Marriage, comedy, and the patristic tradition in the first Ptochoprodromic poem*

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The present paper deals with the first Ptochoprodromic poem's treatment of the early patristic tradition. Its focus is on the conjugal life of the Ptochoprodromic couple, whose interaction is compared to the precepts of the Byzantine Fathers on the ideal Christian marital life. Evidently, the poet parodies the tradition to which the said precepts belong, offering a comic image of the ideal Christian couple in which gender roles have been reversed. Moreover, the final scene of the poem, where the husband disguises himself, is linked to the hagiographical tradition of cross-dressing women, as well as of male saints in disguise.

Keywords: Ptochoprodromos; patristic literature; hagiography; possible parody

There is a scene in the well-loved Greek comedy film *Music, Poverty and Pride* (*Λατέρνα, φτώχια και φιλότιμο*, 1955),[1] in which the protagonists, two barrel-organists, along with their female companion, find themselves in the countryside during a revelry. At one point, a man appears who wishes to dance the well-known 'manly' dance called zeibekiko. However, his stout wife thinks otherwise and instead urges him, in a rather abusive and demanding manner, to return home. The man insists and finally has his way; the barrel-organists play a song, still quite popular today in Greece, with the telling title: 'I'm a man and I'll do as I please' (Είμαι άντρας και το κέφι μου θα κάνω). Both the emphatic lyrics (tongue-in-cheek in the comic context of the film) and the man's

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1 For this translation of the title: V. Karalis, *A History of Greek Cinema* (New York 2012) 82. Karalis' assessment of the film is worth quoting: 'a hilarious carnivalization of stereotypical behavior, juxtaposing the urban mentality with the activities of wandering outsiders, the gypsies'.

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ritualistic dance are ostensibly the very definition of 'performing folk masculinity' in all its glory. Nonetheless, after the end of the song, the last verse of which includes such lines as: 'You need to understand that you don't have a say, / for a woman's place is underneath her man', the situation turns upside-down completely: the burly wife berates her husband, while dragging him to and fro, and he has no choice but to submit. Then, all present, men and women alike, burst into hysterical laughter.

The scene can readily be compared to the first Ptochoprodromic poem,[2] in order to explore how comedy at once undermines and confirms the social norm. Within male-dominated societies, husbands are supposed to be the head of the family and wives are expected to be submissive and obedient.[3] The overturning of this reality in a light-hearted way is, among other things, the domain of comedy, its outcome being the reaction of laughter on behalf of the audience. In the case of this film scene, the background actors' laughter affirms its comic character and we are allowed to assume that theatre audiences laughed along too. Likewise, the Ptochoprodromic poem in question, which is based on the same premise as the film scene, by using similar comic ingredients (e.g. devaluation of male authority through verbal and physical abuse, the latter because the man is thinner, shorter and generally feebler than the woman), must have seemed quite funny to its original recipients. In fact it still is, and thankfully modern scholars are willing to acknowledge it.[4]

Thus, it is easy to discern a pattern in gender-related comedy produced in patriarchal societies which defies time and space. Of course, when we contextualize texts, we have to take into account the cultural framework that breathed life into them. The first Ptochoprodromic poem is preserved in just one manuscript, dating to the fourteenth century,[5] whereas it seems to be relevant to a twelfth-century milieu – after all, it is addressed to the emperor John II Komnenos (1118–43).[6] Its author, who may or may not have been the celebrated twelfth-century poet, teacher, and orator Theodore Prodromos, was in full control of his artistry when creating it and produced a poem

2 Ed. H. Eideneier, *Ptochoprodromos* (Heraklion 2012) 153–61.

3 On gender in Byzantium, see C. S. Galatariotou, 'Holy women and witches: aspects of Byzantine conceptions of gender', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 9 (1984) 55–94 and L. Neville, *Byzantine Gender* (Leeds 2019). On emotions in relation to gender, see S. Constantinou and M. Meyer (eds), *Emotions and Gender in Byzantine Culture* (Florida 2019) and S. Papaioannou, *Michael Psellos: rhetoric and authorship in Byzantium* (Cambridge 2013) 192–231.

4 M. Alexiou's 'The poverty of écriture and the craft of writing: towards a reappraisal of the Prodromic poems', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 10/1 (1986) 1–40 is the starting point for the literary appreciation of the Ptochoprodromic poems. M. Kulhánková in her paper '"For old men too can play, albeit more wisely so": the game of discourses in the *Ptochoprodromika*', in P. Marciniak and I. Nilsson (eds), *Satire in the Middle Byzantine Period: the golden age of laughter?* (Leiden 2021) 304–23 (304) calls these poems an 'extraordinary piece of literature'.

5 See H.-G. Beck, *Geschichte der Byzantinischen Volksliteratur* (Munich 1971) 101. On the manuscript tradition of the Ptochoprodromic poems, see *Ptochoprodromos*, 117–32 = 69–77 in the German version (Cologne 1991).

6 On the dating of the Ptochoprodromic poems, see Alexiou, 'The poverty of écriture', 25–8.

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that excels in linguistic experimentation.[7] Furthermore, the poem belongs also to a long literary tradition, whose authors, ancient and Byzantine, tackled issues of marital co-existence and the role of each gender within the boundaries of wedlock. Since there is an ongoing debate about the person who composed the poems, the placing of the first poem, on which we focus in this paper, in a specific cultural milieu has generated different reactions by scholars.[8] On the other hand, the study of the learned tradition that lies behind the poem, or at least a specific branch of that tradition, may prove a simpler task, if we clarify what the poem is actually about.

It has been argued that the first Ptochoprodromic poem illustrates the sufferings of 'poor Prodromos' at the hands of his quarrelsome / belligerent wife (μάχιμος γυνή).[9] That is true on a first level, although it turns our attention solely to the husband and away from the fact that the whole composition is based on the interaction and confrontation between two individuals (husband and wife). Truly, even when the wife is not present, we sense that Ptochoprodromos' actions and decisions are driven by fear of her. In other words, the first poem shows the hilarious everyday life of a marriage gone wrong: it deals primarily with matrimony,[10] and more specifically with the unfortunate conjugal life between a middle-aged man of humble origins and a nagging, perhaps younger, woman,[11] who comes from a respected and well-to-do family and who, judging from the information we gather from the poem, is still a privileged member of society.[12]

Now, one way to approach the Ptochoprodromic poems is as 'satires in which the lives of ordinary citizens in a big city are described – the way they act, the way they

7 There is a discussion on the language of the Ptochoprodromic poems, whether it is an artificial literary language, and so the product of experimentation, or a spoken idiom among the upper echelons of Constantinopolitan elites. In favour of the first approach: P. A. Agapitos, 'New genres in the twelfth century: the *schedourgia* of Theodore Prodromos', *Medioevo Greco* 15 (2015) 1–41 (37); for the second: M. C. Janssen and M. D. Lauxtermann, 'Authorship revisited: language and metre in the *Ptochoprodromika*', in T. Shawcross and I. Toth (eds), *Reading in the Byzantine Empire and Beyond* (Cambridge 2018) 558–84 (566).

8 For a comprehensive summary of the debate, see Kulhánková, 'For old men too can play', 305–12.

9 See Beck, *Geschichte*, 101. Eideneier's summary of the poem (*Ptochoprodromos*, 2–6) again fixes on the sufferings of the husband.

10 Alexiou argued in 1986 ('The Poverty of Écriture', 30) that the first poem is about 'marital status and the position of women', which is true, although it does not cover the crucial aspect of marital co-existence. More recently, in her article 'Ploys of performance: games and play in the Ptochoprodromic poems', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 53 (1999) 91–109 (95), she asserts that all four poems give insight into such contemporary (twelfth-century) issues as: 'gender and marital relations; household economy and authority; conjugal rights and role reversals'. This is a much more accurate way to assess these poems, and the first in particular.

11 Ptochoprodromos describes himself as 'old' (line 161), a fact stressed derisively by his wife (194–7). Neither case suggests that she is (much) younger than him, although one line of interpretation would be to view the references to the hero's 'old' age as an implicit indication of an age gap.

12 See Alexiou, 'Ploys of performance', 97, n. 21, building on Angeliki Laiou's observations.

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move, the way they talk',[13] meaning that contemporary audiences would welcome the snippets of contemporary reality in the poems.[14] But there is another way, in which I shall engage by regarding the poems as products of learned activity and possible intertextuality. From this standpoint, in this paper I shall study the way the authorial voice of the past on issues of marital life and gender relations in general, and of unequal marriages specifically, is still prevalent in and relevant to the first Ptochoprodromic poem. The voice of the past here is represented by such renowned Church authorities as John Chrysostom and Gregory the Theologian, with cameo appearances by Clement of Alexandria and Plutarch.

Authorial voices and perceptions on marriage, gender and social inequality – and how comedy messes them up

Marriage, like all social constructions, is shaped by reality and circumstance, but both these factors are deeply influenced by theory, which, if compelling enough to be deemed an 'authorial voice', forms the basis of a given social system. Ordinary people are expected to absorb and practise the essence of this theory (not necessarily to the letter; it is the spirit that matters most), even if they are not fully aware of its existence. For their part, future authors may engage in a constructive dialogue with that authorial voice, often in an implicit and subtle manner. That said, the 'authorial voices' of the Byzantine era and their opinion on issues of gender roles within the institution of marriage constitute an integral part of the literary tradition that lies behind the first Ptochoprodromic poem. Within this context, it is useful to see what the precepts of the early Byzantine Fathers on these matters were. Three texts in particular stand out, in terms of relevance: John Chrysostom's sermons on the First Epistle to the Corinthians 11:2[15] and Ephesians 5:22–5,[16] and Gregory the Theologian's paraenetic poem to Olympias (Πρὸς Ὀλυμπιάδα), a newlywed aristocratic girl, on the proper behaviour of the ideal Christian wife.[17] Despite the fact that Gregory's work is related to a specific occasion, whereas John's is not, both texts focus on practical aspects of marital life.

Naturally, John and Gregory were not the first to tackle these issues. Already in the pre-Christian world there is a relevant body of texts, written both in Greek and Latin.

13 Janssen and Lauxtermann, 'Authorship revisited', 559–60.

14 According to P. A. Agapitos ('New genres in the twelfth century', 33), the Ptochoprodromic poems (including the first one) served as 'teacherly material' and are associated with the Byzantine education of the twelfth century. Apart from the complex strategies of Prodromos' 'schedographic project', as titled by Agapitos (14), the similarities between some of the prose parts of the schede and the Ptochoprodromic poems are indeed noteworthy (see, e.g. 6).

15 Ed. PG 61, 211–24.

16 Ed. PG 62, 135–50.

17 Ed. L. Bacci, *Gregory of Nazianzus, Ad Olimpiade [carm. II,2,6]* (Pisa 1996). A more recent edition, which will be used supplementarily, is provided by R. M. Bénin: *Gregory of Nazianzus, Oeuvres Poétiques, Tome II: Poèmes épistolaires, II,2,1–8* (Paris 2021) 127–46 (introduction and text).

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This seems to have played a bigger role in the case of Gregory, while John is dealing primarily with Paul's views on the subject. Among these ancient texts, Plutarch's *Conjugal Precepts* (Γαμικὰ παραγγέλματα) may prove useful at least on one occasion as regards Ptochoprodromos. On the other hand, both Fathers' views on some aspects of Christian marriage – especially Gregory's, as argued in the most recent edition of the poem to Olympias – may have been inspired also by Clement of Alexandria's *Paedagogus*, which in turn includes certain precepts that make us think of some of the first Ptochoprodromic poem's verses.[18] We shall return to both these texts below, but patristic literature should be the starting point, not least because the Ptochoprodromic poem teems with religious references and allusions. These include Ptochoprodromos' wife likening their household to a church and herself to a church official or caretaker of the temple (lines 98–9); Ptochoprodromos' prayer to the Virgin Mary and Jesus before a 'duel' between them takes place[19] (175; this also includes a mention of the Devil, in l. 177[20]); the death and resurrection of the hero's child after an almost fatal fall, akin to Christ's Resurrection (206–20);[21] and finally Ptochoprodromos' disguise as a a penitent and/or pilgrim in the final scene (244–67). To these we could also add the fact that the famished poet is trying to get a hold of the household's bread and wine (179), which could be construed as a possible allusion to the Eucharist. All these elements stress deliberately the Christian context of the poem, but in a comical way – perhaps even blasphemous in the case of the child's 'resurrection'. Therefore, patristic theology would be the appropriate place to look first for a better understanding of

18 On the influence of Plutarch on Gregory's poem, see M. Whitby, '"Sugaring the pill": Gregory of Nazianzus' *Advice to Olympias* (Carm. 2.2.6)', *Ramus* 37.1 (2008) 79–98 (84). For Clement's influence on Gregory's poem, see *Gregory of Nazianzus, Oeuvres Poétiques*, 131 and the commentary in the apparatus of the translation (e.g. on ll. 6, 45–46 and 62).

19 The vocabulary used in this scene is sexually charged, as Alexiou has demonstrated (see 'Ploys of performance', 99, n. 25).

20 P. Speck, in his article '"Interpolations et non-sens indiscutables": the first poem of the Ptochoprodromika', in S. A. Takács (ed.), *Understanding Byzantium: studies in Byzantine historical sources* (Aldershot 2003) 84–103 (99) rightly stresses the blasphemous overtones of this reference. However, his overall argument that the poem teems with interpolations requires a separate discussion. Among contemporary scholars, Kulhánková is not critical of Speck's assumption (see '"For old men too can play"', 307), in contrast to Janssen and Lauxtermann ('Authorship revisited', 565, n. 28).

21 Alexiou ('Ploys of performance', 101) aptly links the scene with the Resurrection but I would also add the Crucifixion to the discussion. Perhaps we could even detect a parody of the gospel narrative in the first two verses (206–7): Τοῦ γοῦν ἡλίου πρὸς δυσμὰς μέλλοντος ἤδη κλῖναι | βοή τις ἄφνω [ἐγείρεται] καὶ ταραχὴ μεγάλη, which is comparable to the start of the Crucifixion scene in Mark (15:33–4): Γενομένης δὲ ὥρας ἕκτης σκότος ἐγένετο ἐφ' ὅλην τὴν γῆν ἕως ὥρας ἐνάτης· καὶ τῇ ὥρᾳ τῇ ἐνάτῃ ἐβόησεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς φωνῇ μεγάλῃ. In addition, in the verse which concludes the Ptochoprodromic scene (219): Τοῦ πάθους καταπαύσαντος, τοῦ βρέφους δ' ἀναστάντος, the word πάθος could be understood as a tongue-in-cheek hint at the Passion, for after the Passion comes the Resurrection (οὕτως ἔδει παθεῖν τὸν Χριστὸν καὶ ἀναστῆναι ἐκ νεκρῶν, to quote Luke, 24:46). Kulhánková ('"For old men too can play"', 321) duly notes the higher style in these Ptochoprodromic verses, but proposes a correlation, in terms of parody, with 'the high style of contemporary novels'.

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how parody and derision against precepts on marriage are shaped in the first Ptochoprodromic poem.

The Fathers were vocal in the way they viewed women in terms of their conjugal role. John Chrysostom's famous assertion that the wife is the 'second authority' (ἀρχὴ δευτέρα) in the house,[22] for she is destined to be subjugated to her husband, the 'head' of the family,[23] sums things up neatly. For anyone who does not wish to delve deeper, the first Ptochoprodromic poem is simply the reversal of John's tenet, for the narrator's wife remains throughout the poem the 'first authority' of the household, whereas the husband is in a state of constant humiliation. What is more, John considers this hierarchy as a prerequisite for peace within the family,[24] and the Ptochoprodromic household would be considered anything but peaceful, now that the tables are turned and gender roles have been reversed. John is very specific about the sentiments that should govern each gender in their interaction with one another: the husband should be full of 'love' (ἀγάπη) towards his wife, whereas she should be 'respectful' and 'fearful' (φοβείτω), for 'reverent fear' makes a woman love her man.[25] Again, it is easy to see how this precept has been turned into comedy in the poem, for Ptochoprodromos is, as already mentioned in the opening address to the emperor, petrified of his wife, to the point that he urges his addressee to keep quiet about what he is about to read / hear, for if it comes to her notice she will have her servants flog him (35–9).

The patristic image of a peaceful household, based on a fixed gender hierarchy, has apparently been turned upside down. The core of the problem is that his wife simply cannot keep quiet. The first two scenes involving the couple are taken up mostly with the wife's prolix nagging of Ptotchoprodromos. Her main grouse is that her husband is a failure, unable to provide her and their family with material things – and she also rejects those he brings from the palace.[26] A long catalogue of such goods ensues, enriched with further insults. The possibility that a wife may reprimand her husband for the lack of luxury in their life had already crossed the mind of John Chrysostom in his sermon on Ephesians: a woman should not reproach her man on account of such

22 Ed. PG 62, 140. On John's views on conjugal roles see N. Verna Harrison, 'Women and the image of God according to St. John Chrysostom', in P. M. Blowers, A. Russell Christman, D. G. Hunter and R. Darling Young (eds), *In Dominico Eloquio / In Lordly Eloquence: essays on patristic exegesis in honor of Robert Louis Wilken* (Ann Arbor 2002) 259–79 (275–9).

23 Ed. PG 62, *op. cit.* Cf. the sermon on 1 Corinthians (PG 61, 224), where John advises men to marry obedient wives, for unbearable ones (μὴ ἀνεκτὴ νύμφη) cause trouble. Even so, husbands should try and 'correct' (ῥυθμίζειν) such wives.

24 Ed. PG 62, 141: Διὰ τοῦτο τὴν μὲν ὑπέταξε, τὸν δὲ ἐπέθηκεν, ἵνα εἰρήνη ᾖ.

25 *Op. cit.*, 142: Ὅτι περὶ ἀγάπης διελέγετο [Παῦλος] καὶ τῷ ἀνδρὶ διελέγετο. Ἐκείνῃ μὲν γὰρ περὶ φόβου διαλεγόμενος, φησίν· Ἀνήρ ἐστι κεφαλὴ τῆς γυναικός. Also, on p. 141, talking about the wife: Καὶ πῶς ἂν γένοιτο ἀγάπη, φησί, φόβου ὄντος; Μάλιστα τότε ἂν γένοιτο. Ἡ γὰρ φοβουμένη καὶ ἀγαπᾷ. On the double meaning of φόβος, as both 'fear, reverence' and 'respect, honour', see G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford 1961) s.v. φόβος, 5 and 6.

26 As rightly stressed by Alexiou, 'Ploys of performance', 96.

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things, but if it occurs, then he should advise her and talk her out of these thoughts. On the other hand, assaults, reproaches and rebukes by the man should not be an option, and physical violence towards his wife should be avoided at all costs.[27]

Nonetheless, in John's sermon on I Corinthians things are a little blurrier, for although a wife-beater is likened to a beast, John advises women to endure physical abuse, if it occurs.[28] Some instances appear in a couple of hagiographical texts from the Middle Byzantine period.[29] Even so, Ptochoprodromos' take, as expected by now, deviates in a striking way from John's teaching in both sermons: The husband sits in complete silence, as the wife keeps scolding him the first time (42–112). Moreover, after the second bout of her delirious ranting, caused by his momentary reaction to her accusations (140–54),[30] Ptochoprodromos decides to use a broomstick[31] as a means of

27 Ed. PG 62, 144: Μὴ λεγέτω ταῦτα γυνή... σῶμα γάρ ἐστιν, οὐχ ἵνα διατάττῃ τῇ κεφαλῇ, ἀλλ' ἵνα πείθηται καὶ ὑπακούῃ... Ἀλλὰ μηδὲ ὁ ἀνὴρ ταῦτα ἀκούων ὡς ἀρχὴν ἔχων, ἐπὶ ὕβρεις τρεπέσθω καὶ πληγάς, ἀλλὰ παραινείτω, νουθετείτω... χεῖρας μηδέποτε ἐντεινέτω· πόρρω ἐλευθέρας ψυχῆς ταῦτα· ἀλλὰ μηδὲ ὕβρεις, μηδὲ ὀνείδη, μηδὲ λοιδορίας· ἀλλ' ὡς ἀνοητότερον διακειμένην ῥυθμιζέτω. Cf. Verna Harrison, 'Women and the image of God', 278–9.

28 Ed. PG 61, 222: Διὸ καὶ τὸν τοιοῦτον ἄνδρα, εἴ γε ἄνδρα αὐτὸν δεῖ καλεῖν, ἀλλ' οὐχὶ θηρίον, but right before that: Καὶ οὐ τοῦτο λέγω, ὥστε τύπτεσθαι γυναῖκα... ἀλλὰ κἂν ἀπὸ περιστάσεώς τινος κληρωθῇς, ὦ γύναι, συνοίκῳ τούτῳ, μὴ δυσχεραίνῃς, τὸν ἀποκείμενον ὑπὲρ τούτων ἐννοοῦσα μισθὸν καὶ τὸν ἐν τῷ παρόντι βίῳ ἔπαινον. See J. A. Schroeder, 'John Chrystostom's critique of spousal violence', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 12/4 (Winter 2004) 413–42. Schroeder draws on several texts but her overall approach downplays his more controversial teachings. On physical violence against women in the teachings of the fourth-century Fathers, see Beck, *Byzantinisches Erotikon*, 39. Cf. C. Messis and A. Kaldellis, 'Conjugal violence and the ideological construction of Byzantine marriage', *Limes. Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 13.2 (2016) 21–40 (23–8). For a comparison between the opinions of Augustine and John Chrysostom on physical abuse within the family (i.e. against women, children and slaves), within the context of Late Roman legislation, see J. Hillner, 'Family violence: punishment and abuse in the late Roman household', in L. Brubaker and S. Tougher (eds), *Approaches to the Byzantine Family* (Farnham 2013) 21–45 (30–6). Hillner concludes that John's views are considerably milder than Augustine's.

29 On physical and psychological abuse towards women in hagiography (saints' lives, edifying tales, etc.), see J. Herrin, 'Toleration and repression within the Byzantine family: gender problems', in *Toleration and Repression in the Middle Ages. In memory of Lenos Mavrommatis / Ανοχή και καταστολή στους Μέσους Χρόνους. Μνήμη Λένου Μαυρομμάτη* (Athens 2002) 173–88 (185–7); S. Constantinou (tr. L. Ceccarelli), '"Il capo della donna è l'uomo": la Kyriarchia e la retorica della subordinazione femminile nella letteratura bizantina", in F.-E. Consolino and J. Herrin (eds), *Donne e Bibbia nel Medioevo, Secoli VI-XII*, Vol. 6.1 (Tripani 2015) 19–38 (29–31). Constantinou shows that abused women in hagiographical texts – e.g. St Thomais of Lesbos and St Mary the Younger – are depicted as accepting their inferiority within the marriage: they endure physical abuse from their husbands without complaint or resistance, rather expecting to be rewarded in the afterlife; see Messis and Kaldellis, 'Conjugal violence', 29–31.

30 Ptochoprodromos' wife cunningly turns his outburst into an accusation of attempted battery (see Alexiou, 'Ploys of performance', 98). Neville's remark that one of the two options a woman in Byzantium had in order to have her way within a male-dominated world was to play the 'damsel in distress' (the other was to man up and act as a male), is relevant here (on both attitudes see Neville, *Byzantine Gender*, 59–78, under the telling title: 'How did medieval Roman women get so much done?').

31 In late Roman and early Byzantine legislation, the use of sticks, whips and rods as means of physical violence against one's wife gave women the right to seek legal protection from their husbands. However, in

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persuasion (which, in a change of plans, turns into an attempt simply to intimidate her), but once again the outcome is hilariously twisted. At the end of the scene, he is lying on the floor, with his wife laughing at him – and after helping him to his feet she is still deriding him (155–99, esp. 190: ὡς δ' εἶδεν ὅτι ἔπεσον, ἤρξατο τοῦ γελᾶν με).

Gregory's poem to Olympias is relevant to all the above, but Chrysostom is more theatrical and thorough. For instance, Gregory too admonishes the young wife not to criticize her husband if they experience a financial loss, for things do not always turn out as one wishes (29–32). On the other hand, she should first endure and share her husband's distress and then try to appease him with her friendly countenance (41–3). These precepts are comparable to Ptochoprodromos' poem, but it is John's occasionally lively prose that seems to be more pertinent to the Ptochoprodromic style. To give one striking example from the sermon on Ephesians, when John talks about a wife's irrational demands for material goods, he employs direct speech, a brief ἠθοποιία, from the woman's mouth and addressed to her husband: 'You cowardly little man, who art sluggish and idle and inept, you see that man who was an utter nobody, how he took the risk and went abroad, and now he has made a fortune and his wife is clad in gold.'[32] In terms of tone these words can be put side by side to the first ones uttered by Ptochoprodromos' wife, where she reprimands him for leaving her bereft of fancy clothes and expensive jewellery, as well as for being lazy.[33] Gregory also stresses briefly, albeit with none of John's literary virtues, that a good Christian wife should have no interest in expensive clothes (6–7).

Thus far we have seen patristic precepts that could apply to any couple, regardless of financial background. We should now turn our attention to the specific profile of the Ptochoprodromic couple. She comes from a noble and rich family, whereas in her eyes her husband's descent and upbringing are anything but noteworthy. To this Ptochoprodromos has no answer. We can deduce that we have a classic case of a rich

the time of Justinian there were legal implications that could exonerate such actions. See on this Hillner, 'Family violence', 26–7 (with a reference to a law issued by Theodosius II in 439) and 29 (the case of Justinian law). On the same subject (the legality of the use of sticks and whips in order to beat one's wife), see also the remarks of Messis and Kaldellis on post-Justinian legislation (see 'Conjugal violence', 24). All this suggests that the poet of the first Ptochoprodromic poem could be parodying here Byzantine legislation regarding domestic violence against wives. It seems that Ptochoprodromos thinks it is his right to slap his wife (l. 156: εἶχον βουλήν, ὦ δέσποτα, νὰ τὴν περιραπίσω) and to have her think that she will be beaten with a stick. In any case, this particular Ptochoprodromic scene needs to be further analysed from a legal point of view.

32 Ed. PG 62, 144: Ἄνανδρε καὶ δειλέ, ὄκνου γέμων καὶ νωθείας καὶ ὕπνου πολλοῦ, ὁ δεῖνα ταπεινὸς καὶ ἐκ ταπεινῶν, κινδύνους ἀράμενος καὶ ἀποδημίας στειλάμενος, πολλὴν τὴν οὐσίαν ἐποίησε, καὶ ἡ γυνὴ χρυσοφορεῖ.

33 For instance: 'κύρι, τί προσέθηκας;' τό 'κύρι, τί ἐπεκτήσω; | Ποῖον ἱμάτιον μὲ ἔραψας; Ποιὸν δίμιτον μὲ ἐποῖκες; | (...) οὐκ ἔβαλα εἰς τὴν ῥάχιν μου μεταξωτὸν ἱμάτιν, | οὐκ εἶδα εἰς τὸ δακτύλιν μου κρικέλλιν δακτυλίδιν' (45–6 and 50–1). And later, on his sluggishness: καὶ σὺ καθέζεσαι ὡς πωλὶν χωσμένον εἰς τὸ βρῶμα, | καὶ καθ' ημέραν προσδοκᾷς τί νὰ σὲ παραβάλω. | Τὸ τί σὲ θέλω ἐξαπορῶ, τὸ τί σὲ χρήζω οὐκ οἶδα (100–2).

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upper-class woman who looks down upon her lower-class husband, which in the poem seems to be the primary cause of conflict between the two of them. If we go back to the Fathers, in Gregory's poem, which is addressed to the daughter of an eminent and, we may assume, wealthy person, the young wife, whose husband is by no means unworthy,[34] is advised in the following manner: 'you should never, being a woman, be eager for manly pride | or make a display of your lineage or show pride in material goods' (20–1).[35] The first hemistich of the second verse is reminiscent of the way Ptochoprodromos' wife reminds her husband of her lineage in comparison to his, in a condescending manner. The second hemistich ('show pride in material goods') is formulated thus by Gregory: μὴ χρήμασιν ὀφρὺν ἀείρειν,[36] which leaves some space for interpretation. An Atticizing prose paraphrase (μετάφρασις) of Gregory's poem, the oldest witness to which is a manuscript dating to the eleventh century, explains the hemistich as follows: μηδ' ἐπὶ χρήμασι φρόνει, τοῖς τοῦ ἀνδρὸς συγκρίνουσα τὰ ἑαυτῆς, μὴ φρονήσει ἐπαίρου.[37] The middle part, which says that a wealthy wife should not compare her fortune to her husband's, is again comparable to the Ptochoprodromic poem, where the wife spends four verses comparing the radically different way she and her husband were raised, with an emphasis on material goods.[38]

John Chrysostom once again has more thought-provoking things to say. In the sermon on Ephesians John counsels his male audience on how to handle a wife who demands a luxurious lifestyle.[39] If the couple is not wealthy, the man should tell his wife that love transcends gold and that worldly goods are not important. However, when it comes to a prospective wife who is richer than the man, John's advice is to avoid marrying her altogether, for the pleasure one will derive from her money is far outweighed by the burden of her complaints and rebukes, as she asks her man to make money himself and stop relying on her dowry.[40] This reminds us of Ptochoprodromos'

34 On the social status of Olympias' father and husband, see Whitby, '"Sugaring the pill"', 79 and 84.

35 I cite Christos Simelidis' translation in K. Kubina and A. Riehle (eds), *Epistolary Poetry in Byzantium and Beyond: an anthology with critical essays* (New York 2021) 113.

36 The manuscripts offer two different readings: χρήμασιν (so Bacci, *Ad Olimpiade*, 62) and εἵμασιν (so Bénin: Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oeuvres Poétiques Saint Grégoire de* Nazianze, 141). Bacci (91) argues that χρήμασιν is more in accordance with the content of the passage, a fact, she adds, supported by two later paraphrases of the poem (in the same edition, 145–8 and 149–52 respectively). For her part, Bénin does not explain the option of εἵμασιν, whereas neither scholar takes account of Sirach 11:4: ἐν περιβολῇ ἱματίων μὴ καυχήσῃ ('don't take pride on account of the clothes you wear'), which gives support to εἵμασιν.

37 Gregory of Nazianzus, *Ad Olimpiade*, 146.

38 σὺ ἐκοιμῶ εἰς τὸ ψιαθὶν καὶ ἐγὼ εἰς τὸ κλινάριν· | ἐγὼ εἶχον προῖκα περισσήν, καὶ σὺ εἶχες ποδοκόπιν, | ἐγὼ εἶχον ἀσημοχρύσαφον, καὶ σὺ εἶχες σκαφοδούγας | καὶ σκάφην τοῦ ζυμώματος καὶ μέγαν πυροστάστην (71–4).

39 John's audience must have consisted mainly of men, although a small number of women must have also been present at his sermons: Schroeder, 'John Chrysostom's Critique', 434.

40 Ed. PG 62, 147: Μηδεὶς ὑμῶν σπουδαζέτω εὐπορωτέραν γαμεῖν, ἀλλὰ πολλῷ μᾶλλον πενεστέραν. Οὐ γὰρ τοσαύτην ἀπὸ τῶν χρημάτων εἰσελεύσεται εἰσφέρουσα ἀφορμὴν ἡδονῆς, ὅσην ἀηδίαν ἀπὸ τῶν ὀνειδῶν, ἀπὸ τοῦ πλείονα ἀπαιτεῖν ὧν εἰσήγαγεν, ἀπὸ τῶν ὕβρεων, ἀπὸ τῆς πολυτελείας, ἀπὸ τῶν φορτικῶν ῥημάτων.

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wife's first monologue, which is interspersed with complaints and rebukes, where she does not let her husband forget her ample dowry.[41]

John tackles the issue of a man marrying a richer woman also in his work entitled *On Virginity* (Περὶ παρθενίας). Here he is even more adamant: there are several reasons why a poor man should eschew marrying a woman from a wealthy family, for it is in female nature to be arrogant and such a union will only give women more reasons to display their conceit.[42] John's worst fear is that eventually the woman will become the head of the family and the authority of the household.[43] This constitutes a reversal of natural Christian order, as established by St Paul, and results in rebukes and insults on the part of the woman. All this is reminiscent of Ptochoprodromos; John speaks of the wife's φορτικὰ ῥήματα (burdensome words),[44] which along with her ὀνείδη and ὕβρεις[45] are comparable to Ptochoprodromos' following two key-verses in the poem: Οὐ φέρω γάρ, ὦ δέσποτα, τὴν ταύτης μοχθηρίαν, | τοὺς καθ' ἡμέραν χλευασμοὺς καὶ τὰς ὀνειδισίας (42–3). Prodromos, married to a socially and financially superior woman, now has to endure everything John Chrysostom warned against many centuries ago.

The first Ptochoprodromic poem is probably the closest we get to 'Christian comedy' in the Byzantine era. The poet is obviously playing with Byzantine notions and attitudes concerning gender roles and male authority within marriage, as shaped through the centuries. Within this context, and taking into account the Fathers' precepts – especially those of John Chrysostom, which are often delivered in an appealing literary manner – we are tempted to take our analysis one step further and surmise that the poet is not merely echoing Byzantine patriarchy in a general manner, but actually parodying patristic theology; in other words, that the poet is making fun not just of the social norms regarding gender within marital life, but also of the authorial voices of Christianity that played a major role in constructing and consolidating these norms. This does not necessarily mean that the poet is parodying specifically the texts we have cited thus far (although this should not be excluded – see, for instance, in the previous paragraph the common vocabulary with John Chrysostom's *On Virginity*), rather that he is being consciously playful with the literary tradition that encompasses them. In

41 A verse like ἐγὼ εἶχον προῖκα περισσήν, καὶ σὺ εἶχες ποδοκόπιν (72) is comparable to John's πλείονα ἀπαιτεῖν ὧν εἰσήγαγεν (see the previous note).

42 Ἔστι μὲν γὰρ καὶ ἄλλως τὸ τῶν γυναικῶν γένος ὑπεροπτικὸν καὶ ἀσθενέστερον, διὸ καὶ μᾶλλον ὑπὸ τοῦ πάθους ἁλίσκεται. Ὅταν δὲ καὶ ἀφορμὰς ἔχῃ τῆς ὑπεροψίας πολλάς, οὐδέν ἐστι τὸ κατέχον αὐτάς (John Chrysostom, *La virginité*, ed. B. Grillet and H. Musurillo (Paris 1966) 298,9–300,13).

43 Ἀλλ' ὥσπερ ὕλης τινὸς λαβομένη φλὸξ οὕτως εἰς ὕψος ἄφατον αἴρονται καὶ τὴν τάξιν ἀντιστρέφουσι καὶ πάντα ἄνω καὶ κάτω ποιοῦσιν. Οὐ γὰρ ἀφίησιν ἐν τῇ τῆς κεφαλῆς χώρᾳ μένειν τὸν ἄνδρα ἡ γυνή, ἀλλ' ὑπὸ φρονήματος καὶ ἀπονοίας ἀπωσαμένη τῆς τάξεως αὐτὸν ἐκείνης καὶ εἰς τὴν αὐτῇ προσήκουσαν ἄγουσα τὴν τῆς ὑποταγῆς, αὐτὴ γίνεται κεφαλὴ καὶ ἀρχή (*op. cit.*, 300,13–19).

44 Ed. PG 62, 147: Οὐ γὰρ τοσαύτην ἀπὸ τῶν χρημάτων εἰσελεύσεται εἰσφέρουσα ἀφορμὴν ἡδονῆς, ὅσην ἀηδίαν... ἀπὸ τῶν φορτικῶν ῥημάτων.

45 Καὶ σιωπῶ τὰ ὀνείδη, τὰς ὕβρεις, τὰς ἀηδίας, ἃ πάντων ἐστὶν ἀφορητότερα (John Chrysostom, *La virginité*, 300, 20–1).

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this respect, texts may be equally important as contemporary 'reality' and social milieu for studying the poetics of the first Ptochoprodromic poem. If this approach is valid, it should come as no surprise; surely, a poet able to compose such a well crafted work in terms of structure and poetic language would be expected to act accordingly with regard to past literature.

If we go beyond patristic theology for a moment, there is at least one more text that should be mentioned, this time by an ancient Greek author. In Plutarch's *Conjugal Precepts* we find a passage that merits consideration in relation to a scene in the Ptochoprodromic poem. Plutarch maintains that many husbands who take a noble or a rich woman to wife try to 'humble' her.[46] This process is likened to a feeble or weak person teaching his horse to kneel before riding it. We can perhaps draw a parallel with the scene in Ptochoprodromos, where he is coming home empty-handed, riding on his horse. His wife waits for him to dismount and then a new quarrel takes place. Ptochoprodromos thinks about slapping her, for he cannot tolerate the 'ignominious words' she said to him (τοὺς λόγους... ἀτίμως μοι λαλοῦσα, 155), but then changes his mind (158–60), for he is old (γέρων), short (κοντός) and feeble (the verb used is ἀδυνατίζω), and fears that she will end up beating him instead. All of the elements from Plutarch are essentially here, but in comical reversal: a physically feeble husband who manages to ride a horse, yet fails miserably to 'ride' his wife and who, at the end of the scene (the 'duel', which has already been mentioned), is the one falling under her. Could it be assumed that the Byzantine poet is in dialogue with Plutarch here? Be that as it may, it is worth mentioning that Plutarch advises men not to overdo the 'humbling' process, but desperate times call for desperate measures and being heedless of John Chrysostom's prohibition of physical violence, Ptochoprodromos is willing to take it to the limit – and finally falls flat on his face.

The last text that will concern us is yet another one belonging to the broader patristic tradition, namely Clement of Alexandria's *Paedagogus* (Παιδαγωγός). This, as already mentioned, must have been among Gregory's sources in the composition of his poem to Olympias. Clement's work comprises precepts and thoughts on the ideal Christian behaviour with regard to different topics, one of them being attitudes against wealth and luxuries within marriage. He cautions both men and women to abstain from such pleasures, but emphasizes that women in particular may become inordinate in their pursuit of material goods. Clement devotes much space to garments (εἵματα), arguing that men should stop women from acquiring expensive and flamboyant clothing, and the same goes for footwear, for fanciful shoes make them arrogant and acting like

46 Οἱ τοῖς ἵπποις ἐφάλλεσθαι μὴ δυνάμενοι δι' ἀσθένειαν ἢ μαλακίαν αὐτοὺς ἐκείνους ὀκλάζειν καὶ ὑποπίπτειν διδάσκουσιν· οὕτως ἔνιοι τῶν λαβόντων εὐγενεῖς ἢ πλουσίας γυναῖκας οὐχ ἑαυτοὺς ποιοῦσι βελτίους, ἀλλ' ἐκείνας περικολούουσιν, ὡς μᾶλλον ἄρξοντες ταπεινῶν γενομένων. Δεῖ γὰρ ὥσπερ ἵππου τὸ μέγεθος φυλάττοντα καὶ τὸ ἀξίωμα τῆς γυναικὸς χρῆσθαι τῷ χαλινῷ (ed. J. Defradas, J. Hani, and R. Klaerr, Plutarch, *Plutarque, Oeuvres Morales, Tome II* (Paris 1985) 149). This precept is discussed by Schroeder ('John Chrysostom's Critique', 425) in connection to John Chrysostom's ideas on Christian marriage.

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ἑταῖραι. Finally, he stresses the dangers lurking for wives in bathhouses, for it is there that other men may see them naked.[47] Expensive bathing accessories are also condemned, in the same vein as other valuable possessions. It is tempting to compare all this to the first monologue of Ptochoprodromos' wife, where she accuses our hero of failing to provide the exact three things condemned by Clement: clothes, shoes and bathing paraphernalia.[48] If there is a connection between the two texts, could it be argued that the poet insinuates that Ptochoprodromos' wife is willing to cheat on her husband – or that she has already been unfaithful to him? If this were the case, it would give a new perspective to the hero's sexual inadequacy, which is apparent throughout the poem, and in the 'duel' scene in particular.[49]

An afterthought: dressing up in hagiography and a husband/father in disguise

We have already noted that Ptochoprodromos' wife likens their house to a church and herself to the temple caretaker (ἐκκλησιάρχης, 98). This reminds us of John Chrysostom's maxim, in relation to marital life, that 'the house is a church on a small scale',[50] although he of course means that the husband should be the caretaker, not the wife. Later on we see Ptochoprodromos striving in vain to get access to food locked in a cupboard (ἀρμάριν, 203). He finally manages to steal the key, sneak in, unlock the cupboard, and have his fill (216–17), but then night falls and he is not invited to dinner. By now he has understood that his wife is not willing to give him any food, so he dresses up and goes to the door of the dining room (κουβούκλιν, 249), which again is locked. He finally manages to enter, for his wife is either fooled by the disguise or takes pity on him for having to dress up in order to trick his own family (Ἡ μάννα των γνωρίσασα in line 256 could mean both 'she understood (who it was)' and 'she recognized (me)').

If the house is a church, then the dining room, which the husband is forbidden to enter, unless in disguise, could be likened to the altar – let us also bear in mind that the bread and wine locked in the cupboard could be a subtle reference to the Eucharist. The progression of the plot in the second part of the poem (roughly from line 113 onwards) is a chain of unfortunate events for the husband, each more humiliating than the last. Let us recapitulate. First, once Ptocoprodromos dismounts from his horse, he has to deal with his wife's whining. Second, he attempts to scare her but to no avail; instead, he is laughed at. In the next scenes, Ptochoprodromos is

47 See Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus*, ed. M. Marcovich (with J. C. M. Van Winden) (Leiden 2002): II,10, 130–8 (on garments); II,11, 138–9 (on footwear, where women who wear garnished shoes are accused of displaying ἑταιρικὸν φρόνημα); III,9, 175–6 (on bathhouses, including accessories).

48 Ποῖον ἱμάτιον μὲ ἔραψας; Ποιὸν δίμιτον μὲ ἐποῖκες; ... οὐκ ἔβαλα ἀπὸ κόπου σου τατίκιν εἰς ποδάριν... Ποτὲ οὐκ ἐλούθην εἰς λουτρὸν νὰ μὴ στραφῶ θλιμμένη. (46, 49 and 55).

49 Cf. Herrin's comment on the first Ptochoprodromic poem: '...the fun poked at husbands considered inadequate in sexual terms by their quick-witted wives' (see Herrin, 'Toleration and repression', 187, n. 47).

50 Ed. PG 62, 143: καὶ ἡ οἰκία γὰρ Ἐκκλησία ἐστὶ μικρά.

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snubbed by his wife. He attempts to coax her, but she simply ignores him. The scorned husband has now become practically invisible and the only way to have dinner with his family is to pretend he is someone else. What we witness is the reversal of Christian hierarchy within the family, for his wife is throughout, to quote John Chrysostom, the ἀρχὴ of the household.

Now that Ptochoprodromos is placed below his wife, thus violating the structure of the ideal Christian family, he cannot enter the 'altar' of the 'church', unless he dresses up. Once he does so, he is taken, among other things, for a pilgrim (πελεγρῖνος, 257). It is tempting to compare this whole episode with a motif we know well from hagiography: female figures (among them, several future saints) who dress up as men.[51] This act of cross-dressing may happen for many different reasons, such as for instance to be able to enter a men's monastery.[52] Often this action is taken by women in order to avoid an arranged marriage or to leave their husbands to pursue an ascetic life.[53] On another occasion, cross-dressing is associated with pilgrimage and some scholars have assumed that this happens in order to secure a safe trip, for female travellers were exposed to harassment of all sorts.[54] As regards the first instance, since Ptochoprodromos does not strive merely to enter his house for the sake of it, but to obtain something tangible (food), let us mention here an episode in the *Life of Tarasios* (ninth century), where an unspecified number of women dressed as men, suffering from an incurable disease, enter the monastery where the body of Tarasios is buried, in order to draw oil from the lamp set upon his coffin.[55] The second instance occurs in the tale of Andronicus and his wife Athanasia, a couple that decide to visit the Holy Land after the death of their children. As the narration progresses, they separate, but they meet again, as they travel separately to the Holy Land for the second time – only Athanasia, who in the meantime has become a monk, is now called Athanasius and lives as a man. They end up travelling together, although Andronicus

51 On women dressing up as men in hagiography, see N. Delierneux, 'Virilité physique et sainteté féminine dans l'hagiographie orientale du IVe au VIIe siècle', *Byzantion* 67/1 (1997) 179–243, and E. Patlagean, 'L'histoire de la femme deguisée en moine et l'évolution de la sainteté feminine à Byzance', *Studi Medievali* 17 (1976) 597–623 (repr. in *Structure sociale, famille, chrétienté à Byzance* (London 1981), n. 11). A 'woke' interpretation of female cross-dressing, based on the tenet of 'gender fluidity', is offered by R. Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality: sexuality, gender, and race in the Middle Ages* (Princeton 2020) 89–120.

52 Cf. Herrin, 'Toleration and repression', 181.

53 See the summaries of ten Lives involving female cross-dressing in J. Van Pelt, 'Saints in Disguise: a literary analysis of performance in Byzantine hagiography', diss., Ghent 2019, 28–37. Five of them are associated with this motif, whereas another, the *Life of Theodora of Alexandria*, involves a woman who leaves her husband after being unfaithful to him, in order to purify herself from the sin.

54 See Delierneux, 'Virilité physique et sainteté féminine', 216 and S. Constantinou, *Female Corporeal Performances: reading the body in Byzantine Passions and Lives of holy women* (Uppsala 2005) 106.

55 See *The Life of the Patriarch Tarasios by Ignatios the Deacon (BHG 1698)*, ed. S. Efthymiades (Aldershot 1998) 160–1, along with the comment on p. 246 that women were not allowed to enter a men's monastery.

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is recognized by her without him being able to identify his wife. Her true identity is revealed after her passing.[56]

So much for female cross-dressing in hagiography. Let us now turn our attention to a similar hagiographical motif, that of disguised male saints – no cross-dressing involved here. In this category we encounter saint John Kalyvites (his *Life* probably written in the late sixth century[57]), who enters his house, after years of absence, in the guise of a beggar, without being recognized by his family, until he chooses to reveal his identity shortly before his passing. According to the story, John led a strictly ascetic life for many years, which altered his appearance. After taking the decision to return home, he exchanged his clothes with the rags of a destitute man he met on the way, which, combined with his gauntness, made him practically unrecognizable. Once at the door of his father's estate, he introduces himself to the gatekeeper as a beggar. In some versions the formulation is ἄνθρωπός εἰμι πτωχός ('I am a beggar / a poor man'),[58] in this way evoking the pity of the gatekeeper, who eventually allows John to enter.

56 Clugnet edited three short versions of the story. For the cross-dressing scene, see *Vie (et Récits) de l'abbé Daniel le Scétiote (Vie siècle)*, ed. L. Clugnet (Paris 1901) 51 (version 1), 55 (version 2) and 59 (version 3). The different short versions, preserved in four manuscripts, the earliest of which dates to the eleventh century, have been edited in a single text by B. Dahlman, *Saint Daniel of Sketis. A Group of Hagiographic Texts Edited with Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Upssala 2007) 166–79 (esp. 174, for the cross-dressing scene). A longer Vita, preserved in a single manuscript from the tenth–eleventh centuries, has been edited by A. Alwis, *Celibate Marriages in Late Antique and Byzantine Hagiography: the Lives of Saints Julian and Basilissa, Andronikos and Athanasia, and Galaktion and Episteme* (London 2011) 249–56 (esp. 253–4, for the cross-dressing scene). Alwis (35–8) argues that the Vita is a reworking of earlier versions of the story. The emotional side of the Vita in relation to gender performance, is analysed by A. Andreou, in '"Emotioning" gender: plotting the male and the female in Byzantine Greek passions and lives of holy couples', in Constantinou and Meyer, *Emotions and Gender*, 35–63 (38–47). Andreou argues that Athanasius' eventual oath of silence juxtaposes Athanasia's hysterical outbursts on account of the passing of her children, at the beginning of the Vita. Cf. Alwis's similar remark, *Celibate Marriages*, 59: 'Her [i.e. Athanasius', formerly living as Athanasia] silence can be viewed by the audience as all the more remarkable and praiseworthy when they remember the careful portrayal of Athanasia's character throughout the narrative.'

57 For a summary and the dating of the text, see Van Pelt, *Saints in Disguise*, 39–42. Van Pelt studies the *Life* within the context of its performative aspects, in comparison with other Lives, which feature cross-dressing female saints and holy fools (89–96).

58 O. Lampsides edited different versions of the *Life* from several Vatican and Parisian manuscripts, in 'Ἅγιος Ἰωάννης ὁ Καλυβίτης (Ἀνέκδοτα κείμενα ἐκ Παρισινῶν κωδίκων)', *Πλάτων* 31 (1964) 259–303 and 'Βατικανοὶ κώδικες περιέχοντες τὸν βίον ἁγίου Ἰωάννου τοῦ Καλυβίτου', *Αρχείον Πόντου* 28 (1966) 3–36. The structure and progress of the story is always the same, but the formulation may vary slightly. For instance, in the version of Vat. gr. 679, dating to the eleventh century, and in that of Par. 513, dating to the tenth century, the saint's words are as cited: ἄνθρωπός εἰμι πτωχός ('Βατικανοὶ κώδικες', 10,30 and 'Ἅγιος Ἰωάννης', 269,22 respectively). In Par. 1556 (fifteenth century), the saint's wording is: ἄνθρωπος πτωχὸς καὶ ξένος παντελῶς εἰμι ('Ἅγιος Ἰωάννης', 277, 15–16). But in Par. 1449 (eleventh century) these words do not appear, since no direct speech is employed (see *op. cit.*, 283–4). Finally, in a version preserved in six manuscripts dating from the tenth to the twelfth centuries the saint says: σοὶ γὰρ ἐγκαταλέλειμμαι ὁ πτωχός (*op. cit.*, 294,13).

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Strikingly, πτωχός ἐνι (257) are the first words uttered by Ptochoprodromos' wife when she sees him disguised, and it is thanks to these words that the poor husband succeeds in entering his own house.

Ptochoprodromos is not entirely comparable to John, for the latter actually spends his time not in the house but in the yard of the estate (in time he builds a humble cabin there, his καλύβη, in which he dwells). Nonetheless, they are connected by the fact that they both manage to reconnect with their families while dressed up as beggars. Of course this happens for different reasons. Within the solemn context of a saint's life, John's actions are driven by faith; in the realm of comedy, Ptochoprodromos is driven by hunger. Family relations are also different: John's is a loving family, whereas Ptochoprodromos is rejected both by his wife and children. It is worth noting that another saint, whose Life, at least the Greek version of it (eighth century), seems to have been influenced by that of John, namely Alexios the Man of God, also returns to his home after a long time (no disguise as a beggar here) and once again we see that the members of his family love each other dearly. One interesting detail not found in John's story, is the total devotion of Alexios' wife to him throughout the narration, which stands in sharp contrast to the attitude of Ptochoprodromos' wife towards her husband.[59]

Taking into account all the above, and without feeling the urge to trace intertextual liaisons with specific texts, we may ask the following question: is Ptochoprodomos (the poet) consciously parodying motifs and plot elements derived from the Byzantine hagiographical tradition in the last scene of the poem? As regards cross-dressing of women, it is worth noting that cross-dressers were occasionally mistaken for eunuchs – in the case of the women who entered the monastery of Tarasios, the author says that they wanted to pass as eunuchs.[60] Perhaps some would be willing to discern in Ptochoprodromos (the hero of the first poem) a husband who has been both castrated and feminized by his fiery wife. The process would involve an additional stage, in comparison to the hagiographical sources, for our hero needs to experience emasculation first, whereas cross-dressing women of course do not. Therefore, Ptochoprodromos would need to regain his ἀνδρικὸν ἦθος,[61] only now through a ploy of disguise. I leave this last interpretation on the table for the moment, while arguing that, as it appears, it would be quite useful to add the rich hagiographical tradition of Byzantium in future studies on the poetics of the first Ptochoprodromic poem.

59 For the family aspect in the *Life of Alexios, the Man of God* (including the wife's devotion and the dating of the Greek version), see S. Constantinou, 'Family in the Byzantine Greek legend of Saint Alexios, the Man of God', in *Approaches to the Byzantine Family*, 273–84.

60 καὶ ὄψιν εὐνούχων ὑποκρινάμεναι (*The Life of Tarasios*, 161).

61 This is a topos in hagiographical texts with female heroes: Holy women are expected to deny their feminine qualities and opt for a male disposition. See Galatariotou, 'Holy women and witches', 84–5.

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Final remarks

In 1986, Margaret Alexiou argued, in relation to the Ptochoprodromic poems: 'In different degrees, a quadruple system of literary allusion may be postulated: to ancient and Byzantine literary tradition; to orally transmitted verse; to ceremonial documents; to religious and liturgical texts'.[62] If we use this argument as a guideline, then the present paper has discussed material from the first and the fourth component of this 'system of literary allusion'. As I have argued, the Byzantine religious (patristic and hagiographical) literary tradition seems to be relevant to the study of the first Ptochoprodromic poem, in terms of comic reversal. The question whether the poet's playfulness involves parodying of specific passages that stem from this tradition remains open. Nonetheless, most of us would agree that the hand that composed the first poem was that of a very gifted poet.

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62 Alexiou, 'The poverty of écriture', 24.

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