη, ψυχῆς ἀγαθῆς ἀγαθὸν τεκτονηθὲν ὄργανον.

ἀστατούσης καὶ ῥεμβώδους σύμβολα). Her physical description starts with Anna having the correct measures in her face a description that is often used rather for men than women,²²⁶ showing Tornikes' difficulty in praising Anna Comnene in female terms. He cannot completely describe her with the normal literary *topoi* used for the physical beauty of women. Instead, he mixes them with characteristics which are typical of men. The elements that do recall a physical description of women are the following (χεῖλη καθάπερ ῥόδου κάλυκες συμπτυσσόμενα καὶ ὡς σπαρτίον κατὰ τὴν Αἰσματίζουσιν κόκκινον. Πάντα λευκὰ ὡσεὶ ἔριον· v19-21.). In this description there is the typical concept of beauty in Byzantine literature of red lips and a pale complexion. Anna herself used these *topoi* in her *Alexiad* to describe the women of the Comnenian court. With these references to female beauty, Tornikes tries again to place Anna inside the gender norms of women in the Byzantine empire. However, it is clear by the use of masculine beauty elements that Tornikes does not feel completely comfortable to portray Anna as completely female.

Georgios Tornikes tries to present Anna Comnene as a woman with unique qualities, seeking to elevate her position among other women in the Byzantine society. He does not fail to describe Anna as a beautiful woman, but her beauty is described differently than that of other women. Anna is described as a faithful daughter, who even receives the title of *philopater* and *philomater*. In using of the usual roles attributed to women in Byzantine society, Tornikes enhances the positive element of the image of Anna Comnene. The intellectual capacities of Anna Comnene that are presented in the oration are also part of a popular trend during the twelfth century. As we have seen in the chronicle from Constantine Manasses²²⁷, women were also praised for their intellectual qualities during this period. However, the intellectual qualities of Anna play a central role in the description and praising of the woman.

The characteristics of Anna that are stressed by Georgios Tournikes are all things that are also presented in the *Alexiad*, written by Anna herself. Her intellect and her love for her

Translation: Her eyes, of well-proportioned size, radiating restrained joy, never restless and turning in all directions, a sign of an unstable and restless soul, or excessively lingering and dull, an indication of an indolent soul, were endowed with a lively and easy movement when they had to focus on the surroundings, but more often than not remained immobile and fixed. Eyebrows like a rainbow; a straight nose slightly curved towards the lips, protruding moderately and harmoniously; lips hemmed like the chalice of roses and evoking the red cord of which the Song speaks. Everywhere was as white as wool, while the cheekbones flushed with a rose blush that coloured the cheeks well into old age. The whole face, as if drawn on a compass, turned in a perfect circle; a head set firmly on the cervical vertebra by a proportionate neck, shoulders that didn't sway out of place, nimble feet and even more nimble hands: all her limbs were beautiful in themselves and in relation to each other. Her body was to her like a lyre or a well-tuned zither, a good instrument built for a good soul.

²²⁶ Hatzaki, *Beauty and the Male Body in Byzantium*, 9.

²²⁷ See pages 53-62.

parents are characteristics that are mentioned numerous times by Anna in her work. In all probability, the similarities regarding the representation of Anna Comnene in the *Alexiad* and Tornikes' oration are the result of the ideal image that became normative in Byzantine society throughout the twelfth century. Tornikes might have taken inspiration from Anna's own work, but it is also possible that his work reflects the traditional literary tropes and female imagery of the time.

4. Negative depictions of women

In the following chapter, I will focus on texts portraying women in a less favourable way. By looking at these types of texts I hope to find some literary themes shared by twelfth-century authors when they present women in a negative way.

I have found a small number of literary sources portraying women in a less favourable way than sources portraying them in a positive way. Because of the nature of the relationship between female patron and author, there are less texts, addressed to female patrons, that portray women negatively. Another reason could be because of the nature of the texts. Most of the literary source groups that I have discussed in the previous chapters do not have any negative portrayal of a woman, since their essential aim was to praise the individual they were written for. This holds especially true for epitaphs and dedicatory epigrams. Epitaphs cannot provide a bad representation of the deceased woman they are supposed to commemorate, since it would go against the nature and rules of their genres. Similarly, dedicatory epigrams have the purpose to celebrate an individual who ordered an object of art or the commission of a text. If this donor is a woman, the text would not describe her in a negative way, since she is the one giving the votive offering or the one paying the author for his literary text.

Thus, this chapter does not include a discussion of epitaphs or dedicatory epigrams. The chapter includes a discussion of the *Ptochopordromica* poems for a negative portrayal of women, even though none of the *Ptochopordromica* were addressed to a woman of the imperial court. The only text in this chapter that is dedicated to a woman is the *Synopsis Chronike*. I have again ordered the authors in a chronological order. The *Ptochopordromica* have been placed last since there are still doubts about Theodoros Prodromos being the author of the poems.

4.1 John Tzetzes

4.1.1 Letter 57 addressed to the treasurer of Bertha von Sulzbach

It is almost impossible to find letters addressed to women with a negative description especially when the recipient is part of the imperial family. It is integral characteristic of letters to have a polite, if not friendly, tone.²²⁸ However, there is a letter addressed to the treasurer of the empress

²²⁸ Mullett, 'The Classical Tradition in the Byzantine Letter', 78-79.

Irene/Bertha of Sulzbach, by John Tzetzes, which refers to is a dispute between the latter and the treasurer of Irene. The dispute is about the price of Tzetzes' literary work: *The Allegories of the Illiad*. It is letter number 57 in the epistolary collection of John Tzetzes.²²⁹ While the overall tone of the letter is still rather polite, the author is clearly exasperated because of the situation, namely the lack of payment for his texts. He does not blame the empress directly for this, but other groups for the overall poverty of society. One of these groups are the monks, who are accused of becoming rich through the hard work of common people.²³⁰

Although the letter does not contain a direct insulting description of the empress, at one point Tzetzes makes a remark on the payment of the empress Irene that he received which could be interpreted as an indirect insult to her.²³¹ In the letter Tzetzes requests to receive payment for his literary work. He does not see the money that he receives from the empress' own treasury as an official payment. To the contrary, he sees this type of payment as a form of charity something which in his opinion should be given to the poor people. The fact that he would receive such a "charity" from the empress' treasurer insults him.²³² I follow the idea that Lovato presents that if Tzetzes were to accept these types of gifts, he would forever be indebted to his patrons and would not have as much literary freedom, as he usually had without accepting these gifts.²³³

This explains his crude reaction in the letter to the gift. I assume that this sentence was interpreted as an insult, not just by the treasurer, but also the empress herself. In essence, Tzetzes does not see the money that he receives from the treasurer, and thus from the empress herself, as his payment for the literary services he is providing but as charity, something that he views as being beneath him.

This letter shows that authors, who were connected to female patrons, did not write in a negative way about those patrons in their letters directly. However, in an indirect way there are insults to be found addressed to the female patrons. In the case of the letter of Tzetzes the insult

²²⁹ John Tzetzes, 'Letter 57', (ed. by Leone), 79-84.

μη γοῦν ἀπαίτει τότε αὐτὸν τρία τοιαῦτα γράψαι τετράδια, τῷ μὲν φαινομένῳ ποσῶ τριάκοντα γεγονότα, τῇ δὲ ἀργίᾳ καὶ βίᾳ ἐνενήκοντα, καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα λέγε· 'δοθήσεται σοι φιλοτίμημα'

Translation by Marieke Verbiest

Let her not then ask him to write three such books, the one with the appearance of thirty events, and the other with the sabbath and violence of ninety, and afterward say, 'Give him a compliment.'

²³⁰ Grünbart M., 'Prosopographische Beiträge zum Briefcorpus des Ioannes Tzetzes', *JÖB*, Vol. 46, 1996, 207.

²³¹ John Tzetzes, *Letter 57*, (ed. by Leone), 83.

²³² Lovato V.F., 'From Cato to Plato and Back Again: Friendship and Patronage in John Tzetzes' Letters and Chiliades', *Class. Mediaev*, Vol. 70, 2021, 76.

²³³ Lovato, 'From Cato to Plato and Back Again', 76.

is connected to his own idea of financial (in)dependence from patrons and how he expects to be paid by them. I believe that the authors did not refrain from writing down their complaints against their female patrons in their work, or letters, just as they would do with their male patrons. Though I believe that the indirect insult in the letter concerning the monetary gift is not an insult directed at the person of empress Irene, but more of an overall remark by Tzetzes, addressed to all patrons from the high-ranking elite. Authors need to live from their craft, just as other artisans, and the use of charity gifts alone for these authors is of a negative impact in the long run for the authors. It must be noted that eventually, John Tzetzes lost the financial support of empress Irene and finished the Allegories of the Illiad through the support of Konstantinos Kotertzes.

4.2 Constantine Manasses

4.2.1 Synopsis Chronike

The *Synopsis Chronike*, as a historiographical work, contains both positive and negative depictions of women. The first woman that is described negatively in this chronicle is the mythical figure of Clytaemnestra, the wife of Agamemnon. In this part it is explained how Menelaos arrived back home, eight years after the end of the Trojan war, and discovered that his brother Agamemnon, who had arrived home much earlier than Menelaos, had been murdered by his own wife.²³⁴

Clytaemnestra is described first as κακίστης γυναικός, Manasses makes use of the superlative κακίστης (v.1467), which provides a clear image of Clytaemnestra. She is the most evil of all women. Manasses puts emphasis on the murderous character of the woman and that what she has done is undeniably horrible. The following image that Manasses present is symbolically very interesting ἐχίδνης μοιχαλίδος (v.1467), meaning *adulterous snake*. The word μοιχαλίδος refers to the myth surrounding this woman: according to the myths

²³⁴ Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike*, (ed. by Lampsides), 1466-1470.

εὕρισκει καὶ τὸν σὺναιμον ἀθλίως ὀλωλότα
δόλῳ κακίστης γυναικός, ἐχίδνης μοιχαλίδος·
εὕρισκει τὸν ἀδελφιδοῦν Ὀρέστην ἐφθαρκότα
τὸν τοῦ πατρὸς αἰσχύναντα τὸ γένος καὶ τὸ λῆχος
καὶ σὺν αὐτῷ τὴν ἀναιδῆ μητέρα Κλυταιμνήστραν.

Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike*, (transl. By Yuretitch), 1466-1470.

He found his kinsman wretchedly killed by the trickery of a most evil woman, an adulterous viper. He discovered that his nephew Orestes had murdered the one who had shamed the family and marriage bed of his father, and with him his own shameless mother Clytemnestra.

Clytaemnestra was angry because Agamemnon killed their eldest daughter Iphigenia to gain favour of the goddess Artemis before sailing off to Troy. As revenge she cheated on her husband with his cousin Aegisthus and together they plotted his death, killing Agamemnon when he returned from Troy.²³⁵ The imagery of the snake is connected to the biblical image of the devil.²³⁶ Snakes were seen as deceivers, since it was the devil disguised as a snake that tricked Adam and Eve to eat from the forbidden fruit. This symbolism for the snake is traditional for Christian literature. Manasses presents the idea of a woman who is not only adulterous, and thus severely lacking in her role as wife, but she is also just as deceiving as the devil himself. The last adjective, ἀναιδῆ (v.1470), meaning ruthless, is a reference to the fact that she would almost have killed her own son Orestes, if he had not escaped. The adjective is presented by Manasses to show how far Clytaemnestra would go to fulfil her plans. She is willing to kill her husband and her own child in order to get revenge for the daughter that she lost.

The second woman that receives a negative depiction in the chronicle by Manasses is Tulia Minor the daughter of Servius Tullius, who was the sixth legendary king of Rome. She plotted to kill her husband and her sister so she could marry her sister's husband. She later on killed her own father, so that her husband could become a king (and she his queen).²³⁷ Her husband became one of the last mythological kings in Rome.²³⁸ The most important terms here are τρόπῳ μαιφόνῳ (v.1650), which means that the daughter killed her own father in a 'bloodthirsty manner'. The focus of this particular adjective is to put focus on the unnatural act of the daughter, who did not hesitate to kill her own father. Manasses puts emphasis on the fact that Tulia Minor defies the Byzantine image of a loving and dutiful daughter, which goes against the gender roles that were accepted in Byzantium. Manasses uses this image as a warning for what happens if daughters do not follow these gender norms that were prescribed by the Byzantine society. Another negative representation of a woman in the *Synopsis Chronike*

²³⁵ Hunger H., *Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie. Mit Hinweisen auf das Fortwirken antiker Stoffe und Motive in der bildenden Kunst, Literatur und Musik des Abendlandes bis zur Gegenwart*, Berlin, 1955, 20.

²³⁶ Lenders H.J.R. & Janssen I.A.W., 'The Grass Snake and the Basilisk: From Pre-Christian Protective House God to the Antichrist', *Environ. Hist. Camb.*, Vol. 20 (3), 2014, 332.

²³⁷ Jansen T. & Meijer F. & Struyk F., *Van Koningen naar Consuls Livius: over Romes Eerste Eeuwen*, Amsterdam, 2012, 27.

²³⁸ Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike*, (ed. by Lampsides), 1648-1651.

οὗτος συνῆψε τὰς αὐτοῦ πρὸς γάμον θυγατέρας

τοῖς βασιλέωσι υἱοῖσι Λευκίου Ταρκυνίου,

ὥν περ μίας ἐπιβουλῇ καὶ τρόπῳ μαιφόνῳ

καὶ τῆς ζωῆς καὶ τῆς ἀρχῆς ὁ τάλας ἐστερήθη.

Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike*, (transl. By Yuretitch), 1648-1651.

He joined his daughters in marriage with the grandsons of Emperor Lucius Tarquinius. One of the daughters, through a plot and in a bloodthirsty manner, deprived the wretched man of his life and power.

concerns Agrippina minor the mother of Nero, and how she was killed by her own son. The description can be found in the following verses.²³⁹

The remark about Agrippina constitutes an indirect insult to woman. Unlike the women discussed previously, she herself is not portrayed as evil. It is because she birthed Nero, the most evil emperor in Roman history, that she deserved to die a gruesome death by her own son's hand (εἴποι τις ἂν δικάίως ὅτι κακὸν εἰσήνεγκε τοιοῦτον τοῖς ἐν βίῳ vv.2015-2016). This indicates that it is not necessary for the women to have done unspeakable acts to receive such negative portrayals in the chronicle. For this reason, she was punished by being murdered by her own son. Manasses makes it clear in this depiction that it is not completely clear if she deserved this fate. He mentions εἴποι (v. 2014) 'one may say', meaning that this is the opinion of a part of the society, but not everyone's. There might also be a group of people that consider her innocent. Though it must be said that he only mentions the idea that some think that she deserved it, indicating that he could have the same opinion on the matter. Whatever the case, it is clear through this small passage that women can receive a negative depiction through their association with men who are remembered in history for their cruel deeds.

One of the longest negative depictions of a woman in the *Synopsis Chronike* is about empress Irene (750-803), the wife of emperor Leo IV (750-780) and mother of Constantine VI (771-805). Empress Irene is mostly known for her rule during the youth of her son and later the blinding of her own son, to exclude him of his birth right, the imperial throne.²⁴⁰

The author includes a much more elaborated description in comparison to that of earlier references to women in his chronicle.²⁴¹ Whereas in the above-mentioned passages about

²³⁹ Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike*, (ed. by Lampsides), 2014-2016.

εἴποι τις ἂν δικάίως

ὅτι κακὸν εἰσήνεγκε τοιοῦτον τοῖς ἐν βίῳ,

ἐπικατέθυσε δ' αὐτῇ καὶ τὴν ὁμοζυγοῦσαν

Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike*, (ed. by Yuretitch), 2014-2016.

One might day that she died justly for having introduced such an evil among te living; with her he also killed his spouse.

²⁴⁰ Herrin J., *Women in Purple: Rulers of Medieval Byzantium*, Princeton, 2021, 113.

²⁴¹ Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike*, (ed. by Lampsides) 4400-4410.

τίς τηλικαύτην ἤκουσε βαρύθυμον μανίαν,

μητρὸς μανίαν εἰς υἱόν; αἱ πάθος φιλαρχίας! (4400)

οὐ πάρδαλις ἐκμαίνεται κατὰ τῶν σκύμνων οὕτως,

οὐχ οὕτως ἀγριαίνεται κατὰ τῶν σκυλακίων,

οὐ τίγρις, οὐδὲ κάρχαρος, οὐδὲ λυσσώδης κύων.

Μήδειαν μόνην λέγουσι τέκνοις ἐπιβουλεῦσαι,

καὶ ταύτην ἀπὸ Σκυθικῆς ἀγριογνωμοσύνης. (4405)

μόνον ἀκούω τὸν ἰχθὺν τὸν πελαγίτην θύννον

πεινήσαντα καταρροφεῖν τὸν γόνον τὸν οἰκεῖον,

ἄλλο δ' οὐδὲν οὐκ ἔνυδρον, ἀλλ' οὐδὲ χερσοπόρον·

women there were only a few lines or adjectives for the description of their deeds, here there is a long part of the chronicle dedicated to the empress Irene. The metaphors that are used by Manasses to describe the act of Irene blinding her own son are connected to either nature or mythology. For example, Manasses writes that not even the most fearsome animals would be able to kill their own offspring, including leopards, tigers, sharks or dogs (vv. 4373-4374). This focuses on the unnatural nature of her actions; Irene is doing something that not even the wildest animals dare to do. The opposition of the use of the images of nature; usually used to describe women in a positive way and here used to describe the unnatural aspect of the deed, makes this passage, in my opinion, all the more jarring. Whereas animals were used to exhibit the loving nature of mothers and their virtue, Manasses represents Irene to be far away from other women in Byzantine society, especially mothers.

Another way in which Manasses emphasises the horror of Irene's act is by comparing her to the mythological figure of Medea (vv.4404-4405). Medea killed her own two sons in revenge for Jason leaving her to marry another princess.²⁴² Manasses presents the empress Irene as a woman who is just as bad as the mythological figure of Medea. She maims her own child for imperial power. The image of Medea in literary tradition has always been that of wicked sorceress, who murders to fulfil the goals that she pursues in life or to take revenge. In this respect Manasses follows a tradition that stretches back to antiquity.

The women outside of the mythological sphere that are portrayed in a less positive way by Manasses, are those that have gone against the roles that were ascribed to women by Byzantine society. They go against the idea of women being either a virgin, mother or widow.²⁴³ Normally women were supposed to support and aid the male members of their family in everything that they did. Going against this idea was seen as going against the natural order in the mind of the Byzantine authors.²⁴⁴ The way in which these women are presented sometimes

αἱ γὰρ Εἰλείθυιαι δεινὰι μητέραυ δυσωπῆσαι.

ἔσβη τὰ σελαγήματα τότε τὰ τοῦ φωσφόρου,

Constantine Manasses, *Synopsis Chronike*, (transl. by Yuretitch), 4400-4410.

Who has ever heard of such great wrathful, unrelenting fury of maternal madness towards her son? Alas the suffering of those who love to rule! A leopard is not thus driven to anger against her young; the tiger does not act so savagely to her cubs, not does the shark, nor the raving-mad dog. Only Medea, they say, plotted against her children, and she had the savage temperament of a Scythian. I have heard that only a sea-roaming fish, the tuna, in hunger swallows its own offspring, but no other creatures in the sea or on dry land do, for the dreaded Eileityiai influence the mothers.

²⁴² Graf F. 'Medea, the Enchantress from Afar: Remarks on a Well-known Myth', *Medea: Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy and Art*, Clauss J.J. & Johnston S.I. eds., Princeton, 1997, 22.

²⁴³ Orlov-Vilimonovic L., 'Contextualizing Gender in XII Century Byzantine Discourse: Women and Power in Ioannes Zonaras' *Epitome Historiarum*', *Glasnik Etnografskog instituta*, Vol. 69 (2), 2021, 366.

²⁴⁴ Stewart, 'Courageous and Wicked Women', 5.

as examples of how to act other times as examples to avoid is typical for the literary tradition of historiography in Byzantium.²⁴⁵

The best example of this idea of the role of women is the figure of the empress Irene. Irene, who was supposed to be a loving mother to Constantine and support him, goes against the natural order and blinds her son to gain power for herself. She is serving as a paradigm on how motherhood is supposed to be and how not to act. This makes the portrayal of the empress Irene not only a simple history lesson. She also serves as a warning for the women reading this text. Chronicles and other literary texts with an educational purpose, are filled with scenes trying to present the ideas that Byzantine society had of women.²⁴⁶

The literary allusions and themes that Manasses uses for his chronicle are centred in the natural, mythological, and even biblical sphere. All these literary themes have been continuously used in literature addressed to women or providing a description of women. The most interesting use of these themes occurs in the case of empress Irene when Manasses, as I have noted earlier, turns around the use of the themes inspired from nature. He does not use these themes to describe her beauty, but to put emphasis on her hideous acts which do not comply with the standards of Byzantine society. Comparing her to Medea only enhances the whole situation. I suggest that, while indirectly referenced, there is another instance when the role of motherhood is broken, at least in the eyes of Manasses. This is with Agrippina, the mother of Nero, as stated, she is not directly portrayed in a negative light, but the fact that her son committed such cruelties, and eventually killed her, is partly blamed on Agrippina. I suggest that Manasses sees her as failing her role of mother, she birthed him and he became one of the worst emperors in Roman history.²⁴⁷ These two women serve as a warning for the reader: namely for Eirene the Sebastokratorissa. In contrast to these women, who failed in their roles of motherhood, Eirene's own life and role as mother of her children is exemplary, as we have seen in the dedicatory epigram prefacing the *Synopsis Chronike*.

The other women presented in a negative way are figures from Greek and Roman mythology, all of which belong to a longstanding tradition. They are not only part of the historiographical narrative of Byzantine literature and society, but they also serve as a warning towards this same society on what happens when women do not follow the path they are

²⁴⁵ Tocci R. & Pizzone A., 'Questions of Authorship and Genre in Chronicles of the Middle Byzantine Period: The Case of Michael Psellos' *Historia Syntomos*, *The Author in Middle Byzantine Literature*, Pizzone A. ed. Vol. 28, Berlin, 2014, 62.

²⁴⁶ Vilimonović, 'Contextualizing Gender in XII Century Byzantine Discourse', 367.

²⁴⁷ Hallett J.P., *Fathers and Daughters in Roman Society: Women and the Elite Family*, Princeton, 2014, 232.

supposed to follow. Clytaemnestra is the common symbol of a wife who betrays her family by killing her husband and keeping her son, Orestes, away from his right to the throne as the son of king Agamemnon. She has betrayed her role as wife and mother. While her motives might be redeemable, her grieve and rage over the sacrifice of her eldest daughter Iphigeneia, her actions, however, are not. Tulia Minor, the second mythological figure in this category fulfils the role as a warning towards daughters who go against their father and by extension their own family.

4.3 Ptochoprodromos

4.3.1 Poem addressed to emperor John II Komnenos

The first poem of the Ptochoprodromica, addressed to emperor John II Komnenos, includes a negative depiction of a woman. The author of the poem describes how he suffers under the treatment of his wife, who is angry with him because he does not earn enough money. The behaviour of the woman against her husband is elaborately described by the narrator of the poem. The acts of the woman stand for her wicked behaviour. However, in my opinion, the vocabulary provided by the author add to the image as to how authors during the twelfth century try to portray woman in a negative way.

The first time the narrator of the poem mentions his wife, he makes use of the following description.²⁴⁸ He calls her a μάχιμου (v.23) a *warlike* woman, granting her a description which is implied to be usually used for men.²⁴⁹ By using this adjective the author provides the reader with the image of a quarrelsome woman. This comes in contrast with Byzantine women who are supposed to be demure.²⁵⁰ The woman in the poem takes every opportunity to degrade her husband. The second part of the sentence, πολλὴν εὐτραπείαν (v.23), is an interesting description for a woman, since this is normally used in a positive or in a comedic sense.²⁵¹ The author places emphasis on the fact that his wife is very cunning. She uses her intellect and cunning for the mistreatment of her husband. The wife makes sure that no one can come to the

²⁴⁸ Ptochoprodromos, Ptochoprodromica, Eideneier H. ed. & transl., Berlin, 1991, 23.

ἀλλὰ μάχιμος γυναικὸς πολλὴν εὐτραπείαν.

Ptochoprodromos, *Poem addressed to emperor John II*, (transl. by Verbiest), 23.

But a warlike woman, very cunning.

²⁴⁹ LSJ, s.v. μάχιμ-ος'.

²⁵⁰ Jouano, 'Women in Byzantine Novels', 144-145.

²⁵¹ LSJ, s.v. 'εὐτραπεία-ία'.

LBG, s.v. 'εὐτραπελής'.

defence of her husband whenever she mistreats him. From the first presentation of the woman by the narrator the reader notices that the roles between the husband and wife, strong and demure, are reversed. This element attributes to the comical character of the poem, a normal situation (the byzantine household) is turned upside down.²⁵²

A second time when the author describes his wife with a negative adjective can be found in the following verse.²⁵³ Μοχθηρίαν (v.26) can be translated as *wickedness* or *depravity*, the author again puts emphasis on the horrible character of his wife and how he suffers from her behaviour towards him. The adjective *wicked* was often attributed to women in Byzantine society who did not follow the norm. In this respect, the author is following the literary tradition of portraying women negatively. However, there is the underlying comical tone of calling a woman *wicked*. Procopius describes the empress Theodora as wicked. The use of this choice of vocabulary can be ascribed to the possibility that the *Secret History* was meant to be a comical work, just like the *Ptochoprodromika*.²⁵⁴ The same combination of words is used in a sentence a few lines further down.²⁵⁵ I believe that the grammatical closeness of the sentences, especially the second part of the verse, can be attributed to the oral aspect of the poem as part of the *theatra* of the Byzantine higher class, as a kind of mnemonic pointer for the person who read the poem during its performance.²⁵⁶

A following description of the woman gives more information on her actions. The author does not only describe her wickedness through adjectives, but he wants to explain how her behaviour also proves her wicked character.²⁵⁷ The second line is a reference to the emotional

²⁵² Bernard F., 'Laughter, Derision, and Abuse in Byzantine Verse', *Satire in the Middle Byzantine Period: the Golden Age of Laughter?*, Marciniak P. ed., Leiden, 2021. 43.

²⁵³ Ptochoprodromos, *Ptochoprodromica, Poem Addressed to John II*, (ed. by Eideneier), 26.

Καὶ θέλω δεῖξαι προφανῶς τὴν ταύτης μοχθηρίαν.

Ptochoprodromos, *Poem addressed to emperor John II*, (transl. by Verbiest), 26.

I want to reveal to you all the wickedness of this creature.

²⁵⁴ Heather P., *The Restoration of Rome: Barbarian Popes and Imperial Pretender*, London, 2013, 111-116.

²⁵⁵ Ptochoprodromos, *Ptochoprodromica, Poem addressed to John II*, (ed. by Eideneier), 42.

Οὐ φέρω γάρ, ὦ δέσποτα, τὴν ταύτης μοχθηρίαν

Translation Marieke Verbiest

I cannot bear, oh master, her wickedness.

²⁵⁶ Janssen & Lauxtermann, 'Language and Metre in the Ptochoprodromika', 559.

²⁵⁷ Ptochoprodromos, *Ptochoprodromica, Poem addressed to John II*, (ed. by Eideneier), 123-126.

Ἡ δὲ τὰς ἀποκρίσεις μου μὴ καταδεχομένη,

στήκει, τριχομαδίζεται, δέρει τὰ μάγουλά της·

συνάγει τὰ παιδία της, ἀπαίρει καὶ τὴν ρόκαν,

ἐμβαίνει εἰς τὸ κουβούκλιον της, κλείει σφικτὴν τὴν θύραν,

μουλλώνεται καὶ κρύπτεται, ἐμὲ δ' ἀφήνει ἔξω.

Ptochoprodromos, *Poem addressed to John II*, (transl. by Verbiest), 123-126.

My wife, unhappy with my answers, stands up, pulls out her hair, tears her cheeks, takes her children with her, grabs her distaff, goes into her room and shuts the door. She sulks and hides, and leaves me outside.

reaction of women in mourning: they hurt themselves and pulled out their hair as a sign of loss (στήκει, τριχομαδίζεται, δέρει τὰ μάγουλά της, v124).²⁵⁸ However, in this sentence the act of mourning is attributed to the emotional reaction of the wife of the narrator. She is angry at him and his behaviour and thus acts in this extreme way. This is, again, a way of the narrator to elevate the unreasonable character of his wife. She acts as being in mourning, but according to the narrator there is nothing to mourn. The narrator is portraying a woman who is being led by her emotions, a weakness attributed to women in Byzantium.²⁵⁹

The way in which the narrator of the poem describes his wife creates a picture of a horrible woman who abuses her husband. The exaggerated image of the woman in the Ptochoprodromic poem is related with the generic identity of the poem. The reason why the author of the Ptochoprodromica uses vocabulary connected to violence and abuse is because of the comic purpose of the poem. Abuse was part of comic texts, especially of the satire during the Byzantine period.²⁶⁰ The fact that the wife deprives her husband from food and keeps him locked outside enhances the satirical tone of the poem, linking the starvation of the husband with a sexual starvation.²⁶¹ The abusive way that the woman is behaving towards her husband is not only a way to describe women in a negative manner, but it also adds to the comic element of the poem.

²⁵⁸ Bartlett R., 'Symbolic Meanings of Hair in the Middle Ages', *Trans. R. Hist. Soc.*, Vol. 4, 1994, 54.

²⁵⁹ Laiou A., *Gender, Society and Economic Life in Byzantium*, Aldershot, 78.

²⁶⁰ Floris Bernard, *Laughter, Derision, and Abuse in Byzantine Verse*, 42.

²⁶¹ Alexiou M. ed., *New departures in the Twelfth Century*, Cornell, 2002, 129.

V. Women's literature

5.1 The *Alexiad*

A discussion of the twelfth-century literature connected to women cannot exclude the *Alexiad*, by Anna Comnene. The following chapter will focus on this twelfth-century historiographical work and the descriptions of women included in it. While there are many women mentioned by name in Comnene's work, only four of them receive a detailed description. These women were members of the imperial family and had close relations to Anna. The only exception was Sikelgaita, the wife of Robert de Guiscard. At first glance the descriptions of these women may look very similar, but a closer look allows us to notice some differences. By comparing the way Anna describes these women with how women were usually portrayed in literary sources might give an insight into how much a female author was influenced by the literary *topoi* of her time. Taking a closer look at the *Alexiad* we also have the chance to compare the description of a man and woman by the same author, namely emperor Alexios I and his wife Irene Doukaina, in the same textual source.

5.1.1 Anna Dalassene

Anna Dalassene, the paternal grandmother of Anna Comnene, is the first woman mentioned in the *Alexiad*. She is introduced in the first chapter of the first book together with her son Alexios. It indicates the important role that Anna Comnene attributed to her grandmother. However, the goal of this introduction, is to place emphasis on the emperor Alexios and the time he spent as a young man under the emperor Diogenes.²⁶²

In this first description of Anna Dalassene we are told that her grief for her first-born son Manuel Comnenos, and her fear that Alexios will also die in battle, are the main reasons why Alexios is not permitted by the emperor to go on military campaign (lines 16-17). The

²⁶² Anna Comnene, *Alexias*, Kambylis A. & Reinsch R. ed. 2 vols., Berlin/ New York, 2001, Book I, Chapter 1, Section 1, 12-17.

ἀλλὰ τότε οὐκ ἐξεχώρησεν ὁ αὐτοκράτωρ Διογένης αὐτῷ ξυνέπεσθαι, ἅτε πάθους καταλαβόντος τὴν μητέρα βαρυτάτου. ἐθρήνει γὰρ τὸ τηνικαῦτα θάνατον τοῦ πρωτοτόκου υἱοῦ Μανουήλ, (...) καὶ ἵνα μὴ ἀπαραμύθητος εἴη ἐκείνη, τὸν μὲν τῶν υἱῶν μηκέτι γινώσκουσα οὐ κατορύξειε, τὸν δὲ ἀποστέλλουσα ἐν πολέμοις καὶ δεδοικυῖα, μή τι ἀπαίσιον συναντήσῃ τῷ νεανίσκῳ καὶ οὐδ' οἱ γῆς πεσεῖται ἐπιγνώσεται, διὰ ταῦτα ὑποστρέψαι πρὸς τὴν μητέρα τὸ μεράκιον Ἀλεξίου κατηνάγκασε.

Anna Comnene, *The Alexiad*, (ed. & transl. by Dawes E.A.), London, 1928, Book I, Chapter 1, Section 1, 12-17. However, on that occasion the Emperor Diogenes did not allow him to accompany him, as a heavy sorrow had befallen Alexius' mother, for she was then mourning the death of her firstborn son, Manuel, (...) In order that she might not be quite inconsolable, for she did not yet know where she had buried the elder of her sons, and if she sent the younger to the war, she would be afraid of something untoward happening to the lad, and might not even know in what part of the world he fell, for these reasons he compelled the boy Alexius to return to his mother.

emperor shows compassion to Anna Dalassene for the loss of her elder son and her fear of losing another one to war. The portrayal of Anna Dalassene in this first chapter can be interpreted in two different ways in connection to the gender roles attributed to women in Byzantine society. Anna Dalassene has both the role of a loving and concerned mother (she does not want Alexios to go on campaign), but also that of a grieving woman (she has lost her eldest son Manuel to battle).²⁶³ A paradigm of this last literary theme for women is the sermon of Gregory of Nyssa about the widow of Nain, a woman that is so grieved by her sons death that she asks Jesus to bring him back to the living.²⁶⁴

This first depiction of Anna Dalassene is meant to be a first elevation of the character of Alexios I (of which many more will follow throughout the *Alexiad*). It showcases the bravery of Alexios, by expressing his wish to participate in a military campaign at a very young age. This passage presents Alexios as a great ruler, embodying all the manly characteristics that were necessary for an emperor.²⁶⁵ Through the use of Anna Dalassene's mourning, Anna Comnene shows that Alexios possessed the qualities of a good emperor, even at a young age. This sets a first tone for the *Alexiad* and the characteristics that Anna Comnene will attribute to her father throughout the book. It also indicates that the portrayals of the women in the *Alexiad* will serve to enhance the image of Alexios.

The next time Anna Comnene describes her grandmother is in book II, chapter 5. This chapter describes the way in which Anna Dalassene acted during the Comnenian revolt and how she saved the other women of the family from the imperial forces through her own wit and intellect. When Anna Dalassene heard that the emperor knew of the plans of Alexios and his brother to take over the throne, she led the women to the Sanctuary of Bishop Nicholas, which was an annexe part of the Hagia Sophia and, as Anna describes it, known to be a refuge place for people who were charged as criminals.²⁶⁶ This plan is described by Anna Comnena as βουλὴν ἀρίστην.²⁶⁷ The plan is not merely described as being “good”, for which Anna would have probably used the adjective ἀγαθή, but she instead uses the superlative form of ἀγαθή; ἀρίστην (v.4), calling it the “best” or “most excellent” plan.²⁶⁸ This shows Anna Comnene's

²⁶³ Stewart, ‘Courageous and Wicked Women’, 4.

²⁶⁴ Neville, *Anna Komnene: The Life and Work of a Medieval Historian*, 63.

²⁶⁵ Conway C.M., *Behold the Man: Jesus and Greco-Roman Masculinity*, New York, 2008, 39.

²⁶⁶ Anna Comnene, *Alexiad*, (ed. by Kambylis & Reinsch), Book II, Chapter 5, Section 4, 1-7.

²⁶⁷ Anna Comnene, *Alexiad*, (ed. by Kambylis & Reinsch), Book II, Chapter 5, Section 1, 4-5
βουλὴν ἀρίστην βουλευεται.

Anna Comene, *The Alexiad*, (transl. by Dawes), Book II, Chapter 5, Section 1, 4-5.

She formed a very good plan.

²⁶⁸ LSJ, s.v. ‘ἄριστος’.

admiration for the intellect of her grandmother and her ability to think clear and stay calm during times of crisis she did not just come up with a “good plan”, she came up with the “best plan” for this situation. It is also the first time in the *Alexiad*, but certainly not the last time, that the intellectual dexterity of women is being praised by Anna Comnene. As stated in chapter III, the intellectual capabilities of women is a characteristic that became even more important in Byzantine literature of the twelfth-century.²⁶⁹ Anna Comnene, a highly educated woman herself followed this trend for two different reasons. The first is that she followed the literary tradition that was popular during the twelfth-century. The second reason is that by focussing on the intellect of women in her own work, she sets an example for authors would later write about Anna herself. For example the oration Tornikes, where he focusses mainly on Anna her intellectual capabilities. In doing so I would argue that she may have sought to show through her own work that women could indeed be praised for their intellect alone, and did not have to rely on their physical description or Christian virtues to receive a positive portrayal. This portrayal of women would later also be used for Anna herself in the orations addressed to her.

Further on in this chapter there is another example of Anna Dalassene’s intellect and quick thinking. When she was not allowed to enter of the church she used trickery to gain entrance to the sanctuary and afterwards refused to leave the church unless she was promised safety by imperial decree.²⁷⁰ It is stated in these lines by Anna Comnene that Anna Dalassene only *acted* as an old woman, indicated by the words ὑποκρινομένη (line 8), which metaphorically means “to pretend”²⁷¹. This description is in contrast with the image of Anna Dalassene that was presented in chapter 1 of Book I. By focusing on the fact that Anna Dalassene is pretending to be an old woman Anna Comnene is actually trying to attract the attention of the reader to Anna Dalassene’s trickery of the guards. Comnene complements the intellect of her grandmother for a second time. It is interesting that Anna Comnene mentions Anna Dalassene’s mental capacities, but none of her physical characteristics.

²⁶⁹ Lung, ‘Depictions of Women in the Works of Early Byzantine Historians and Chroniclers’, 12.

²⁷⁰ Anna Comnene, *Alexiad*, (ed. by Kambylis & Reinsch), Book II, Chapter 5, Section 6, 7-13: ἡ δὲ βραδεῖ ποδὶ στεῖχουσα ὡς οἶον ὑπὸ τοῦ γήρωος καὶ τῆς λύπης κεκμηκυῖα, μᾶλλον δὲ καὶ τὸν κεκμηκότα ὑποκρινομένη περὶ τε αὐτὰ που τὰ εἰσόδια τοῦ ἱεροῦ βήματος πελάσασα καὶ γονυκλισίας δύο ποιησαμένη περὶ τὴν τρίτην καθεσθεῖσα χαμαὶ ἀπριζ τῶν ἁγίων εἶχετο θυρῶν ἐπιβοωμένη ὡς “εἰ μὴ τὰς χεῖρας ἀποτμηθεῖν, οὐκ ἂν τοῦ ἱεροῦ τεμένους ἐξέλθοιμι, εἰ μὴ τὸν τοῦ βασιλέως ὥσπερ ἐχέγγυον τῆς σωτηρίας δεξαίμην σταυρόν”.

Anna Comnene, *The Alexiad*, (transl. by Dawes E.A.), Book II, Chapter 5, Section 6, 7-13: She advanced slowly as a woman worn out with age or grief would, or rather she simulated fatigue, and when she had almost reached the very entrance of the Sanctuary, she made two genuflections and at the third collapsed on the ground, and clinging to the Royal Doors cried out: "Unless my hands are cut off, I shall not leave these holy precincts, until I receive the Emperor's cross as pledge of my safety."

²⁷¹ LSJ, s.v. ‘ὑποκρίνω’.

Larissa Vilimonov argues that Anna Comnene portrays Anna Dalassene as a hero and the description of her grandmother in chapters six, seven and eight of book three is the best example in this respect.²⁷² The description of Anna Dalassene “as a hero”, if we accept Vilimonov’s argument, already starts in book two of the *Alexiad*. However, Gouma-Peterson argues for the use of the term “role model” for the relationship between Anna Comnene and Anna Dalassene,²⁷³ which in my opinion is a better one concerning their relationship. From the descriptions we can make out that she had a deep regard for her grandmother, she saw herself as a second Anna Dalassene. Both women sought to acquire the imperial throne, but were denied this position through forces outside their control.²⁷⁴ However, whereas Anna Dalassene succeeded in her imperial dreams through her son Alexios, Anna Comnene failed and had to live out her days in a convent.

The last and longest description of Anna Dalassene in the *Alexiad* is included in Book III (chapters six, seven and eight). These three chapters focus on the government of Anna Dalassene, handed to her by her son Alexios I, after his departure on a military campaign. As evidence for this fact Anna presents a *chrysobull* in which Alexios states that his mother will have the governing power while he is away.²⁷⁵ The main reasons behind this decision are her wisdom (φρενός) and her ability to make righteous decisions (γνώμης): ὡς ἄτερ τῆς ἐκείνης φρενός καὶ γνώμης ἀπολεῖται τῆς βασιλείας τὰ πράγματα.²⁷⁶ This follows the depiction of Anna Dalassene in Book II, where it was again her intellect, by having the “best” plan, which saved her family. It is not only because of her wisdom alone that Alexios decides to let his mother

²⁷² Vilimonovic, ‘Structure and features of Anna Komnene’s *Alexiad*’, 271-272.

²⁷³ Gouma-Peterson T, ‘Passages to the Maternal’, *Anna Komnena and her times*, ed. Gouma-Peterson T., New York, 2000, 115.

²⁷⁴ Blanken G.H., *Glorie der Griekse Middeleeuwen, Anna Komnena 1083-1148*, Arnhem, 1953, 22-23.

²⁷⁵ Anna Comnene, *Alexiad*, (ed. by Kambylis & Reinsch), Book III, Chapter 6, Section 1, 1-10.

οἰακοστρόφον δὲ μᾶλλον ἑαυτοῦ τὴν μητέρα ἱμειρόμενος εἶναι τὴν βουλὴν ὑποβρύχιον τέως εἶχε δεδιώς, μὴ τοῦ τοιοῦτου γνωσθέντος αὐτῇ λογισμοῦ καὶ τῶν βασιλείων ἐξέλθοι, πρὸς ὑψηλότερον βίον γινώσκων αὐτὴν ἀποβλέπουσαν. ἐν πᾶσι μὲν οὖν τοῖς προσπίπτουσι βουλής αὐτῆς ἄτερ μὴδὲ τὸ τυχόν ἦν ἐνεργῶν, ἀλλὰ κοινωνὸν εἶχε τῶν βουλευμάτων (5) ὁμοῦ καὶ συλλήπτορα, καὶ κατὰ μικρὸν ὑφέρπων αὐτῇ καὶ κοινοποιούμενος τὴν τῶν πραγμάτων διοίκησιν καὶ που καὶ φανερώς ἐνδεικνύμενος, ὡς ἄτερ τῆς ἐκείνης φρενός καὶ γνώμης ἀπολεῖται τῆς βασιλείας τὰ πράγματα· οὕτως εἶχε καὶ ξυνεδέσμει πλέον ἑαυτῷ τὴν μητέρα καὶ τοῦ κατὰ σκοπὸν ἀπεῖργε καὶ ἀπεκώλυεν

Anna Comnene, *The Alexiad*, (transl. by Dawes E.A.), Book III, Chapter 6, Section 1, 1-10.

He really longed that his mother rather than himself should take the helm of the state, but so far he had concealed this design from her, fearing that if she became cognizant of it, she might actually leave the palace, as he knew she aimed at the higher life. Therefore in all daily business he did nothing, not even a trifling thing, without her advice, but made her the recipient and coadjutor of his plans, and gradually he stole a march upon her and made her a partner in the administration of affairs, sometimes too he would say openly that without her brain and judgment the Empire would go to pieces.

²⁷⁶ Anna Comnene, *Alexiad*, (ed. by Kambylis & Reinsch), Book III, Chapter 6, Section 1, 8-9.

govern, according to Anna, but also because of her righteousness. Next to these depictions that focus on Anna Dalassene's intellectual capacities, other descriptions are more focused on the religious aspect of Anna Dalassene.²⁷⁷ Most of the women positively portrayed in earlier Byzantine literature were often saints or religiously virtuous women. This shows that Anna Comnene not only uses positive characteristics for women from the twelfth century, but she also makes use of earlier literary traditions to portray the women in the *Alexiad*.

5.1.2 Empress Irene Doukaina

The woman that is most often mentioned by Anna Comnene is her mother, the empress Irene Doukaina. Since the *Alexiad* is a book on emperor Alexios Comnenos, it is to be expected that his wife, the mother of Anna Comnene, would have the longest and most detailed description in this literary work. A first example of this can be found in Book III, Chapter 3. The appearance of empress Irene Doukaina is described by Anna Comnene in a very detailed way.

ἀνίστατο μὲν γὰρ καθάπερ τι ἔρνος ὄρθιον καὶ ἀειθαλὲς συμμέτρως καὶ πλατυνομένη καὶ στενουμένη καταλλήλως ἐκασταχοῦ τῶν μελῶν καὶ μερῶν· καὶ ἐπέραστος μὲν ἰδεῖν, ἐπέραστος δὲ ἀκοῦσαι καὶ ὄψεώς τε καὶ ἀκοῆς ἀκόρεστον ὡς ὄντως ἄκουσμά τε καὶ θέαμα. αὐτὸ μὲν γὰρ τὸ πρόσωπον σελήνης μὲν ἀπέστιλβε φέγγος, οὐ μὴν εἰς κύκλον ἀκριβῆ διαπέπλαστο κατὰ τὰς Ἀσσυρίους γυναῖκας οὐδ' ἄλλως ἐξεμηκύνετο κατὰ τὰς Σκυθίδας, ἀλλ' ὑπεχαλᾷτο μικρὸν πως τῆς ἀκριβείας τοῦ κύκλου. ἀνεπέπτατο δὲ αὐτῆς ὁ λειμὼν ἀπὸ τῶν παρειῶν καὶ τὴν ῥοδωνιὰν καὶ τοῖς πόρρω προὔβαλλετο· ὄμμα δὲ χαροπὸν καὶ σὺν ἡδονῇ φοβερὸν ἐνητένιζεν, ὡς τῶν ὁρώντων τὰ ὄμματα τῇ μὲν ἡδονῇ καὶ τῷ κάλλει ἔλκειν πρὸς ἑαυτήν, τῷ δὲ φόβῳ μύειν καταναγκάζειν οὐκ ἐχόντων ὅπως ἀποβλέψωνται ἢ ὅπως ἂν ἀποκρύψωνται. καὶ εἰ μὲν τις ἦν Ἀθηναῖα τοῖς πρῶην ἐφευρημένη ποιηταῖς τε καὶ συγγραφεῦσιν, οὐκ οἶδα ἔγωγε, μῦθον δὲ ταύτην ἀκούω περιφερόμενον καὶ περισυρόμενον· τὴν δὲ βασιλίδα ταύτην Ἀθηναῖαν εἴ τις εἶπεν ἐν τοῖς τότε χρόνοις φανεῖσαν τῷ ἀνθρωπίνῳ βίῳ ἢ καταρραγεῖσαν ἐξ οὐρανοῦ μετὰ τινος οὐρανίας αἴγλης καὶ ἀπροσίτου μαρμαρυγῆς, οὐκ ἂν ἐξήμαρτε τοῦ εἰκότος. καὶ τὸ θαυμασιώτερον, ὅπερ οὐκ ἂν ἐν ἄλλῃ τῶν γυναικῶν εὐρεθείη, τοὺς μὲν ἱταμοὺς τῶν ἀνδρῶν συνέστελλε, τοῖς δ' ὑπὸ

²⁷⁷ Anna Comnene, *Alexiad*, (ed. by Kambylis & Reinsch), Book III, Chapter 6, Section 2, 1-4.

ἡ μὲν γὰρ πρὸς σταθμὸν ἀπέβλεπεν ἔσχατον καὶ μονὰς διενοεῖτο, ἐν αἷς τὸν ἐπίλοιπον χρόνον μετ' ἔμφορον λογισμῶν ἐλκύσει τοῦ βίου· καὶ ταῦτ' ἐνενόει καὶ ἑαυτῇ διαπαντὸς ἐπηύχετο τεύξασθαι

Anna Comnene, *The Alexiad*, (transl. by Dawes), Book III, Chapter 6, Section 2, 1-4.

By these means he kept and bound his mother more closely to himself, but hindered and thwarted her in her desires. She however looked towards her last abode and dreamt of a convent in which she might spend the remainder of her life in pious meditation.

φόβου συνεσταλμένοις θαρρεῖν ἐνεδίδου ἐκ μόνης ὄψεως. τὰ δὲ χεῖλη ἐμεμύκει μὲν τὰ πολλὰ καὶ ἐδείκνυ σιγῶσαν, ἔμπνουν ὡς ἀληθῶς ἄγαλμα καλλονῆς καὶ στήλην ἔμβιον εὐρυθμίας. ἡνιόχει δὲ τὰ πολλὰ ἢ χεῖρ τῷ λόγῳ σὺν εὐρυθμίᾳ μέχρι τοῦ καρποῦ παραδεικνύσα τὸ μετακάρπιον, καὶ εἶπες ἂν ἐλέφαντα ἐκτετορεῦσθαι παρὰ τεχνίτου τινὸς εἰς δακτύλων καὶ χειρῶν διάθεσιν. ἢ μέντοι ἴρις τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν θάλατταν ἐμμεῖτο γαληνιῶσαν ἐν βαθυκύμονι διαθέσει τὸ κυανοῦν ἐξαυγάζουσα· ἀντέστιλβε δὲ καὶ τὸ λευκὸν τῶν ὀμμάτων κύκλῳ τῆς ἱρίδος, καὶ χάριν ἀπέλαμπον ἄμαχον καὶ ἡδονὴν ἄφατον ἐνεδίδουν ταῖς ὄψεσι.

She was just like some young, ever-blooming plant, all her limbs and features were perfectly symmetrical, each being broad or narrow in due proportion. She was so charming to look at as well as listen to that eyes and ears seemed unable to get their fill of seeing and hearing. Her face too shone with the soft glamour of the moon, it was not fashioned in a perfect circle like the faces of the Assyrian women, nor again was it very long like those of the Scythians, but it was just slightly modified from a perfect round. And the bloom of her cheeks was such that their rosy hue was visible even to those who stood afar off. Her eyes were blue, yet in spite of their gaiety, they were somewhat awe-inspiring, so that though by their gladness and beauty they attracted the eyes of all beholders, yet these felt constrained to close their eyes so that they knew neither how to resist looking at her nor how to look. Whether there ever existed such a person as the described by the poets and writers of old, I really cannot say, but the following tale I have often heard repeated, namely that, if in those olden days a man had said that this Empress was Athena in mortal guise or that she had glided down from heaven in heavenly brilliance and unapproachable splendour he would not have been far from the truth. The most surprising feature, seldom found in other women, was that she abashed the audacious, but by a single glance gave fresh courage to those abashed by fear. Her lips were generally closed, and thus silent she resembled a living statue of beauty, a breathing pillar of grace. She usually accompanied her words with appropriate gestures, displaying her forearm up to the elbow, and from the shape of her hands and fingers you would have thought they were wrought in ivory by some artificer. The pupils of her eyes resembled a calm sea shining with the intense blue of quiet deep water; the white surrounding the pupils was extraordinarily bright, thus giving the eyes an indescribable dazzling and exquisite beauty.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁸ Anna Comnene, *Alexiad*, (ed. by Kambylis & Reinsch), Book III, chapter 3, section 3-4, 5-16.
Anna Comnene, *The Alexiad*, (transl. by Dawes), Book III, Chapter 3, section 3-4, 5-16.

Anna makes use of images found in nature to describe her mother (section 3 vv.9 & 13 section 4 vv.13 & 15), following the Byzantine literary tradition.²⁷⁹ Nature and female beauty were inextricably connected to each other in Byzantine literature. However, it is not just her beauty that is mentioned. The intellectual capacities of Irene Doukaina are also put forward in this passage through a comparison to the goddess Athena (section 4 line 1&3). Women in novels, who partake in the art of rhetoric for example, are described as to take interest in male interests instead of those that are usually ascribed to women.²⁸⁰ The novels portray their female heroines as smarter and better than their male counterparts, they even receive more spoken lines than the males, who are often the narrator of the story, still they are supposed to follow the demure and virtuous characteristics of women that were present in Byzantine literature and society.²⁸¹ However, the presentation of the intellect of women follows a growing literary tradition during the twelfth century.

Anna also compares the wife of Robert, Sikelgaite, to the goddess Athena as I will discuss later in this chapter. The difference between her and Eirene, however, is that for Irene Doukaina, the comparison is focused on both the intellectual and physical aspects, while the comparison with Sikelgaita is more on the aspect of Athena as a warrior goddess. Anna grants her mother with the perfect combination of beauty and wisdom to elevate the image of her father emperor Alexios. Only a woman who is granted divine wisdom and beauty is worthy of being the wife of the emperor. It is also a way for Anna to elevate her own self-representation, since she is the daughter of this great woman. Anna also puts forward the exceptional character of her mother by using Athena. In ancient and Byzantine novels the female protagonists were often compared to ancient goddesses. The most common goddess for this comparison included Artemis, maiden goddess of the hunt.²⁸² Anna uses the literary *topos* of comparing her mother to an ancient Greek goddess but changes the topic of the comparison by also focussing on the wisdom of her mother, in contrast to the authors of the novels whose sole purpose for this comparison was to highlight the beauty of the female heroines.

The modest character of Irene Doukaina is also described by Anna Komnene in book XII chapter 3. The portrayal of Irene in this section follows the literary tradition put forward in Byzantine Literature that women should stay inside the house and have no contact with the

²⁷⁹ Reinsch, 'Women's Literature in Byzantium? The case of Anna Komnene', *Anna Komnene and Her Times*, Gouma-Peterson T. ed., New York, 2000, 91.

²⁸⁰ Jouano, 'Women in Byzantine Novels', 145.

²⁸¹ Jouano, 'Women in Byzantine Novels', 144-145.

²⁸² Theodoros Prodromos, *Rhodanthe and Dosicles*, (ed. by Marcovich), Book I, 39-41.

outside world, to preserve their honour. By portraying Eirene as the ideal woman and placing an emphasis on her modesty according to the Byzantine literary standards of the twelfth century, Anna shapes the perfect image of her mother.²⁸³

Anna combines different literary tropes in this passage to describe her mother. She is a modest woman that prefers to stay indoors and read religious works (section 2 lines 4-6). However, out of loyalty to her husband she follows him on his campaigns (section 4 lines 1-4). The idea of Irene Doukaina, preferring to stay inside is a societal idea that was often attributed to women by the Byzantine society.²⁸⁴ The practice of imperial women of the Comnenian dynasty accompanying their husbands when they are on campaigns is a theme that is often mentioned in literary texts dedicated to various women during this period.²⁸⁵ Anna not only makes use of traditional literary *topoi* of the virtuous and obedient wife, but also of a literary *topos* that is regularly found within texts addressed to women of the Comnenoi family.

In the last book, Anna imposes on Irene the role of the caring wife, making the last moments of her husband as comfortable as possible. An example of this can be found in Book

²⁸³ Anna Comnene, *Alexiad*, (ed. by Kambylis & Reinsch), Book XII chapter 3, section 2-4, 2-4.

καὶ τὴν αὐγούσαν δὲ παρεβιάσατο συνεξελθῆναι μετ' αὐτοῦ. ὁ γὰρ τρόπος ἐκείνης τοιοῦτος τίς ἦν· οὐ πάννυ τι δημοσιεύεσθαι ἤθελεν, ἀλλὰ τὰ πολλὰ μὲν οἰκουρούσα ἦν καὶ τὰ ἐκείνης ἔργα ἐποίει, λέγω δὲ βιβλίων τὲ ἀνεγίξεις τῶν μακαρίων ἀνδρῶν καὶ τὸ πρὸς ἑαυτὴν ἐπιστρέφειν καὶ εὐποιίας καὶ χάριτας εἰς ἀνθρώπους, μάλιστα δὲ εἰς ἐκείνους οὓς οἶδεν ἀπὸ τοῦ σχήματος ἀπὸ τοῦ βίου θεραπεύειν Θεὸν καὶ προσευχῇ προσανέχειν καὶ καταλήλοις ᾧδαίς. ἐπειδὴ δὲ μέλλοι δημοσιεύσειν ἑαυτὴν κατὰ τινα χρεῖαν ἀναγκαιότητα ὡς βασιλίδαν, αἰδοῦς τὲ ὑπερίπματο καὶ ἐρύθημα εὐθὺς ἐξηνθήκει ταῖς παραιαῖς. καὶ ἡ μὲν φιλόσοφος Θεανὼ τοῦ πήχεως αὐτῆς γυμνωθέντος, ἐπειδὴ τις παίζων εἰρήκει πρὸς ταύτην „καλὸς ὁ πήχυς“, „ἀλλ' οὐ δημόσιος“, εἶπεν ἐκείνη. ἡ δὲ βασιλὶς καὶ μήτηρ ἐμή, τὸ τῆς σεμνότητος ἄγαλμα, τὸ τῆς ἀγιότητος καταγώγιον, μὴ ὅτι γε πήχυν ἢ βλέμμα δημοσιεύειν ἠγάπα, ἀλλ' οὐδὲ φωνὴν ἐκείνης ἤθελεν εἰς ἀσυνήθεις παραπέμπεσθαι ἀκοάς· τοσοῦτον ἦν ἐκείνη χρήμα θαυμάσιον εἰς αἰδῶ. ἐπεὶ δὲ ἀνάγκη οὐδὲ θεοί, φησί, μάχονται, ἀναγκάζεται πρὸς τὰς συχνὰς τοῦ αὐτοκράτορος ἐκστρατεύσεις αὐτῷ παρακολουθεῖν. κατεῖχε μὲν γὰρ αὐτὴν ἡ σύμφυτος αἰδὼς ἔνδον τῶν βασιλείων, τὸ δὲ πρὸς τὸν αὐτοκράτορα φίλτρον καὶ ἡ διάπυρος πρὸς ἐκείνον ἀγάπη ἐξηγεν αὐτὴν καὶ μὴ βουλομένην τῶν ἀνακτόρων διὰ παντὰς τὰς αἰτίας·

Anna Comnene, *The Alexiad*, (transl. by Dawes), Book XII, Chapter 3, Section 2-4, 2-4.

For her disposition was of such a nature that she did not willingly appear much in public, but generally kept at home and attended to her duties, such as reading the books of the Saints and communing with herself and doing acts of kindness and charity to men, especially to those who were, as she saw from their conduct and manner of life, true servants of God, and she persevered in prayers and a succession of hymns. Whenever it behoved her to appear in public as Empress on some very necessary occasion, she was overcome with shyness and her cheeks were mantled with blushes. Similarly the philosopher Theano, when her forearm once became uncovered and somebody jokingly said, "What a beautiful forearm!" replied "Yes, but not a public one." And so the Empress, my mother, the image of dignity, the temple of holiness, did not only dislike shewing her arm or eyes to the public, but did not even like her voice to be carried to unaccustomed ears. Such a wonderful example of modesty was she! But since, as it is said, not even the gods can fight against necessity, she was obliged to accompany the Emperor on his frequent expeditions. Her natural modesty would have kept her at home in the palace, but her devotion and ardent love for the Emperor drove her out of it even against her will for various reasons, the first of which was that the illness, which had attacked his feet, necessitated very constant care.

²⁸⁴ Garland, 'The life and Ideology of Byzantine Women', 364.

²⁸⁵ See the epitaph that I have discussed in chapter two: pages 37-40.

15 Chapter 11.²⁸⁶ After the death of her husband, she is transformed into a grieving widow.²⁸⁷ She cuts her hair and changes her clothing from the imperial purple to grieving black. These are typical actions in Byzantine literature portraying the mourning of women for a family member, most notably for widows mourning the death of their husband. Empress Eirene changes her sandals from purple to black, indicating that she is no longer the reigning empress. Black has a long history of being the colour associated with death and mourning, which explains why she chose to carry black clothing from the moment of Alexios' death. The cutting of her hair close to her scalp is a sign of mourning, which can be found in different types of texts in the medieval period.²⁸⁸ During the Roman period, women were even hired to weep and pull their hair out during funerals.²⁸⁹ The image of Irene Doukaina cutting of her long hair is thus part of a long literary and societal tradition.

Taken together, the description includes all the *topoi* used for women during the twelfth-century, combined with some literary innovations by Anna Comnene. First there is the description of the young Irene being compared to the goddess Athena. Secondly, she receives the role of the virtuous wife, who preferred to stay inside and give all of her attention to her family and religious pursuits but followed the emperor out of her duty as wife. Thirdly, she

²⁸⁶ Anna Comnene, *Alexiad*, (ed. by Kambylis & Reinsch), Book XV, chapter 11, section 8, 5-12.

πολλάκις γοῦν ἐγὼ (μᾶλλον δὲ συνεχῶς) καὶ τὴν μητέρα τεθέσθαι διανυκτερεύουσάν τε τῷ βασιλεῖ καὶ κατόπιν τούτου ἐπὶ τῆς κλίνης καὶ ὑπανεχούσαν τοῦτον ταῖς χερσὶ καὶ παραμυθουμένην τρόπον τινὰ τὴν ἀναπνοήν. ἐχεῖτο μέντοι αὐτῆς τῶν ὀμμάτων τὸ δάκρυον καὶ ὑπὲρ τὰ νειλῶα ρεύματα. ὁπόσῃν τὲ τὴν περὶ αὐτὸν δι' ὅλης ἡμέρας τὲ καὶ νυκτὸς σπουδὴν ἐπεποιήτο, καὶ τὸν μόχθον ὅσον ἐνεδείκνυτο διαπονουμένη περὶ τὴν αὐτοῦ θεραπείαν, {καὶ} κλίσεις καὶ μετακλίσεις <καὶ> στρωμάτων παντοίας μηχανωμένη θέσεις, οὐκ ἔστιν ἐρεῖν

Anna Comnene, *The Alexiad*, (transl. by Dawes), Book XV, Chapter 11, Section 8, 5-12

I have often, or rather continuously, seen my mother spending a sleepless night with the Emperor, sitting behind him on the bed and supporting him in her arms and relieving his breathing somewhat. And verily the tears she shed were more abundant than the waters of the Nile. The care she bestowed on him by day and night, and the work she did while nursing him and continually changing his position, and devising all kinds of changes in the bedding, these cannot be described.

²⁸⁷ Anna Comnene, *Alexiad*, (ed. by Kambylis & Reinsch), Book XV, chapter 11, section 19-20, 16-10: ἡ δὲ συνεῖσα τοῦ πράγματος καὶ τοῖς ὅλο[ις] ἀπαγορεύσασα ἐκόκυσέ τε ἄθρόον μέγα κ[αὶ] διωλύγιον. ἀλλὰ γὰρ πῶς παραστήσω τῇ[ν] κατασχούσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην ἅπασαν συ[μφο]ρὰν ἢ πῶς τὰ ἐμμαντῆς ἀποκλαύσομαι; [τὴν] τε βασιλικὴν καλύπτραν ἀπέθετο καὶ τὰς κ[αλὰς] ἐκεῖνας ἐθείρας μαχαιρίδιόν τι λαβοῦ[σα] ἐν χρῶ διέτεμε, καὶ τὰ κοκκοβαφῇ [πέδιλα] τῶν ποδῶν ἀπορριψαμένη μέλανα [καὶ κοινὰ ὑπ]εδεῖτο τὰ προστυχόντα ἀλλάξασθαι δὲ κ[αὶ] τὴν πορφυρίδα βουλομένη μελαίνης ἐσθῆτος, προχείρως ἱμάτιον οὐχ' εὗρίσκετο. ἐξ ὧν δὲ ἡ τρίτη τῶν ἐμῶν ἀδελφῶν εἶχεν ἀμ[φί]ων καταλήλων τῷ καιρῷ καὶ τῷ πράγ[ματι] χηρείας καὶ πάλαι κακοῖς ὀμιλήσασα, [λα]βοῦσα ἡ βασιλὶς ἀμφιέννυτο καὶ τὴν ἀφ[ελῆ] καὶ ζοφώδη καλύπτραν ἐπέθετο τῇ κεφαλ[ῇ].

Anna Comnene, *The Alexiad*, (transl. by Dawes), Book XV, chapter 11, section 19-20, 16-10.

The Empress understood what that meant and in absolute despair uttered a sudden loud, far-reaching shriek. How can I possibly picture the disaster which overtook the whole world? or how deplore my own condition? The Empress took off her royal veil and caught hold of a knife and cut off all her hair close to the skin and threw off the red shoes from her feet and demanded ordinary black sandals. And when she wanted to change her purple dress for a black garment, no dress could be found at hand, But the third of my sisters had garments suitable for the time and occasion, as she had already experienced the ills of widowhood, so the Empress took them and dressed herself and put on a plain dark veil on her head

²⁸⁸ Bartlett, 'Symbolic Meanings of Hair in the Middle Ages', 53.

²⁸⁹ Alexiou M., *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition*, Oxford, 2002, 10.

became the caring wife for her husband while he is on his deathbed, and after his death became the grieving widow. Thalia Gouma-Peterson has argued that Anna Comnene wants to present her mother as better a better person than any man.²⁹⁰ She takes a certain pride in the maternal line of her family; by emphasizing the characteristics that make Irene Doukaina the epitome of a Byzantine woman Anna Comnene also enhances her own image for the reader.

5.1.3 Empress Mary of Alania

The empress Mary of Alania is allotted with one very elaborate description in the *Alexiad* (Book III chapter 2), which focuses solely on her appearance. This is so because descriptions of Mary of Alania only focus on her physical appearance and its exceptional beauty, and not her intellect.²⁹¹ It is very interesting that for a woman like Mary of Alania, who was also a known patron of the literary arts, the focus was solely on her beauty and not on her intellect, coming in contrast with the description of other women at the court.²⁹²

The beginning of this description is reminiscent of the novels during the twelfth century. The female protagonists were often described with elements of nature, bringing forth a connection between their beauty and the garden. Indeed, the physical portrayal of the female

²⁹⁰ Gouma-Peterson, 'Passages to the Maternal', 110.

²⁹¹ Kalavrezou I., 'Female Popular Beliefs and Maria of Alania', *TUBA/JTS*, Vol. 36, 2011, 87.

²⁹² Anna Comnene, *Alexiad*, (ed. by Kambylis & Reinsch), Book III, Chapter 2, section 4, 2-17.

καὶ γὰρ ἦν εὐμήκης μὲν τὴν ἡλικίαν καθαπερὶ κυπάριτος, λευκὴ δὲ τὸ σῶμα ὥσει χιών, πρόσωπον κύκλον μὲν οὐκ ἀπαρτίζον, τὸ δὲ χρῶμα δι' ὅλου ἄνθος ἡρινὸν ἢ ρόδον ἀντικρυς· τὰς δὲ τῶν ὀμμάτων αὐγὰς τίς ἀνθρώπων ἐξεῖποι; ὀφρῦς ὑπερανέστηκυῖα καὶ πυρσὴ, βλέμμα χαροπόν. ζωγράφου μὲν οὖν χεὶρ τὰ τῶν ἀνθέων πολλάκις ἐμιμήσατο χρώματα, ὅποσα ὦραι φέρειν εἰώθασι, τὸ δὲ τῆς βασιλίδος κάλλος καὶ ἡ ἐπιλάμπουσα αὐτῇ χάρις καὶ τὸ τῶν ἡθῶν ἐπαγωγόν τε καὶ εὐχαρί ὑπὲρ λόγον καὶ τέχνην ἐφαίνετο· οὐκ Ἀπελλῆς, οὐ Φειδίας οὐδὲ τις τῶν ἀγαλματοποιῶν τοιοῦτόν ποτε παρήγαγεν ἄγαλμα. καὶ ἡ μὲν τῆς Γοργοῦς κεφαλὴ λίθους ἐξ ἀνθρώπων τοὺς ὀρῶντας ἐποίησε, ὡς λέγεται, τὴν δὲ ἰδὼν ἂν τις βαδίζουσιν ἢ αἴφνης ὑπαντίσας ἐκεχίνηι τε καὶ ἐπὶ ταυτοῦ σχήματος, ἐφ' ᾧ ἔτυχεν ὦν, ἵστατο ἐννεός, ὡς ἀφηρησθαι τῆς καὶ ψυχῆς καὶ διάνοιαν. ἀναλογίαν γὰρ τοιαύτην μελῶν καὶ μερῶν, τοῦ ὅλου πρὸς τὰ μέρη καὶ τούτων πρὸς τὸ ὅλον, οὐδεὶς οὐδέπω τοιαύτην ἐν ἀνθρώπου σώματι ἐθεάσατο· ἄγαλμα ἔμψυχον καὶ ἀνθρώποις φιλοκάλοις ἐράσμιον. ἡμερὸς γὰρ ἀντικρυς ἦν σωματοθεῖς οἷον εἰς τόνδε τὸν περίγειον κόσμον

Anna Comnene, *The Alexiad*, (transl. by Dawes), Book III, Chapter 2, Section 4, 2-17.

And certainly she was as slender of stature as a cypress, her skin was white as snow, and though her face was not a perfect round, yet her complexion was exactly like a spring flower or a rose. And what mortal could describe the radiance of her eyes? Her eyebrows were well-marked and red-gold, while her eyes were blue. Full many a painter's hand has successfully imitated the colours of the various flowers the seasons bring, but this queen's beauty, the radiance of her grace and the charm and sweetness of her manners surpassed all description and all art. Never did Apelles or Pheidias or any of the sculptors produce a statue so beautiful. The Gorgon's head was said to turn those who looked upon it into stone, but anyone who saw the Queen walking or met her unexpectedly, would have gaped and remained rooted to the spot, speechless, as if apparently robbed of his mind and wits. There was such harmony of limbs and features, such perfect relation of the whole to the parts and of the parts to the whole, as was never before seen in a mortal body, she was a living statue, a joy to all true lovers of the beautiful. In a word, she was an incarnation of Love come down to this terrestrial globe.

protagonist was frequently preceded or followed by an extensive description of a garden.²⁹³ Anna Comnene follows the tradition of Byzantine authors in this depiction of Mary of Alania. Since she is solely focusing on the beauty of the previous empress, she uses every literary *topos* that was available to her to present Mary as the most beautiful person possible. Many of the characteristics used by Anna Comnene can be found in the novels of the twelfth century, including the comparison to the cypress tree (καὶ γὰρ ἦν εὐμήκης μὲν τὴν ἡλικίαν καθαπερεὶ κυπάριττος v.4), the description of the whiteness of skin to that of snow (λευκὴ δὲ τὸ σῶμα ὥσεὶ χιών v.5) and the complexion of the cheeks to that of a rose. (τὸ δὲ χρῶμα δι' ὅλου ἄνθος ἡρινὸν ἢ ρόδον ἄντικρυς v.6). Prodromos used the image of a snow-white skin for his female heroine Rhodanthe: μίμημα λευκῆς χιόνος τὸ σαρκίον.²⁹⁴ Nicetas Eugenianus uses the image of the rose and the cypress to describe his female heroine Drosilla: χεῖλη, παρειὰς ἐξέρυθρος ὡς ρόδον.²⁹⁵ ἦβης τὸ μέτρον ὡς κυπάριττος νέα.²⁹⁶ Mary of Alania is portrayed as the beautiful main heroine of the novels of the twelfth century by Anna Comnene. This is probably in accordance with the literary tradition of Mary of Alania by other contemporary authors of the twelfth-century, who also solely focused on her beauty. However, Anna Comnene goes a step further by comparing the beauty of Mary to the main characters of the twelfth century-novels, the which were seen as paradigms of grace and beauty.

However, the second part of the portrayal of Mary of Alania shifts focus to more mythological elements. Anna compares Mary of Alania to the mythological Gorgon, who could turn men to stone by just one look. Like the Gorgon, Mary of Alania is able to stop men in their path, as if they are turned to stone because of her beauty. (καὶ ἡ μὲν τῆς Γοργοῦς κεφαλὴ λίθους ἐξ ἀνθρώπων τοὺς ὁρῶντας ἐποίει, ὡς λέγεται, τὴν δὲ ἰδὼν ἄν τις βαδίζουσιν ἢ αἰφνης ὑπαντιάσας ἐκεχίνηει τὲ καὶ ἐπὶ ταύτῳ σχήματος, ἐφ' ᾧ ἔτυχεν ὢν, ἴστατο ἐννεός, ὡς ἀφηρησθαι τῆνικαῦτα δοκεῖν καὶ ψυχὴν καὶ διάνοιαν. lines.10-14) This is connected to the literary *topos* of comparing women to divine creatures of the ancient times, which is also a very frequent phenomenon in the novels of the twelfth century. For example, Prodromos compares

²⁹³ Barber, 'Reading the Garden in Byzantium', 15.

²⁹⁴ Theodoros Prodromos, *Rhodanthe and Dosicles*, (ed. by Marcovich), Book I, 42.

Theodoros Prodromos, 'Rhodanthe and Dosicles', *Four Byzantine Novels*, Jeffreys E. ed. & transl., Liverpool, 2012, Book I, 42

Her flesh mimicked white snow.

²⁹⁵ Nicetas Eugenianus, *Drosillae and Charicles*, (ed. by Conca), Book I, 124.

Nicetas Eugenianus, 'Drosilla and Charicles', Jeffreys E. ed. & transl. Liverpool, 2012, Book I, 124

Her lips and cheeks as crimson as a rose.

²⁹⁶ Nicetas Eugenianus, *Drosillae and Charicles*, (ed. by Conca), Book I, 142.

Nicetas Eugenianus, *Drosilla and Charicles*, (transl. by Jeffreys), Book I, 142.

In her youthful vigour she was tall as a young cypress.

his Rhodanthe to Artemis: Ἦν οὖν τὸ κάλλος τῆς κόρης χρῆμα ξένον, ἄγαλμα σεπτόν, εἰκόνας θείας τύπος, εἰς εἶδος Ἀρτέμιδος ἀπεξεσμένον.²⁹⁷ But it can also be found in other literary genres. Anna Comnene, for example, compares Irene Doukaina and Sikelgaita to the goddess Athene in the *Alexiad*. However, while normally the authors would use references to the ancient goddesses, Anna uses a monstrous creature. Buckley states that the foreign background of Mary of Alania was never forgotten by Byzantine society.²⁹⁸ Anna emphasizes the idea of Mary of Alania as an outsider by using the image of the gorgon as a comparison with her beauty.

While Anna Comnene includes references to the political thinking of Mary of Alania, it should be seen as a medium to enhance the position of her son at the imperial court. In other parts of her historical account, she places an emphasis on the beauty of the old empress. Interestingly enough, the beauty of Mary of Alania is also the main characteristic highlighted by other contemporary historians.

5.1.4 Sikelgaita wife of Robert de Guiscard

Sikelgaita is the only woman not related to Anna Comnene (be it through blood or adoption) that receives a detailed description in the *Alexiad*, though not as extensive as the ones for Anna Dalassene or Irene Doukaina. The fact that Anna Comnene even takes the time to give such attention to the Norman woman indicates a feeling of respect from Anna towards Sikelgaita. She is mentioned for the first time in Book I (chapter 12). According to Anna's text, Sikelgaita belongs to Robert's advisors. She even tried to persuade him not to attack a fellow Christian empire like Byzantium.²⁹⁹ Sikelgaita assumes an advising role for her husband, just like Anna Dalassene and Irene Doukaina, who served as advisors for Alexios I Comnenos. There is a difference however: whereas Alexios I followed the advice of the women around him, Robert de Guiscard did not. The advice of women for men was originally considered to be a negative trait in Byzantine sources. The perfect woman would remain silent and would not take on a

²⁹⁷ Theodoros Prodromos, *Rhodanthe and Dosicles*, (ed. by Marcovich), Book I, 39-41.

Theodoros Prodromos, *Rhodanthe and Dosicles*, (transl. by Jeffreys), Book I, 39-41

The girl's beauty was something extraordinary, an august figure, a replica of a divine image, wrought in the form of Artemis.

²⁹⁸ Buckley P., *The Alexiad of Anna Komnene: Artistic Strategy in the Making of a Myth*, Cambridge, 2014, 92.

²⁹⁹ Anna Comnene, *Alexiad*, (ed. by Kambylis & Reinsch), Book I, Chapter 12, Section 8-9, 6-2.

αὐτός μὲν, ὡς φασιν, ὁ Ῥομπέρτος ῥαδιουργότατος ὢν καὶ τὴν κατὰ Ῥωμαίων ὠδίνων μάχην καὶ πρὸ πολλοῦ πρὸς τὸν πόλεμον παρασκευαζόμενος ἐκωλύετο μὲν ὡς ἀσίκων πολέμον ἄρων καὶ κατὰ Χριστιανῶν εὐτρεπιζόμενος παρὰ τινῶν τῶν περὶ αὐτὸν ἐνδοξοτάτων ἀνδρῶν καὶ αὐτῆς τῆς γυναικὸς αὐτοῦ Γαίτης

Anna Comnene, *The Alexiad*, (transl. by Dawes), Book I, chapter 12, Section 8, 6.

(he)was kept in check by the nobles of highest rank in his suite, and also by his own wife, Gaïta

political role. For example, Procopius describes in his *Secret History* how Theodora's advice to her husband Emperor Justinian to end the rebellion results in bloodshed.³⁰⁰ However, Anna Comnene's description runs counter to this tradition. One could speculate that this is a result of the growing representation of the intellectual capacities of women in literature in the twelfth century. Due to their intellectual dexterity, they could also act as advisors to the men in their families. It could also be argued that it reflects another new Byzantine trend: namely women started leaving behind their female characteristics and assumed male characteristics. This phenomenon is known from the hagiographical tradition, where women were praised for overcoming their female characteristics and taking on characteristics, which were typically ascribed to men.³⁰¹

By going against the advice of his wife, Robert de Guiscard brought ruin to himself and his family. By contrast, Alexios takes advice from his mother and from his wife. By drawing up this contrast, Anna Comnene wants to demonstrate the difference between her father Alexios and his opponent Robert de Guiscard. It is, ultimately, a way to accentuate the positive description of her father. The description of Sikelgaita as an advisor to her husband follows the image that Anna wants to give of all women. The *Alexiad* is one big argument from Anna that women are competent rulers and should not be delegated to the fringes of society or rulership.³⁰²

The second time Sikelgaita is mentioned by Anna Comnene in the *Alexiad* is when her husband Robert de Guiscard prepares for battle. Anna gives a description of how Sikelgaita appears in her armour.³⁰³ What is very striking here is Anna's use of the word φοβερόν for Sikelgaita, meaning "fear inducing". Anna Comnene turns Sikelgaita into a barbarian. By describing her as a barbarian, Anna shows her own horror of the actions of Sikelgaita. This comes in contrast with the next paragraph. More specifically in the *Alexiad* book IV chapter 6, Sikelaita persuades the Norman soldiers to fight against the Byzantine soldiers instead of running away.³⁰⁴

³⁰⁰ Neville, *Anna Komnene: the Life and Work of a Medieval Historian*, 62.

³⁰¹ Vogt K., "The Woman Monk", *A Theme in Byzantine Hagiography*, Athens, 1995, 148.

³⁰² Hill B., 'Actions Speak Louder Than Words: Anna Komnene's Attempted Usurpation', *Anna Komnene and Her Times*, Gouma-Peterson T. ed., New York, 2000, 45.

³⁰³ Anna Comnene, *Alexiad*, (ed. by Kambylis & Reinsch), Book I, Chapter 15, Section 1, 1-4.

Ἀπάρας γὰρ ἐκεῖθεν γίνεται κατὰ τὸν Ὑδροῦντα, εἰς ἐκεῖθι διακατερήσας ὀλίγας ἡμέρας καὶ τὴν γυναῖκα Γαῖταν ἀπεκδεχόμενος (καὶ γὰρ καὶ αὕτη ξυνεστράτευε τῷ ἀνδρὶ καὶ χρῆμα ἦν ἡ γυνὴ φοβερόν, ἐπειδὴν ἐξοπλίσαιτο)

Anna Comnene, *The Alexiad*, (transl. by Dawes), Book I, Chapter 15, Section 1, 1-4.

Leaving Salernum, he came to Hydruntum, and there spent a few days waiting for his wife, Gaita (for she too accompanied her husband, and when dressed in full armour the woman was a fearsome sight).

³⁰⁴ Anna Comnene, *Alexiad*, (ed. by Kambylis & Reinsch), Book IV, Chapter 6, Section 5, 1-9.

In this paragraph the admiration of Anna Comnene for the woman comes more to the forefront. She compares Sikelgaita to the Greek goddess Athena, a comparison which she also uses for her own mother the empress Eirene Doukaina. Athena was often used in Byzantine literature as a comparison for women to put emphasis on their intellect or used as a positive image for warlike women. Anna Comnene not only expresses her admiration for the warrior duchess of the Normans in this passage, she also feminises the Norman army.³⁰⁵ By feminising the Norman army, Anna Comnene indirectly states that the Byzantine army is superior. A woman, had to persuade the men to be brave and fight the other army. In this paragraph, Anna Comnene compares Sikelgaita to an ancient Greek female war goddess, confirming Sikelgaita's femineity to the reader and defeminising the Norman army. In the eyes of the Byzantine readers, nothing could be more emasculating than an army persuaded by a woman to fight.³⁰⁶

5.2 Depictions of the women

The portrayals of these women in the *Alexiad* are very different to each other; Anna Dalassene is praised for her intellect; Irene Doukaina for her beauty, modest behaviour and wisdom; Maria of Alania for her beauty; and Sikelgaita for her warlike behaviour. A second thing that is noticeable in these depictions is that there is only one woman (namely, Irene Doukaina) whose description completely conforms to other twelfth-century descriptions of women. She encompasses all ideals imposed on women by the Byzantine society. This was connected to the ideal roles of women in Christian society; virgin, mother/wife and widow.³⁰⁷ The ideal image of Byzantine women was in sharp contrast to the real place of women in Byzantine society, especially during the twelfth century, who were allowed to leave their house and walk the streets without any societal repercussions.³⁰⁸ Three out of the four women in the *Alexiad*, do not

ἡ δὲ γε Γαῖτα, ὡς λόγος τίς φησίν, ἢ τοῦ Ῥομπέρτου σύνευνος αὐτῷ συστρατευομένη Παλλὰς ἄλλη κἂν μὴ Ἀθήνη, θεασαμένη τοὺς φεύγοντας δριμύν τούτοις ἐνατενίσασα κατ' αὐτῶν μεγίστην ἀφείσα φωνὴν μονοῦ τοῦ ὁμηρικῶν ἐκεῖνο ἔπος τῇ ἰδίᾳ διαλέκτῳ λέγειν ἐώκει· „μέχρι πόσου φεύξεσθε; στήτε, ἄνδρες ἐστέ“. ὡς δὲ ἔτι φεύγοντας τούτους ἐώρα, δόρυ μακρὸν ἐναγκαλισαμένη ὅλους ῥυτῆρας ἐνδοῦσα κατὰ τῶν φευγόντων ἵεται· τοῦτο θεασάμενοι καὶ ἑαυτῶν γεγονότες αὐτῆς πρὸς μάχην ἑαυτοὺς ἀνεκαλέσαντο

Anna Comnene, *The Alexiad*, (transl. by Dawes), Book IV, Chapter 6, Section 5, 1-9.

And now, as rumour relates, directly Gaïta, Robert's wife (who was riding at his side and was a second Pallas, if not an Athene) saw these soldiers running away, she looked after them fiercely and in a very powerful voice called out to them in her own language an equivalent to Homer's words, " How far will ye flee ? Stand, and quit you like men! " And when she saw they continued to run, she grasped a long spear and at full gallop rushed after the fugitives; and on seeing this they recovered themselves and returned to the fight.

³⁰⁵ Skinner, 'Halt! Be Men!', 623.

³⁰⁶ Neville, *Anna Komnene: the Life and Work of a Medieval Historian*, 64.

³⁰⁷ James L. & Hill B., *Women and Politics in the Byzantine Empire: Imperial Women*, Oxford, 1998, 158.

³⁰⁸ Laiou A., 'The Role of Women in Byzantine Society', *Women in the Medieval World*, Beattie C. ed., London, 2017, 91.

portray the ideal female role model of Byzantine society. They are often in the centre of political intrigue and play a role in the military and political escapades of their male relatives.

As a woman in a world dominated by men, Anna Comnene had to find ways to positively portray the women in her family, without making them voiceless. Women in literature didn't have any agency, while women who took on a more active role in politics or society were portrayed in a negative way by the male Byzantine authors.³⁰⁹ The only time a woman was allowed to articulate her voice in a literary work was when she was represented as the grieving widow. Anna takes advantage of this characteristic throughout the *Alexiad* for her own agenda. The only times when she takes the word is when she is overcome by grief.³¹⁰

Anna Comnene's portrayal of women is a combination between innovation and tradition. She makes use of literary *topoi* from different genres that were typical for the twelfth century to describe the women in her *Alexiad*, but the overall portrayal of the women is different from normal Byzantine literature. Women have agency in the *Alexiad*, they are not just beautiful ornaments standing next to their husbands or other male relatives, they participate in political and military actions. The involvement of these women in politics does not result in negative consequences for the emperor, but helps him rule the Byzantine empire and defeat his enemies. Alexios' reign becomes stronger through the women that surround him, mainly his mother Anna Dalassene and his wife Irene Doukaina. Anna strives to show that women are not incompetent and can manoeuvre in the political area of ruling. What is more, she presents her grandmother and mother as more skillful than men when it comes to issues of ruling.³¹¹

Intellectual capacities are the most important characteristic for women in the *Alexiad*. The wisdom of the women is emphasized more often than their beauty. Anna portrays her mother as the goddess Athena to focus on her beauty as well as her intellectual capabilities. Mary of Alania is mainly described as being beautiful, but when we read other passages on Mary, we notice that her political thinking in her attempt to protect her son's heritage also plays an important role.

I would also like to put forward the idea that Anna Comnene used her father in the *Alexiad* to elevate the women around him. Alexios is the main character of the work, but his close ties to the female characters, be they members of his family or the wife of an enemy, gives

³⁰⁹ Neville, *Anna Komnene: the Life and Work of a Medieval Historian*, 17.

³¹⁰ Reinsch, 'Women's Literature in Byzantium? The case of Anna Komnene', 84.

³¹¹ Gouma-Peterson, 'Passages to the Maternal', 110.

Anna the opportunity to go into details about these women. The characters of these women, especially those of Sikelgaita would have been negatively portrayed in other Byzantine literary works. On the other hand, Anna sheds a positive light on these characteristics. She cannot portray the women surrounding Alexios in a bad way. This would harm the ultimate goal of the *Alexiad*, which is to portray the reign of her father Alexios in a positive way, (in contrast with the reigns of her brother and nephew).

There are also traditional literary elements in the *Alexiad* concerning the portrayal of women. The beauty of Irene Doukaina and Mary of Alania follows the traditional norms of the Byzantine novels. Anna uses elements of nature to describe these women and their bodies; their lips and cheeks are as red as roses, their skin as white as snow and their body as lithe as trees. Another way to depict their beauty is the comparison to mythological figures; Irene is as beautiful as the goddess Athena, Mary of Alania turns people to stone with her gaze, just like the gorgon Medusa, and Sikelgaita leads her army like Athena.

5.3 Comparison between men and women

The *ekphraseis* of the physical description of men and women in the twelfth century displays similarities and differences. The *Alexiad* allows to take a look at how an author describes the physical appearance of both genders. One of the best passages to use for this comparison are the descriptions given of both emperor Alexios and his wife Irene Doukaina in book III of the *Alexiad*. The description of the empress Irene has already been discussed earlier in this chapter so I will not give the Greek text again. However, I will refer to the lines that I wish to discuss. Anna describes her father, the emperor Alexios, in the following way in book III chapter 3³¹²

³¹² Anna Comnene, *Alexiad*, (ed. by Kambylis & Reinsch), Book III, Chapter 3, Section 2, 2-19.

ὁ μὲν γὰρ Ἀλέξιος οὐ πᾶν μὲν ἀπὸ τῆς γῆς ἐπῆρτο ἐπὶ πολὺ, εἰς εὖρος δὲ συμμέτρως πως ἡϋρύνετο· καὶ ιστάμενος μὲν οὐ τοσοῦτον θάμβος ἐδίδου τοῖς θεωμένοις, εἰ δ' ἐπὶ τοῦ βασιλείου καθίσαιεν οὗτος θρόνου καὶ γοργωπὸν σέλας ἀφήσει τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν, πρηστήρ ἐδόκει καὶ ἄμαχον αὐγὴν ἀποστέλλειν καὶ τοῦ προσώπου καὶ τῆς ὅλης διοργανώσεως. μέλαινα μὲν γὰρ ἡ ὀφρὺς ἐκατέρωθεν ἐκυρτοῦτο, τῇ δὲ ὀφθαλμὸς ὑπεκάθητο βλοσυρὸν ἅμα καὶ ἡμερον ἐνορῶν, ὥς ἀπὸ τε τῆς βολῆς τῶν ὀμμάτων καὶ τῆς στιλπνότητος τοῦ μετώπου καὶ τῶν παρειῶν τῆς σεμνότητος καὶ τοῦ ἐπιτρέχοντος αὐταῖς ἐρεύθους ὁμοῦ καὶ δεδοικέναι τὸ καὶ θαρρεῖν· τῶν τε ὤμων ἡ εὐρύτης καὶ τῶν βραχιόνων τὸ στερρὸν καὶ τῶν στέρνων ἡ προβολὴ ἡρωικὰ πάντα καὶ ὅλως εἰς θάμβος καὶ τέρψιν τοὺς πολλοὺς ἐκκαλούμενα· τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ τοῦ ἀνδρὸς καὶ ὥραν εἶχε καὶ χάριν καὶ βάρος καὶ ὄγκον ἀπρόσιτον. εἰ δὲ καὶ εἰς ὁμιλίαν ἦλθεν ἐκεῖνος καὶ τὴν γλῶτταν ἐκίνησεν, εἶδες ἂν αὐτόχρομα τὴν πυρίπνου ἐπικαθημένην τοῖς χεῖλεσιν ἐκείνου ῥητορικῇ· τῷ γὰρ κατακλυσμῷ τῶν ἐπιχειρημάτων πᾶσαν καὶ ἀκοὴν καὶ ψυχὴν κατεσύρετο καὶ ἀμύθητος ἦν καὶ ἄμαχος καὶ τὴν γλῶτταν ὁμοῦ καὶ τὴν χεῖρα, τὴν μὲν πρὸς δόρατος ἀφῆσιν, τὴν δὲ πρὸς ἀκήρατα θέλητρα.

Anna Comnene, *The Alexiade*, (Transl. by Dawes), Book III, Chapter 3, Section 2, 2-19.

Alexius indeed was not especially tall but rather broad, and yet his breadth was well proportioned to his height. When standing he did not strike the onlookers with such admiration, but if when sitting on the imperial throne, he

What is different between the description of Alexios and Irene Doukaina is that Anna focusses on the feelings of Alexios' presence would bring forth rather than his actual physical looks. He is a well-proportioned man with a physical symmetry. She goes on by describing his gaze and presence. Alexios has a radiant countenance and a brilliant gaze (vv.4-6). When describing Alexios, Anna uses a vocabulary that inspires awe for Alexios' person: θάμβος (object of wonder, v.3), γοργωπὸν (fierce-eyed, v.4). She makes reference to one element of nature in the description of her father πρηστήρ (whirlwind v.5). Those are the words that are being used to describe Alexios Comnenos' presence. The overall picture that appears in one's mind is that of a majestic, almost godlike, emperor. The characteristics ascribed to Alexios by Anna are typical for the literary tradition and for the Byzantine beauty standards of the twelfth century.³¹³ Reading the description of Alexios is reminiscent of the appearance of the main heroes in the Comnenian novels or other long narrative works. A description that is reminiscent of that of Alexios can be found in the *Digenis Akritis*.³¹⁴

The overall theme of these descriptions is to give the male protagonist, or in the case of the *Alexiad*, the emperor, a heroic or even godly appearance. They are in a separate class, they are closer to the divine than to humankind. The physical beauty of the emperor is not as important for his description as it is for the empress. The *topoi* used focus more on the feeling that one gets by being in close proximity to the emperor.

Anna Comnene does not deviate from literary and social conventions when describing the male body. The same can be said for the description provided for her mother. As noted above, Anna makes use of a nature based *topoi* to describe her mother, comparing her to an

shot forth the fierce splendour of his eyes, he seemed to be a blaze of lightning, such irresistible radiance shone from his face, nay from his whole person. He had black arched eyebrows, from beneath which his eyes darted a glance at once terrible and tender, so that from the gleam of his eyes, the radiance of his face, the dignified curve of his cheeks and the ruddy colour that suffused them, both awe and confidence were awakened. His broad shoulders, muscular arms, mighty chest, in fact his generally heroic appearance, evoked in the multitude the greatest admiration and pleasure. From his whole person emanated beauty and grace and dignity, and an unapproachable majesty. And if he entered into conversation and let loose his tongue, you would have realized from his first words that fiery eloquence dwelt on his lips. For with a flood of argument he would carry the opinions of his hearers with him, for truly he could not be surpassed in discussion or action, being as ready with his tongue as with his hand, the one for hurling the spear, the other for casting fresh spells.

³¹³ Hatzaki, *Beauty and the Male Body in Byzantium*, 9.

³¹⁴ *Digenis Akritis, The Grottaferrata and Escorial Versions*, Jeffreys E. ed. & transl., Oxford, 1998, 1176-1179.

Εἶχε γὰρ ὁ νεώτερος πανθαύμαστος ἐκεῖνος
κόμην ξανθὴν, ὑπόγουρον καὶ ὀμματα μεγάλα,
πρόσωπον ἄσπρον, ῥοδινόν, κατάμαυρα ὀφρύδια,
στῆθος ὡς κρύσταλλον κρυοῦ ὀργυιᾶν ἔχον μήκος.

Indeed the young man had a comely stature, and fair hair, curling a little, and large eyes, a white and rosy face, a brow all black.

“ever-blooming plant” (Section 3 v.13) and having a face that “shone with the soft glamour of the moon”(Section 3 vv.9-10). As I have said, the female beauty and nature were closely related to each other in Byzantine literature, especially in the novels of the twelfth century, where authors used terminology associated with plants and nature. Another typical medium for the description of female beauty in Byzantine literature of the twelfth century is the comparison to divine characters.

By comparing these two descriptions of both Alexios and Irene there are clear similarities. Both parents are described as beautiful via the *topoi* that were ascribed to respectively men and women in Byzantine literature. By describing the beauty of her parents Anna enhances the image of both her parents for the reader. Because the literary *topoi* used by Anna are ascribed by gender, there are differences found in the physical descriptions of Alexios and Irene. A first observation is that in the description of Alexios, there are almost no references to nature, the only element that has a connection to nature is the passage: “He reminded one of a fiery whirlwind”. The rest of the text uses terminology connected to that of the heroes of antiquity, like Heracles, or the Homeric heroes, like Achilles. In comparison to this, the description of Irene Doukaina is full of references to nature emphasising the connection between the beauty of women and nature. A second difference between the two descriptions is that Anna focussed more on the presence of Alexios and how other perceive him, while for Irene Doukaina her physical attributes were mostly put forward.

The differences between the descriptions is thus not because of Anna herself as the author, but is a direct result of the Byzantine literary traditions, which Anna follows, and their ideals attributed to male beauty (eg. being closer to the divine and mythological figures of old) and female beauty (eg. being intertwined with the beauty of nature and its elements).

5.3 A letter from a Mother to her Child

5.3.1 The Manuscript and Previous Research

The letter which I have transcribed can be found in the manuscript Parisinus Graecus 400. According to Lauxtermann the manuscript was made between 1335 and 1336.³¹⁵ The evidence he presents for this is the confession of Bishop Leo of Famagusta as *terminus post quem*, which dates from 1320 and a note on an earthquake, reported to have taken place between the years

³¹⁵ Lauxtermann M., ‘Parisinus Graecus 400. Poetry and Paraenesis in Cyprus’, *REB*, Vol. 79, 2021, 151.

1343-1344 as *terminus ante quem*. A column for the lunar epacts on folio 157 place the document within the years of 1335 and 1336.³¹⁶

The manuscript most probably comes from Cyprus, there are multiple reasons for attributing this island as the place of origin for the manuscript according to Reinsch and Lauxtermann. In the manuscript Reinsch found letters that can also be found in another Cypriot manuscript, namely Vat.pal.gr.367.³¹⁷ Next to the similarities in content found by Reinsch between the two manuscripts, Lauxtermann presents numerous other reasons as evidence for Cyprus as the place of origin for the manuscript. The first piece of evidence is the presence of two Cypriot saints on the liturgical calender on folia 60-84.³¹⁸ The second and third reasons given by Lauxtermann for Cyprus as the place of origin are connected. There are a lot of references throughout the manuscript to free slaves. One of the homilies which urges people to free their fellow Christians makes a reference to “our island”, meaning Cyprus. The large amount of references to this topic can be attributed to the efforts of George Lapithes and king Hugh IV of Cyprus, both of whom made an effort to free slaves brought to Cyprus.³¹⁹ A last argument presented by Lauxtermann is that the manuscript was originally bought on Cyprus by Balthazar Sauvan and then send over to Jean-Baptiste Colbert from Cyprus to France.³²⁰

The manuscript transmits a collection of different types of texts. It contains epigrams and poems of Theodoros Prodromos, homilies from Gregorios of Nazianzenus and Nikolaus Mysticus, *De Sancta Trinitate* from Johannes of Damascus, verses of Manuel Holobolus, two hagiographical texts and the prologue of the *Alexiad*. Not much research has been done on the manuscript. The first person to focus his attention on this manuscript was Reinsch, in his presentation at a conference in Thessalonike in 1994 and later on in his article *Einige Beobachtungen zur Zypriotischen Handschrift Parisinus Graecus 400*.³²¹ Another important article regarding research on the manuscript is that by Lauxtermann, *Parisinus Graecus 400. Poetry and Paraenesis in Cyprus*. I will be focusing on a letter which can be found on folia 171-173.

³¹⁶ Lauxtermann, ‘Parisinus Graecus 400’, 150-151.

³¹⁷ Reinsch D.R., Μερικές παρατηρήσεις, unpublished tekst from a conference in 1994, 10-11.

³¹⁸ Lauxtermann, ‘Parisinus Graecus 400’, 151.

³¹⁹ Lauxtermann, ‘Parisinus Graecus 400’, 151-152.

³²⁰ Lauxtermann, ‘Parisinus Graecus 400’, 152.

³²¹ Reinsch D.R., ‘Einige Beobachtungen zur Zypriotischen Handschrift Parisinus Graecus 400’, *Le livre manuscrit Grec: écritures, matériaux, histoire*, Cronier M. & Mondrain B. eds. Paris, 2020, 197-208.

5.3.2 Context and Content

The folia 171-173 contain the correspondence between a mother and her son. The family consists of the following family members: the mother, named Eirene who lives in a monastery, her son, who lives further away from Constantinople, her daughter and a grandmother, both of whom live closeby Constantinople.³²² References in the letter itself, namely the following sentence; ἡ ἁγία ἡμῶν κυρία καὶ πανευγενεστάτη καὶ περιπόθητη ἀδελφή, μᾶλλον δὲ μήτηρ τοῦ κραταιοῦ καὶ ἁγίου ἡμῶν αὐθέντου καὶ βασιλέως³²³, give an indication as to when the letter was written. The titles used in this sentence were typically used for the emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos and his family³²⁴, which dates the letter between 1261 and 1282. The name of the son has been removed from the letter. It is possible to assume that the mother Eirene, through the hints in the response letter of the son, was a member of a monastery in Constantinople founded by the sister of Michael Palaiologos.³²⁵

The mother, Eirene, writes an angry letter to her son, urging him to come home and visit his family in Constantinople. The woman uses rhetorical *topoi* in her letter linked to theological themes. The response by her son even makes a reference to the rhetorical skills of the woman.³²⁶ From this information it is possible to assume that the author of the letter came from a wealthy background and had at the very least enjoyed an elaborate education regarding rhetorics and epistolography. Letters were often seen as a form of art with the authors making use of various literary and rhetorical *topoi*.³²⁷ The fact that the woman makes use of religious themes in her letter can be attributed to the fact that women in Byzantine society were interested in theological works. As shown in the *Alexiad*, empress Irene Doukaina read many theological texts. The use of these religious themes in the letter to add gravity to the rhetorical skills of the woman can be seen as traditional for women in Byzantine society.

The theme of the letter is connected to a family matter. It appears that the son of the author has been gone from Constantinople for such a long time the exact duration is not

³²² Reinsch, 'Einige Beobachtungen', 199.

³²³ Folio 172r.

Translation by Marieke Verbiest

then our holy lady and most gracious and coveted sister, but rather the mother of our mighty and holy ruler and emperor.

³²⁴ Reinsch, 'Einige Beobachtungen', 199.

³²⁵ Janin R., *La géographie ecclésiastique de l'Empire byzantin. I, Le siège de Constantinople et le patriarcat œcuménique, t. III, Les églises et les monastères*, Paris, 1969, 324-326.

Reinsch, 'Einige Beobachtungen', 200.

³²⁶ Reinsch, 'Einige Beobachtungen', 199.

³²⁷ Mullett, 'The Classical Tradition in the Byzantine Letter', 76.

mentioned in the letter that the mother thought it was prudent to write her son about his absence. The themes used in this letter refer mostly to the familial connection between the author and the addressee, as mother and son. It is possible to see the annoyance the woman feels for her son's prolonged absence. She even makes use of dramatic images to urge her son to come home: Εἰ γὰρ τοσαῦτα γράψασαν πρὸς τὸ τὰ ἐνταῦθα καταλαβεῖν κατὰ τὸν νῦν καιρὸν ὅτε δὴ καὶ ἡμᾶς ἀκμὴν εἶχες εὐρεῖν μετὰ τῶν ζώντων.³²⁸ It appears that the content of the letter is a rather mundane topic, it is a mother chastising her son on his lack of visits.

As Lauxtermann pointed out in his article, many of the other letters in the manuscript are included to serve as draft examples for future authors of letters.³²⁹ All of the names of people and places that might give specific information on the letters have been replaced with ὁ δεῖνα. The name of the addressee in the letter that was transcribed has also been removed. Because of this, the letter was also meant to be an example letter for women on how to write a letter to their sons. This idea is not that strange in Byzantine epistolary tradition since there existed handbooks on how to formulate letters in Byzantine society.³³⁰

5.3.3 Transcription of the Letter

f. 171v Μήτηρ πρὸς παῖδα.

Ὁ μὲν πρὸς σὲ ἡμῶν πόθος ὁ φυσικὸς καὶ τὰ μητρικὰ σπλάγχνα τὰ ἀδιάρρηκτα, καὶ ἡ λουπὴ τῆς φύσεως τυραννίς, υἱὲ ἡμῶν φίλτατε καὶ τῶν ἡμετέρων καρδιῶν καύσων, κύριε οὐδ', ἀλλήλοις ἐν ταῦτα ὑλέπειν. Καὶ ἐπαγαλλε Θεός: ἐπέιδε ἡ ἀπὸ ἐπεὶ καὶ υἱε καὶ οὐ βραχὺ τὸδε οἱ στη μα ὡς γράφεις ἡμῶν: δε ἐπεὶ καὶ υἱε καὶ οὐ βραχὺ τὸδε οἱ στη μα ὡς γράφεις ἡμῶν: δε ἐπεὶ καὶ υἱε καὶ οὐ βραχὺ τὸδε οἱ στη μα ὡς γράφεις ἡμῶν: δε ὡς ἡθην οἱ καὶ ἐγὼ το μαζ κινεῖ ἡμᾶς πάλιν γράψαι σοι, καὶ πρὸς τὰ ἐνταῦθα πάλιν ἐπαναστρέψαι παρακαλέσαι, καὶ τὴν ἐπιθυμίαν ἡμῶν τὴν πρὸς σὲ πληροφορῆσαι, πρὸ τοῦ ἡμᾶς εἰς γῆν ὑποστρέψαι λελυπημένας καὶ τεθλιμμένας. Τῶν σταλεισῶν δὲ γραφῶν καὶ τῶν μηνυμάτων ἡ ἀκαρπία ὡς εἰπεῖν καὶ τὸ ἀνενέργητον ῥαθυμοτέρας πρὸς τὸ γράφειν σε, καὶ ὑπτιοτέρας³³¹ ποιοῦσαι, καὶ τὴν φυσικὴν θερμὴν καὶ προθυμίαν ἀμβλύνουσί τε καὶ περικόπτουσι, (f. 172r) γεωργὸς τῶν προτέρων αὐτοῦ σπερμάτων μὴ ἐκφυνέντων, ὀκνηρότερος γίνεται ταῖς αὐτοῦ ἀρούραις πάλιν τὰ σπέρματα καταβάλλειν. Εἰ γὰρ τοσαῦτα σοι γράψασαν πρὸς τὸ τὰ ἐνταῦθα καταλαβεῖν κατὰ τὸν νῦν καιρὸν ὅτε δὴ καὶ ἡμᾶς ἀκμὴν εὐρεῖν εἶχες μετὰ τῶν ζώντων, ὅτε καὶ ἡ ἀγία ἡμῶν κυρία καὶ πανευγενεστάτη καὶ περιπόθητος ἀδελφή, μᾶλλον δὲ μήτηρ τοῦ κραταιοῦ καὶ ἀγίου ἡμῶν αὐθέντου καὶ βασιλέως, διὰ τὴν ἐνοῦσαν αὐτῇ συμπάθειάν τε καὶ πρὸς πάντας κηδεμονίαν ἐκ Θεοῦ κινηθεῖσα, ἠνάγκασεν ἡμᾶς πολλάκις γράψαι σοι, ἵν' ὅσον δύνασαι καταλάβῃς πρὸς ἡμᾶς, ἵνα πάντως καὶ

³²⁸ Folio 172r.

Translation by Marieke Verbiest:

For if they had written these things so that they would understand these things in the present tense, you would not have found us among the living

³²⁹ Lauxtermann, 'Parisinus Graecus 400', 152.

³³⁰ Kotzabassi, 'Epistolography and Rhetoric', 177.

³³¹ In the manuscript it is ὑπτιοτέρας

σὲ προμηθεύσεται ὥς καὶ τοὺς λοιποὺς αὐτῆς οἰκείους, καὶ πλέον σέ, διὰ τὸ εὕρισκομένας ἡμᾶς ἐν αὐτῇ, καὶ διὰ τὸ ἀκοῦσαι τὴν σὴν στερρὰν γνώμην πῶς ἀπεσεῖσω τὸν μιᾶρὸν ἐκεῖνον καὶ τάχα θεῖον ἐγγεγονότα, καὶ κατήσχυνας καὶ ἐβδελύξω καὶ οὐκ ἐδειλίασας ταῖς ἐκείνου ματαιολογίαις καὶ μηχαναῖς. (f. 172v) Εἰ οὖν τοσαῦτα σοὶ γράψασαι ἐπὶ συμφέροντι σῶ δὲ πλέον ἢ ἡμῶν, οὐκ ἐδυσωπήθης οὔτε διὰ τὴν ἡμετέραν ἀγάπην, οὔτε διὰ τὴν τοσαύτην ἀναδοχὴν ἣν ἔμελλες εὐρεῖν ὁμολογουμένως παρὰ τῆς τοιαύτης συμπαθεστάτης κυρίας καὶ ἀγίας ἡμῶν, τί λοιπὸν νῦν εἰποῦσαι πλέον ἢ κάλλιον δυνηθῶμεν μαλάξαι τὴν σὴν σκληρὰν καὶ ἀνένδοτον καὶ ἀμείλικτον καρδίαν; Εἰ γὰρ μητρὸς γήρας καὶ ξενιτεία καὶ ἀπορία τῶν οἰκείων καὶ συγγενῶν, καὶ ἡ λοιπὴ τῆς φύσεως σχέσις - ἐῷ λέγειν κόπους τοὺς ἐπὶ σοὶ οὕς ὑπέστην εἰς τὸ ἀναθρέψαι καὶ παιδεῦσαι σε -, οὐκ ἴσχυσαν οὐδὲ ἰσχύουσι κάμψαι σου τὴν ἀσπλαγχνίαν, ἢ ἀναισθησίαν, ἢ οὐκ οἶδ' ὅπως χρὴ λέγειν σαφέστερον ἢ οἰκειότερον, πῶς οἱ λόγοι ἢ αἱ γραφαὶ δυνήσονται καταπεῖσαι σε, ἢ ἐντρέψαι ἢ δυσωπεῖσαι; Πλὴν ἄλλ' ἡμεῖς καὶ νῦν πάλιν τὸ φυσικὸν αὐτὸ χρέος πληροῦσαι καθὰ δῆτα καὶ τὸ πρότερον, λέγω μὲν δὴ τὸ προμη (f. 173r) θεῦσαι καὶ παιδαγωγῆσαι καὶ πρὸς πᾶν καλὸν ὁδηγῆσαι, πάλιν γράφομεν καὶ παραδηλοῦμεν καὶ ἀξιοῦμεν, εἰ καὶ ἀνάρμοστον πρὸς σέ τὸ παρ' ἡμῶν ἀξιοῦσθαί τε καὶ παρακαλεῖσθαι. Εἰ μὲν οὖν ποιήσεις ταῦτα, μέλλεις καὶ ἡμᾶς εὐφράναι ὅσον οὐκ ἔχομεν εἰπεῖν καὶ σαυτὸν διπλῶς ὠφελῆσαι· εἰ δὲ ὥς οὐδὲν ταῦτα λογίσῃ, ἡμᾶς μὲν ὀλίγον ζημιώσης, σεαυτὸν δὲ τὰ μέγιστα, πρῶτον μὲν τῶν ἡμετέρων στερηθεὶς εὐχῶν - οὐδὲ γὰρ ἐν τῷ θανάτῳ ἡμῶν συγχωρῆσαι ἔχομεν, ὥς τοιοῦτον πρὸς ἡμᾶς φανέντα, ἀγνώμονά τε καὶ ἄσπλαγχνον -, ἔπειτα δὲ καὶ τῆς τοῦ Θεοῦ εὐλογίας, ὃς καὶ κελεύει πᾶσαν τιμὴν τοῖς γονεῦσιν ἀπονέμειν, μετὰ τούτων καὶ τῆς κυβερνήσεως τῆς σωματικῆς ἣς σοὶ προείπομεν πολλάκις. Αἰ εὐχαὶ ἡμῶν ἔστωσαν μεθ' ὑμῶν. Ἔρρωσο.

Conclusions

The present thesis has concentrated on literature addressed to women or written by women in twelfth-century Byzantine society. It has taken a look at different genres and their respective popularity, including a discussion of the positive and negative depictions of women by authors and how women themselves speak about their own gender.

Although it is impossible to undisputedly determine a popular literary genre for women, most of the sources belong to three genres: namely epitaphs, letters and poems. The widespread use of the first two literary genres (epitaphs and letters) is closely related to their central function in Byzantine society. Epitaphs were inscribed on the tombs to commemorate the deceased, while the letters constitute the main communication tool. The popularity of poetry was the result of the growing interest of the Comnenian court in these types of texts.

The description of women in Byzantine literature during the twelfth-century followed the literary traditions that were already established before this century. The connection between nature and the beauty of women; for example, their snow white skin or red cheeks like roses, are imageries that appear consistently throughout byzantine literary history across different genres. Authors like Constantine Manasses and Georgios Tornikes used these images in their respective texts (eg. poems and orations). Throughout my research these literary *topoi* appeared in the literary sources that I used for my research. This, I believe, indicated the importance and the widespread use of the imagery of nature and the garden in Byzantine literature connected to women.

However, beauty was not the only characteristic used by authors for the creation of positive depictions of women. The virtuousness usually ascribed to women, especially in Christian Byzantium is something that often appears in the literature addressed to women. Just like in the novels, women are frequently compared to mythological figures (eg. various goddesses of antiquity) or protagonists of the Homeric poems (eg. Hecuba). The poem of Theodoros Prodromos addressed to Irene Doukaina makes use of tragic female mythological figures to portray the grief of the empress. Anna, in her *Alexiad*, used the image of the goddess Athena at least two times in his descriptions of women.

Many descriptions of women during the twelfth century concentrate on their intellectual capacities. Good examples include the oration addressed to Anna Comnene by Georgios Tornikes and the poems of Manganeios Prodromos for Eirene Sebastokratorissa, both texts were discussed in chapter three. In the case of Anna Comnene I have found that authors like

Georgios Tornikes had difficulty attributing traditional female characteristics to Anna Comnene. The result of this is that they focused almost exclusively on her intellect. The growing attention of Byzantine authors to the intellect of women could be because of the changing position of the woman in Byzantine society during the twelfth-century, this through the influence of women like Anna Dalassene, Irene Doukaina and Anna Comnene.

A last group of *topoi* to compliment women is connected to the Christian mentality that permeated Byzantine society. The idea of women in the role of virgin, mother/wife and widow has its origin in Christianity. Their recurrent use in literary texts of the twelfth century shows their importance for Byzantine society. The idea that the perfect woman would fulfil one or more of these three roles and thereby enhancing her own virtuousness is present in these sources. In the dedicatory epigram of the *Synopsis Chronike* Constantine Manasses' praises Eirene Sebastokratorissa's role as a mother. The same characteristic of the sebastokratorissa is brought to the forefront in the poems of Manganeios Prodromos and is being lauded extensively by both authors.

When describing women negatively in literary sources, authors would make use of the literary *topoi* also used for positive descriptions. For example, empress Irene (ca.750-803) in Manasses' *Synopsis chronike* is described to act just as horrible as the mythological figure of Medea by wounding her son. The link between women and nature can also be found in negative descriptions. Again, the actions of empress Irene (750-803) are so bad that not even the wildest animals would act in this way. This comparison to nature, which normally enhances the beauty of the woman, gives an idea of the unnatural qualities of the negatively portrayed women. A last way to describe women negatively was through the changing of the gender-role. An example of this can be found in the *Ptochoprodromika*; the goal of this representation, however, is satirical. Moreover, the anonymous author does not portray the female gender as a whole in a negative way. It is also important to note that the *Ptochoprodromika*, as a satirical work, would focus on the negative aspect of Byzantine women taken on male characteristics. In contrast, hagiographical works would portray women who would take on these same male characteristics in a very positive way and would praise them for leaving behind their female weakness.

In her *Alexiad*, Anna Comnene made use of traditional literary *topoi* to present the women in her work. She made an extensive use of the descriptions in the form of *ekphraseis* often found in novels of the twelfth-century to portray the physical looks of these women. What is more she included references to nature and mythological figures. What is interesting in her work is that she not only paid attention to the physical appearance of women, but also to their

intellectual capabilities. By focusing on the latter she followed the growing trend of the twelfth-century Byzantine literature.

While I was going through the sources of the twelfth-century I focussed on texts that were addressed to women and also had women as their literary topic. Because of the smaller scope of my thesis I made a choice to focus solely on sources addressed to women from the Comnenian imperial court like for example Eirene Sebastokratorissa, Irene Doukaina and Anna Comnene.

As noted, due to the large number of sources and the limited scope of my research, I opted for a small amount of source material. A future large-scale study should take a closer look at all these literary sources and improve our understanding of the relationship between authors and their female patrons. Another possible research avenue is to focus on one of the women who held these literary circles, like Eirene Sebastokratorissa or Irene Doukaina and explore their relationship with the authors.

List of Abbreviations

BMGS	Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies
Byzantion	Byzantion: Revue Internationale des Etudes Byzantines
BZ	Byzantinische Zeitschrift
Class. Mediaev.	Classica et Mediaevalia
DOP	Dumbarton Oaks Papers
Environ Hist. Camb.	Environment and history
ICS	Illinois Classical Studies
Gend. Hist.	Gender History
GLB	Graeco-Latina Brunesia
GR	Greece and Rome
GRBS	Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies
Hist. Reflect.	Historical Reflections
J. Ex. Bot.	Journal of Experimental Botany
JHI	Journal of the History of Ideas
J. Mediev. Hist.	Journal of Medieval History
JÖB	Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik
REB	Révue des Etudes Byzantines
Stud. Ceranea	Studia Ceranea
Scott. J. Theol.	Scottish Journal of Theology
Trans. R. Hist. Soc.	Transactions of the Royal Historical Society
TROIA	Troianalexandrina
WBS	Wiener Byzantinische Studien

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