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The Ashgate Research Companion to Byzantine Hagiography

Volume II: Genres and Contexts

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To Sophia, Eva and Pavlos



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Holy Actors and Actresses Fools and Cross-Dressers as the Protagonists of Saints' *Lives*

Stavroula Constantinou

Fools and cross-dressers are typical saintly figures of late antique hagiography. They have their origins in the early Eastern – especially the Egyptian – monastic culture,¹ and they are believed to have been in their large majority fictional. Initially they are celebrated in the hagiographical genres of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* and the *Narrationes animae utiles*,² and later they become the protagonists of free-standing *Lives*.³ Despite their high popularity in Byzantium, holy fools are commemorated in three Byzantine Greek *Lives* only:⁴ *Life of Symeon* (mid-seventh century) by Leontios of Neapolis,⁵ *Life of Andrew* (mid-tenth century) by a pseudonymous author who

¹ For the origins of the holy fool see, for example, Grosdidier de Matons, 'Les thèmes d'édification', 279, and for those of the cross-dresser, see Patlagean, 'L'histoire de la femme déguisée en moine et l'évolution de la sainteté féminine à Byzance', 616.

² For a presentation of the holy fools appearing in these genres, see Ivanov, *Holy Fools*, 29–65. As for the cross-dressers, a list is provided in Patlagean, 'L'histoire de la femme déguisée en moine', 600–02.

³ There are also *Lives* that include episodes in which other characters act as fools or cross-dress. These are: *Life of John the Almsgiver* by Leontios of Neapolis (the holy fool Vitalios, see ed. Festugière, ch. XXXVIII), *Life of Gregentios* [mid-tenth century: the holy fools Peter in Moryne (ch. 2^{52–84}), an anonymous woman in Agrigentum (ch. 2^{340–76}), Philothea in Carthage (ch. 4^{6–53}), John in Rome (ch. 5^{380–445}) and Stephen in Rome (ch. 6^{192–262})] and *Life of Paul the Bishop and John the Priest* (for a cross-dressing woman called Matthias in the monastic community of Stephen, see BHG 1476 – ch. 9). For a discussion of the holy fools in the *Life of John the Almsgiver* and that of *Gregentios*, see Ivanov, *Holy Fools*, 124–30 and 148–53.

⁴ A fourth *vita* devoted to a saint who bore some of the traits of the holy fool, Nicholas the Pilgrim (or of Trani), has come down to us in Latin; see Efthymiadis, 'D'Orient en Occident mais étranger aux deux mondes. Messages et renseignements tirés de la Vie de saint Nicolas le Pèlerin (BHL 6223)'.

⁵ On Leontios of Neapolis, see Déroche in Efthymiadis *et al.*, 'Greek hagiography in Late Antiquity (Fourth–Seventh Centuries)', in ARCBH I, 72–6, and the following studies:

names himself Nikephoros, and who appears as one of the saint's friends, and the fragmentary anonymous *Life of Paul the Corinthian* (BHG 2362 – ninth century).⁶ While Symeon and Paul must have been historical persons, the first lived in the sixth century and the latter in the ninth century, Andrew is an imaginary saint who, according to his hagiographer, lived in the fifth century.⁷

The equally and in some cases more popular cross-dressers, on the contrary, are the heroines of at least nine *Lives*, most of which were written in late antiquity and have come down to us in more than one version. These are: *Life of Pelagia* (fifth century) by a certain James, the deacon of a legendary bishop named Nonnos; the anonymous *Passion and Life of Susanna* (possibly fifth century), *Life of Theodora of Alexandria* (mid-fifth or sixth century), *Life of Euphrosyne* (sixth or seventh century) and *Life of Mary* (between 525 and 650); *Life of Matrona* (mid-sixth century) by an anonymous monk who claims to have used the notes of Eulogia that supposedly was a nun of Matrona's monastery, and a witness of the holy woman's deeds; *Passion and Life of Eugenia* by Symeon Metaphrastes (tenth century), the anonymous *Life of Marina* (eleventh or twelfth century) and the *Life of Euphrosyne the Younger* by Nikephoros Xanthopoulos (fourteenth century). Possibly only Matrona and Euphrosyne the Younger existed in reality. Matrona is believed to have lived in the fifth century whereas Euphrosyne the Younger is probably a saint of the ninth and tenth centuries. It should be also pointed out that two of the texts listed here, the *Passion and Life of Susanna* and the *Passion and Life of Eugenia*, are generic mixtures that combine the genre of *Life* with that of *Passion*. In other words, these texts have typical characteristics of a saint's *vita*, such as the presentation of the protagonist's early life and religious career, and elements of a martyr's passion, such as the depiction of trials and horrendous tortures.⁸

Déroche, *Études sur Léontios de Néapolis*; and Krueger, *Symeon the Holy Fool: Leontius's Life and the Late Antique City*, 1–18.

⁶ What can be reconstructed about the life of Paul the Corinthian derives from a *kanon*, a hymn dedicated to his memory: see Ivanov, 'St. Paul the Corinthian, Holy Fool'. Some scholars classify in the category of the holy fool such saints as Philaretos the Merciful, Alexios the Man of God, Basil the Younger and Cyril Phileotes. For Philaretos, see, for example, Kazhdan and Sherry, 'The Tale of a Happy Fool: The *Vita* of St Philaretos the Merciful (BHG 1511z–1512b)' and Rydén, 'Time in the Lives of the Fools'; for Alexios, Basil the Younger and Cyril Phileotes, see Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium*, 81–6, 154–6 and 208–09. If the performance of foolishness is the main characteristic of the holy fool, the first two saints, Philaretos and Alexios, are not holy fools since they do not play the madmen. As for the latter saints, Basil and Cyril, they are 'part-time holy fools' as Lennart Rydén calls them ('The Holy Fool', 111–2); they simulate madness for very short periods in their lives, and their mad behaviour is very different from that of the classic holy fools, especially Symeon and Andrew.

⁷ Later examples of holy fools appearing in Byzantine hagiography include Sabas the Younger (born in 1283; his *vita* was written by Philotheos Kokkinos) and Maximos Kausokalybitis (died in 1365; he is presented as a holy fool in the *vita* composed by Theophanes).

⁸ For the generic characteristics of holy women's *Passions* and *Lives*, see Constantinou, *Female Corporeal Performances: Reading the Body in Byzantine Passions and Lives of Holy Women*.

An obvious difference between the late antique *Lives* of cross-dressers and the later ones is that the first have a prominent erotic element that is absent from the latter. The protagonists of the earlier *Lives* are accused of either tempting their fellow monks (Euphrosyne), or having sexual affairs with other women (Susanna, Eugenia, Theodora and Mary). The presence of both Marina and Euphrosyne the Younger in a male monastery, on the other hand, is not related to any erotic scandal. A second difference between the earlier and the later texts is the way in which the protagonist leaves the male monastery. In the earlier texts, such as the *Lives* of Susanna, Matrona and Eugenia, the saints' female identity is revealed while they reside in a monastery. They are forced to leave this once they have to give up their roles as monks. Thus as women they come out of the monasteries that they entered as eunuchs or men. Marina and Euphrosyne the Younger, on the other hand, abandon their monastic dwellings when they themselves resolve to do so, and they come out of them in the same fashion as they entered them, namely as eunuchs or men. Unlike Susanna, Matrona and Eugenia, the female identity of both Marina and Euphrosyne the Younger is not disclosed while they are living in male monastic communities.

The *Lives* of holy fools, especially that of Andrew, have had a great success in the Russian tradition while the late antique *Lives* of cross-dressers have been 'best sellers' in the medieval West.⁹ Despite their huge appeal to medieval audiences, fools and cross-dressers in Christ have been condemned by ecclesiastical authorities. In its sixteenth canon, the *Council of Trullo* (691/692) forbids feigned madness, a prohibition that is repeated by later canonists and interpreters.¹⁰ As for cross-dressing, its first prohibition was expressed much earlier, in the Bible: 'A woman shall not wear a man's garment, nor shall a man put on a woman's cloak, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord your God' (*Deuteronomy* 22: 5). Repeating the Deuteronomic injunction, the Council of Gangra (340) anathematised any woman who 'under pretence of asceticism' wears men's clothing (Canon 13), or cuts her hair 'which God gave [her] as a reminder of [her] subjection' (Canon 17).¹¹

The official Church's negative attitude towards feigning madness and cross-dressing for religious and social purposes, which might be related to the high degree of pretence characterising the lives of pious fools and cross-dressers, might have been the reason why hagiographers often felt obliged to justify the behaviour of their heroes and heroines. In the prologue to the *vita* of Symeon (BHG 1677 – p. 56^{29–30}–57¹), for instance, Leontios explains Symeon's adoption of the madman's role

⁹ For the impact of holy fools in Russia, see Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium*, 244–358. As far as the success of cross-dressers in the West is concerned, see Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man: Female Cross Dressing in Medieval Europe*.

¹⁰ See, for example, the chapter on behaviour that aims at worldly admiration and on feigning madness by an anonymous commentator: 'Godly laws disapprove those who play the madmen after the manner of the great Symeon and Andrew' (PG 106, ch. 33, col. 1372; my translation).

¹¹ Héfélé, *Histoire des conciles d'après les documents originaux*, 1:1036–9.

by quoting St Paul's words in his *First Letter to the Corinthians*: 'If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become fool that he may become wise' (1 Cor. 3:18), 'we are fools for Christ's sake' (1 Cor. 4:10) and 'the foolishness of God is wiser than that of men' (1 Cor. 1:25). The hagiographers of cross-dressers, on the other hand, do not fail to present their heroines' decision to become monks as the only choice available to them if they want to devote themselves to God, and in so doing to save their souls.¹²

From a gender perspective both examined roles are gender specific; holy fools are men while holy cross-dressers are women.¹³ In fact, the holy fool's role is originally undertaken by men and women alike. The first holy fool appearing in Byzantine hagiography is an anonymous nun later known as Isidora whose short story is narrated by Palladios in ch. 34 of his *Historia Lausiaca*. However, the role becomes exclusively male when the holy fool becomes the protagonist of the genre of *Life*. Arguably, this is not surprising, given the facts that the holy fools' *Lives* are very few, and that the large majority of saints' *Lives* are devoted to men. Concerning cross-dressers, the reason for which they have no male counterparts might be related to the masculine model of sainthood whereby women have to renounce their femininity that is associated with corporeality to achieve the manly status of holiness whereas men just suppress their bodily needs.¹⁴

Being highly interesting from many perspectives (anthropological, sociological, psychological, cultural, historical, theological and literary), holy fools and cross-dressers have attracted the interest of a growing number of scholars from different disciplines. In fact, they belong to the most discussed saints of the Byzantine and other medieval cultures. However, despite their evident parallels – more of which will be pointed out in the following analysis – a comparative examination of the two roles has not been properly undertaken yet.¹⁵ This chapter proposes to set forth such a comparison in the light of a literary perspective. This said, any questions concerning the origins, historicity and the theological and other meanings of the phenomena of the holy fool and the cross-dresser will not be addressed here. These have already been the subjects of a number of studies.¹⁶ In particular, what will be

¹² See Constantinou, *Female Corporeal Performances*, 107–10.

¹³ There are possibly one or two examples of male cross-dressers which prove the rule. One is the anonymous protagonist of an edifying story (BHG 1317u), a monk, who, adopting occasionally female attire, passes as a woman. After being accused of having a sexual relationship with the woman the monk himself pretends to be, his secret is revealed. The second example is that of Patriarch Germanos of Constantinople; see ch. 19 of his *Life* (BHG 697).

¹⁴ According to Vern Bullough, female cross-dressing in patriarchal societies is understandable since it allows women to acquire a better social status whereas in the case of men cross-dressing appears as perverse for it is equated with the loss of status (Bullough, 'Transvestites in the Middle Ages').

¹⁵ Some scholars have treated the two roles as instances of the theme of secret holiness. See, for example, Dahlman, *Saint Daniel of Sketis: A Group of Hagiographic Texts*, 70–89.

¹⁶ See Dagrón, 'L'homme sans honneur ou le saint scandaleux'; Fritz, *Le discours du fou au Moyen Age: XIIe–XIIIe siècles*; Gorainoff, *Les fols en Christ dans la tradition orthodoxe*; Ivanov,

examined here concerns the literary depictions of the two roles: their differences and shared elements; important characteristics of the texts incorporating them; and the anonymous or pseudonymous hagiographers' disguised intentions. This comparative reading aims at further illuminating the literary workings of some very popular hagiographical texts in which the two famous roles are fully developed. These texts have been listed above in chronological order and form two distinct groups according to their protagonists' type of sainthood: *Lives* of holy fools and *Lives* of cross-dressers.¹⁷

At this point it should be noted that the connection between madness and cross-dressing exists in some of the medieval legends themselves. In the legend of Onesima, which has come down to us not in Greek, but in various other languages, such as Syriac, Arabic, Ethiopian and Georgian, the heroine starts her monastic career as a holy fool, but, as soon as her saintly identity is revealed, she cross-dresses and enters a male monastery.¹⁸ In the *Life of Marina*, the heroine pretends to be mad in her attempt to convince her parents that she is not eligible for marriage. After achieving her purpose through feigning foolishness, Marina starts her religious career as a solitary. She soon becomes famous for her miraculous powers. Wishing to avoid worldly fame and to regain her previous anonymity that allowed her to devote herself entirely to spiritual life, she cross-dresses, calls herself Marinos and enters a monastery in Jerusalem. In Onesima's legend, the heroine adopts both the role of the man and that of the madman because they serve the same purpose: they hide her real identity that she wants to keep secret. Even though in Marina's case there is no such affinity between her feigned madness and cross-dressing – her madness does not even belong to the category of holy foolishness – it is remarkable that a cross-dressing heroine has a short career as a madwoman.

Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond; Ludwig, *Sonderformen byzantinischer Hagiographie und ihr literarisches Vorbild: Untersuchungen zu den Viten des Äsop, des Philaretos, des Symeon Salos und des Andreas Salos*; Seward, *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ's Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality*; Syrkin, 'On the Behavior of the "Fool for Christ's Sake"'; Ware, 'The Fool in Christ as Prophet and Apostle'; Anson, 'The Female Transvestite in Early Monasticism: the Origin and Development of a Motif'; Bullough, 'Transvestites in the Middle Ages'; Davis, 'Crossed Texts, Crossed Sex: Intertextuality and Gender in Early Christian Legends of Holy Women Disguised as Men'; Delcourt, 'Le complexe de Diane dans l'hagiographie chrétienne'; Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man: Female Cross-Dressing in Medieval Europe*; Vogt, 'The "Woman Monk": A Theme in Byzantine Hagiography'.

¹⁷ For the sub-generic distinctions and internal categories of the hagiographical genre of the saint's *Life*, see Constantinou, 'Subgenre and Gender in Saints' *Lives*'.

¹⁸ See Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium*, 60–63.

The Mask

According to a number of scholars, holy fools may be described as the ascetics who wear the 'mask of foolishness' ('Maske der Verrücktheit').¹⁹ The German scholars Ernst Benz, Walter Nigg and Peter Hauptmann in particular argued that the holy fool's most important characteristic is his mask through which his eccentric behaviour and spirituality might be explained and understood.²⁰ By wearing the madman's mask, a means of absolute humility and humiliation, the holy fool acts as a second Christ who suffered for humanity's salvation.²¹ The holy fool's salvific mission is very clearly expressed by Symeon of Emesa, who, just before adopting the madman's role, remarks that there is no point leading an ascetic life in the desert, since such an isolated way of living benefits no one but the hermit (*Life of Symeon*, 76¹⁴⁻⁸). Symeon's decision to leave the desert in order to play the fool in the city is inextricably related to his strong wish to save not only his own soul but also that of other people.

In addition to the holy fool, the mask is an essential characteristic of the holy cross-dresser, who in her attempt to escape marriage, a sinful life, or worldly fame assumes male attire and identity that enable her to lead the religious life of the cenobitic monk or the hermit.²² Like holy fools, a cross-dresser such as Euphrosyne suffers in order to save others. The heroine, who passes as the monk Smaragdus whose beauty arouses her fellow monks, is enclosed in the monastery's most isolated cell being deprived of the other monks' communal life in order to save them from temptation. While the fool hides his already acquired divine wisdom and sanctity behind the mask of foolishness, the cross-dresser uses the mask of maleness to hide her negatively connoted femininity and, in so doing, to protect her chastity through which she can reach holiness. Whatever their motives may be in employing a mask, the fool and the cross-dresser are the best actors and the

¹⁹ Hauptmann, 'Die "Narren um Christi Willen" in der Ostkirche', 29. See also Benz, 'Heilige Narrheit', and Nigg, *Der christliche Narr*. Holy foolishness is treated as a role in almost all later studies on the subject. See, for instance, Déroche, *Études sur Léontios de Néapolis*, 154–225; idem, *Syméon Salos, le fou en Christ*; Fritz, *Le discours du fou au Moyen Age XII^e–XIII^e siècles*; Grosdidier de Matons, 'Les thèmes d'édification dans la Vie d'André Salos'; Ivanov, *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*; Krueger, *Symeon the Holy Fool: Leontius's Life and the Late Antique City*; Rydén, 'The Holy Fool'; and Seward, *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ's Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality*, 25.

²⁰ Benz, 'Heilige Narrheit'; Nigg, *Der christliche Narr*; and Hauptmann, 'Die "Narren um Christi Willen"'.

²¹ For the *Christocentricity* of the holy fool, see Rydén, *Bemerkungen zum Leben des heiligen Narren Symeon von Leontios von Neapolis*, 34–8, 85–7; and Seward, *Perfect Fools*, 25. In a more recent study, Derek Krueger (*Symeon the Holy Fool*, 108–25) has convincingly showed how the Cypriot hagiographer Leontios of Neapolis models his holy fool hero on Christ.

²² The bibliography on cross-dressing saints is large. Some of the latest studies on the subject are the following: Constantinou, *Female Corporeal Performances*, 90–126; Davis, 'Crossed Texts, Crossed Sex: Intertextuality and Gender in Early Christian Legends of Holy Women Disguised as Men'; and Vogt, 'The "Woman Monk": A Theme in Byzantine Hagiography'.

greatest 'liars' in Byzantine hagiography; the first lies about his saintly identity and the latter lies about her gender identity.

Costume, according to a number of theoretical studies on theatre, is an integral part of the assumption of a role. Each role is associated with particular clothing through which it becomes discernible. Costume is pivotal not only for the spectator, but also for the actor or the actress whose initiation into a role is facilitated by wearing the corresponding attire.²³ In other words, costume serves a twofold function: it directs the wearer's actions, and it generates a specific set of expectations. Costume's power to enhance a role and to contribute to its successful performance and perception was probably acknowledged by the biographers of holy fools and cross-dressers who do not fail to present the disguises that their protagonists adopt just before the enactment of their roles. The scenes where the protagonists are depicted wearing their costumes belong to the last and most decisive part of their role preparation that starts much earlier in the narrative. Symeon, for instance, is ready to wear the madman's costume after spending 29 years in the desert where he reaches a high level of spirituality that enables him to 'mock the world' ('ἐμπαίζειν τῷ κόσμῳ', BHG 1677 – p. 76^{25,28}) through the mask of madness. Andrew, on the other hand, needs less time to prepare himself for the madman's role which he undertakes after discussing with his alleged hagiographer Nikephoros a divine dream of his where he first defeats the devil in a single combat, and then is asked by Christ to become a holy fool. Cross-dressers, too, take less time than Symeon for their role preparation. The large majority of the heroines in question decide to cross-dress, and to enter holy orders after being forced by a divine power or a male authority to interrupt a sinful life (Theodora of Alexandria and Pelagia) or a (secret) pious life (Euphrosyne, Matrona, Eugenia, Marina and Euphrosyne the Younger).

In almost all *Lives* under discussion, the scene of disguise acquires the form of a ritual that takes place in either a public (holy fools) or a private space (cross-dressers). Holy fools whose madness is a public spectacle disguise themselves 'on stage'. In fact, their disguise that is mostly their nakedness appears as a foolish act during which they remove their clothes in a theatrical way. Andrew, for example, performs his first mad behaviour in the following way: he wakes up at midnight, prays, takes a knife and goes out. He walks to the well of his master's house where he removes his shirt and cuts it into many pieces 'like a lunatic', as his hagiographer remarks. Andrew's behaviour attracts all members of his master's household who take him as a madman, and in so doing they confirm the efficiency of his performance. Believed to have gone mad, Andrew is chained and confined at the church of St Anastasia, an asylum for the deranged (BHG 117 – ch. 2⁹⁶⁻¹¹²). Symeon, on the other hand, uses nakedness as a costume after establishing himself as Emesa's fool. The disguise he puts on just before entering the city is quite different from that of Andrew, yet equally spectacular: he takes a dead dog's body that he finds on a dunghill outside Emesa, and after loosening his rope belt he

²³ See Fischer-Lichte, *Semiotik des Theaters: eine Einführung I: das System der theatralischen Zeichen*, 121–2.

ties it to one of the dog's feet. Afterwards he starts running towards the city gate while at the same time he drags the animal's lifeless body. He passes by a school, and as soon as the children take notice of him they start shouting: "Hey, a crazy abba!" And they set about to run after him and box him on the ears' (BHG 1677 – p. 79²¹⁻⁵, tr. Krueger, 151). By just adding the dog's dead body as an 'accessory' to his robe, Symeon acquires an absurd appearance through which he is seen by the inhabitants of Emesa as a mad monk.²⁴

Holy cross-dressers, on the other hand, who have to hide their femaleness in order to be able to perform their role as men or eunuchs, disguise themselves 'offstage'. Their gender transformation achieved through adopting a man's appearance is a secret act that takes place in the family house. Alone or assisted by someone very close to them, the heroines become male-like by effacing the female characteristics of their external appearance: they cut short their long hair, they remove the jewellery they wear,²⁵ and they put on male attire that belongs to a male relative, husband or father. As is the case with holy fools, the heroines' external transformation takes up a very short narrative space, and it is narrated in a paratactic way: 'she took off the clothes and the golden ornaments she was wearing; and she cut her hair off her head, and she put on her husband's clothes' [*Life of Theodora of Alexandria* (BHG 1727) – p. 27)]. Despite its short presentation, disguise is a very important narrative device, since, as already pointed out, the examined roles around which the narrative develops cannot be enacted without their corresponding costumes. As soon as they enter the public sphere in their male attire, the heroines pass as either men or eunuchs. As a result, they encounter no trouble being accepted in the monasteries they choose for leading their religious careers as monks. Upon entering holy orders, they take off their secular male clothing, and they put on their second costume, that is the monk's robe. In so doing, they resemble the holy fools, especially Symeon, who has two costumes: the monk's attire with the dead dog and his nakedness.

In the examined *Lives*, costume is more than a narrative device and a means through which the two roles are represented. It is also a text that invites various readings, both literal and symbolic, which direct both the listening or reading audiences' and the narrative characters' feelings and attitudes towards the protagonists. The costume's literal reading refers to a set of conventions that determine the wearers' identities: they are men or madmen. As a man, the cross-dresser is allowed to enter and experience the male monastic world within which she has certain rights and responsibilities. When, for instance, some of our cross-dressers are accused of fathering a child (such examples are Mary/Marinos and Theodora/Theodoros), and they have to be expelled from their monastic communities as serious sinners, none of their fellow monks comes to the idea that such an accusation is completely

²⁴ For a discussion of the meaning of Symeon's dog, see Kislinger, 'Symeon Salos' Hund' and Krueger, *Symeon the Holy Fool*, 100–103.

²⁵ Matrona, for example, who removes her earrings, exposes her two earring holes that attract the attention of a fellow monk of hers (*Life of Matrona*, ch. 5; for an analysis of this episode, see Constantinou, *Female Corporeal Performances*, 105).

invalid – no woman can impregnate another woman – because their appearance says that they are men. As madmen, Symeon and Andrew, on the other hand, become the victims of the townspeople's violence. If people knew that they were saints, they would not have humiliated them, but they would have honoured them instead. However, the reading that their costumes allow drives other individuals to attack them because that is how madmen are treated in the societies depicted in the *Lives* discussed here. Obviously, the costumes' literal readings are mainly addressed to the monks who are expected to view the cross-dressing heroines as men or eunuchs, or to the citizens of Emesa or Constantinople who are supposed to see the wearers as madmen.

The costumes' symbolic meanings, in contrast, are less obvious and more complicated; they are addressed to both the persons who know the protagonists' real identities and the texts' actual audiences. In this case, costume can be read as a signifier of the protagonists' characters and powers. Symeon's first costume, for instance, has different readings, which the modern reader might not be able to grasp in their entirety. The dead animal he attaches on his body might be a symbol of the deadening of his senses to the world.²⁶ Earlier in the narrative his friend and fellow-hermit John tells him to beware of the world's pleasures during his life in the city (BHG 1677 – p. 77¹⁸⁻³¹). John's fears concerning Symeon's temptations in Emesa prove to be wrong. When the hero is later asked by another friend called also John how he feels when he enters naked into the women's bath, he answers: 'Believe me, child, just as a piece of wood goes with other pieces of wood, thus I was there. For I felt neither that I had a body nor that I had entered among bodies, but the whole of my mind was on God's work' (BHG 1677 – p. 83¹³⁻⁶, tr. Krueger, 154). The dead dog points also to the empty meaning that social values, such as worldly wisdom and order, have for Symeon. The animal's dead, smelly and dirty body functions, too, as a powerful manifestation of the hero's freedom from passions, i.e. his *apatheia*. In addition, it recalls the savage nature of late antique ascetics, and of the saint's previous life in the wilderness. At the same time Symeon's weird costume might be seen as a criticism of the ascetic's wild life in the desert. Finally, the accessory of the dead dog symbolises Symeon's treatment by the Emesians who see him as an animal, as a creature lacking of reason and of human qualities. That the madman is treated as a dog is an idea developed by Andrew the Fool's hagiographer, who is influenced by Symeon's *Life*. Referring to some beggars' attitude towards him, Andrew says:

They chased me away with their sticks like a dog, loathing me, saying, 'Go away from here, you cur, be gone!' . . . I went to a corner of the portico, found a dog and lay down close to him . . . But when the dog saw me at his

²⁶ The deadening of an ascetic's senses to the world might be signified in various ways. In the *Life of Irene of Chrysobalanton* (BHG 952), for example, the holy woman's lack of pain is pointed out by one of the demons who attack her; he describes her body as 'wooden' (ch. 11²⁰). As 'a piece of wood or stone', and as 'dead' are also used to describe Andrew the Fool's body by the prostitutes who attempt unsuccessfully to seduce him (ch. 6³¹⁰⁻¹¹).

side he rose and moved to another place. I said to myself, . . . 'Even the dogs despise you and run away from you, not even accepting you as a dog equal to themselves!' (*Life of Andrew*, 470–81, tr. Rydén, 45).

As for the madman's nakedness, it represents the first man's pure and innocent state before the fall. It also points to Christ's nakedness on the cross and to his suffering. It signifies both vulnerability and endurance: vulnerability before the elements of nature and endurance in pain. The male attire of the cross-dresser, on the other hand, is a sign of the transcendence of her weak femininity and acquisition of spirituality defined as masculine in Christian literature.²⁷ The cross-dresser's costume signifies also her courage and hard ascetic life, since the ascetic practices of monks are harder than those of nuns. In the cases of Theodora, who commits adultery, and the former harlot Pelagia, the monk's robe also functions as a symbol of the abandonment of their sinful female selves.

As soon as they put on their costumes, the heroes and heroines in question start performing their role. The holy fool's mad behaviour, which constitutes a reversal of social and ecclesiastical order, takes various forms: he communicates with other people through parables, riddles, incomprehensible and incoherent sentences, and sometimes with an annoying silence often associated with gestures. He wanders the streets kicking and running like an ass, pretending to be drunk, dancing, playing and begging. He eats in insatiable manner raw meat and superhuman amounts of food. He relieves himself openly. He steals from the marketplace, and he gives away all the goods he is employed to sell. He befriends prostitutes and demands their fidelity. He enters a church with the intention of interrupting the service by making noise, putting out the candles and throwing things at people. During Lent he consumes meat in an exhibitionistic way. Obviously, the aim of such provocative, shocking and wild behaviour is to attract attention in the first place, and to cause the spectators' scorn and violent reactions, in the second. Through the people's scorn and violence the holy fool's humility and endurance in suffering, two essential characteristics of holiness, are manifested. As Andrew himself puts it, 'let us run with toil and be despised in this world, that we may receive praise and glory from our heavenly king Jesus Christ God's Son' (*Life of Andrew*, 283–5, tr. Rydén, 33).

The cross-dresser, on the other hand, performs a behaviour that is in accordance with monastic values and rules because, in contrast to the fool, she does not want to attract attention. Her goal is to fully integrate herself into the monastic community she enters so that no suspicions are aroused concerning her female self. However, like the fool, she does attract attention through her ambiguous beauty, exemplarity and involuntary involvement in a sexual scandal. Euphrosyne's beauty, for instance, as mentioned earlier, distracts the other monks. In their very zeal to perform their role in the most efficient way, all cross-dressing heroines distinguish themselves as monks and become subjects of admiration. The heroines that are

²⁷ See Aspegren, *The Male Woman: A Feminine Ideal in the Early Church*; Castelli, "'I Will Make Mary Male': Pieties of the Body and Gender Transformation of Christian Women in Late Antiquity"; and Constantinou, *Female Corporeal Performances*, 91–3.

accused of either raping a female visitor of the monastery (Susanna and Eugenia) or fathering a child (Theodora and Mary) become, as is the case with the fools, the victims of the whole monastic community's scorn and humiliation. The cross-dressers who accept the accusations with the intention of continuing their lives as monks (Theodora and Maria) are forced to lead a life that has many parallels with the holy fool's way of living: just as the fool lives on society's margins as the victim of collective violence, the cross-dresser lives a life of suffering and humiliation on the monastic community's margins.

Behind the Mask

Holy fools and the cross-dressers whose femininity is revealed before their death are depicted having a life behind the mask. Holy fools' 'offstage' life is lived on a daily basis. When they are alone or with a friend who is aware of their secret holy identity, they remove their mask and perform their saintly self that is the exact opposite of the madman's role enacted in the town's busy streets. If they are on their own, they behave as true ascetics: they fast, keep vigils and pray continuously with tears; and if they are with a friend, they engage in edifying discussions, and they teach their Christian wisdom. In *Andrew's Life* in particular, some vivid supernatural and eschatological worlds are revealed when the hero removes his mask: Andrew's visits to Paradise and hell, and his eschatological narration which take up a considerable narrative space are in great detail presented. The cross-dressers, whose female identity is revealed either by divine intervention (Matrona) or by the heroines themselves in order to refute false sexual accusations (Susanna and Eugenia) or to avoid a disclosure of their femaleness by the devil (Euphrosyne the Younger), have to take off the man's mask, leave the male monastic community, and continue their religious careers as women. They are thus depicted leading the life of the nun, the abbess and the anchoress.²⁸ Two of them (Susanna and Eugenia) die as martyrs. As for the cross-dressers whose femininity remains secret until their death (Pelagia, Theodora, Euphrosyne, Mary and Marina), their life behind the mask is never presented in their hagiographies. In contrast to the fool, the cross-dresser is not depicted being on her own, and her hidden thoughts are almost never revealed; as long as she performs the man's role, she does not appear to have a private life as a woman. She is nevertheless sanctified as a woman.

During the examined protagonists' enactment of their roles there are instances in which the mask is removed and their hidden identities are for a while uncovered. For example, Symeon's saintly identity is manifested when he performs a miracle before the wife of a seller in whose shop the hero works: he burns incense in his hand, which remains untouched by the fire. As an answer to the woman's remark: 'Good God! Abba Symeon, are you burning incense in your hand?' (*Life of Symeon*, p. 80²²⁻³, tr. Krueger, 152), Symeon throws the coals to his cloak, which does not burn either.

²⁸ See Constantinou, *Female Corporeal Performances*, 117–20.

After this episode Symeon disappears. As the narrator comments, 'it was also the saint's practice, whenever he did something miraculous, to leave that neighbourhood immediately, until the deed which he had done was forgotten. He hurried on immediately elsewhere to do something inappropriate, so that he might thereby hide his perfection' (*Life of Symeon*, p. 81⁵⁻⁸, tr. Krueger, 152). As for cross-dressers, a case in point is Matrona's behaviour during the liturgy and the holy communion taking place in the monastery: as a woman she always covers her head [*Life of Matrona* (BHG 1221), ch. 7], and in so doing she follows St Paul's injunction according to which a woman who prays must have her head covered (1 Cor. 11: 3–16).

Even though the examined texts' actual audiences are aware of the heroes' and heroines' role playing, this is not the case with the large majority of townspeople in the fools' *Lives* and the monks in the *Lives* of cross-dressers who die as men (Pelagia, Theodora, Mary and Euphrosyne). It is only after the protagonists' death that their real identities are disclosed to everyone, and as a result they are venerated as saints. While the fool's dead body miraculously disappears, the cross-dresser's dead body becomes the means through which her femininity is exposed: as soon as her fellow-monks remove her clothes to prepare her for burial, they discover to their great surprise that a woman was sharing monastic life with them. The naked body thus becomes in the fool's case a means of hiding identity while it reveals identity in the case of the cross-dresser.²⁹

Irony and Humour

If, according to a common definition, irony is a statement or a situation which conveys exactly opposite meanings from what is literally meant or hidden,³⁰ both the fool's and the cross-dresser's role might be seen as highly ironic: the wisest and most holy man behaves in public as his exact opposite, namely as a deeply sinful madman, while through her own appearance and behaviour, a woman passes in lay and monastic contexts as a eunuch or a man that is her opposite from a gender perspective. Due to the discrepancy between appearance and reality that it creates, irony along with humour, that is one of irony's formal properties, is also associated with lying and deception,³¹ two essential elements of the fool's and the cross-dresser's performance.

The humoristic aspect of the two examined roles is not only associated with their ironic character, but it is also one of their most important features. Fools and cross-dressers are funny by definition; they excite laughter by inverting proper order,

²⁹ Scenes of recognition acquire an important role in some *Lives* of cross-dressers. See Boulhol, *Αναγνωρισμός. La scène de reconnaissance dans l'hagiographie antique et médiévale*; and Goddard-Elliot, *Roads to Paradise. Reading the Lives of the Early Saints*. For an analysis of the theatricality of such scenes, see Constantinou, *Female Corporeal Performances*, 120–26.

³⁰ See Colebrook, *Irony*, 1.

³¹ See Muecke, 'Images of Irony', 408–12.

and by being daring in ways not expected by the audiences of the texts. The fools in particular become a source of amusement for both the texts' audiences and the people situated within the narratives. In Andrew's *Life*, for example, a prostitute drags the saint into her dwelling where he becomes a laughing stock, and a means of entertainment for all the harlots that gather around him (*Life of Andrew*, 298–340). In another episode, some young boys make his funny appearance even more humorous by covering his face with ink made of charcoal, and by putting a rope around his neck. In this fashion they drag him through the city (*Life of Andrew*, 1220–3).

In general, the fool is a comic figure in more ways than the cross-dresser. First, he is ridiculous both through his appearance and behaviour. For instance, the dead dog's body hanging from Symeon's belt (*Life of Symeon*, p. 79²¹⁻²), the sausages that he wears as a deacon's stole (*Life of Symeon*, p. 94²⁶), or the turban he makes from his own clothes and puts on his head leaving the rest of his body naked (*Life of Symeon*, p. 82²⁷⁻⁸) are profoundly funny images of the protagonist's appearance. As for Symeon's comic behaviour, he does not fail to demonstrate it from his very first foolish act when he enters a church during liturgy and starts throwing nuts to the female attendants (*Life of Symeon*, p. 79²⁵⁻⁸). Here laughter arises from the combination of the serious setting with Symeon's playful gesture.³² Second, the fool performs funny miracles. A case in point is Symeon's miracle of the dancing girls whom the hero made cross-eyed because they ridiculed monks. As soon as the girls realised what he had done to them, they started chasing him asking to be released from the spell. When they caught him, he said in a playful manner, as the narrator points out, that he could cure them by kissing their eyes. The ones who let the hero kiss them were healed while the others, for all their desperate attempts, never found a cure: they 'run after him and cry, 'Wait, Fool, wait! By God, wait! Kiss us too!'' (*Life of Symeon*, p. 91¹⁷⁻²⁷; p. 92¹⁻⁸, tr. Krueger, 161).

In this case, Symeon gave a funny lesson to the girls who ridiculed him by rendering them ridiculous through his comic miracle. Third, as this miracle shows, the fool is not only a victim of derision, but also a victimiser. He sets as one of his goals to 'mock the world'. He laughs at his society's values, which in his and God's eyes are equated with sheer madness. For this reason, he often addresses the people he comes across as 'fools' and 'idiots': 'As they [unnamed citizens of Constantinople] had not seen him for a long time they asked him, 'Where have you been until now, you fool? Where have you spent all these days?' He answered them and said, 'you fools, do you not know that I have been mingling and fighting like a fool? For you are fools yourselves'' (*Life of Andrew*, 1226–30, tr. Rydén, 95).

Since the audiences of the discussed texts are aware of the protagonists' real identities while this is not the case with the persons within the narratives, irony takes also the form of dramatic irony with comic effects. Our hagiographers fully explore the literary device of comic dramatic irony in certain episodes that in many cases are centred on sexual scandals. Susanna/John, for instance, becomes the object of a woman's desire that falls madly in love with the young monk John and tries

³² On humour in Byzantine culture, see Haldon, 'Humour and the Everyday in Byzantium'.

unsuccessfully to seduce him. The woman, like Potiphar's wife in the Bible (*Genesis* 39), accuses Susanna/John of rape. As already stated, Theodora/Theodore and Mary/Marinos are accused of fathering children. A similar episode is found in Symeon's *Life* where a slave girl who is impregnated by a citizen whom she does not want to expose accuses the saint of raping her. Symeon accepts the accusation, and treats the girl as his wife bringing her food as long as she is pregnant. When, however, the time of the child's birth arrives, Symeon prevents the girl from giving birth until she reveals the truth (*Life of Symeon*, p. 85¹⁰⁻²⁵, p. 86¹⁻⁴). In contrast to Symeon, however, Theodora and Mary are forced to bring up their alleged children. In all these funny episodes in which the protagonists accept the impossible accusations of rape (the heroines as women and the heroes as saints cannot perform such an act), the audiences' superiority of perspective gives them, on the one hand, the pleasure of recognising the irony, and makes them laugh at the reactions of the narrative characters, who ignore the truth, on the other.

Masked Authors

Following their protagonists, the authors of the texts in question are masked by the saintly heroes and heroines 'whom they invest with historical *personae*'.³³ Hagiographers hide their real identities and intentions behind their fictitious protagonists and their own pen names (Nikephoros, Eulogia) or anonymity.³⁴ Concerning 'Nikephoros the priest', for instance, it is possible that behind the mask of his pen name lay an author who was connected with the Byzantine aristocratic *oikos* and the bureaucrats of Constantine Porphyrogennitos' era, Basil the *parakoimomenos* in particular. It seems that Nikephoros' intention was to 'bring the clergy, the monastic establishments and lay magnates, an apostolic message of salvation more urgent and more far reaching than the debate over the relative merits of communal and solitary asceticism'.³⁵ The intentions of Leontios and Nikephoros Xanthopoulos have also been the subject of contemporary scholarly discussions. It has been argued that Leontios' intention in writing Symeon's *Life* was to create, by using his personal experience of Cypriot urban life, a Christ-like answer to the ascetic model of Diogenes, the Cynic philosopher.³⁶ In turn, Symeon's *Life* was seen as an attempt of Leontios to take part in the theological discussions of his times.³⁷ As for Xanthopoulos, an inquiry has been made into the question about what led two famous Byzantine writers of the early fourteenth century, Xanthopoulos and Constantine Akropolites, to write hagiographical texts celebrating a cross-dressing saint such as

³³ Magdalino, "'What we Heard in the Lives of the Saints we have Seen with our Own Eyes": The Holy Man as Literary Text in Tenth-Century Constantinople', 112.

³⁴ See Rydén, 'Fiction and Reality in the Hagiographer's Self-Presentation'.

³⁵ Magdalino, "'What we Heard in the Lives of the Saints we have Seen with our Own Eyes'", 112.

³⁶ Krueger, *Symeon the Holy Fool*, 108–29.

³⁷ Déroche, *Études sur Léontios de Néapolis*, 270–96.

Euphrosyne the Younger whose historicity is doubtful.³⁸ In fact, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to recover precisely our hagiographers' intentions and identities.

All the scholars who have attempted to detect the discussed hagiographers' identities and intentions might have to a certain degree given some important answers. It is undeniable that our hagiographers are motivated by religious and edifying purposes. But there must be some more reasons leading them to create saints who play the madmen, and who cross-dress. Paul Magdalino, for instance, made a good case to show how the author of the *Life of Andrew* engages in a dialogue with contemporary and previous hagiographical literature. Taking Magdalino's conclusions one step further, it could be argued that apart from religious, edifying, ideological or other purposes, our hagiographers have primarily literary intentions. Their works possess essential literary features: fictionality, intertextuality, (tragic) irony, humour, suspense and recognition, which render them highly entertaining and fascinating. It is, therefore, not surprising that narratives with holy fools and cross-dressers are appealing, on the one hand, while they seem to have been condemned by the official Church, on the other. Obviously, in addition to producing sophisticated and pleasant narratives, the hagiographers in question wished to 'sell' their works, and in order to achieve this, they had to use fools and cross-dressers as their protagonists.

³⁸ Rochow, 'Die Vita der Euphrosyne der Jüngerer, das späteste Beispiel des Motivs der weiblichen Transvestitentums (*Monachoparthenia*) in der byzantinischen Hagiographie'.

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The Literary Portrait of Byzantine Female Saints

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From the earliest years of Christianity, women distinguished themselves during times of persecution by suffering the same hardships as men in their confession and martyrdom. Their struggles earned them great admiration among the faithful, but if their male counterparts were easily assimilated to 'soldiers' and 'athletes' of Christ in contemporary religious literature, certain adaptations were necessary to extend these exclusively masculine comparisons to women, considered weak and malleable by nature. On the basis of *Galatians* 3: 28 ('There is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ'), the Byzantines affirmed that it was through the 'virility' of their spirit, that is, their 'courage' and 'energy', that the heroines could conquer their natural physical frailty and endure the same torments as men.

Once peace had been definitively established within the Church, the category of the 'virile (female) martyr' did not lose any of its prestige, but it did become quite difficult to achieve. At the same time, ecclesiastical authorities imposed ever-greater restrictions on the public functions that had previously been carried out by women within the Christian community, such as the diaconate. The conjuncture of these two factors oriented the piety of women along a variety of ascetic paths that allowed them to fulfil their spiritual vocation and that frequently elicited the admiration of other Christians on account of their extreme rigour.

In the seventh century, however, the Arab invasions cut off Egypt, Syria and Palestine – provinces from which the most extreme forms of asceticism had sprung – from the rest of the Empire. Excluding Arab-held Palestine, after 650 we find no noteworthy hagiographic production until the end of the eighth century. Nevertheless, the ancient models did not disappear. Too attached to their religious and secular culture to relinquish it entirely, hagiographers would instead 'regenerate' these motifs to align them with contemporary perspectives, offering models of female sanctity that were innovative from a literary perspective while still imbued with historical, cultural and social meaning.¹

¹ Talbot, 'Essere donna e santa', 62–3; cf. Auzépy, 'La sainteté et le couvent: libération ou normalisation des femmes?', 176–9.