

# A Dialogue with Death: Ritual Lament and the $\theta\rho\eta\nu\omicron\varsigma$ $\Theta\epsilon\omicron\tau\acute{o}\kappa\omicron\upsilon$ of Romanos Melodos

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“This disease of females still persists.”  
John Chrysostom

IN HER RECENT STUDY of women’s laments and Greek literature, Gail Holst-Warhaft writes: “The female lamenter articulates the inarticulate, forming a bridge between the living and the dead that is recognized by the community.... But as it is articulated by male poets removed from a ritual context, it loses its functional quality as a communal expression of grief.”<sup>1</sup> Were we to compose an index locorum to this fine book, however, we would find ourselves lisiting a rich variety of passages extending from the present—Yannis Ritsos’ *Epitaphios* and Kostis Palamas’ *Thanatos Pallikariou*—back through Athenian tragedy to Homer. Unless we narrowly restrict the definition of cultural production and its contexts, however, most entries in our index would turn out to have quite a bit to do with ritual after all. Recent scholarship on Greek drama, for example, has shed light on the manifold connections between the ceremonial context of the City Dionysia and the wider fields of ritual.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, modern writers continue to engage the Orthodox

<sup>1</sup> *Dangerous Voices: Women’s Laments and Greek Literature* (London 1992: hereafter ‘Holst-Warhaft’) 9.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. N. Loraux, *The Invention of Athens: The Funeral Oration in the Classical City*, tr. A. Sheridan (Cambridge [Mass.] 1986); J. J. Winkler and F. Zeitlin, ed., *Nothing to Do with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in Its Social Context* (Princeton 1990); A. M. Bowie, *Aristophanes: Myth, Ritual and Comedy* (Cambridge 1993); A. H. Sommerstein et al., ed., *Tragedy, Comedy and the Polis* (Bari 1993), esp. H. P. Foley, “The Politics of Tragic Lamentation,” 101–43; R. A. S. Seaford, *Reciprocity and Ritual: Homer and Tragedy in the Developing City-State* (Oxford 1994); and C. Sourvinou-Inwood, “Something to Do with Athens: Tragedy and Ritual,” in R. Osborne and S. Hornblower, ed., *Ritual, Finance, Politics: Athenian Democratic Accounts Presented to David Lewis* (Oxford 1994) 269–90.

Epitaphios (Requiem) tradition in both its official and popular manifestations. Least of all removed from a ritual context are the poetic and homiletic works of the Eastern church that served to negotiate—and in some cases continue to negotiate—the dramatic conflict between demotic and institutional responses to death. An important early Byzantine contribution to Greek sacred and popular culture is the protagonist of this discourse, the θεοτόκος μοιρολογίστρα, so to speak, the rather aggressive *mater dolorosa* who makes her dramatic entrance in the kontakion of Romanos Melodos known as θρήνος θεοτόκου or “Mary at the Cross” (Mass-Trypanis 19). In this paper I shall suggest that we read Romanos’ θρήνος not simply as the beginning of the “appropriation” of lament by the church or the “symbolic substitution” of one form of lament for another,<sup>3</sup> but as a dialogical negotiation, within the contexts of community and ritual, between various responses to death: Christian and non-Christian, physical and spiritual, demotic and institutional, political and devotional, male and female. Viewed in this light, the male composer may occupy a ‘third’ position as an interpreter or mediator of a conflict between the community, on the one hand, and a given institution—political, ecclesiastical, or intellectual—on the other. In the case of Romanos this mediation appears conciliatory, although later transformations of the Orthodox Epitaphios are often confrontational and unsettling. Ristsos’ political use of tradition has made his *Epitaphios* a modern classic—a historical crisis mythologized in terms of the Virgin’s lament. The θρήνος θεοτόκου illustrates well the eagerness on the part of the ‘male literary lament’ to engage other texts and traditions in a display of its socio-political purpose. Marjorie Carpenter’s ingenious interpretation of Romanos’ miracle—his poetic initiation by the Virgin who appeared on Christmas Eve to feed him a scroll—would

<sup>3</sup> “Perhaps by transforming the folk laments into an integral part of the Christian ritual, the church thought to appropriate for itself the role of official mourner” (Holst-Warhaft 172); “Similarly, the early Christian fathers may have diverted the subversive potential of private mourning, controlled by women, into the central focus of a ritual controlled by male priests in which the Virgin’s lament for her dead son becomes a symbolic substitution for the worshippers’ personal grieving” (6).

connect the intertextuality eloquently revealed by La Piana with a basic feature of the Saint's iconography and legend.<sup>4</sup>

## I. Dialogic Imagination and the Kontakion

The fourth chapter of Margaret Alexiou's ground-breaking work<sup>5</sup> is largely devoted to the rich medieval tradition of the Virgin's lament, which the author traces from Romanos through a variety of examples down to the current text and practice of the ἐπιτάφιος θρῆνος of Holy Week. Alexiou's discussion is impressive in its illustration of the broad reciprocity between the various registers of discourse: official, literary, and popular. "It is this dynamic interaction," she notes (xi), "between learned and popular poetry which makes the study of Greek tradition so rewarding and exciting when seen as a whole." Reflecting this interaction, the kontakion, as perfected by Romanos, came to be thoroughly 'dialogized', *i.e.*, characterized by a variety of interacting and responding elements. Beginning with the antiphonal aspects of the original delivery—*e.g.* the annual performance of the nativity kontakion by two choirs in the place of the emperor<sup>6</sup>—there can be no doubt that dialogue, generally understood, and antiphony are the defining characteristics of the genre, *i.e.*, the vigorous,

<sup>4</sup> M. Carpenter, "The Paper that Romanos Swallowed," *Speculum* 7 (1932) 3–22; G. La Piana, *Le Rappresentazioni sacre nella letteratura bizantina* (Grottoferata 1912), and "The Byzantine Theatre," *Speculum* 11 (1936) 172–211.

<sup>5</sup> *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (Cambridge 1974: hereafter 'Alexiou'). Other important work in this field includes Alexiou's "The Lament of the Virgin in Byzantine Literature and Modern Greek Folk Song," *ByzGrSt* 1 (1975) 11–40, and "Reappropriating Greek Sacrifice: *Homo Necans* or ἄνθρωπος θυσιάζων?" *JMGrSt* 8 (1990) 97–124; D. de Martino, *Morte e pianto nel mondo antico: dal lamento pagano al pianto di Maria* (Turin 1958); B. Bouvier, *Le Mirologue de la Vierge* (Geneva 1976); and C. Sourvinou-Inwood, *'Reading' Greek Culture: Texts and Images, Rituals and Myths* (Oxford 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Apparently an especially elaborate ceremony: see P. Maas and C. A. Trypanis, *Sancti Romani Melodi Cantica* (Oxford 1963) xf. "From the surviving texts," notes Trypanis, "we gather that the main body of the metrical sermon was chanted from the pulpit by the preacher himself after the reading of the gospel, while a choir, or even the whole congregation, probably joined in the refrain." For the Greek text of Romanos I have consulted the editions of Maas-Trypanis and Grosdidier de Matons, *Romanos le Mélode: Hymnes* (= SC 99, 110, 114, 128 [Paris 1964–67]).

antithetical give-and-take at the levels of meter, language, characterization, strophic structure, and theme. Romanos presents his players as eloquent and independent stage-figures in urgent conversation. The social, moral, and theological issues of each composition, moreover, are articulated throughout by means of incessant and highly varied verbal and thematic antitheses, the stock-in-trade of the kontakion. Such sermons, notes MacCormack, were not “actual ceremonies carried out, but the events of the redemption viewed as events which recur each year in such a way as to fuse time and eternity into one.”<sup>7</sup>

Having used the terms “dialogism” and “dialogical” several times I have implicitly engaged an important term of Bakhtinian criticism that trades in large and flexible—often quite ‘fuzzy’—concepts such as “carnival,” “chronotope,” and “memory.” Dialogical interaction, argues Bakhtin in his influential study of Dostoevsky,<sup>8</sup>

is the authentic realm of living discourse [*podlinnaya sfera zhizni yazyka*]. All human discourse [again, *zhizn' yazyka*] is permeated with dialogical relations.... Since they lie in the realm of the word which is by nature dialogical, these relations are the province of metalinguistic study that transcends the boundaries of linguistics and has an independent agenda [*predmet i zadachi*].

Dialogical relations are, thus not limited to whole utterances:

We may, in fact, take a dialogical approach to any [semantically] significant element of an utterance, even to a single word, if [such a word] is perceived not as an impersonal lexical item, but as a sign belonging to another’s system of signification,<sup>9</sup> as a representative of another’s utterance; that is, if we hear in [this word] the voice of another.

The often problematic application of Bakhtin’s notions of “carnival” to ancient genres and authors has been much advanced in the scholarship of the last decade and a half.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> S. MacCormack, “Christ and Empire: Time and Ceremonial in Sixth Century Byzantium and Beyond,” *Byzantion* 52 (1982) 287–309.

<sup>8</sup> M. Bakhtin, *Problemy Poetiki Dostoevskovo*<sup>4</sup> (Moscow 1979) 212ff.

<sup>9</sup> Literally “a sign of the semantic position of another” (*znak chuzhoi smyslovoi pozitsii*).

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. J.-C. Carrière, *Le carnaval et la politique* (Paris 1979); W. Rösler, “Michail Bachtin und die Karnevalskultur im antiken Griechenland,” *Quad Urbin* 23 (1986) 25–44; K. Reckford, *Aristophanes’ Old-and-New Comedy*:

“Dialogism” has come to the fore more recently and has its own bibliography.<sup>11</sup> Particularly relevant to my discussion of Romanos is the recent study of lyric by Paul Allen Miller that emphasizes the need to distinguish between different types of dialogism when working across ancient genres. Miller suggests the terms “primary dialogism” to refer to “that interplay of voices and concepts, which is found in realist fiction and daily life [as well as drama and the kontakion, I might add]. It designates that set of relations that governs the exchange of complete ‘utterances’ between individuals, social groups, and/or their fictional representatives....” Secondary dialogism, on the other hand, “represents that more subtle level of dialogical interaction which occurs not only within utterances, but within individual words.” This phenomenon is dialogical in a deeper sense as it “results from the speaker’s simultaneous *response* to past and *anticipation* of future utterances ... For every word we use carries with it the sights, sounds, and smells, the social and rhetorical contexts of its previous uses” (emphasis added).<sup>12</sup> Miller argues persuasively that ancient lyric, whose realization was oral and public, was profoundly dialogical in this ‘secondary’ sense: an apparently monological text whose elements, nevertheless, were dialogized by the performance situation.<sup>13</sup>

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*Six Essays in Perspective* (Chapel Hill 1987); D. F. Sutton, *Self and Society in Aristophanes* (Washington 1980); A. Edwards, “Historicizing the Popular Grotesque: Bakhtin’s Rabelais and Attic Old Comedy,” in R. Scodel, ed., *Theater and Society in the Classical World* (Ann Arbor 1993) 89–117.

<sup>11</sup> The starting point for this line of inquiry (and most any other) must be the work of Caryl Emerson, Michael Holquist (not least their translations of, and introductions to, Bakhtin’s work), and Gary Saul Morson. A particularly influential work has been C. Emerson, tr., and M. Holquist, ed. and tr., *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin 1981), esp. the essay “Discourse in the Novel,” 258–422. See e.g. M. Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World* (London 1990); G. S. Morson and C. Emerson, *Rethinking Bakhtin: Extensions and Challenges* (Evanston 1989), and *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford 1990); C. Emerson, “Irreverent Bakhtin,” *Arethusa* 26 (1993) 123–40.

<sup>12</sup> P. A. Miller, “Sappho 31 and Catullus 51: The Dialogism of Lyric,” *Arethusa* 26 (1993) 183f.

<sup>13</sup> Miller (*supra* n.12: 186) notes that “utterances are always other-directed, and this is particularly so in the case of public artistic performances where the audience is immediately present. Such poems are of necessity communal events, rather than closed confessions. Each new performance is a separate utterance, indissolubly linked to the moment of enunciation and so forever reinforcing the radically occasional nature of archaic lyric.” The dialogue of a

## II. Invention of the Theotokos

The narrative contribution of the kontakion evolved in a sphere contiguous with imperial ceremonial and the cult of icons that, as Averil Cameron and others have argued, were instrumental in redefining sixth-century society.<sup>14</sup> Theologically, the θρήνος kontakion studies the tensions attendant on the political promotion of Mary as Theotokos during Romanos' lifetime. The bare outline that we have of his career begins with his birth, midway between the Council of Chalcedon and the accession of Anastasius I, in Syrian Emesa, and includes a sojourn in Constantinople, perhaps even at the court of Anastasius, around the turn of the century.<sup>15</sup> Given the likelihood that the kontakia *On the Ten Virgins* (II) and *On Earthquakes and Fires* are authentic, Romanos appears to have been in Constantinople to witness the Nika riots (January 532), the earthquakes of the mid-fifties (July 552, August 555),<sup>16</sup> and perhaps even the collapse and rebuilding of Hagia Sophia (May 558–December 562).<sup>17</sup> Particularly relevant to the kontakion narratives is the fidelity with which Romanos defends the

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poet in this genre is "with both the (oral) poetic tradition and the collective ideological and social world in which it is performed" (195).

<sup>14</sup> See MacCormack (*supra* n.7: 308) on the "perhaps deliberate abandonment of classical culture and philosophy which characterize the empire between the death of Justinian and the rise of Islam [and, as she argues, somewhat earlier as well]. As everyone knows, this was not the end of classical culture and philosophy in Byzantium. But henceforth, they rubbed shoulders with quite unclassical ideas which became as ingrained in Byzantine mentalities as the classical tradition itself"; see also 287f and *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley 1981); A. Cameron, "Images of Authority: Elites and Icons in Late Sixth Century Byzantium," *PaP* 84 (1979) 3–35.

<sup>15</sup> See P. Maas, "Die Chronologie der Hymnen des Romanos," *BZ* 15 (1906) 1–44; J. Grosdidier de Matons, *Romanos le Mélode et les origines de la poésie religieuse à Byzance* (Paris 1977) 178–89. S. P. Brock's recent work on Syriac verse has important implications for the evolution of the kontakion: see esp. "Two Syriac Verse Homilies on the Binding of Isaac," *Muséon* 99 (1986) 61–129, and "A Syriac Verse Homily on Elijah and the Widow of Sarepta," *Muséon* 102 (1989) 93–113.

<sup>16</sup> On the tradition of incorporating natural disasters into the liturgical cycle see B. Croke, "Two Early Byzantine Earthquakes and their Liturgical Commemoration," *Byzantion* 51 (1981) 122–47, esp. 123f with n.11.

<sup>17</sup> The evidence is internal: see Maas (*supra* n.15) 9; see also Maas and Trypanis (*supra* n.6) xvff.

official position on the important theological issues of his day, especially the anti-monophysitism of Chalcedon and the establishment of Mary as Theotokos, between the extremes of Nestorius and Eutyches, at Ephesus.<sup>18</sup> The passionate treatment of these great themes in the kontakia, however, reflects their overwhelming importance in political and social life and is far from the mere reiteration of the dead letter.

The θρῆνος kontakion, like the Akathistos, whose iconographic expression has attracted scholarly attention recently,<sup>19</sup> is largely devoted to a conversation that dialogizes the very term θεοτόκος. The refrain of the hymn, “my son and my God,” as well as its structure are informed by the polarity of the human and divine aspects of Mary’s relation to Christ. The theological program of the kontakion, as usual, is framed by the prooimion and concluding strophe. In the former Mary simultaneously asserts her ‘natural’ motherhood and reluctant acquiescence in the crucifixion as having transcendent significance. We note that the clause concluding the proem places the first statement of the refrain in this ambivalent context:

Εἰ καὶ σταυρὸν ὑπομένεις, σὺ ὑπάρχεις  
ὁ υἱὸς καὶ θεὸς μου.<sup>20</sup>

In the final strophe, similarly, the kontakion apostrophizes Christ as υἱὲ τῆς παρθένου, θεὲ τῆς παρθένου (“Son of the Virgin, God of the Virgin”), both to summarize the doctrine of redemption and underscore that, as a woman and mother, Mary required supernatural support to find the confidence (παρρησία) to accept the harsh paradox of Golgotha. Between these bookends is a series of direct exchanges of increasing frequency framed by the pious narrator’s commentary into symmetrical groups of strophes. Mary holds forth for the first three strophes (1ff) and is answered in as many (4ff). Mary speaks

<sup>18</sup> See Grosdidier de Matons (*supra* n.15) 263–84, who makes the important point, however, that Romanos’ philosophical strength lies much more in the area of “economy” (dispensation) than in pure theology.

<sup>19</sup> See e.g. A. A. Grabar, “L’illustration de la première partie de L’hymne Akathiste,” *Byzantion* 54 (1984) 648–702; E. Voordeckers, *De Akathistos-hymne van de Byzantijnse Kerk* (Bonheiden 1988); J. Vereecken, “L’hymne Acathiste: icône chantée et mystère de l’incarnation en nombres,” *Byzantion* 63 (1988) 357–87; J. Lafontaine-Dosogne, “Nouvelles remarques sur l’illustration du prooimion de L’hymne Akathiste,” *Byzantion* 6 (1991) 448–57.

<sup>20</sup> “Despite the fact that you endure the cross,  
you remain my son and my God.”

again for two strophes (7f, not including the second sixth) to which Christ responds in two (9f). Mary then has a single strophe (11) that inspires the poem's climax: a theological speech in which Christ presents the redemption by means of an extended medical metaphor (12ff). There follows a final single-strophe exchange between mother and son (15f) capped by the concluding prayer. This dramatic symmetry is strictly articulated by the strophic unit—clearly *the* basic module of performance—which is, in turn, asserted throughout by means of a melodic and metrical resposion matched only by classical choral lyric in complexity and variety.

If the “theo-” part of Mary's relation to Christ is institutionally and politically determined, the specifics of the second morpheme, *i.e.*, “-tokos” “giver of birth,” are more available to the poet for creative manipulation. In our kontakion, I submit, Romanos situates the paradoxical and synthetic figure of the Theotokos within an archetypal structure of ritual lament involving a mother, in the company of other women, lamenting her dead son. The traditional funerary context of ritual lamentation is cleverly modified on the basis of a few poignant moments in the Gospels to acknowledge the traditional female management of burial and to place it, as it were, in dialogue with evolving theology. As we shall see, the θρηνος kontakion represents the irreconcilable conflict between ‘natural’ grief in the context of traditional (extra-ecclesiastical) ritual, on the one hand, and the Orthodox doctrines of redemption, resurrection, and Mary's motherhood of God, on the other. At the poem's end, moreover, it becomes clear that Romanos' Virgin asserts her ‘natural’ right to mourn in an implicit rejection of any artificial theological resolution of this conflict.

### III. En Route to the Cross

There can be little doubt that it was a bold innovation on the part of Romanos to assimilate the Virgin—otherwise absent from the passion narratives<sup>21</sup>—to the women who followed Christ along the *via dolorosa*. These women, as well as those

<sup>21</sup> A single reference (John 19:25) locates Mary on Calvary as a silent character. The Synoptic Gospels, of course, have much more to say about Christ's female followers than about his mother. The liturgy, as a rule, eschews material from the apocryphal gospels.



who come to be celebrated as the γυναῖκες μυροφόροι, are frustrated in their traditional attempts to mourn and dress the body. It is striking that Christ, the subject of lamentation and burial, underscores the cultural and spiritual ‘subversion’ of Passover by explicitly rejecting traditional funerary ritual. He is buried by men and will not allow the μυροφόροι to touch his ‘new’ body. We read in the Gospel of Luke (23:27–31):

And there were following him a great multitude of the people, and of women who were mourning him and lamenting him. But Jesus turned to them and said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, stop weeping for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, “Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.” Then they will begin to say to the mountains, “Fall on us,” and to the hills, “Cover us,” for if they do these things in the green tree, what will happen in the dry?”

Romanos uses this context, which mirrors the common language of lamentation (κόπτειν, θρηνεῖν, κλαίειν), to articulate Mary’s ‘natural’ humanity and motherhood.<sup>22</sup> The soundtrack of this kontakion, as it were, is inconsolable weeping with κλαίω and κλαυθμός as the leitmotifs. The first strophe begins with Mary “following wearily with the other women, crying ‘Where are you going child?’” Throughout this poem, down to the final exchange, she continues to weep, overwhelmed by love and sorrow: “I am vanquished by loving grief (πόθῳ), child,” she cries in the fifteenth strophe, and repeats her very first request:

Νικῶμαι, ὦ τέκνον, νικῶμαι τῷ πόθῳ  
καὶ οὐ στέγω ἀληθῶς, ἴν’ ἐγὼ μὲν ἐν θαλάμῳ, σὺ δ’ ἐν ξύλῳ  
καὶ ἐγὼ μὲν ἐν οἰκιᾷ, σὺ δ’ ἐν μνημείῳ·

<sup>22</sup> The full significance of a sacred fable can only be appreciated against the backdrop of social reality. For lament-specific material Alexiou has not been superseded. More general ground is covered in the accessible bibliographical overview of recent work in L. Garland, “The Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women,” *Byzantion* 58 (1988) 361–93, esp. nn.1–4.

ἄφες οὖν συνέλθω· θεραπεύει γὰρ ἐμὲ τὸ θεωρεῖν σε.<sup>23</sup>

It is tempting to see here a hint of the death-wish theme that becomes so prominent in the later vernacular θρῆνοι Θεοτόκου.<sup>24</sup> Students of funerary rituals across a variety of cultures have suggested that the lamenter approaches the apparent madness of the shamanic function by engaging the dead in direct dialogue—“ritual dialogues with death,” in Holst-Warhaft’s phrase (26f)—and the format of the *kontakion* provides an ideal literary medium for the “antiphonic construction of pain” in the performance of lament.<sup>25</sup> The Gospels, then, have provided an ingenious way for Romanos to stage this very aspect of ritual lament and, thereby, to contribute an important feature to the subsequent *threnos* tradition: the *moirologhistra* may still engage the ‘deceased’ on this side of eternity! The force of this stark dramatization is to enact, *as a process*, the irreconcilable conflict between the mourning mother and her son’s death, which may still be challenged as an imminent event. Throughout the *kontakion* Mary asserts her failure to understand Christ’s sacrificial death, and her words in the second strophe, πῶς τὸ φῶς μου σβέννυται; (“How is it that my light is

<sup>23</sup> “I am vanquished by loving grief, child, vanquished  
And cannot bear the thought of being in my chambers while  
you are on the cross;  
I, at home while you are in the tomb.  
Let me come with you! The sight of you soothes my pain.”

<sup>24</sup> “Perhaps it is hardly surprising that the suicide wish was not developed in the *kontákia*,” notes Alexiou (65), “which tended to reflect more official Orthodox doctrine; but it has remained an important motif in many of the modern folk ballads, where it provokes the reply from Christ that if his Mother gives way to suicide and despair, there can be no salvation for the rest of the world—a point which Romanos and later hymn writers do not omit to elaborate at some length (Romanos 19.6–9, *MMB* 5.180.11).”

<sup>25</sup> To cite a modern example, Holst-Warhaft (45) notes that Nadia Seremetakis “argues for antiphony as the dominant organizational principle of the laments of Mani. In her view the antiphony of performance, expressed in the interchange between soloist and chorus, underscores a broader relationship of the small female lament group to the community, and of women to men. The interchange becomes ‘a formal procedure for the production and reception of jural discourse and for the cultural construction of truth ... [as well as] a political strategy that organizes the relationship of women to male-dominated institutions’. Seremetakis contends that the antiphonic ‘construction’ of pain not only lies at the heart of lament performance but is consciously used by women as a means of social manipulation.”

being extinguished?") have been echoed in countless lament poems, including Ritsos' *Epitaphios*.<sup>26</sup>

Mary is first made to ring the changes on the *quo vadis* theme: is there another wedding in Cana? In a moment of possible self-citation, Romanos has Mary recall the *acclamatio* theme of the Palm Sunday kontakion (Maas-Trypanis 16), analyzed as a *basilikos logos* by Eva Topping.<sup>27</sup> The road is still strewn with palms and the streets resound with praise: "Hosanna," originally a cry for help, is transmuted, via the Messianic Psalm 118 (verse 25) into the triumphant εὐλογημένοσ sung by children. "Have I confused my rituals?" she appears to ask; "Is this not a funeral, but a wedding?"<sup>28</sup> The reciprocity between the discourses of funeral and wedding as analogous rites of passage is well documented across the spectrum of Greek tradition from Athenian tragedy (in Rush

<sup>26</sup> Cf. the stichira from Vespers of Great Friday:

Οἶμοι, θεῖον τέκνον,	Alas, my divine child!
Οἶμοι, τὸ φῶς τοῦ κόσμου	Alas, Light of the world!
Τί ἔδυσ ἐξ ὀφθαλμῶν μου,	Why have you vanished from my sight
ὁ Ἄμνὸς τοῦ Θεοῦ;	O Lamb of God?

And these staseis (3.27, 29) from the current *Epitaphios Threnos* that are a clear echo of Romanos 19.1f:

ἡ δάμαλις τὸν μόσχον, ἐν ξύλῳ κρεμασθέντα,  
 ἠλάλαξεν ὀρώσα.  
 ὦ φῶς τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν μου, γλυκύτατον μου  
 τέκνον, πῶς τάφῳ νῦν καλύπτῃ;  
 "The heifer, seeing her calf hanged on the cross,  
 Wailed in grief.  
 Light of my eyes, my sweetest child,  
 How is it that you are now concealed by the tomb?"

In Ritsos' *Epitaphios* (VI) the latter sentiment is thus expressed:

Καὶ μοῦλεγεσ, γιέ, πῶσ ὄλ' αὐτὰ τὰ ὠραῖα θάναι δικά μας  
 καὶ τῶρα ἐσβήστησ κ' ἐσβησε τὸ φέγγοσ κ' ἡ φωτιά μας.  
 "And you told me, son, that all that is beautiful shall be our own.  
 Now you've been snuffed out. Extinguished are our light and fire!

On this and related topoi see Alexiou 65–68.

<sup>27</sup> E. C. Topping, "Romanos, On the Entry into Jerusalem: A Basilikos Logos," *Byzantion* 4 (1977) 65–91, esp. 78ff.

<sup>28</sup> See Topping (*supra* n.27: 78–82) for the extensive thematics of acclamation in the kontakion on the Entry into Jerusalem.

Rehm's monograph<sup>29</sup>) down to contemporary Peloponnesian laments (by Loring Danforth, Nadia Seremetakis, and Holst-Warhaft). "The fearful mystery of death," notes the latter, "is reduced by likening it to a marriage, including the practice of dressing the corpse as a bride or groom. The funeral then becomes a wedding and the grave is likened to a new home."<sup>30</sup> Romanos assimilates this traditional symmetry to the paradox of the Virgin bride, the *νύμφη ἀνύμφευτος* of the Akathistos, in an amplification of the parable at Matthew (25:1–13) that is to inform much subsequent hymnography such as the famous verses of Great Monday, *ἰδου ὁ νυμφίος ἔρχεται* ("Behold, the Bridegroom cometh") and *τόν νυμφῶνα σου βλέπω* ("I see your bridal chamber").

The framing dialogue between mother and son is thus complicated by what I shall call the 'theological' voice—the 'official' or 'institutional' aspect of the Christ persona—which seeks to reposition Mary between God and man as Theotokos: "Behold," we hear in the fifth strophe, "you are in the midst of my bridal chamber! Don't wither away in spirit like those who are shut out. Regard those within as your slaves who will run at your beckoning in fearful obedience." This, of course, alludes to the Virgin's exalted status whereby she, as second in rank only to the Godhead, absorbs much of Christ's function as intermediary between God and man, leaving an Old Testament-style Christ Pantokrator to glower from icons and mosaics in later Byzantine art. The full force of Mary's 'motherhood of God' is her profound isolation, on the levels of hagiographical narrative and official doctrine, from all other sacred and mortal figures. Accordingly, in the fourth strophe (as again in the fourteenth), Christ confronts her and separates her from the 'other women':

Ἀπόθου, ὦ μήτερ, τὴν λύπην ἀπόθου·  
οὐ γὰρ πρέπει σοι θρηνεῖν, ὅτι κεχαριτωμένη ὠνομάσθης·

<sup>29</sup> *Marriage to Death: The Conflation of Wedding and Funeral Rituals in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton 1994).

<sup>30</sup> Holst-Warhaft 18f. L. M. Danforth, *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece* (Princeton 1982) 74, observes that "one of the most striking features of Greek funeral laments is the close resemblance they bear to the songs that are sung at weddings throughout Greece.... The relationship between funeral laments and wedding songs is but one aspect of a larger correspondence or analogy between death rites and marriage rites which is to be found in Greek culture."

τὴν οὖν κλήσιν τῷ κλαυθμῷ μὴ συγκαλύψης·  
μὴ ταῖς ἀσυνέτοις ὁμοιώσης ἑαυτήν, πάνσοφε κόρη·  
ἐν μέσῳ ὑπάρχεις τοῦ νυμφῶνος τοῦ ἐμοῦ.<sup>31</sup>

It is significant that Christ opposes the lamenters' "lack of understanding" to the Virgin's wisdom, her σοφία: μὴ ταῖς ἀσυνέτοις ὁμοιώσης ἑαυτήν, πάνσοφε κόρη (5.4). That this σύνεσις ("understanding") is technical and theological is made clear later (13.8ff), when Mary is encouraged to subscribe to doctrine of "salvation through suffering." Christ presents himself as a healer whose remedies will bring her understanding: μήτηρ, ἵνα ψάλλῃς συνειτῶς· πάσχων πάθος ἔλυσεν ὁ υἱὸς καὶ θεὸς μου" ("That you might sing with understanding, mother, 'Suffering, my son and my God has ended suffering'").

The discomfort and contempt with which church spokesmen regarded traditional lament rituals is evident from the writings of the famous fourth-century fathers Basil of Caesarea and John Chrysostom. In the homily *De gratiarum actione*, the former asserts that "neither men nor women should be permitted too much lamentation and mourning."<sup>32</sup> The outlines of contemporary practice emerge in his next comment: "They should show moderate distress in their affliction, with only a few tears, shed quietly and without moaning, wailing, tearing of clothes, and groveling in the dust, or committing any other indecency commonly practiced by the ungodly." A passage that must be juxtaposed with the 'theological' voice of our kontakion is Chrysostom's famous outburst (*PG LIX 346*):

What are you doing, woman? Tell me, would you shamelessly strip yourself naked in the middle of the marketplace, you, who are a part of Christ, in the presence of men and in the very marketplace? And would you tear your hair, rend your garments and wail loudly, dancing and preserving the image of Bacchic women, without regard for your offense to God?

<sup>31</sup> "Lay aside your grief, mother, lay it aside.  
Lamentation does not befit you who have been called "Blessed."  
Do not obscure your calling with weeping.  
Do not liken yourself to those who lack understanding, all-wise maiden.  
You are in the midst of my bridal chamber."

<sup>32</sup> *PG XXXI 229c*. This and the Chrysostom passage below are cited in the translation of Alexiou 28f.

Alexiou notes in this connection:

It is significant that he objects not only to the more violent practices, such as laceration of the cheeks, tearing of the hair, and rending of garments, roundly condemning a widow bereaved of her only son for her wild desire to bury herself alive with him in the tomb, but also *to the very essence of the dirge*, which he describes as self-centered and self-indulgent (emphasis added).

The theme of a mother who would follow her son in death and who has little concern for the Christian ‘calling’ finds powerful—and very persuasive—expression in Romanos’ dramatic character.

Mary continues to weep, and Christ is forced to repeat his rhetorical questions again and again (4.4, 8): τί δακρύεις, μήτηρ; τί οὖν κλαίεις, μήτηρ; (“Why *are* you crying, mother?”). It is important to emphasize that, on the dramatic plane, both Christ’s arguments and his rhetorical displays remain ineffective and that the Theotokos’ position remains theoretical. Mary weeps at the end as she does in the beginning, a disconsolate μοιρολογίστρα who will not be assuaged by promises of salvation or resurrection. The programmatic nature of Romanos’ introductory verses throughout the corpus<sup>33</sup> should alert us to the special significance of the brief prooimium τὸν δι’ ἡμᾶς σταυρωθέντα that announces the disjunction between ritual lament and the official interpretation of the crucifixion scenario—and all subsequent ‘deaths in Christ’, for that matter.<sup>34</sup> Mary asserts the bond of kinship despite the apparent theological *absurdum*, a spectacle that Romanos summons the community to witness and to celebrate in song:

Let us, then, all of us sing a hymn of praise  
for the One crucified on our behalf,  
for Mary saw him on the cross and said:  
“Despite the fact that you endure crucifixion, you remain  
my son and my god.”

<sup>33</sup> See Grosdidier de Matons (*supra* n.15) 40ff.

<sup>34</sup> The Orthodox Requiem Service emphasizes the link between the redemptive death of Christ and the death of the faithful. As I discuss below, Romanos explores this idea by means of the retrieval, or “calling up,” of Adam and Eve (ἀνακαλέω, “to invoke the dead to rise again,” is a technical term; see Alexiou 59, 109f).

The dialogical conflict between the 'theological' and 'ritual' voices is deep and arises, ultimately, from fundamentally different, and competing, approaches to the realm of the dead.

#### IV. The *Moirologhistra* and the Shaman: an Agon

Mary's implicit assertion of her ritual right to a dialogue with death meets with a direct challenge on what I would call the 'shamanic' level. Just as the 'official' or 'theological' voice would transform the popular metaphor of separation (funeral=wedding) into one of union, *i.e.*, "This is a wedding and you are *my* bride," so it attempts to diffuse the subtle anger of Mary's subsequent questions by dramatizing a counter-shamanic exploit of soul-retrieval (*katabasis* and spiritual healing). Basic functions of the shamanic quest to other realms include mediumistic dialogues with the dead and their outright retrieval from the beyond.<sup>35</sup> Homer's *Nekyia* (*Od.* 11) is a poetic presentation of the former, and the various 'harrowings of hell' by Heracles, Theseus, Orpheus, Isis, *etc.* are narrative reflections of the latter. The early medieval mythology of Christ's *katabasis* is, of course, part of a very old tradition. "Heracles remained the great helper against the horror of death down to the sarcophagi of the late empire," writes Burkert in this connection, and "It has even been suggested that the last word of Jesus Christ according to the Gospel of St John, *telélestai*, is taken over from Heracles."<sup>36</sup> Romanos, I would argue, stages an eschatological contest for the dead between the female 'medium' and the male hero who undertakes the ultimate quest. This agon between mutually exclusive positions is not fair, however, as it pits traditional social practice against slippery, symbolic invention in the service of theology. Mary's expression of ritual lament confronts the real death of a single family member, while Christ usurps the ancient scenario of

<sup>35</sup> For an interesting contemporary example (Coast Salish Indians of Puget Sound) of shamanic travel to the realm of the dead, see J. Miller, *Shamanic Odyssey: The Lushootseed Salish Journey to the Land of the Dead* (Menlo Park 1988); for shamanic elements in Greek mythology see W. Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley 1979) 88–97.

<sup>36</sup> Burkert (*supra* n.35) 94 n.2; *cf.* J. Kroll, *Der Mythos vom Descensus-kämpfe* (Leipzig 1932); J. A. MacCullough, *The Harrowing of Hell* (Edinburgh 1930); M. Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell* (Philadelphia 1983); and A. D. Kartsonis, *Anastasis: The Making of an Image* (Princeton 1986).

*katabasis* to fabricate a new myth of a *potential*, general redemption. In this strange concretization of doctrine, the redemptive sacrifice of Golgotha mutates to become a quest to ‘retrieve’ humanity from ‘Hades’.

In the spirit of folk laments that mingle cries of revenge and imprecations with bitter and confrontational question, Mary wants to know why Christ’s followers have abandoned him (3) and why a man who bestowed health and life is being put to death (7f). An early twentieth-century Peloponnesian lament, for example, includes the following outburst in the third person on the part of the Ligourou, sister of the murdered Vetoulas:<sup>37</sup>

κι ἔσκουξ’ ἡ Ληγοροῦ φωνή  
ὁ τόπος ν’ ἀνατριάλιστεῖ:  
—Δὲν εἶχ’ ὁ Βέτουλας καφó,  
δὲν εἶχε πρωτοξάδερφο;  
Ἐχάθη νάμαι σερνικὸς·  
καὶ νὰ φοροῦ βρακὶ καὶ γώ!  
Νάχου στὸν νόμο τὸ σαρμᾶ  
νὰ κυνηγήσου τὸ φονιᾶ!<sup>38</sup>

In the third strophe of our poem we are close to the emotional source that inspires the Virgin of later laments, both learned (*Christos Paschon*) and vernacular (*Threnos Theotokou*), to threaten suicide and utter fierce curses on the guilty parties, including the notorious gypsy nail-maker.<sup>39</sup>

The response to this cry, as we have seen, takes the form of a narrative in which the ‘shaman’ sets his heroic *katabasis* against the female lamenter’s dialogue with death. Ritual lament, of course, knows nothing of soul retrieval and Mary is skeptical: “If you go down to rescue them, will I ever see you again?” (11). Christ exploits the potential of what I have called the

<sup>37</sup> K. Kassis, *Μοιρολόγια τῆς Μέσα Μάνης I* (Athens 1979) 188.

<sup>38</sup> “And Ligoros let out a shrill cry  
that made the place shudder all around  
—Did Vetoulas have no brother,  
did he have no first cousin?  
If only I’d been a male  
and could wear pants myself!  
To have shouldered the gun myself  
and hunted down the murderer!”

Tr. Holst-Warhaft 58 (adapted).

<sup>39</sup> Alexiou 64f; see also Holst-Warhaft’s third chapter, “The Politics of Revenge in the Laments of Inner Mani,” 75–97.



‘shamanic’ persona to enrich the new myth by asserting his prowess as a healer. The metaphysical damage of sin becomes an illness requiring a curious homeopathic surgery that makes intimate use of the ‘shaman’s’ body, both in its capacity to endure suffering and as a field of signification. This new counter-ritual of λύτρωσις (12.4) involves the “great labors” (12.4) and “sweat” (12.5) of death, which will be written in his flesh as signs to be read. “I shall reveal all this to my friends,” he says, “showing the evidence [thereof] inscribed in my hands” (12.6). The thirteenth strophe describes the medicine man at work:

Μικρὸν οὖν, ὦ μήτηρ, ἀνάσχου καὶ βλέπεις,  
 πῶς καθάπερ ἰατρὸς ἀποδύομαι καὶ φθάνω ὅπου κείνται,  
 καὶ ἐκείνων τὰς πληγὰς περιοδεύω,  
 τέμνων ἐν τῇ λόγχῃ τὰ πωρώματα αὐτῶν καὶ τὴν σκληρίαν·  
 λαμβάνω καὶ ὄξος, καταστύφω τὴν πληγὴν·  
 τῇ μίλῃ τῶν ἥλων ἐρευνήσας τὴν νομὴν χλαίνῃ μοτώσω·  
 καὶ δὴ τὸν σταυρὸν μου ὡς νάρθηκα ἔχων  
 τούτῳ χρώμαι, μήτηρ, ἵνα ψάλλῃς συνετῶς·  
 “πάσχων πάθος ἔλυσεν  
 ὁ υἱὸς καὶ θεὸς μου.”<sup>40</sup>

The attempt at inspiring σύνεσις (“understanding”) is not very successful and Christ must repeat his exhortation to stop crying. “Utterly swamped with grief” (14f), Mary does not hear him.

In addition to the angry and desolate aspects of lament with which the ‘theological’ and ‘shamanic’ voices have been contending, there is a striking moment in the second (spurious?) sixth strophe in which Mary rejects her son’s metaphors of the body to speak of the womb that bore him and the breasts that nourished him. In response to Christ’s ‘shamanic’ imagery and the Old Testament *topoi* of the manna and the ὄρος

<sup>40</sup> “For a short while, o mother, be patient and you shall see  
 How, like a doctor, I divest myself and reach where they lie  
 And cure their wounds.  
 I will cut their sores and callouses with the lance.  
 I will take vinegar too and staunch the wound.  
 Having explored the ulcer with the surgical probe of the  
 nails, I will bind it up with my cloak.  
 And then, carrying my Cross as a medicine chest  
 I will use it so that you might sing with understanding.  
 ‘By suffering, he has dissolved suffering,  
 My son and my God’.”

(tr. Alexiou).

τετυρωμένον (“curdled mountain,” 6),<sup>41</sup> Mary casts his words back at him and grounds her sorrow in her own maternal body:

Τί μοι λέγεις, τέκνον· “μὴ ταῖς ἄλλαις γυναιξὶ συναποφέρει;”  
καὶ γὰρ ὡσπερ αὐταὶ ἐν κοιλίᾳ ὑἱὸν  
σὲ ἔσχον ἐν μήτρᾳ, καὶ μαστοῖς σοι τοῖς ἐμοῖς γάλα παρέσχον.  
πῶς οὖν θέλεις ἄρτι μὴ κλαῦσαι σε, τέκνον,  
θάνατον ἀδίκως ὑποστήναι σπεύδοντα;<sup>42</sup>

The underlying connection between birth and death, motherhood and grief that pervades ritual lament is asserted here in pointed reference to the New Testament passage where Christ rejects the women’s lamentation (and implicit management of death) by alluding to an apocalyptic landscape in which motherhood will be a curse: “The days are coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed....’” The voice of maternal lament is here implicitly critical of a theology that would deny the female body its status as one of the main sites where cultural meanings are negotiated. Mary can neither regret having given birth nor accept her son’s execution as a new Passover sacrifice. We shall search hard in the *kontakion* for any move on her part towards the rôle on which the ‘official’ or ‘theological’ voice insists. Christ’s last direct words to Mary, and the concluding line of the drama (following an enumeration of the wonders to accompany his death), are significant: “When you see all this, if you cower, being a mere woman, call upon me and say: ‘Spare me, my son and my God!’”

We have come full circle, then, to the basic dichotomy stated in the prooimion between mortal and divine, ritual lament and Orthodox doctrine, female and male. Where is Romanos, the “poet-preacher” as he is sometimes called, in all this? Clearly his *θρῆνος* *kontakion* traces various aspects of a rift in the social and cultural fabric and that the poet has deftly played along its dangerous fault lines. Like the tragedians of Classical antiquity, Romanos appears less anxious to fabricate neat solutions than he is to engage and represent conflict from his position some-

<sup>41</sup> See the Septuagint version of Psalm 61 and Grosdidier de Matons (*supra* n.15) *ad loc.*

<sup>42</sup> “What do you mean, child, ‘Don’t follow along with the other women?’  
Indeed, just as they in their wombs,  
So I, in mine, bore you and gave you milk at my breasts;  
How is it, then, that you want me not to lament you  
As you hasten to submit to an unjust death, my child?”

where between factions in the community, between the people and their institution(s).<sup>43</sup> In naming and invoking, Romanos as narrator is scrupulously pious; in dramatizing and giving his characters voice, he is much more adventurous. In the large-scale dialogues as well as in the ‘microdialogic’ aspects of his work we find a wealth of thought and unresolved tension. How else, one might ask, can an evolving tradition face the conflict between the grandiose mythology of miracles, eternal life, and other worlds, on the one hand, and the cheerless realities of suffering, death, and oppression on the other?

## V. Conclusion

The influence of Romanos’ *θρηνηος* kontakion on learned and vernacular lament literature is well-attested by Alexiou and others, and one can still enjoy fragments of his verse in the more thorough reading of the Triodion in monastic and parish ritual practice. In the case of the sixth-century kontakion composed and performed for a unique occasion (absolutely, and in the calendar), I am not prepared to see Romanos as simply the mouthpiece of authority and doctrine. Rather, he was able to make of the bare bones of scripture and the arid material of doctrine a theater where important conflicts were simultaneously explored and put on display. The dialogic technique underlying this exploration invested the given fable with a variety of voices, creating both vivid conversations between characters and a variety of microdialogues. In the *θρηνηος* kontakion within the framework of several quick exchanges between mother and son, Romanos explores the place of traditional ritual lament in the emerging theology of the official church. In the resulting and complex exchange between the voices of the pious narrator, Mary—the lamenter, mother, Servant of God, Virgin bride, Mother of God—and Christ—Son, Sacrificial Victim, ‘Shaman’, Savior, God—we discern the problematic relation of Church doctrine and practice to ‘natural’ and traditional views towards suffering and death.

A watershed in the ‘creation’ of the Theotokos, then, was the sixth-century kontakion where the paradoxes of her body—

<sup>43</sup> On the relationship between Romanos and his ‘audience’ see H. Hunger, “Romanos Melodos, Dichter, Prediger, Rhetor, und sein Publicum,” *JÖBG* 34 (1984) 15–42.

mother/virgin, creatrix/created, ἁγίων ἀρχηγός/δούλη—are projected into a dramatic form giving rise to a sophisticated polyphony. A fundamental aspect of the Virgin-in-dialogue is the opposition of gendered voices as Mary engages a variety of (mostly male) interlocutors in confrontational and argumentative modes grounded into the paradoxes of her being. It is the interplay, tension, and difference of these voices that she takes shape as a leading dramatic and sacred female figure. As we move from hymns such as the *Parthenion* of Methodius, Proclus' *Dialogue*, and the *Akathistos*, to the mature θρῆνος Θεοτόκου of Romanos we see the progress from onomastic writing and strophomythia towards an authentically dialogical (and dramatic) concept. It is not an exaggeration to say that this moment in Byzantine hagiography, *i.e.*, the 'invention' of the Theotokos, owes a great deal to the ways in which Romanos engaged the paradoxes of gender, body, and voice in the antiphonal, public performance of kontakia.

I would locate the beginning of the Threnos tradition, then, in the work of a poet who placed himself between demotic and institutional positions, and who, through his work, attempted to engage both sides in a conciliatory and productive dialogue. It is not necessarily true, as has been variously asserted, that men must experience death through literature, removed from a ritual context. In the case of Romanos, we see an example of a male poet exploring conflict by means of a public performance destined to shape ritual. In our passion kontakion, moreover, it is the common-sense grief and traditional practice of the Greek *mater dolorosa* that prevails, if anything, and it is this passion of the Virgin that informs the many works of song, poetry, and prose in centuries to come. The tenacity with which Romanos' violently grieving Virgin, the Virgin μοιρολογίστρα, has endured in the literary and popular imagination suggests that the conflict has never been resolved and is put on display with every Epitaphios Threnos. To this the work of many modern

poets (Yannis Ritsos, Kostis Palamas, Katrina Anghelaki-Rooke) bears eloquent testimony.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> This paper has its beginnings in Ch. 5 of *Kondaki Sv. Romana Sladkopevtsa na Strastnuuiu S'edmitsu* ("The Passion Kontakia of Romanos Melodos," B.Th. thesis, Jordanville, [N.Y.] 1981). I am particularly grateful to Margaret Alexiou, Sabine MacCormack, and Gail Holst-Warhaft for their guidance and assistance. I also wish to thank my colleagues at the Institute for the Humanities at the University of Michigan with whom I have had both formal and informal opportunities to discuss my work. I am grateful also to audiences at the 20<sup>th</sup> annual Byzantine Studies Conference and colloquia at the University of Michigan and California State University, Long Beach, for their comments on earlier versions of this paper.