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**FEMALE CORPOREAL  
PERFORMANCES**

Reading the Body in Byzantine Passions  
and Lives of Holy Women

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of roles now takes place; the abbot is the sinner and not Mary, whom the abbot now treats as a saint.

As soon as he receives the forgiveness he is waiting for, the abbot calls for the innkeeper. When the innkeeper arrives a situation is created similar to the one that followed after the abbot became aware of Mary's/Marinos' death. Without revealing Mary's/Marinos' sex, the abbot informs the innkeeper about her death. Like the abbot earlier, the innkeeper treats Mary/Marinos as sinful and wishes that God forgive her/him. Here again, the effect of irony is repeated, in this case experienced both by the persons of the narrative (abbot and monks) and the audience of the Life. When the abbot tells the innkeeper that Marinos is a woman, he is greatly surprised. He then enters Mary's cell in order to see with his own eyes the truth concerning Mary's sex. After seeing, he is transformed too.

The revelation of Euphrosyne's, Mary's, Pelagia's and Theodora's female sex is followed by public recognition. The abbots, the brethren and/or members of different monastic communities celebrate the heroines' religious triumphs. The miracles performed on their corpses increase everybody's admiration for their conduct which led them to holiness:

And she was immediately healed at the tomb of the blessed Mary and everyone glorified God because of this sign, and because of [Mary's] patient endurance, for she vigorously endured [her trials] until death, refusing to make herself known. (tr. Constan 1996: 12)

Καὶ παραχρῆμα ἰάθη ἐν τῷ μνήματι τῆς ὁσίας Μαρίας καὶ πάντες ἐδόξαζον τὸν Θεὸν ἐπὶ τῷ γεγονότι σημείῳ καὶ τῇ ὑπομονῇ αὐτῆς, ὅτι μέχρι θανάτου ἐκαρτέρησε, μὴ φανερώσασα ἑαυτήν. (*VMar* ch.21.171–174)

As their Lives show, holy cross-dressers successfully perform both genders. This becomes more striking in the cases of the heroines who at some point of the narrative give up their lives as men and become once again women by just remaking their appearance. The holy cross-dressers who can act as both exemplary monks and nuns manifest that being a nun is as much a performance as being a monk. The enactment of both roles is a matter of changing clothes and place of activity (male monastery is replaced by a nunnery). In the Lives of the holy cross-dressers, religious performance meets social performance, since the role of the cross-dresser is performed in a religious environment by imitation of the male gender that is a social role.

## CHAPTER 4

### Life in the Nunnery:

### The Exemplary Body of the Abbess and the Obedient Body of the Nun

#### Introduction

Female monastic tradition in Byzantium differed from the corresponding male tradition. The majority of female monastics adopted the cenobitic life (Morris 1995: 52). Women were not encouraged to lead the life of the hermit and therefore, unlike their male counterparts, they never created "cities in the deserts" or on the mountains. In fact, male monastic tradition has its very roots in eremitic life, which was established by Antony. Thus while during the first Christian centuries many holy men, following the example of Antony, moved to the desert seeking a life of contemplation, their female counterparts—such an example is Macrina—transformed their houses into nunneries instead (Chitty 1966; Brown 1988).

The historical reality according to which women did not favour the life of the hermit is reflected in the Lives of female monastics, as heroines who are solitaires are very few and most of them are fictional.<sup>1</sup> As for the male monastics, many of them seem to prefer the solitary to the cenobitic life. Nevertheless, they do not fail to spend parts of their religious lives both in monasteries *and* in the wilderness, because as Basil, the hagiographer of Euthymios the Younger, formulates it, "it is not good to lead only the life of a hermit" (*VEuthymIun* ch.27.27–28; date: 910).

Thus a common motif of male monastic Lives is the central heroes' experiences of different styles of monasticism which combine the solitary and the cenobitic life. Euthymios the Younger, for instance, begins

<sup>1</sup> There are only eight female monastics out of twenty-six whose accounts belong to the subgenre of the female Life. These women are the following: Melania, Pelagia, Taïsia, Mary of Egypt, Synkletike, Matrona, Theoktiste and Euphrosyne the Younger.

his monastic career on Mount Olympos in Bithynia as a disciple of a famous hermit, Ioannikios, who initiates him in the ascetic and contemplative life (*VEuthymIun* ch.7). After some time he leaves Ioannikios and becomes a disciple of another famous hermit, John. At some point, after teaching Euthymios everything about a monk's life, John sends him to a monastery, considering him pious enough to enter a monastic community where he could serve other monks and compete with them in spiritual battles (*VEuthymIun* chs.8–9). After spending some time in the monastery, Euthymios returns to the solitary life (*VEuthymIun* ch.12). Much later he experiences the lavriot form of monasticism, a combination of solitary and loose cenobitic life. After that he founds a monastery and becomes the abbot (*VEuthymIun* ch.32). He stays in his monastery for fourteen years, teaching and looking after the members of his community but longing for solitary life he thereafter leaves the monastery and ascends a column. He soon comes down from the column as a result of not being able to find the *hesychia* he seeks. He then goes to Mount Athos where he ends his earthly life as a hermit.

Such a multifarious monastic life as that of Euthymios the Younger is quite uncommon for a female monastic (Talbot 1985). Among all the female monastics, only Melania, Matrona and Euphrosyne the Younger experience both the cenobitic and the solitary life; and not in the ways in which a monk such as Euthymios the Younger does. The lavriot monastic style and the ascent to a column, for example, are forms of ascetic life which are never adopted by the central heroines of female Lives. In contrast to their male counterparts, female solitaries do not travel from one holy mountain to another. With the exception of Euphrosyne the Younger (when she is a cross-dresser), Mary of Egypt and Theoktiste—whose fictitious Life is modelled on that of Mary of Egypt—who wander alone in the wilderness, the other female solitaries enclose themselves in cells.

Unlike holy men who, as the example of Euthymios the Younger shows, give up their role as abbots and abandon their monasteries, holy women retain their role as abbesses until the end of their lives. Despite the principle of “monastic stability”, according to which a monk or a nun should remain in the monastery where he or she first took monastic vows (Talbot 1996b: 194, n. 175), many holy men choose to lead their cenobitic lives in different monasteries. Such an example is Michael Maleinos (*VMichMal BHG* 1295). Holy men of the late Byzantine

period in particular are characterised by their wanderlust (Nicol 1985).

The cenobitic nuns venerated in Byzantine Lives, on the other hand, remaining faithful to the principle of “monastic stability”, never change one nunnery for another, not even if asked by male religious authorities to do so, as in the unique case of Theodora of Thessalonike. According to Theodora's Life, the *archimandrite* John, being aware of her piety, wants to transfer her from the convent of Saint Stephen to another nunnery in order to appoint her its abbess. Referring to the principle of “monastic stability”, Theodora argues against such a decision. She exclaims: “It is impossible for me, a sinful woman, to become a transgressor of my vows to God and to leave this convent where I made my vows” (tr. Talbot 1996b: 194; ἀδύνατον ἐμὲ τὴν ἀμαρτωλὸν παραβάτιν τῶν πρὸς Θεὸν συνθηκῶν μου γενέσθαι καὶ καταλιπεῖν τοῦτο τὸ μοναστήριον, ἔνθα μου τὰς συνθήκας πεποίημαι. *VTheodThess* ch.36.10–13).

The fact that monks have various monastic experiences imposes on their Lives certain structures which are absent from the Lives of nuns and female solitaries. The Life of a nun who spends all her religious life in a convent, for instance, has a different form from that of a monk who travels, enters many monasteries and changes monastic styles according to his spiritual needs. Since a nun and an abbess do not abandon their convents, their Lives, unlike those of most cenobitic monks, are focused almost exclusively on their cenobitic experiences and the incidents that occur within the barriers of their nunneries. Of course there are parallels between the life of a cenobitic monk or an abbot and that of a cenobitic nun or an abbess. Both a monk and a nun have to obey their superiors. An abbot and an abbess have to teach the members of their communities in both words and actions. However, these similarities between the cenobitic monks and nuns, abbots and abbesses are not presented in the same way in male and female Lives. A nun's obedience and an abbess' exemplary role, i.e. their cenobitic tasks, and their roles in the nunnery are more emphasised than those of a monk and an abbot, who also undertake other activities which are not directly relevant to their lives in the cenobium.

In this chapter two roles of female sainthood will be examined: the abbess and the nun. These two roles of female holiness are investigated together not only because they are enacted simultaneously in a convent but also because the realisation of the one role presupposes the

existence of the other. An abbess needs the presence of at least two nuns in order to be able to carry out her tasks as a spiritual guide and director of the convent. The nun, on the other hand, has to be under the supervision and the disciplinary control of a pious and exemplary abbess in order to learn how to exercise herself against temptations and to acquire the virtues of obedience, *apatheia* and humility.

It is not only the nun who has to discipline herself but also the abbess who, being aware of her difficult mission as the spiritual guide of many women and of her responsibility for their salvation, feels obliged to discipline her body and her behaviour. As the following analysis will demonstrate, the abbess' life in the convent is a continuous struggle to achieve a self and a body which I call "exemplary". Through her extremely strict ascetic life and her edifying speeches, the abbess aims at providing her nuns with the means that will enable them to reach salvation. While the nuns look to their abbess' body and behaviour for the exercise of their own bodies and selves, the abbess in turn constantly observes her nuns to verify whether or not they behave according to the monastic canon. In fact, the abbess has the divine ability to read her nuns' thoughts and to see all their actions. If a nun misbehaves or fails to fulfil her duties, she is punished. Thus, the nun learns to discipline herself not only by observing her abbess' exemplary conduct achieved through self-discipline but also by being aware of the fact that she is under her abbess' constant surveillance.

This presentation of an abbess' and a nun's cenobitic behaviour and bodily performances is valid both for the Life in which the central heroine undertakes the role of the abbess and for the Life where the main heroine enacts the role of the nun. There are, however, certain differences in the depiction of these two roles between the Life of an abbess and that of a nun, as the following analysis will seek to show. These differences are created according to who is the central heroine. If she is an abbess, the emphasis is placed on her own religious performance and if she is a nun, on the piety she obtains through her abbess' instructions.

The roles of the abbess and the nun are undertaken by fourteen holy women. One of them, Irene of Chrysobalanton (*VIrChrys BHG* 952; date: after 980), enacts both roles in their development. Nine female saints are abbesses and four are nuns. The abbesses are: Macrina (*VMacr BHG* 1012; date: 380, 382/383), Melania (*VMel BHG* 1241; date: after

439 and before 485), Olympias (*VOl BHG* 1374; date: fifth or sixth century), Eusebia/Xene (*VEusebX BHG* 633; date: fifth century), Matrona (*VMatr BHG* 1221; date: around 550), Eudokia (*VEud BHG* 604; date unknown), Domnika (*VDom BHG* 562; date unknown), Athanasia of Aegina (*VAthAeg BHG* 180; date: tenth century), Elisabeth the Wonderworker (*VELisThaum BHG* 2121; date: between the ninth and the eleventh centuries).<sup>2</sup> Two of the nuns, Febronia (*PFeb BHG* 659; date: seventh century) and Anastasia the Virgin (*PAnastV BHG* 76z; date unknown), undertake also the role of the martyr. The other nuns are Eupraxia (*VEupr BHG* 631; date: fifth century) and Theodora of Thessalonike (*VTheodThess BHG* 1737; date: 894).

In the present chapter, only the Lives of two abbesses and four nuns will be discussed. The abbesses are Melania and Irene of Chrysobalanton. I have chosen the Lives of these two abbesses because they illustrate in great detail the "exemplary body of the abbess", which is one of the subjects of this chapter. One Life of a nun has been excluded: the Life of Anastasia the Virgin. This Life is not discussed here because the literary treatment of Anastasia and her portrayal as a nun resemble those of Febronia, which are more detailed. The Life of Anastasia the Virgin was modelled on Febronia's Life which was popular in the Middle Ages and was used as a source for later texts (Halkin 1973: 158; Brock and Ashbrook-Harvey 1987: 151).

Melania's Life has come down to us in Greek and Latin versions and it was written by Melania's disciple Gerontios, a monophysite monk who died around 485 (Clark 1984: 13–24; Gorce 1962: 54–62). According to Adhémar d'Alès (1906), the original Life was written in Greek about nine years after Melania's death. The versions in Greek and Latin that have survived constitute later reworkings of the Greek original written by Gerontios. According to her Greek Life, Melania comes from an extremely rich and noble Roman family. Seeking to ensure heirs to their vast fortune, Melania's parents marry her off at an early age to the son of a Roman prefect, thus ignoring her desire to remain a virgin and devote herself entirely to God. After the death of their two children, Melania and her husband decide to live in chastity and to sell their

<sup>2</sup> As we are informed by their hagiographers, Eudokia, Domnika, Athanasia of Aegina and Elisabeth spend part of their monastic careers as nuns. However, they are not depicted enacting the role of the nun in its development.

properties in order to distribute the money to the poor. For this reason Melania and her husband travel to the areas where they possess lands and slaves. After selling off their lands and slaves, they visit holy hermits, found nunneries and monasteries and engage in ascetic practices. Melania's ascetic life, as mentioned above (p. 128), is a combination of the life in solitude and that in a cenobium. She dies from illness and in complete poverty.

According to her anonymous *Life*,<sup>3</sup> Irene of Chrysobalanton is a young woman who in the company of her sister leaves her homeland, Capadocia, in order to go to Constantinople, with the intention of participating in the bride-show that the empress Theodora organises for her son Michael III (842–867). On the way, the two sisters visit Ioannikios, the famous hermit, who appears to know Irene's name and who tells her that the nuns of the Chrysobalanton convent need her protection. When Irene and her sister reach Constantinople, Michael's future wife has already been selected. Irene's sister marries caesar Bardas, while Irene, recalling Ioannikios' words, enters the convent of Chrysobalanton where she is singled out for her piety and obedience. After the abbess' death, Irene becomes her successor. As an abbess, Irene hardens her ascetic practices. She acquires the gift of reading her nuns' thoughts, and she performs various miracles.

Eupraxia's *Life* is also anonymous. Eupraxia is the daughter of Antigonos, a kinsman of emperor Theodosius I (379–395) and a pious woman, Eupraxia. After Antigonos' death the emperor takes the widow Eupraxia and her daughter under his protection. When the little girl reaches the age of five, Theodosius betroths her to the son of a rich senator. Some time later one of the senators, assisted by the empress, asks the widow Eupraxia to marry him. Eupraxia, who renounces sexual life while her husband is alive, rejects the proposal. When the emperor is informed that his wife has tried to arrange a marriage for the pious Eupraxia, he becomes angry and has an argument with the empress. As soon as Eupraxia hears that the emperor and the empress have had an argument because of her, she takes her daughter and goes to Egypt. She settles down in the Thebaid. In a nearby town there is a nunnery which Eupraxia and her daughter visit frequently. At some point the

<sup>3</sup> On the historical context of the *Life* of Irene of Chrysobalanton and on issues referring to the text's date and authorship, see Rosenqvist 1986: xxiii–xliii.

young Eupraxia decides to stay in the nunnery permanently by adopting the habit of a nun. Eupraxia appears to be a pious and obedient nun, who is frequently tempted by the Devil. She manages to drive the Devil away by confessing her temptations to the abbess and by performing hard and humbling tasks. Eupraxia's spirituality reaches such high levels that she begins performing miracles. Before Eupraxia's death the abbess has a vision in which the Virgin informs her that Eupraxia will be received in Paradise after ten days. This information causes great distress to the abbess who does not want to lose Eupraxia. Shortly after Eupraxia's death the abbess dies happily, knowing that she will be offered a place in Heaven through the intercession of her beloved Eupraxia.<sup>4</sup>

The author of the *Life* of Theodora of Thessalonike is a certain cleric called Gregory, who wrote not only Theodora's *Life* but also a text about the translation of the holy woman's relics two years after her death. He presents himself as the author of both texts towards the end of the *Translation*. As Gregory states, he felt obliged to write an account of the life and miracles of Theodora, since no such account had been written, in order to praise the saint who healed his sister Martha when she was seriously ill (*Translation*, ch.20). Gregory's account was delivered to a general congregation on the holy woman's feast day at the convent of Saint Stephen, where, as mentioned earlier, Theodora led her religious life (Kazhdan 1991; Patlagean 1984; Talbot 1996b: 159–162; Talbot 1996c).

The content of Theodora's *Life* is the following. She is born in Aegina but soon becomes an orphan after the death of her pious mother Chrysanthe. Her father, Antony, adopts the monastic habit immediately afterwards and the little Theodora is placed under the protection of her godmother who brings her up. At the early age of seven she is engaged to a man of a noble family. Theodora gives birth to three children. Two of them die in infancy and the third, Theopiste, is given to a nunnery in Thessalonike. After her husband's death Theodora too adopts the monastic habit and enters the nunnery where her daughter leads her monastic life. During her life in the convent Theodora manages through her abbess' disciplinary methods to surpass herself as a mother and to become an ideal nun distinguished for her obedience, hard work and humility.

<sup>4</sup> For the content of the *Life* of Febronia, see Chapter 1 (pp. 26–27).

The following analysis consists of two parts. In the first part, “The Exemplary Body of the Abbess” the role of the abbess is investigated through the abbess’ bodily performances, as manifested in the Lives of Melania and Irene of Chrysobalanton. In the second part, “The Obedient Body of the Nun”, the corresponding bodily performances of the holy women undertaking the role of the nun are examined.

### The Exemplary Body of the Abbess

#### THE ABBESS’ DEEDS

Irene becomes greatly distressed when she is appointed abbess of the Chrysobalanton nunnery after the death of the previous abbess. Despite the fact that the undertaking of the abbess’ role is against her will, Irene feels obliged to accept and become the convent’s superior because she realises that this is a divine decision from which she cannot escape. Immediately after her first common meal with the nuns of the convent in her new status as their abbess, Irene goes to the cell which is reserved for the superior of the convent and, after closing its door, she immediately begins to pray in a flood of tears. In her prayer, she asks God to help her in her new mission. As soon as her prayer comes to an end, Irene says to herself:

Do you realise, humble Irene, what a burden Christ has laid on your shoulders? You have been entrusted with souls, and for the sake of souls God even became man and shed His blood. [...] Now, in the day of judgment everyone shall give account for an idle word. If this is so, can you be ignorant of the price for a soul that is lost, to be paid by him who has undertaken to care for her but fails to do all in his power to save her? You must by all means be utterly wakeful in your prayers and persevere in your fasting and bear the infirmities of the sisters, enduring all bravely and gently. Take heed to yourself lest one of your faults, although escaping yourself, become a cause of destruction for anyone of the sisters. (tr. Rosenqvist 1986: 31, 33)

Ἐὰρ γε, ταπεινὴ Εἰρήνη, ἐπιγινώσκεις τὸ φορτίον ὅπερ σου Χριστὸς ἐπὶ τῶν ὤμων ἐπέθετο; Ψυχὰς ἐνεπιστεύθης, ὑπὲρ ὧν Θεὸς καὶ ἄνθρωπος ἐγένετο καὶ τὸ αἷμα ἐξέχεε! [...] Οὐδ’ ἐκεῖνο πάλιν ἀγνοεῖς, ὅτι, ἐὰν ὑπὲρ ἀργοῦ λόγου λόγον ἕκαστος δώσει ἐν ἡμέρᾳ κρίσεως, ὑπὲρ ψυχῆς ἀπολλυμένης οἷα πείσεται ὁ τὴν φροντίδα ταύτης ἀναδεδεγμένος, εἰ μὴ τὰ παρ’ ἑαυτοῦ ποιήσει πρὸς τὴν αὐτῆς σωτηρίαν. Ἐπαγρυπνεῖν σε δεῖ πάντως περισσοτέρως ἐν

εὐχαίς, καρτερεῖν ἐν νηστείαις, τὰ ἀσθενήματα τῶν ἀδελφῶν σου βαστάζειν καὶ πάντα φέρειν γενναίως καὶ πράως. Πρόσεχε δὲ σεαυτῇ, μήποτε τὸ σὸν ἐλάττωμα τὸ σε λανθάνον ἀφορμὴ τινὶ τῶν ἀδελφῶν ἀπωλείας γένηται. (*VlrChrys*, p.30.19–29, p.32.1)

Being enclosed and isolated in her cell, where none of the nuns can hear her, Irene expresses what she did not dare to say earlier to the nuns when they saw her distress and thought it was caused by her fear that they might not be obedient to her. At that point, she said nothing in reply when they asked her not to be worried about being the abbess:

The sisters begged her not to be so worried and distressed about being their abbess. “Look”, they said, wholly ignorant of the sorrows she bore in her mind, “we are all ready for every kind of obedience towards you, and you will meet with no obstruction from us. No, with God’s will our obedience will make all your ways easy.” (tr. Rosenqvist 1986: 29, 31)

αἱ ἀδελφαί, “Μὴ οὕτω λυπεῖσθαι” παρεκάλουν αὐτήν, “καὶ ἀδημονεῖν περὶ τῆς ἡμετέρας”, λέγουσαι, “προστασίας πᾶσαι γὰρ ἡμεῖς πρὸς πᾶσαν ὑπακοήν, ἰδοῦ, σοὶ ἐτοιμῶς ἔχομεν”—ἀγνοοῦσαι πάντως ἅπερ ἐκεῖνη κατὰ νοῦν ἐλογίζετο—, “καὶ οὐδὲν ἔσται πρόσκομμα παρ’ ἡμῶν, ῥάδια πάντα τῆς ἡμετέρας ὑπακοῆς Θεοῦ διομαλιζούσης σοὶ ῥοπή.” (*VlrChrys*, p.28.22–25, p.30.1–2)

Irene’s words quoted above explain what the hagiographer means with his comment that the nuns were “wholly ignorant of the sorrows she [Irene] bore in her mind”. In fact, Irene was not worried about the nuns, as they thought, but about herself and about her own responsibilities towards them. As Irene’s self-confessional words reveal, she is not willing to undertake the role of the abbess because it is a difficult task from which great responsibilities emerge. Her previous role, that of the nun, was less complicated and less demanding. Her main tasks were to obey her abbess, perform ascetic practices and offer services to her fellow sisters. Then, even the issue of her own salvation was rather a responsibility of the former abbess than of herself. Now Irene, as the new abbess and effectively the spiritual leader of the convent, is responsible not only for her own salvation, since her spiritual mother has died, but also for the salvation of each of her nuns, which is an even more important and difficult task. Irene believes that her nuns’ salvation, upon which in turn her own salvation relies, depends greatly on her own behaviour. It is crucial that she be especially careful so that she does not behave in a way that might prove spiritually harmful to the nuns.

In order to be able to perform successfully the role of the abbess, Irene has to acquire another self and a new identity which can be seen by both herself and her nuns. A first step towards the acquisition of her new identity as an abbess constitutes Irene's physical movement from a nun's cell to that of an abbess. This movement should be viewed not only as a cenobitic custom that Irene has to follow but also as an act which has a deeper significance. It signifies Irene's abandonment of the nun's role and her undertaking of the abbess' role. In other words, this movement in space symbolises Irene's movement from one identity to another.<sup>5</sup> Irene's new cell used to be inhabited by the previous abbess, who was highly respected by the nuns and by Irene in particular. As her successor, Irene carries on her shoulders the weight of her pious life and of her abilities as the convent's superior. A comparison between the former abbess and Irene is unavoidable both on Irene's part and on that of the nuns. Irene expects from herself and is expected by her nuns not only to imitate the life of her spiritual mother but to surpass her in piety.

The main characteristics of Irene's new self are high spirituality, exemplarity and religious authority. This new self emerges from the relation which Irene establishes between herself and her nuns, as the following analysis will show, and from the stricter ascetic life in which she engages. Irene's ascetic practices as an abbess are described by the hagiographer in the following words:

Such were the words she spoke to herself, thereby arousing her soul and provoking it to a still harder training. The mode of life and conduct she had chosen was wholly angelic: she performed fasts of many days' duration and standing exercises lasting whole nights; she accomplished numberless genuflections; she slept on the floor, using the bed less as a source of rest than of discomfort. (tr. Rosenqvist 1986: 33)

Ἄλλὰ τὰ μὲν πρὸς ἑαυτὴν τοιαῦτα, οἷς δὴ καὶ θήξασα τὴν ψυχὴν ἐπὶ πολλῶ πλείονα διήγειρε τὴν ἄσκησιν, ἀγγελικὴν διόλου βίωσιν ἐλομένη καὶ πολιτείαν, νηστείας μὲν ἀνύουσα πολυημέρους, στάσεις παννύχους, γονάτων ὑπὲρ ἀριθμὸν τελοῦσα κλίσεις, χαμευνία ξηρᾶ καὶ μὴ μᾶλλον ἀνέσεως ὅσον κακοπαθείας ἀφορμῇ κεχρημένη. (*VirChrys* p.32.3–7)

<sup>5</sup> Space is crucial in the construction of female religious identities. Each role of female sainthood is inextricably connected with the place where it is enacted. See in particular Chapter 5.

The severe ascetic practices in which Irene engages directly after she becomes the convent's abbess indicate that she understands her transformation from a nun into an abbess primarily as a bodily transformation. Of course, Irene also underwent a strict ascetic life as a nun but always under the control of the previous abbess. As soon as she becomes an abbess herself, Irene is free to engage in even stricter and more frequent ascetic practices. The ascetic performances described above by the hagiographer are repeated by Irene continuously as they become more and more difficult and spectacular. Her body as it is, being trained by her constant fasting and standing exercises, can gradually endure more severe ones. This causes the admiration and the astonishment of the convent's nuns and leads to the establishment of Irene's religious authority, since she is the only one in the nunnery who can perform such ascetic deeds. Irene's ascetic endurance, which surpasses that of her nuns, provides her with the spiritual superiority a good abbess should possess.

Irene's fasts, which become gradually more and more strict, allow her to reach a stage in which she can survive by eating and drinking almost nothing for forty days. Eventually she obtains a body that is "mere skin clinging to the bones" (*VirChrys* p.76.5; tr. Rosenqvist 1986: 77). As for her standing exercises, at the beginning of her career as an abbess they last for a whole night or a whole day (this is the point she managed to reach when she performed this exercise while a nun). Later the standing exercises are extended to two or three days and in the end she can remain stretched with her hands directed to heaven for a whole week without having to lean on a wall or any other support (*VirChrys* p.74.21–25). Thus, Irene manages to surpass even Saint Arsenios whose standing exercises she undertakes to imitate. Saint Arsenios used to stand with his hands stretched to the east for no longer than one evening (*VirChrys* p.16.20–23). Irene's greater endurance shows that her devotion to God is even stronger than that of a holy man like Arsenios and that, in consequence, she is no less holy than he was. At some point, due to Irene's severe standing exercises, her body loses its natural flexibility with the result that she cannot bend her own arms and has to ask some nuns to do that for her (*VirChrys* p.74.25–30).

Through the depiction of Irene's ascetic life, her hagiographer aims at presenting his heroine as an example of piety not only for her nuns but also for the Byzantine audience of the Life, which may also have

consisted of nuns, who in turn could identify with the fictional nuns. To achieve this aim, the author of the Life gives a theatrical character to the scenes where Irene's ascetic practices are depicted. Due to their theatricality, these scenes acquire a liveliness which makes them vividly present before the audience's eyes. This illusory visibility of Irene's pious life and steadfastness in God, created by the theatrical dimension of the narrative, results in the better perception and understanding of Irene's religious life and effectively its better imitation. An example of a theatrical episode concerning Irene's acetic life is the following:

Once, when she had begun her exercise about sunset, raising her holy hands to heaven, as was her wont, a horde of demons suddenly appeared before her—it was about midnight—and tried with inarticulate shouts and agitated cries to shake her so as to prevent her immobile standing. One of them, being more evil as well as more insolent than the others, seemed to approach her and sneer at her, shouting such words as mimes use to utter. "Irene is made of wood", he said, "she is carried by wooden legs", and he spoke still other nonsense. Again he changed his tone and lamented, "How long will you oppress our race? How long will you lash us with your protracted prayers? How long will you burn us? How long shall we have to endure you? We have enough of the distress that you cause us." Then also the rest of them seemed to be afflicted and gave vent to loud lamentation, slapping their cheeks as if a great calamity had befallen them. But they made no progress towards the goal which they strived for, whereas Irene, as if caught up to heaven, had her whole mind there with God, standing wholly unshaken and undaunted. Then the demon stretched out his hand and kindled a stick against the lamp-wick. He dropped it around the neck of the holy woman, and it burnt up as if fanned, violently inflaming her whole hood along with the scapular and the shift, and began even to lick her flesh. It went over her, scorching her shoulders, her breast, her spine, her kidneys, and her flanks. [...] One of the sisters, who was awake for the nocturnal prayers, smelled the smoke from her flesh and left her cell in fear, thinking, "In what part of the convent can the fire be?" Tracking the scent she followed the odour to the cell of the abbess and stopped there. Looking in and seeing that it was filled with smoke and steam she only just managed to fling the door open and entered. She found—a terrible sight!—Irene all in flames but standing immobile and unwavering and unconquered, paying no heed whatever to the fire. As the sister, striving only to quench the flame and remove her teacher from the fire, began to agitate and shake her, extinguishing the fire and putting out the flame, at last she lowered her hands from their

extended position and remarked, "Why did you do this my child? Why did you deprive me of those great good things through your untimely kindness? We ought to savour not the things that be of men, but those that be of God. Behold, before my eyes there appeared an angel of God twining me a wreath of flowers that *eye hath not seen not ear heard* (1 Cor. 2.9), and he already kept his hand extended to put it on my head. But because of your concern he left me and went away with his wreath. Why, my child, did you render me an act of consideration worse than ingratitude? I hate a gift that causes me a loss." When the disciple heard this she began, tears falling from her eyes, with her fingers to pull away the Saint's clothes which, still, glowing, stuck to her flesh. And a strange fragrance was exhaled from them, incomparably more fragrant than any perfume and precious scents, which filled the whole convent. (tr. Rosenqvist 1986: 45, 47, 49)

Καὶ δὴ ποτε περὶ δυσμὰς ἡλίου ταύτης ἀρξαμένης καὶ τὰς ὀσίας ἐπαράσης χεῖρας, ὡς ἔθος, εἰς οὐρανόν, περὶ που τὸ μεσονύκτιον φάλαγξ δαιμονίων ἀθρόον ἐπιστάσα φωναῖς ἀσήμοις τε καὶ τεταραγμένη βοῇ τὴν ἀκίνητον αὐτῆς διασαλεῦσαι στάσιν ἐπειρῶντο. Τούτων δὲ πονηρότερον ἔν οἷα καὶ αὐθαδέστερον πλησίον αὐτῆς γενόμενον ἐώκει ταύτην μυκτηρίζειν καὶ τὰ μίμων φθέγγεσθαι, Εἰρήνην ξυλίνην καὶ ξυλίνοις τοῖς ποσὶ βασταζομένην λέγον καὶ ἄλλ' ἄττα φλυαροῦν. Καὶ μεταβαλλόμενον αὐθις ὠδύρευτο: "Ἔως πότε τὴν γενεὰν ἡμῶν", φάσκον "θλίβεις; Ἔως πότε ταῖς μακραις σου μαστίζεις ἡμᾶς προσευχαῖς; Ἔως πότε καίεις ἡμᾶς; Ἔως πότε σου ἀνεξόμεθα; Πλήρεις ἡμεῖς ἀνίας τῆς παρὰ σοῦ." Εἶτα σὺν ἐκείνῳ ἐδόκουν καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ κατατρέχεσθαι καὶ τὰς παρειὰς τύπτοντα θρήνον πολὺν ἐξηχεῖν ὡς ἐπὶ μεγάλῃ τούτοις τῇ συμφορᾷ. Ὡς δὲ μηδὲν ἦνουν πρὸς τὸ σπουδαζόμενον αὐτοῖς, ἐκείνη δὲ ὡσπερ ἀρπαγείσα εἰς οὐρανὸν ὄλην εἶχεν ἐκεῖ πρὸς Θεὸν τὴν διάνοιαν, ἀκλόνητος τὸ παράπαν καὶ ἀπτόητος ἰσταμένη, τὴν χεῖρα τὸ δαιμόνιον ἀπλώσαν καὶ πυρσὸν ἀπὸ τῆς θρυαλλίδος ἐπιμύξαν καθῆκε περὶ τὸν τράχηλον τῆς ὀσίας. Ὁ δὲ καθάπερ τισὶ ῥιπίσιν ἀνάψας, ὄλον μὲν τὸ κουκούλιον σὺν τῷ ἐπωμίῳ καὶ τῷ χιτωνίσκῳ λάθρως κατακαίων ἦφατο καὶ τῶν σαρκῶν καὶ διεπορεύετο καταφλέγων τοὺς ὦμους, τὸ στήθος, τὴν ῥάχιν, τοὺς νεφροὺς, τοὺς λαγόνας. [...] Τισ τῶν ἀδελφῶν ταῖς νυκτεριναῖς εὐχαῖς ἐγρηγορούα καὶ τῆς κνίσσης τῶν σαρκῶν ὀσφραϊνομένη καὶ "Ποῦ ποτε τῆς μονῆς τὸ καϊόμενόν ἐστιν" ἐξῆι θρονηεῖσα τῆς κέλλης καὶ ῥινηλατοῦσα ἐπομένη τῇ δυσωδίᾳ μέχρι τοῦ τῆς προεστῶσης ἔστησε τοὺς πόδας κελλίου. Παρακύψασα δὲ καὶ τοῦτο καπνοῦ καὶ κνίσσης πεπληρωμένον ἰδοῦσα, τῆς θύρας ἐκτροφὴν μόγις ποιησαμένη εἰσῆλθε μὲν, εὔρε δὲ—θέαμα φρικτόν—ὄλην μὲν τὴν Εἰρήνην ἐμπερησμένην, ἀκίνητον δὲ καὶ ἀρρεπῆ καὶ ἀήττητον ἐστηκυῖαν καὶ μηδαμῶς τῆς τοιαύτης ἐπιστρεφομένην πυρκαϊᾶς. Ἐπει δὲ πρὸς μόνον σπεύδουσα τὸ κατασβέσαι τὴν φλόγα, καὶ τοῦ πυρὸς ἐξελεῖσθαι τὴν διδάσκαλον ἡρώατ' ἃ τε κλονεῖν αὐτὴν καὶ συσσειεῖν, σβεννῦσα τὸ πῦρ καὶ

καταστέλλουσα τὴν φλόγα τὰς χεῖρας ὁψέ ποτε τῆς ἐκτάσεως ἐκείνη κατενεγκούσα, “Ἰνα τί τοῦτο πεποίηκας, τέκνον μου;” ἀπεκρίνατο, “τί με τοσούτων ἀπεστέρησας τῇ εὐνοίᾳ σου ταύτῃ τῇ ἀκαίρῳ τῶν ἀγαθῶν; Οὐ δέον ἡμᾶς φρονεῖν τὰ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἀλλὰ τὰ τοῦ Θεοῦ· ἰδοὺ γὰρ πρὸ τῶν ἐμῶν ὀφθαλμῶν ἄγγελος ὠρᾶτο Θεοῦ πλέκων μοι στέφανον ἐξ ἀνθέων ὧν ὀφθαλμὸς οὐκ εἶδε καὶ οὐκ ἤκουσε, καὶ ἦδη τὴν χεῖρα διατεινομένην εἶχε τῇ ἐμῇ τοῦτον ἐπιθεῖναι κεφαλῇ· σοῦ δὲ τῆς προμηθείας ἔνεκεν ἄπεισί με λιπῶν, ἔχων τὸν στέφανον μεθ’ ἑαυτοῦ. Τί οὖν μοι, τέκνον, ἀγνωμοσύνης χεῖρονα τὴν εὐγνωμοσύνην ἀπέδωκας; Μισῶ δωρεὰν προξενούσάν μοι ζημίαν.” Ὡς οὖν ταῦτα ἤκουσεν ἡ μαθήτρια, δάκρυα στάζουσα τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν ἤρξατο τὰ προσφύντα ταῖς σαρκὶ τῆς ὀσίας ῥακία ζέοντα ἔτι τοῖς δακτύλοις ἐκείθεν ἀνασπᾶν· καὶ ἰδοὺ ξένη τις ἐκ τούτων ἀνεπέμπετο εὐωδία μύρου παντὸς καὶ ἀρωμάτων πολυτίμων ἀσυγκρίτως εὐωδιστέρα, ἣτις ὄλην ἐπλήρωσε τὴν μονήν. (*VlChrys* p.44.14–27, p.46.1–26, p.48.1–9)

This episode can be divided into three scenes. The first scene is set in Irene’s cell. There appears Irene’s figure which has the characteristics of a statue; the heroine is standing speechless and immobile having her arms stretched to heaven. Obviously what marks this setting is a lack of both movement and sound. This situation changes dramatically when a group of demons appear unexpectedly in Irene’s cell. The demons’ entrance to the scene is accompanied by loud sounds which attempt to destroy Irene’s peaceful contemplation. While the acoustic chaos created by the demons presents a striking contrast to Irene’s silence, the movements made by the demons are opposed to her immobility.

The demons’ movements and behaviour, which are described vividly and in detail, have a dramatic character. The most evil demon separates himself from the group and approaches Irene seeking to communicate with her. In order to achieve that, he has to imitate human language. Thus he transforms the inarticulate and incomprehensible sounds, that he has emitted so far, into understandable phrases and sentences. The vocabulary he employs is, according to the hagiographer, borrowed from that of the mimes. The presentation of the demon as an actor is in accordance with the way the Church Fathers viewed the performance put on by Satan to deceive human beings and divert pious persons from righteous ways.<sup>6</sup>

The demon calls Irene “wooden”,<sup>7</sup> an adjective which in fact describes the substance of Irene’s new body and is in accordance with her portrayal as a statue.<sup>8</sup> As has been stated above, Irene’s body is exercised to such a high degree that it loses its natural flexibility. Later in the narrative Irene is called “night-eater”, “wooden leg”, “insatiable stander”, “ironhearted” and “subduer of stones” by the devil who inhabits a man whom she cures (*VlChrys* p.70.19–22). These phrases are obviously addressed to Irene in a hostile and ironic manner, since they are coming from her enemy, the devil. They, however, express the truth about Irene’s new self, which the hagiographer does not fail to depict and praise. The demons try to tempt Irene by reminding her of the natural body she renounces and of the one she possesses while performing her standing exercises.

The most evil demon of the demons’ chorus, who goes near Irene, appears at the beginning to assume a powerful position. This very fact is also proved by the discourse he employs and the mocking tone of his voice. The demon’s presentation of himself as powerful, however, is just a pretence. In fact, he sees himself and his fellow demons being in a powerless position before Irene, as the sudden change of his mood and behaviour shows. Behaving as a talented actor, he immediately transforms his mocking tone into lamentation through which Irene’s power over the demons emerges. Her power, according to the demon, takes the form of violent acts such as whipping and burning. On seeing and hearing the demon’s words, the other demons also begin lamenting.

The demons’ theatrical behaviour, which aims at undermining Irene’s ascetic practices, has no effect on her since she remains motionless and concentrated on her communication with the divine. Not being able to convince Irene with words and theatrical behaviour to interrupt her standing exercise, the demons employ violence. The most evil demon

<sup>7</sup> In the Life of Andrew the Fool, Andrew is described by the prostitutes as “wooden”, as a piece of stone for, despite their attempts, they do not manage to make him feel any sexual desire (*VAndr* p.34.311–312).

<sup>8</sup> The holy person’s image as a statue is a common motif in monastic literature (Gorce 1962: 213–214, n. 2). In the Life of Melania, during one of Melania’s teachings addressed to her nuns referring to the steadfastness in faith, she mentions the *apophthegma* of a holy father. According to this *apophthegma*, one can be saved only if one behaves like a statue, namely if one, like Irene here, does not react against the insults and the beatings directed to him or her by the enemies of Christianity (*VMel* ch.44).

<sup>6</sup> For John Chrysostom, for instance, see Leyerle 2001: 44–45.

sets fire to Irene's body and in this way he literally burns the heroine who "burns" the devil and his disciples with her steadfastness and ascetic life. His movements, which are described very vividly and in detail, make the dramatic character of the whole scene more prominent: first he stretches his hand, then he kindles a stick against the lamp-wick. Immediately afterwards he puts the burning stick to her neck, which takes fire at once. The fire goes down to her clothes and touches her flesh. It then starts burning her internal organs. At this point the first scene closes.

In the second scene, which is the shortest one, the protagonist's role is played by a nun of the convent whose name is not given by the hagiographer but whose actions, like those of the devils, are presented in detail. Following the example of her abbess, yet not in the same spectacular and uncommon way, the nun performs her nocturnal prayers. Unlike Irene, who does not interrupt her contemplation despite the incidents occurring in her cell and the fact that her body is about to burn, the nun breaks off her prayers in order to find the origin of the smell of burnt flesh that reaches her nose. Following the smell in the darkness, the nun ends up in Irene's cell where the third scene takes place. In this last scene, the nun becomes witness to a spectacle which is forbidden to her because it leads her to undertake actions that are against her superior's will. By entering Irene's cell and shaking her to extinguish the fire, the nun manages to do what the demons did not achieve earlier: to make Irene interrupt her standing exercise. Of course, the nun's initiative provokes Irene's angry reaction and this brings about her transformation from a statue into a living person. Now she moves and talks to the nun, blaming her for destroying her divine vision. While she was burning, she saw an angel who was twining a wreath of flowers which he was about to place on her head.

The demons' crying in the first scene is substituted by the nun's crying in the third scene, for causing her superior's anger and because she feels sorry for her behaviour. In both cases, however, crying is strongly associated with power and powerlessness. The characters who cry are the ones who find themselves in a powerless position before Irene. Both the demons and the nun attempt unsuccessfully to exercise a form of power over Irene, directed at her body. The demons appear to be able to burn Irene's body, whereas the nun is the one who saves it from being burnt.

Irene's "wooden" body constitutes the sign of her self-discipline and spiritual life of which the nuns should be constantly reminded so that they can lead their lives according to her example. However, Irene does not consider the example she offers to her nuns as the only means through which they can be disciplined and consequently led to salvation:

She said to herself, "If the Lord would grant me the gift of knowing by second sight those things which are done in secret by my sisters, I should try to set aright those who fall and stimulate those who are successful to run the race of virtue even more vigorously." (tr. Rosenqvist 1986: 39)

"Ἐλεγε γὰρ ἐν ἑαυτῇ· "Εἴ μοι διορατικῶς εἰδέναι κύριος ἔδωκε τὰ κρυφῆ παρὰ τῶν ἐμῶν ἀδελφῶν γινόμενα, τὰς μὲν ἐπηνώρθουν ἂν σφαλλομένας, τὰς δὲ προκοπτούσας τρέχειν ἂν συνώθουν τὸν δρόμον τῆς ἀρετῆς εὐτονώτερον." (*VlChr* p.38.18-22)

As soon as Irene is granted the gift of knowing the acts of her nuns, she arranges a meeting with each of them after the morning prayers. This takes place in the following way:

Calling each of the sisters in to her, naming their names and having them sit down beside her, she gently made intimations about obscure and secret things. Skilfully hinting at their souls' emotions and thoughts and pricking their conscience, she provoked them to confess their transgressions and repent, and exacted promises of complete improvement of such faults. This made the sisters beside themselves in amazement. No longer did they merely pay heed to her as before but confessed and proclaimed that Irene was superior to human beings. (tr. Rosenqvist 1986: 41)

καὶ τῶν ἀδελφῶν ὀνομαστὶ πρὸς ἑαυτὴν ἐκάστην καλοῦσα καὶ ταύτην παρακαθιζομένη ὁμαλῶς πῶς ὑπηνίττετο τὰ ἄδηλα καὶ κρύφια· καὶ τῶν τῆς ψυχῆς κινήματων αὐτῆς καὶ διανοημάτων εὐφυῶς καθήπτετο, νύττουσα τὸ συνειδὸς καὶ εἰς ὁμολογίαν τῶν σφαλμάτων καὶ μετάνοιαν ἐρεθίζουσα καὶ παντελοῦς λαμβάνουσα τῶν τοιούτων διορθώσεως ὑπόσχεσιν· ὅπερ ἐξίστασθαι ἑαυτῶν ἐποίει τὰς ἀδελφάς, καὶ οὐκέτι ταύτη προσεῖχον ὡς πρότερον, ἀλλ' ὑπὲρ ἄνθρωπον εἶναι τὴν Εἰρήνην καὶ ὠμολόγουν καὶ ἀνεκέρυττον. (*VlChr* p.40.17-25)

Through her divine gaze, Irene can acquire knowledge about her nuns of which they themselves may not always be aware. She can know which of their acts and thoughts are right or wrong. Such knowledge allows her, on one hand, to improve them by correcting their wrongdoings, something they would not be able to do on their own, and on the other,

to motivate them to perform even better deeds by praising their good works.

As already stated, the abbess' main task in the convent is the teaching of Christian ethics through which the religious lives of her nuns can be directed and formed. The abbess' teaching project, which is founded on her body, takes two forms: a practical and a theoretical form, both of which take up a considerable space in the narrative, a fact that underscores their importance. The practical form, which is related to the abbess' actions and general behaviour, has been examined in this section through the example of Irene. It is to the theoretical part of the abbess' teaching project that we now turn.

#### THE ABBESS' WORDS

The theoretical form of the abbess' teaching refers to her didactic discourses addressed both to her nuns and to the visitors of her convent. In most cases, the hagiographers choose the narrative technique of *telling* in order to depict the abbesses' exemplary acts of bodily subjection through asceticism, whereas they employ the technique of *showing* for the abbesses' edifying acts of speaking.<sup>9</sup> In telling, the omniscient narrator presents in his or her discourse the characters and their actions. In showing, the author silences the narrator's voice in order to give voice to the characters whose own discourse is quoted. In other words, as far as the technique of telling is concerned, the episodes of the narrative marked by the characters' behaviour and actions are presented from the narrator's point of view, while through the technique of showing, these episodes are depicted from the perspective of the characters. Thus, during most of the theoretical part of the abbess' teachings, it is her voice which speaks and not that of the narrator. In this case, the employment of the technique of showing, in which the narrator "shows" to his or her audiences the way by which the abbess preaches both to her nuns and to the laity, provides the texts with a vividness that has effects on the actual audiences of the Lives. In her sermons, the holy abbess speaks either in the first person plural, namely as "we", or in the second person plural, that is "you":

<sup>9</sup> The narrative terms *telling* and *showing* were coined by Wayne Booth in his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961). Gérard Genette (1980) equates *telling* and *showing* with the Platonic terms *diegesis* and *mimesis*.

*Sisters*, recall how the subjected stand before their mortal and worldly rulers with all fear and vigilance; so *we*, who stand before the fearsome and heavenly King, should perform our liturgy with much fear and trembling. (tr. Clark 1984: 56; emphasis added)

Κατανοήσατε, ἀδελφαί, πῶς τοῖς φθαρτοῖς καὶ ἐπιγείοις ἄρχουσιν μετὰ παντὸς φόβου καὶ νήψεως παρίστανται οἱ ὑποτεταγμένοι ἡμεῖς δὲ τῷ φοβερῷ καὶ ἐπουρανίῳ βασιλεῖ παριστάμενοι, μετὰ πόσου φόβου καὶ τρόμου ὀφείλομεν ἐκτελεῖν ἑαυτῶν τὴν λειτουργίαν. (*VMel* ch.42; emphasis added)

The fact that the abbess' words are addressed to "us" and "you" creates the illusion that they are not only directed to the texts' internal audiences, the nuns and the laity, but also to the texts' external audiences which possibly also consisted of nuns and laypeople. According to the hagiographers, the heroines' sermons always have a large impact on their listeners who are inspired by divine zeal and who then transform the holy women's words into practice. In Melania's Life, after quoting Melania's sermon on chastity addressed to laypeople, the hagiographer states: "Many who heard these things were zealous for purity and leaped into the arena of virtue" (tr. Clark 1984: 47; Ταῦτα δὲ πολλοὶ ἀκούοντες ἐζήλωσαν τὴν ἀγνείαν καὶ τοῖς σκάμμασιν τῆς ἀρετῆς ἐπεπήδησαν. *VMel* ch.29).

Melania's *didaskalia* to her nuns has a similar influence. Referring to Melania's words on the nuns' participation in nocturnal liturgy, the hagiographer points out:

By thus saying these things, she affirmed the sisters' zeal through her teaching, so that when the blessed woman wished to spare them in their vigil, because of the great toil which they had had ..., they would not agree. (tr. Clark 1984: 60)

Καὶ ταῦτα λέγουσα οὕτως αὐτῶν τὴν προθυμίαν ἐπερρώννυνεν τῇ καλῇ διδασκαλίᾳ, ὥστε, εἰ καὶ ποτε ἠβούλετο ἡ μακαρία φείσασθαι αὐτῶν ἐν τῇ ἀγρυπνίᾳ διὰ τὸ εἶναι αὐτὰς ἀπὸ πολλοῦ κόπου ..., αὐταὶ οὐ συνεχώρουν. (*VMel* ch.48)

Taking into account the edifying function of saints' Lives in Byzantine society, one cannot avoid seeing the effect which the abbess' *didaskalia* appears to have on the text's internal listeners as a metaphor for the effect that the hagiographer aims at having on his or her own audiences by employing the technique of showing. Since the Lives of saints used to be read out loud, the external listeners of the texts could

identify with the internal listeners of the abbesses' discourses.

The success of the abbess' sermons can be attributed to two important factors: the accordance of her words with her life and the highly rhetorical character of her speeches. The abbess' words find their first application in her own deeds. Her act of telling is at the same time a gesture of showing. She talks about fasting, vigils, prayers and virtues, while she herself is the living example of all these. Her speaking body, which stands before the nuns, reveals through its appearance her ascetic life (it is skinny and tired) and her lack of vanity (her garments are of hair-cloth [Melania] or she possesses only the one garment she wears [Irene]). Thus the abbess' language does not constitute just an instrument of representation but it places the addressees under the obligation to respond to her words with actions. As stressed by Irene in one of her teachings, words without actions are meaningless:

Endure the words I speak in my humility: they are brought to you in love. For unless we lead this ascetic life, to which we have submitted ourselves voluntarily, in accordance with the laws laid down for it, we shall have no profit even from faith itself. Yes, faith without works is dead. (tr. Rosenqvist 1986: 33)

ἀνέχεσθαι τῶν ῥημάτων τῆς ἐμῆς ταπεινώσεως δι' ἀγάπην ὑμῖν προσφερομένων· καὶ γὰρ ἂν τὸν βίον τοῦτον τὸν ἀσκητικόν, ὃν ὑπήλθομεν ἐκουσίως, μὴ κατὰ τοὺς αὐτῶ κειμένους μετέλθωμεν νόμους, οὐδὲ ἡμῖν ὄφελος οὐδ' αὐτῆς τῆς πίστεως. Χωρὶς γὰρ ἔργων ἡ πίστις νεκρά. (*VlChrys* p.32.19–23)

The abbess' edifying discourses are also influential and persuasive as linguistic products. The abbess appears to be rhetorically competent and can manipulate language in ways that give rise to powerful effects. The following extract from one of Irene's sermons addressed to her nuns is a good specimen of an abbess' rhetorical talents:

We have heard of a Kingdom of Heaven, an eternal and endless life, and an enjoyment of undefiled and everlasting good things. We have come to believe in Jesus our God and Lord who brought these good news and gave these promises: in Him we do believe. [...] The Lord said, "No man can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will hold to the one and despise the other" (Mt. 6.24; Lk. 16.13). Being one, the soul cannot be divided into two, nor can the same soul simultaneously enjoy herself and restrain herself, both live in poverty and be rich, both seek the Lord's humility and win the futile glory of men. We, then,

have forsaken all and followed Him. To follow Him will be of no avail to us if we do so merely corporeally, but only if our soul and our whole inner being follow Him too. Yes, we must dispel all desire and attachment to this life from our souls, lest we, outwardly appearing to have fled this world, be inwardly in the very middle of the world. [...] Let it be our work and our hard struggle to acquire such virtues as will save us, namely, purity and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord (Heb. 12.14) but shall hear, "Away with the ungodly one lest he behold the majesty of the Lord!" (Is. 26.11). Humility, for whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased, as the Lord said, and that humbleth himself shall be exalted (Lk. 14.11). [...] purity is above nature, above nature is also freedom from passion. But when He came who is above nature, being both God and man, He gave these things above nature to those who believe in Him. They are given, however, only to those who pray for them, and even to them not when in doubt of the heart; for a double minded man is unstable in all his ways. (Iac. 1.8; tr. Rosenqvist 1986: 33, 35, 37)

Ἡκούσαμεν γὰρ βασιλείαν οὐρανῶν,  
ζῶην αἰδίου καὶ ἀτελεύτητον,  
τρυφὴν ἀκηράτων αἰωνίων ἀγαθῶν·

ἐπιστεύσαμεν τῷ εὐαγγελισμένῳ  
καὶ ὑποσχόμενῳ Ἰησοῦ  
τῷ Θεῷ καὶ κυρίῳ ἡμῶν,  
εἰς ὃν καὶ πεπιστεύκαμεν.

[...]

Εἶπε γὰρ ὁ κύριος·  
"Οὐδεὶς δύναται δυοὶ κυρίοις δουλεῦειν·  
ἢ γὰρ τὸν ἓνα μισήσει καὶ τὸν ἕτερον ἀγαπήσει  
ἢ τοῦ ἑνὸς ἀνθέξεται καὶ τοῦ ἑτέρου καταφρονήσει."

Μία γὰρ οὐσα ἡ ψυχὴ εἰς δύο μερισθῆναι οὐ δύναται·  
οὐ δύναται ἢ αὐτὴ ἐν ταύτῳ καὶ τρυφᾶν καὶ ἐγκρατεῦσθαι,  
καὶ πτωχείαν χρημάτων ἔχειν καὶ πλουτεῖν ἐν χρήμασι,  
καὶ ταπεινῶσιν τοῦ κυρίου μετιέναι  
καὶ τὴν κενὴν τῶν ἀνθρώπων θερίζειν δόξαν.

Ἡμεῖς οὖν ἀφήκαμεν πάντα καὶ ἠκολούθησαμεν αὐτῷ.  
Ἐὰν μὴ καὶ ἡ ψυχὴ ἡμῶν καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐντὸς ἡμῶν ἀκολουθῆ,  
οὐδὲν ἡμῖν ὄφελος ἡ σωματικῆ μόνον ἀκολουθήσις·  
ἀλλὰ δεόν ἡμᾶς πᾶσαν ἀπὸ τῆς ψυχῆς διῶξαι  
βιωτικὴν ἐπιθυμίαν καὶ προσπάθειαν,

ἵνα μὴ τὰ ἔξω φαινόμενα τὸν κόσμον φυγοῦσαι  
τὰ ἔνδον μέσον ὤμεν τοῦ κόσμου.

[...]

Τὸ δὲ ἔργον ἡμῶν καὶ τὸ ἀγώνισμα τὸ μέγα ἐκεῖνο ἂν εἴη,  
τὸ τὰς ἀρετὰς ἐκείνας κτήσασθαι, αἱ σῶζουσιν ἡμᾶς·  
τὴν ἀγνεῖαν τε καὶ τὸν ἀγιασμόν,  
οὐ χωρὶς οὐδεὶς ὄψεται τὸν κύριον

ἀλλ' ἀκούσει

“Ἀρθήτω ὁ ἀσεβής, ἵνα μὴ ἴδῃ τὴν δόξαν κυρίου,”

τὴν ταπεινοφροσύνην, ὅτι

“Πᾶς ὁ ὑψῶν ἑαυτὸν ταπεινωθήσεται,”

εἶπεν ὁ κύριος,

“ὁ δὲ ταπεινῶν ἑαυτὸν ὑψωθήσεται.”

[...]

Ἵπὲρ φύσιν γὰρ ἡ ἀγνεῖα,

ὑπὲρ φύσιν καὶ τὸ ἀόρητον.

Ἄφ' οὗ δὲ ὁ ὑπὲρ φύσιν παρεγένετο,

Θεὸς ὢν καὶ ἄνθρωπος,

καὶ τὰ ὑπὲρ φύσιν ταῦτα

τοῖς πιστεύουσιν εἰς αὐτὸν ἐδωρήσατο·

δωρεῖται δὲ τοῖς αἰτοῦσι μόνοις,

καὶ τούτοις μὴ ἐν δισταγμῷ καρδίας·

“Ἄνθρωπος γὰρ δίψυχος ἀκατάστατος ἐν πάσαις ταῖς ὁδοῖς αὐτοῦ.”

(*VlChr* p.32.24–27, p.34.3–14 and 23–30, p.36.10–15)<sup>10</sup>

Irene's sermon is characterised by its prominent biblical style that becomes obvious from the very first sentence opening with a verb in the first person plural: ἠκούσαμεν. The biblical tone of the sermon is not only to be recognised in the repetitive use of verbs in the first person plural but also in the biblical citations employed by Irene which are so successfully incorporated in her speech that they become inseparable parts of it.

Irene mentions only one of her sources, namely Christ in the Gospels. She quotes some of the aphorisms he employed during his teachings. After each quotation of Christ's words, Irene's own discourse imitates

<sup>10</sup> I print the Greek text in such a way as to make its poetic elements more obvious.

the style of Christ's speech. Such an example is the following:

*No man can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will hold to the one and despise the other. (Mt. 6.24; Lk. 16.13) Being one, the soul cannot be divided into two, nor can the same soul simultaneously enjoy herself and restrain herself, both live in poverty and be rich. (tr. Rosenqvist 1986: 35)*

“Οὐδεὶς δύναται δυοῖς κυρίοις δουλεῦν·

ἢ γὰρ τὸν ἓνα μισήσει καὶ τὸν ἕτερον ἀγαπήσει

ἢ τοῦ ἐνὸς ἀνθέξεται καὶ τοῦ ἑτέρου καταφρονήσει.”

Μία γὰρ οὐσα ἡ ψυχὴ εἰς δύο μερισθῆναι οὐ δύναται·

οὐ δύναται ἡ αὐτὴ ἐν ταύτῳ καὶ τρυφᾶν καὶ ἐγκρατεῦσθαι,

καὶ πτωχεῖαν χρημάτων ἔχειν καὶ πλουτεῖν ἐν χρήμασι.

(*VlChr* p.34.4–8; emphasis added)

Here Irene follows the paratactic structure adopted in the speech that is supposed to belong to Christ. Like Christ's speech, her own is based on binary oppositions. She also repeats words from Christ's text. The biblical style of Irene's sermon achieves a double effect. On one hand it provides the sermon with religious authority which establishes Irene's role as a preacher. On the other hand it makes her sermon acoustically pleasant and therefore easier to learn and to apply. Irene's sermon contains an abundance of rhetorical devices, such as aphorisms, pleonasms, repetition of the same words which create a rhyme, metaphors, images, symbols and stylistic symmetry which is formed by binary oppositions.

In the Life of an abbess, the techniques the abbess employs for spiritual instruction are mainly directed towards a number of anonymous nuns whose existence and actions acquire importance in the narrative as long as they highlight the abbess' exemplarity and allow her to attain higher levels of spirituality.<sup>11</sup> The nuns' anonymity, and the lack of any episodes or subplots referring to their bodily subjections and spiritual achievements mark their unimportance as individuals in relation to the holy abbess. Thus, in the Life of an abbess, even though her disciplinary project is addressed to her nuns, it serves in fact her desire to become a

<sup>11</sup> There are some cases in which a nun's name is given, but these cases are not related to the abbess' disciplinary project. Such an instance is when the abbess lying on her deathbed names the nun who will succeed her.

saint: she is sanctified because she is exemplary. She is the one who is singled out through her disciplinary strategies, and not her nuns, since the locus where these strategies are performed is her own body, which shows and tells. In other words, in an abbess' Life the emphasis is placed on the one part of the disciplinary project that is the teacher and not on the second part which consists of the disciples.

In their attempt to present the abbesses as heroines belonging to a divine rather than to a human world, the hagiographers provide them with godly attributes. The abbesses' approach towards their people, namely the nuns, resembles God's treatment of his people. Like God, the abbesses see their nuns from a distance and in secret and they develop no personal and close relationships with any of them. The lack of any personal relationships between the abbess and some of her nuns of course reinforces the abbess' individuality and spiritual distance which mark her protagonist's role in the narrative and in the end effect her sanctity. The situation changes in the Life of a nun.

### The Obedient Body of the Nun

#### THE NUN UNDER THE ABBESS' CONTROL

In the Life of a nun the abbess' disciplinary strategies appear to be directed not to a number of nuns, but to a particular nun, on the body of whom these strategies are manifested thus making this nun the central heroine of the narrative. For a large part of the protagonist nun's cenobitic career, the abbess appears to manipulate, to train, to punish the nun's body, to make it obey, respond and become pious. In the nun's Life, the abbess' *didaskalia* loses the public character it has in the Life of an abbess and takes a private form. The abbess appears to build up with her didactic discourse only the protagonist nun, and her divine gaze focuses mainly on this specific nun whose actions and behaviour it carefully examines and corrects. In contrast to the Life of the abbess, in a nun's Life the disciplinary practices exercised by the abbess seek to improve and lead to holiness only the protagonist nun.

In the Life of a nun, the form which the abbess' approach towards her nuns takes constitutes a combination of two different types of behaviour: she behaves both like the Christian God, as she does when she is the central heroine of a Life, and like a mother. She appears to be the distant, religious authority before all the nuns except for the central hero-

ine, with whom she creates a mother-daughter relationship through the disciplinary strategies she applies to her. The image of the abbess as both God and mother is in accordance with God's image in the Old Testament where God is sometimes presented having motherly behaviour towards his chosen people, the Israelites (Bynum-Walker 1982: 125).<sup>12</sup>

Like God who in the Old Testament "chooses" his people, the abbess "chooses" the central heroine, who is distinguished among the other nuns for her beauty, divine zeal and obedience, and devotes her life rather to this nun's salvation than to her own. By doing this, the abbess behaves not much differently from a mother who is prepared to undergo self-sacrifice in order to protect her children whom she loves more than herself. An abbess also shares an agony similar to that of a mother, which is manifested in a continuous struggle to bring up her children rightly so that they prove successful in their social roles when they grow up. The abbess struggles to provide her favourite nun with the conditions and means needed in order to offer her a place in the society of saints.

The nun, on the other hand, like an infant that is incapable of satisfying its own needs and consequently depends absolutely on its mother's care, relies for a long time on the abbess' advice and instructions. Through her abbess' help, the nun attempts to construct her spiritual self. Eventually the nun becomes spiritually independent. This occurs when the nun identifies with the abbess and becomes her double, as it will be shown later.

In two Lives out of the five in which the role of the nun is depicted, the chosen nun is a blood relative of the abbess, a fact that reinforces the abbess' motherly feelings towards her. Febronia, the first example, is the daughter of the abbess Bryene's brother. Bryene takes Febronia under her protection from the early age of two and brings her up, replacing her physical mother. The second example is Theodora of Thessalonike. The abbess of the convent of Saint Stephen, Anna, is her relative and for this reason she treats Theodora, who lost her natural mother in infancy, as her own child. She says to Theodora when the latter asks her to include her in the group of her nuns:

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Is. 49.15:

"The Lord has forsaken me; my God has forgotten me."  
Can a woman forget the infant at her breast,  
or a loving mother the child of her womb?  
Even these forget, yet I will not forget you.

Since you are my blood [relative] and my child and I am well aware of the mode of life [you have led] since you were in swaddling clothes, how should I not welcome you and embrace you as if you were one of my limbs? (tr. Talbot 1996b: 181–182)

Αἴμα ἐμόν σε καί τέκνον ὑπάρχουσαν καί τήν ἐκ σπαργάνων σου εἰδυῖα διαγωγὴν, πῶς οὐ προσδέξομαι καί ὡς οἰκεῖον καταφιλήσω μέλος; (*VTheodThess* ch.21.2–4)

Theodora returns Anna's motherly feelings towards her by appearing to be a real daughter to her: she takes responsibility for her when Anna reaches very old age and needs to be looked after. Theodora's portrayal as the good daughter who takes care of her old parents is accentuated by the hagiographer's statement that Theodora was:

Mindful to the One Who says, "Child, help thy father in his old age, and grieve him not as long as he liveth. And if his understanding fails, have patience with him, and despise him not when thou art in thy full strength. For compassion for a father will not be forgotten." (Sir. 3.12–14; tr. Talbot 1996b: 196)

μεμνημένη τοῦ λέγοντος: "τέκνον, ἀντιλαβοῦ ἐν γῆρα πατρός σου, καί μὴ λυπήσης αὐτὸν ἐν τῇ ζωῇ σου· καὶ ἂν ἀπολίπη σύνεσιν, συγγνώμην ἔχε, καὶ μὴ ἀτιμᾶσης αὐτὸν ἐν πάσῃ ἰσχύϊ σου. Ἐλεημοσύνη γὰρ πατρός οὐκ ἐπιλησθήσεται." (*VTheodThess* ch.37.27–31)

The main difference between a mother and the abbesses appearing in the Lives of nuns lies in the fact that a mother has in mind the welfare of her children, whereas abbesses seek to lead their chosen nuns to a total indifference of worldly things so that they might achieve holiness. An abbess' motherly affection towards her favourite nun is translated into an ascetic training which is harder than the one imposed on the other nuns. Bryene, for instance, orders Febronia to eat only once every second day, whereas all the other nuns are allowed to eat every day. This different treatment of Febronia by the abbess serves as a motivation for Febronia to restrict herself to an even stricter regime and she refrains from bread and water. In addition, unlike the other nuns, Febronia sleeps on a narrow stool and sometimes she makes her sleep even more uneasily by sleeping on the ground (*PFeb* ch.5).

With the consent and even the encouragement of the abbess, the chosen nun's ascetic life appears to violate the convent's rules, according to which all nuns should be treated in the same way and should follow

the same ascetic practices. Theodora of Thessalonike knows that she breaks the convent's rules by fasting more than the nuns who had entered the convent before her. For this reason she keeps her fasting secret. However, when the abbess realises this she not only approves it but also encourages Theodora to fast openly:

Desiring to increase [her exercise of] this virtue even more in the convent, and not being bold enough to ask the superior [for permission] to fast more than the nuns who had come there before her, nor daring to break the monastic rule, lest she thereby give offence to the nuns, she used to sit in the refectory with the nuns, but hardly touched food. And often she did not drink water for an entire week. But she did not do this for long without the knowledge of her superior. For she [Anna] bade her to practice openly, as best she could, this [fasting] and whatever else was profitable to her, because she loved Theodora. (tr. Talbot 1996b: 183)

Διά τοι καὶ ἐν τῷ κοινοβίῳ ἐπιθυμοῦσα ταύτην καὶ μᾶλλον αὖξειν, καὶ μὴ θαρροῦσα τὴν προεστῶσαν ἐξαιτήσασθαι τοῦ περισσοτέρως τῶν πρὸ αὐτῆς ἐκέισε τεταγμένων ἀδελφῶν ἐγκρατεῦσθαι, μήτε τολμῶσα τὸν τῆς μονῆς καταλύσαι κανόνα, ἵνα μὴ σκάνδαλον ταῖς ἀδελφαῖς ἐκ τούτου προσάψειν, ἐκάθητο μὲν μετὰ τῶν ἀδελφῶν ἐν τῇ τραπέζῃ, ἔμενεν δὲ παρὰ μικρὸν νῆστις· καὶ πολλακίς πᾶσαν τὴν ἑβδομάδα οὐδὲ ὕδατος ἐγεύετο. Ἄλλ' οὐκ ἀπὸ σκοποῦ τῆς προεστῶσης μέχρι πολλοῦ τοῦτο διετελεῖτο. Ἐνετείλατο γὰρ καὶ τοῦτο καὶ πᾶν ὃ λυσιτελές εἶη αὐτῇ φανερώς ποιεῖν ὅση δύναμις, ὅτι ἡγάπα τὴν Θεοδώραν. (*VTheodThess* ch.22.12–22)

The fact that there is a nun in the convent who has different ascetic rights from the other nuns and is provided with more spiritual affection, at times provokes the envy of some of the other nuns and disturbs the relations between them and the protagonist nun or the abbess. In Febronia's Passion, the nuns of the convent turn against Bryene, who because of Febronia's illness is not prepared to let them leave the nunnery so that they can avoid being arrested by the pagan soldiers (*PFeb* ch.10).

In Eupraxia's Life, Germana, a fellow nun of Eupraxia motivated by envy tries to tempt Eupraxia. She presents Eupraxia's strict and different ascetic life as false and claims that Eupraxia undergoes harsh asceticism in order to distinguish herself from the other nuns because she wants to be chosen as the future abbess of the convent (*VEupr* ch.20). Germana's thought that Eupraxia's ascetic performances would allow her to become an abbess reflects a reality that is strongly supported by the Lives of nuns. As we will see later, the abbess views the protago-

nist nun's salvation as a personal matter because she intends to make her her successor.

The difference between a physical mother and an abbess behaving like a mother is graphically illustrated in Theodora's Life, where Theodora leads her cenobitic life in the same convent as her daughter Theopiste. Being tempted by the devil, Theodora begins worrying about Theopiste's welfare. She says to the abbess:

My Lady Mother, you who alone are concerned with my soul, I cannot endure to see the daughter born of my womb clothed in a cheap and tattered garment and subsisting on so little food. Please arrange for her to be transferred to another convent, since I cannot bear the fire in my heart. For I am a mother, and like all [mothers], I am too devoted to my child. (tr. Talbot 1996b: 185–186)

Κυρία μήτηρ, σοῦ τῆς ψυχῆς μόνης ποιούσης τὴν ἐπιμέλειαν, οὐ φέρω τὴν ἐκ τῶν ἐμῶν σπλάγχχνων τεχθεῖσαν καθορᾶν εὐτελεῖ καὶ διερρηγμένῳ ῥακίῳ περικαλυπτομένην καὶ βραχυτάτῃ διαιτωμένην τροφῇ. Κέλευσον οὖν αὐτὴν ἐτέρῳ μοναστηρίῳ δοθῆναι, ἐπεὶ οὐ φέρω τὴν τῶν σπλάγχχνων μου πύρωσιν· μήτηρ γάρ εἰμι, καὶ ὡς πᾶσαι καὶ γὼ περὶ τὸ τέκνον διάκειμαι. (*VTheodThess* ch.25.14–20)

Here Theodora, being influenced by her motherly instincts—she is a mother who suffers by seeing her daughter's body suffering—misunderstands the abbess' role as a mother. She seems to expect that the abbess would behave towards her in the way a natural mother like herself does, one who would do everything to avoid her child's bodily sufferings. Thus she asks the abbess to send Theopiste away so that she can be released from her own sufferings as a mother. The abbess replies to Theodora's request by engaging in a long private edifying speech in which she presents Theodora's motherly behaviour as worldly and as such that contradicts the angelic habit of the nun which she has decided to adopt. She finally threatens Theodora with punishment if she goes on treating Theopiste as her daughter.

After this incident, Anna, as a genuine spiritual mother and relative of Theodora, who is highly concerned about her salvation, seeks to find a way to free Theodora from her emotional attachment to her daughter (*VTheodThess* ch.27.2–7). She therefore examines Theodora's behaviour more intensively in order to find an instance in which Theodora shows motherly affection towards her daughter. When such an in-

stance occurs, Anna orders the two women not to talk to each other any longer (*VTheodThess* ch.27.36–39). Through this punishment both women are disciplined, especially Theodora who is not interested in her daughter's welfare any more but only in her spiritual improvement.

The protagonist nun's spiritual dependence on the mother-abbess, and the complete control of the latter over the nun, are manifested mainly in two disciplinary methods employed by the abbess: punishment and confession. The abbess utilises punishment when her favourite nun fails to follow her instructions, as the example of Theodora demonstrates. In fact, Theodora of Thessalonike, being punished twice during her cenobitic career, is the only protagonist nun who undergoes punishment.

Punishment as an instrument of discipline is also directed at holy women enacting other roles of sainthood, such as the martyr (Chapter 1) and the pious wife (Chapter 5). The difference between the punishment of a nun and those of a martyr and a pious wife is that in the first instance the punishment has a positive connotation, whereas in the second it acquires a negative meaning. Both the martyr and the pious wife are punished by violent and hostile male authorities in order that they either renounce their faith (martyr) or give up their God-pleasing activities (pious wife). The nun, however, is punished out of motherly love in order to become spiritually better.

Theodora's second offence is the following: on a cold winter's night, without informing her abbess, Theodora removes her rush mat from its usual place because the place gets wet. The abbess sees this movement of Theodora as a form of selfishness. Aiming at striking at the root of Theodora's offence based on selfishness and at offering an example of obedience and humility to the other nuns, the abbess imposes on Theodora a punishment both humiliating and painful. She orders Theodora to spend the night outside in the severe cold. Theodora's punishment, witnessed by the nuns and seen by the angels, is quite spectacular:

She went out to the assigned spot, paying no heed to the extremely bitter weather and the torrential downpour of rain at that time and icy cold and violent blasts of wind. Thus from evening on she spent the night outdoors, sitting on both feet. For she was unable to sit down all the way because of the rainwater flowing beneath her. O, what a marvel! The angels were astonished to see such a terrible sight, a woman, the soft and *weakest vessel* (1 Pet. 3.7), thus spending the night in the open air, being assailed by constant pelting of rain and frozen by the cold because of the order of the moth-

er superior. [...] Around midnight when the rain stopped and the bitter air became even colder because a lot of snow had fallen, the raindrops froze and stuck to the tattered garment that covered her head and shoulders. (tr. Talbot 1996b: 192)

εἰς τὸν ὀρισθέντα τόπον ἐξῆει τῆς δριμυτάτης ὥρας καταφρονήσασα καὶ τοῦ ραγδαίως τότε καταφερομένου ὑετοῦ καὶ τῆς κρυμώδους ἐκείνης καὶ διαίαις τῶν ἀνέμων πνοῆς. Τοιγαροῦν ἀφ' ἐσπέρας ἐπ' ἀμφοτέροις καθεσθεῖσα ποσί, διενυκτέρευε αἰθριος. Οὐδὲ γὰρ τέλεον καθεσθῆναι ἡδύνατο διὰ τὸ ἐκ τοῦ ὑετοῦ κάτῳθεν ὑπορρέον ὕδωρ. Ὡ τοῦ θαύματος· ἐξέστησαν ἄγγελιοι τοῦτο τὸ φρικτὸν ὄραμα βλέποντες, γυναῖκα, τὸ ἀσθενέστατον καὶ μαλακὸν σκεῦος, οὕτως αἰθριον διανυκτερεύουσιν, πυκνοῖς βόλοις βαλλομένην τοῦ ὄμβρου καὶ πηγνυμένην τῷ κρύει διὰ τὴν τῆς μητρὸς ἐντολήν. [...] Περὶ δὲ τὸ μεσονύκτιον τῆς τοῦ ἀέρος πικρίας διὰ τὸ καὶ χιόνα καταβληθῆναι πολλήν, αἱ τοῦ ὄμβρου σταγόνες κατὰ τοῦ ἐπὶ τῆς κεφαλῆς αὐτῆς καὶ τῶν ὤμων κειμένου ῥάκουσ κρυσταλλωθεῖσαι ἐκρέμαντο. (*VTheodThess* ch.33.8–17 and 19–22)

The situation of Theodora's body as described in the above passage produces the truth of her sin. She attempted to protect her body by avoiding getting wet through sleeping on a wet floor: now, not only is water all around her, but she is also exposed to extremely bad weather conditions. Theodora's long stay outside in the cold results in her head and shoulders being turned into an icy bust.

As for confession, in the monastic contexts depicted in the examined texts, it sometimes appears to be a painful experience which the protagonist nun tries to avoid. Eupraxia, for instance, does not inform her abbess about her first temptations because she is ashamed of talking about them (*VEupr* ch.14). Part of the nun's monastic training is also to learn to confess. Anna, the abbess of Theodora of Thessalonike, "exhorts her night and day to confess her deeds and her thoughts, her words and her movements, and not to do anything without her approval" (tr. Talbot 1996b: 183; καὶ παρήνει νύκτωρ τε καὶ μεθ' ἡμέραν τὰς πράξεις καὶ ἐνθυμήσεις, τὰ ῥήματα καὶ τὰς κινήσεις ἐξαγορεύειν καὶ μηδὲν ἄνευ τῆς γνώμης αὐτῆς δρᾶν. *VTheodThess* ch.22.26–28). The act of confession becomes easier for the nun as she realises that nothing escapes the divine gaze of her abbess.

Confession appears as a necessity for the nun. By verbalising her temptations and the thoughts that preoccupy her mind, she can see what occurs inside her and learn about herself. The abbess, who is there to listen, gives advice deriving from her own experience about how

to overcome temptations. The ways suggested by the abbess for defeating temptations are related to stricter ascetic practices or labour through which the heroine is humiliated and her body suffers. Eupraxia, for example, is once asked to abstain from eating for one more day and thus she ends up eating only two days a week (*VEupr* ch.15). At some other point, when Eupraxia is again tempted and she confesses to the abbess, her abbess orders her to remove some heavy stones from their original place next to the convent's oven, and from the oven back to their place, and repeat this task for thirty days while she is seen and mocked by the other nuns (*VEupr* chs.16–17).

In contrast to the nun, the abbess does not need confession, since she possesses such high levels of spirituality, as the example of Irene as abbess that was discussed earlier, indicates. While she is a nun, however, Irene cannot defeat her temptations without confession:

But with her pure spiritual eye she [Irene] perceived this to be part of the Evil One's plot and immediately revealed all these thoughts to her guide and abbess. Finding relief from the attack through her confession, she persevered in her struggle as before. (tr. Rosenqvist 1986: 21)

Ἡ δὲ τῷ κεκαθαρμένῳ τῆς διανοίας ὄμματι τῆς ἐπιβουλῆς εἶναι ταῦτα τοῦ πονηροῦ μὴ ἀγνοήσασα, παραυτίκα πάντας τοὺς τοιοῦτους διαλογισμοὺς ἀνακαλύπτει τῇ ὁδηγῷ καὶ καθηγουμένη, καὶ διὰ τῆς ἐξαγορεύσεως ἀπαλλαγὴν εὐρούσα τῆς ἐπηρείας τῶν προτέρων ὁμοίως ἀγώνων εἶχετο. (*VIrChrys* p.20.2–6)

After having been trained for a long time under the close supervision of her abbess, the nun "grows up" spiritually and reaches a stage at which she does not need her abbess' disciplinary methods. In other words, she ceases to be the "infant" for which life is impossible without a mother's care and she becomes capable of taking care both of herself and others. It is to this new stage of the nun's life that we now turn.

#### THE NUN AS THE ABBESS' DOUBLE

That in the texts devoted to the nun's role the abbess takes many pains to create the ideal nun so that the latter proves to be the abbess' own plant is very graphically expressed in Febronia's Passion:

Febronia said, "I have faith in God, mother; just as in the past I have never transgressed your commandments, so now I will not do so or be neglectful of your admonitions. Rather, let the peoples see and be astounded, let

them congratulate the aged Bryene and say, truly this is a plant belonging to Bryene.” (tr. Brock and Ashbrook-Harvey 1987: 163)

Φεβρωνία λέγει “πιστεύω εἰς τὸν Θεὸν μητέρα μου ὅτι ὡς οὐδέποτε παρηλάθον σου ἐντολὴν οὐδὲ νῦν παρέλθω τὴν ἐντολὴν σου καὶ τὴν παραίνεσιν· ἀλλ’ ὄφονται πολλοὶ καὶ ἐκστήσονται καὶ μακαριοῦσι τὸ γῆρας Βρυένης καὶ εἴπωσιν ἀληθῶς αὐτὴ ἢ φυτεία Βρυένης ἐστίν”. (*PFeb* ch.19)

The creation of the ideal nun is associated with the abbess’ desire to secure the continuity of the convent’s spiritual life according to her own principles. Being aware of the fact that one day she will die, the abbess needs to prepare her successor, who should be a nun with the potential to become an even better abbess than herself. To be highly concerned about her successor is one of the abbess’ responsibilities towards her nuns for whom the presence of a pious and exemplary abbess is crucial, as indicated in Irene’s Life. On the deathbed of the abbess of Chrysobalanton, Irene and her fellow nuns express in tears, on one hand, their distress at losing their abbess who proved ideal for their instruction, and on the other, they show their anxiety concerning the finding of an abbess equal to her. They say to her:

What will become of us when you leave us? Where shall we find your equal to succeed you as abbess, someone who will love us with deeper care than a mother, being good and meek as you, and bear the burdens of each of us and fulfil the law of Christ amongst us as you have done? (tr. Rosenqvist 1986: 25)

Ποῦ τοίνυν ἡμᾶς καταλιμπάνεις, ποῦ ποτε τοιαύτης ἡμεῖς μετὰ σε τύχοιμεν προστάτιδος καὶ μητρὸς κηδεμονικώτερον περὶ ἡμᾶς διατεθειμένης, οὕτως ἀγαθῆς, οὕτω πραεῖας, οὕτως ἐκάστης ἡμῶν τὰ βάρη βασταζούσης καὶ τὸν νόμον ἐν ἡμῖν ἀναπληρούσης τοῦ Χριστοῦ; (*VlIrChrys* p.24.5–9)

The abbess, however, does not share the nuns’ anxieties, since she has arranged for her successor. She replies to the nuns:

Why do you disquiet my soul with your crying? In fact, my children, you already possess your future good shepherd. Believe me, she is as superior to me as I am to you owing to my age, and the spirit of God resteth upon her. If you obey my advice not to look for anyone else—, it is your sister Irene I mean. (tr. Rosenqvist 1986: 25)

Ἴνα τί μου τὴν ψυχὴν συνταράσσετε ὀλολύζουσαι; Ἐχετε, τέκνα, ἔχετε τὴν καλῶς ὑμᾶς ποιμανοῦσαν· πιστεύσατε τοσοῦτον ὑπὲρ ἡμᾶς οὐσαν,

ὅσον ἐγὼ τῷ γῆρα ὑπὲρ ὑμᾶς, καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ Θεοῦ ἀναπέπαιται ἐπ’ αὐτῆ. Καὶ ἦν ἐμοὶ πείθησθε μὴ ἂν πρὸς ἑτέραν ἀποβλέψαι—, τὴν ἀδελφὴν ὑμῶν Εἰρήνην λέγω. (*VlIrChrys* p.24.12–17)

The notion of continuity is an integral part of the cenobitic life. The abbesses, who in the nuns’ Lives choose a nun whom they undertake to train so that she can succeed them, behave like the abbesses whom they themselves used to have. The abbess of a nun’s Life was once a nun herself who was also chosen by her abbess and instructed by her in such a way in order to become an abbess herself in due course. Thus the abbess of a nun’s Life is recreated in the person of the protagonist nun herself while she was a nun, or causes such a recreation. In Febronia’s Passion, the abbess Bryene, who as a nun used to be the favourite of the abbess Platonis whom she finally succeeded, orders her own favourite, Febronia, to perform the tasks she herself used to undertake as the disciple of Platonis. When she was a nun, Bryene was asked, for instance, to read out loud passages from the Bible before the other nuns every Friday (*PFeb* ch.4). Febronia is in turn asked by Bryene every Friday to do the same (*PFeb* ch.6). In her Life, Eupraxia appears to fight against temptation in the same way in which her abbess used to overcome temptation when she herself was a nun (*VEupr* ch.21).

As stated earlier, at some point of her cenobitic career the nun acquires her spiritual independence. This occurs when the nun becomes an abbess herself (Irene of Chrysobalanton) or when she starts behaving like an abbess. Except for Febronia, whose role as a nun is violently interrupted after she has been arrested by the pagan persecutors of Christians, the other heroines examined here become their abbess’ doubles.

In the Lives of Irene of Chrysobalanton and Theodora of Thessalonike, the central heroine’s independence is associated with the abbess’ death. In the case of Irene, her enactment of the role of the abbess after the death of the previous abbess has been examined in the first part of this chapter. As for Theodora, she feels that her real ascetic struggles begin after Anna’s death because she is no longer subject to Anna’s will, but to her own (*VTheodThess* ch.39.1–4). Theodora does not become the spiritual master just of herself but also that of the other nuns:

Therefore she endured nobly and persevered mightily and fearlessly in the holy monastery like a champion of a battle formation, in no way frightened by the enemy phalanx, but thrusting aside every assault of afflictions which attacked her and her companions and she anointed the souls of the

weaker [sisters] with her own unyielding and steadfast purpose to prepare them for deeds of manly valour and battle against the unseen foe. For since most of those marvellous nuns had departed to the Lord, some before the great [Anna], others after her, no one was left to urge and incite the sisters to obedience with a zeal like hers. [...] She did not cease from her spiritual labour. But she shared with her sisters all the tasks that were imposed on them, zealously sharing their duties, and voluntarily lightening most of their labours. [...] It was her endeavour [...] by her example to make her companions strive together with her in a similar struggle. (tr. Talbot 1996b: 198)

Ἐφερε τοίνυν γενναίως καὶ διεκαρτέρει ἐν τῷ εὐαγεῖ μοναστηρίῳ ὡσπερ τις ἀτρέμας παρατάξεως ἀθλητῆς κραταιότατα, ἐν οὐδενὶ τῆς ἐκ τῶν ἐναντίων φάλαγγος δειματομένη, ἀλλὰ καὶ πᾶσαν θλιβερῶν προσβολὴν ἐπιούσαν ἑαυτῆς καὶ τῶν μετ' αὐτῆς ἀπωθουμένη, τῷ καθ' ἑαυτὴν ἀνευδότη τε καὶ στερρῷ τῆς προθέσεως τῶν ἀσθενεστέρων τὰς ψυχὰς πρὸς ἀνδρείαν καὶ πάλιν τῶν ἀοράτων ἐχθρῶν ἐπαλείφουσα. Ἐπειδὴ γὰρ αἱ πλείους τῶν θαυμασιῶν ἐκείνων ἀκουσῶν αἱ μὲν πρὸ τῆς μεγάλης, αἱ δὲ μετ' αὐτὴν πρὸς Κύριον ἐξεδήμησαν, ὑπελείπετο δὲ οὐδεμία, ἣ τῷ καθ' αὐτὴν ζήλῳ τὰς ἀδελφὰς πρὸς ὑπακοὴν διανίστα καὶ διήγειρεν [...] οὐκ ἐπαύετο τῆς πνευματικῆς ἐργασίας· ἀλλ' ἐν πάσαις ταῖς ἐπικειμέναις φροντίσι κοινῶν ὑπῆρχε ταῖς ἀδελφαῖς, τῇ σπουδῇ συμμεριζομένη τὰς φροντίδας καὶ τὸ πλεῖστον τῶν πόνων τῇ προαιρέσει ἐπικουφίζουσα. [...] Τοῦτο δὲ παρ' αὐτῆς ἐσπουδάζετο, ἵνα [...] τῷ καθ' ἑαυτὴν ὑποδείγματι πρὸς τὸν ὁμοίον ἀγῶνα τὰς μετ' αὐτῆς συναμιλλᾶσθαι ποιήσειεν. (*VTheodThess* ch.39.4–15, 19–23 and 26–28)

Theodora's portrait, as it emerges from the above passage, is that of an abbess. The phalanx of the enemies, against which Theodora as the convent's spiritual superior fights, has a parallel in Irene's fight against a phalanx of demons that enter her cell. Like an abbess, Theodora shows to those nuns who are spiritually inferior the ways to fight against temptations, as she once was taught about them through the former abbess. As is the case with an abbess, Theodora is the exemplary figure of the nunnery through whom the other nuns are disciplined and led to higher levels of spirituality. As the abbess' double, Theodora does everything that would contribute to the salvation of the nuns. Even though the hagiographer calls Theopiste, the new abbess, Theodora's spiritual mother, it is in essence Theodora who becomes Theopiste's spiritual mother, since she appears to have more religious experience and higher spirituality than Theopiste. Theodora can hear divine voices, which Theopiste cannot:

For when all the nuns were sleeping in the narthex of the church, she would often quietly rouse Theopiste and say, "Did you hear the very sweet and melodic angelic psalmody inside the church?" She used to do this, not showing off or boasting of her spiritual favour [granted to her], but, in my opinion, to prepare her own daughter to desire the divine spiritual gifts. (tr. Talbot 1996b: 199)

Ἐν γὰρ τῷ τῆς ἐκκλησίας νάρθηκι, πασῶν τῶν ἀδελφῶν κοιμωμένων, τὴν Θεοπίστην πολλάκις διανιστῶσα ἡρέμα καὶ ἔλεγεν· Ἀκήκοας τῆς ἔνδον ἐν τῷ ναῷ γεναμένης μετὰ μέλους ἡδυτάτης ἀγγελικῆς ψαλμωδίας; Τοῦτο δὲ ἐποίει οὐ φανητιῶσα οὐδὲ κομπάζουσα τῷ χαρίσματι, ἀλλ' ὡς ἐγῶμαι τὴν αὐτῆς θυγατέρα πρὸς ἔφeson τῶν θείων χαρισμάτων ἐπαλείφουσα. (*VTheodThess* ch.40.18–25)

By waking up only Theopiste out of all the nuns in order to make her listen to the divine voices, so that, according to the hagiographer's comment, she might be motivated for the acquisition of the divine gifts, Theodora appears once again to behave like an abbess who has her favourite nun.

In the case of Eupraxia, her spiritual independence is manifested in Eupraxia's miracles and ascetic exercises which are even stricter than those of her abbess. Becoming able to perform standing exercises for longer than her abbess, Eupraxia is considered unbeaten by the devil who changes the form of attack he used against her. Instead of attacking her mind, from now on he undertakes to attack her body. Her body proves miraculous, since despite all the violent attacks of the demon nothing serious occurs to it (*VEupr* chs.22–25). Since the demon's attacks are directed at Eupraxia's body only, confession proves useless for her. Finally Eupraxia substitutes the abbess in her role as miracle-worker (*VEupr* chs.26–27 and 30–31).

The issue of the nun who behaves like an abbess brings us back to the beginning of this analysis, which refers to the role of the abbess. At this point it becomes quite clear that the Life of the abbess and that of the nun are complementary: the one can be read through the other and vice-versa. During her life in a convent, a holy nun acquires in the first place an *obedient* body, that is a body, which acts according to the rules, the orders and the teachings of the abbess whose *exemplary* body provides her with religious authority. When the holy nun becomes spiritually independent, she performs the role of the abbess without being an abbess. The nun's initially obedient body, which after her spiritual independence becomes miraculous and exemplary, provides her with the religious authority that the holy abbess possesses.