



Saints and Holy (Wo)Men in Byzantine Literature and Art

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Session 5: Secret Holiness: Cross-Dressing Nuns and Holy Fools

■ Secret Holiness: Cross-Dressing Nuns and Holy Fools

Literary Analysis: The *Life of Mary/Marinos* (no BHG no.), transl. by N. Conostas

After reading the text and the relevant article, you should be able to discuss the following topics:

- How many *Lives* of cross-dressing nuns have come down to us and what are the main differences between the early and the later texts? (see the article by Constantinou)
- What does the motif of ‘the transvestite nun’ mean and what does it symbolize? Can you expand on your thoughts considering the case of Mary/Marinos? (see the text and its introduction)
- What was the official attitude of the Church towards the phenomenon of ‘cross-dressing’? (see the introduction of the text and the article by Constantinou)
- The author of the introduction and translator of the text makes the following statement (p. 4): “the story of Mary/Marinos is primarily a drama of elaborate personal transformation, a grand exchange of otherness.” How do you understand this statement? Explain.

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After reading the text and the relevant article, you should be able to discuss the following topics:

- Contextualization of the text: author and date of composition of the text; place, time and characters of the story
- Why did Mary decide to enter a male monastery? What difficulties did she encounter and what did she propose as a solution?
- How did she eventually manage to enter the male monastery?
- After having been sent outside the monastery with three other monks to run some errands and having had to spend the night in an inn, she is accused of impregnating the innkeeper's daughter. Explain the details and the outcome of this story.
- How would you interpret the decision of Mary/Marinos to conceal the truth of the events and undertake the parenting of the child? How does her decision affect her spiritual advancement?
- How is the truth about the gender identity of Mary revealed? What are the reactions of the narrative characters?
- Healing miracles before and after Mary's death. Explain by referring to specific examples.

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After reading the text and the relevant article, you should be able to discuss the following topics:

- **Comparisons between cross-dressing nuns and holy fools:** “[f]rom a gender perspective both examined roles are gender specific.” What does S. Constantinou mean with this statement (p. 346)?
- What are the differences and shared elements of these two roles, namely the cross-dressing nuns and holy fools, in the light of the two basic phases in their life (cf. Constantinou): “The Mask” (348-353) and “Behind the Mask” (353-354).
- In which sense are the *Lives* of cross-dressing nuns and holy fools ironic and humorous? (see Constantinou, p. 354-356)
- What are the ‘disguised intentions’ of the hagiographers? (see Constantinou, p. 356-357)