

## Review Essay\*

# Byzantine Lives: Discussing Nonbinary Sexuality, Gender, and Race in Byzantium

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Roland Betancourt's thought-provoking monograph raises a series of questions concerning sexuality, prejudice, and racism in late antiquity and in the medieval world. It stimulates more careful reflection on gender and race-related matters, with particular attention to *intersectionality*, a word the activist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw coined back in 1989, referring to the intersections of different forms of oppression, namely, racism and sexism, as a way to explain the condition of African American women.<sup>1</sup> This innovative book has all the requirements necessary to broaden the perspective of scholars of Byzantine literature, as it shows that many gender-related issues are extremely multifaceted and far more complex than one might initially suspect.

The wealth of sources (literary and nonliterary) investigated in this volume is impressively wide: it includes saints' *Lives*, medical handbooks, historical works, letters, and poetry. These are not analyzed merely for their content but also in relation to coeval works of art, such as medieval frescoes or mosaics and material objects, set in a dialectic relationship, which then serves to cast further light on the written sources. This interdisciplinary approach is fruitful and stimulating not only

\* Roland Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality: Sexuality, Gender, and Race in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 288 pp., \$35.50 hb., ISBN 9780691179452. Page references appear in parentheses within the text.

<sup>1</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140 (1989) 139–67.

for art historians, but also for sociologists, historians, and philologists, as well as for anyone interested in Byzantine culture.

Betancourt's arguments are solidly grounded on a deep knowledge of the sources, and his points are explained with clarity and in terse prose, which adds pleasure to the reading.

The volume is divided into four chapters. The first chapter, "The Virgin's Consent," focuses on the importance of the Virgin Mary's will to consent to become the mother of Christ. A number of literary sources about the Annunciation are investigated, such as ones by Romanus the Melodist, Patriarch Germanus, Photius, Nicholas Mesarites, Michael Glykas, and Nicholas Cabasilas. On the basis of this overview, the author illustrates an increasing interest in Mary's consent to become the *Theotokos*, which clearly emerges from the language utilized by post-Iconoclastic sources. This is contextualized against a greater awareness of sexual crimes and forced marriages that can be traced in the legal and historical sources of this period (20). The literary sources concerning the incarnation shed light upon a deep interest in Mary's voluntary decision. The Virgin is depicted as the antitype of Eve, who hastily acquiesced to the serpent (40), whereas Mary shows prudence and ponderation in making her decision when visited by the archangel, and she eventually becomes an active co-worker for the salvation of humanity on the grounds of her individual choice. This theme is also thoroughly and convincingly investigated in the visual arts, through the author's analysis of images in icons and manuscripts representing the Annunciation. I have but one small remark to make about Betancourt's interpretation of the *Homily of the Annunciation* by Nicholas Cabasilas, namely, regarding the passage describing the creation of Eve: Betancourt's assertion that the language of the homily "unambiguously" depicts the "rape" of an unconscious Adam, when God steals his rib in the process of creating Eve (40), seems a bit far-fetched.

Chapter Two, "Slut-shaming an Empress," deals with the rhetorical force of sexual defamation. It examines Procopius's infamous attacks on Empress Theodora in which he resorts to graphic sexual details in order to slander the empress. These malicious insinuations about Theodora's insatiable lust are notorious. Less discussed by scholars are the implications concerning her allegedly frequent abortions. As Procopius states, in her youth, the empress-to-be frequently interrupted her pregnancies both because she did not want them to hinder her intense sexual life and out of sheer vanity, since she did not want her beauty to be spoiled. Obviously, Procopius's goal is to present Theodora as a cynical nymphomaniac, a monster of cruelty and depravation. He stresses that she was merely following her perverse nature, as nobody was forcing her to perform any sexual acts, which were entirely of her own volition.

What is interesting about Betancourt's analysis, which is based on several medical treatises (such as those of Soranus of Ephesus, Aetius of Amida, Paul of Aegina, and Dioscorides) and on historical sources (such as those by Paul the

Deacon), is his discussion of the social implications of abortion and contraception. From this overview it emerges that Greek doctors were particularly skilled in performing sophisticated surgical operations, such as embryotomies and caesarean deliveries. However, only wealthy aristocratic women could afford this kind of expensive medical care, notwithstanding the moral condemnation of abortion in a Christian society. On the other hand, the poor were forced, in a sense, to give birth, or they were likely to die if they decided to terminate their pregnancies by resorting to other inexpensive (yet less safe) abortive techniques or substances.

Another very significant theme explored in this chapter is that of a woman's volition in sexual matters, as it emerges in the work of Nemesius, the bishop of Emesa. In *On the Nature of Man*, he explicitly states that women have their own power of choice, and sexual choice is presented as an exercise of freedom (79).<sup>2</sup>

Chapter Three, "Transgender Lives," analyzes the *Lives* of a number of "trans monks," to use Betancourt's term, in order to assess whether they fully committed to their male transgender identities. According to Betancourt, some of these saints, after making the decision to become male persons, perceived themselves as men throughout their lives, especially Mary/Marinos, Pelagia/Pelagius, Apollinaria/Dorotheaus, and Anastasia/Anastasius. Consequently, in Betancourt's view, these figures should be respected as men (120).

Beside transgender saints, other nonbinary figures are taken into consideration, for example, the Emperor Elagabalus, who clearly possessed a coherent transgender identity, to the extent that, as Dio Cassius states, "he asked the physicians to contrive a woman's vagina in his body by means of an incision." Betancourt also examines medical issues: operations such as castration, genital mutilation, "correction" of gynecomastia, circumcision, and even "cosmetic" surgery were performed in Byzantium. He reminds us that eunuchs were integral members of Byzantine society, and, though they are often described in the sources as feminine characters, their identity could fluctuate between male and female (109–10). The fascinating figure of Michael Psellos is also suggestive of a nonbinary gender identity, as it emerges from the voice of the historian-philosopher himself, when he repeatedly asserts that he has a feminine disposition with respect to natural emotions (111, 113–14).

Chapter Four, "Queer Sensations," surveys same-gender desire in Byzantium, with the aim of contextualizing it as a complex reality that manifests both chastely and erotically (131). The presence of same-gender attraction in monastic communities is evident, for example, in admonitions to avoid any form of intimacy between monks, as attested in many monastic rules. This is also clear in a passage of the *Life* of Euphrosyne/Smaragdus, where it is explicitly stated that the beauty

<sup>2</sup> We may add that this element is particularly noteworthy, since individual choice is also a crucial philosophical concept as far as the decision of the faithful to profess the Christian faith is concerned, as it relates to the awareness in making the choice (*προαίρεσις*) of being a Christian. Already in Aristotle, *Eth. Nic.* 1111b–1112a, it is stressed that the concept of *προαίρεσις* differs from that of simple desire or will, as it implies the awareness of good and evil that distinguishes rational from irrational beings.

of the new monk who has just entered the monastery poses a threat to the brothers who are overcome with same-gender desire for the young beardless ascetic (127).

Betancourt also analyzes less evident hints of queer desire transpiring within a variety of sources, namely, the queerness implicit in the episode of the doubting Thomas. This scene, as it was once depicted in the Church of the Holy Apostles, is illustrated by Nicholas Mesarites in his description of the church, using a terminology that, according to the author, is charged with erotic tension. Similarly, it is also possible to detect erotic undertones in the language chosen to describe Thomas touching the Lord in the poetry of the hymnographer Romanos the Melodist. These literary narratives are compared with visual representations of the same episode in a number of frescoes and mosaics (at Mount Athos, Hosios Loukas, San Marco, the Meteora, etc.) suggesting, in various ways, that the veneration of Christ was characterized by a yearning for his carnal presence.

Even though Betancourt's interpretation of the sources is undoubtedly captivating, and in many instances convincing, it should be kept in mind that in theological poetry erotic language is widespread and ultimately symbolic. Betancourt is obviously well aware of this, familiar as he is with Byzantine poetry. Nevertheless, there is the risk of occasionally over-interpreting the sources—for example, when mosaics and a fresco in Hosios Loukas depicting the scenes of the incredulity of Thomas and the washing of the feet are defined as evocative of a sense of “queer conviviality” (155). Of course, we are not denying the possibility of the existence of a Christian queerness (160), which seems detectable in many of the examples Betancourt selected. The point is that this queerness cannot be demonstrated on the grounds of a sometimes slightly arbitrary reading of the sources.

The last chapter, “The Ethiopian Eunuch,” deals with intersectionality of race and gender. It focuses on the image of the Ethiopian eunuch in the *Menologium Basilii*, illustrating a scene from Acts, where the apostle Philip of Tralles encounters a powerful eunuch, the treasurer of Queen Candace, in the course of his evangelistic mission in Ethiopia. The eunuch is here depicted as a black person, sitting on a chariot, and reading the prophet Isaiah. In many other representations Betancourt examines, mostly coming from psalters (the Chludoy Psalter, the Pantokrator Psalter, the Theodore Psalter, and a fresco of the Dečani monastery in Serbia), the same figure has an “exotic” look (often with a turban) but is invariably depicted with white skin (164), the only exception being the Docheiariou Monastery *Synaxarion*, where the same figure is black. Betancourt observes that white Ethiopians are not uncommon in Byzantine art, even though they are depicted as black when they appear as demons. Moreover, the effeminate look of the Ethiopian eunuch is stereotypically represented as pale, for pale skin is traditionally associated with femininity and dark with masculinity. The blackness of the eunuch of the *Menologium Basilii* is also an exception, but even if “he” (or “they”<sup>3</sup>) is depicted as black, “he” shows delicate feminine traits, also in terms of colors, with a glowing

<sup>3</sup> As Betancourt suggests, on the grounds that they belong to a nonbinary sexual identity.

appearance and a pink tunic, an attire typical of a court eunuch. In this respect the Ethiopian eunuch becomes a visual metaphor for intersectionality (202).

From Betancourt's analysis of a series of sources containing details on Constantinopolitan cosmopolitanism and several hints of the variety of ethnicities present in Constantinople (e.g., Malalas, Michael Psellos, Eustathios of Thessaloniki, Christopher of Mytilene, etc.), it appears that skin tone and ethnicity were not that important for several Byzantine authors (177). In other words, it seems that even though racial biases were obviously present in Byzantine culture, Eastern writers and artists were less racist than their Western counterparts (176).

As already stated, Betancourt's monograph is an original study that offers scholars stimulating new perspectives and paves the ground for further research. A few remarks can be made with reference to some specific issues discussed in his work, in particular on terminology (especially concerning a couple of saints' *Lives*).

With regard to Theodora, we should not underestimate the literary character of the rhetorical exercise of the  $\psi\acute{o}\gamma\omicron\varsigma$ : Procopius intends to be hyperbolic in his critiques. In his pamphlet, he attacks Theodora, but he also does not spare Justinian. The difference is that, since the emperor is a male, the accusations are based on different grounds. Betancourt concedes that Theodora did exactly the same to Basianos, a young opponent of hers who was slandering her publicly. In vengeance, instead of being accused of calumny, the man was charged with pederasty, humiliated, and tortured in public without a trial and eventually sentenced to death (85). From this episode, it is evident that Theodora shared the same tactics as Procopius: exactly like her defamer, she used sexual allegations as weapons to delegitimize political opponents, thus showing the same sexist attitude, even though she was a woman, and consequently a victim (or a potential victim) of this prejudice. The episode is indicative of the spirit of the time, and it is a reminder that, in interpreting ancient sources, it is anachronistic to apply the standards of today. Naturally, the main objection to this last consideration would be that historical anachronicity is often used as an argument to delegitimize gender studies, but it is worth bearing in mind that when analyzing our sources, a rigorously historical perspective does not imply that we approve of the sexual calumnies purposely devised with the aim of vilifying women and men.

Furthermore, in introducing the topic of the "holy transgender," Betancourt urges us to rethink the definitions of the holy women who became male monks, stressing that "terminology matters" (90). Of course, I do agree, but the choice of terminology gestures toward a number of complex issues. According to Betancourt, we should dismiss the definition "transvestite nuns" because "transvestite" is a pejorative term. Similarly, the expression "cross-dressing saints" should be rejected on the grounds that it refers to persons who choose to dress temporarily as the "opposite" gender, but not full-time. "Women in disguise" is also to be refuted, because it negates the possibility that these saints perceived themselves as male persons. Betancourt suggests we adopt the

adjective “transgender,” since it represents a wider umbrella that encompasses a larger range of possibilities (90).

The need for respectful terminology is more than warranted and is fully understandable, but this category of saints seems to elude all definitions, including that of transgender: they are often characterized by a subtle ambiguity that is indeed rather difficult to label. Theodora of Alexandria, for example, is an unfaithful wife who lives as a man until the day of her/his death but is consistently described as the mystical spouse of Christ.<sup>4</sup> The adjective “transgender” defines a person who consciously chooses to belong to a gender different from that assigned at birth, and this seems to be the most difficult point to prove in Betancourt’s interpretation. More specifically, on the grounds of an analysis based on the written sources (without over-interpreting them), it is hard to demonstrate that the holy women who make the transition into male monks actually perceived themselves as men.

Returning to current definitions, the expression “women in disguise,” reductive as it may be, has an advantage, because it takes into account the theme of hidden sanctity, which is crucial in all these stories, since the element of secrecy is essential to making the saint’s holiness even greater. It is not only a literary topos but is also a concrete way to achieve sanctity, as it is apparent in another category of hidden saints, the holy fools who pretend to be insane in order not to be praised as saints.<sup>5</sup> The saint does not want her sex to be revealed because s/he wants to continue to be a hidden servant of Christ. S/he does not want her holiness to be revealed and, for the same reason, s/he does not want her female body to be revered as that of a holy person: her/his identity as a saint must remain secret.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, definitions of “transvestite” and “cross-dressing” saints may merely refer to the male attire of the saint, and should not necessarily be interpreted as disrespectful, as they both also refer to the aspect of transvestism as a narrative mechanism, which is pivotal in these hagiographical accounts. It suffices to mention the story of Euphrosyne/Smaragdus, where two encounters between the protagonist

<sup>4</sup> See Arietta Papaconstantinou, “‘Je suis noire ma belle’. Le double langage de la *Vie de Théodora d’Alexandrie*, alias Abba Théodore,” *Lalies* 24 (2004) 63–86, esp. 77–78.

<sup>5</sup> See Vincent Deroche, “Du rejet à l’adulation, de la vie scandaleuse au cult établi. Le paradoxe des *saloï*,” in *Culte des saints et littérature hagiographique. Accords et désaccords* (ed. Vincent Deroche, Bryan Ward-Perkins, and Robert Wiśniewski; Monographies du Centre de recherche d’histoire et civilisation de Byzance, Collège de France 55; Leuven: Peeters, 2020) 213–24.

<sup>6</sup> On the concept of hidden sanctity as a literary topos, see the seminal article by Bernard Flusin, “Le serviteur caché ou le saint sans existence,” in *Les “Vies des saints” à Byzance. Genre littéraire ou biographie historique? Actes du IF colloque international philologique, Paris 6-7-8 juin 2002* (Paris: Centre d’études byzantines, néo-helléniques et sud-est européennes, 2004) 59–71. And later, on Theodora of Alexandria, see Julie van Pelt, “Saints in Disguise: Performance in the *Life of John Kalyvites* (BHG 868), the *Life of Theodora of Alexandria* (BHG 1727) and the *Life of Symeon Salos* (BHG 1677),” in *Storytelling in Byzantium: Narratological Approaches to Byzantine Texts and Images* (ed. Charis Messis et al.; *Studia Byzantina Upsaliensia* 19; Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala University, 2018) 137–57. On Daniel of Sketis, see Britt Dahlman, *Saint Daniel of Sketis: A Group of Hagiographic Texts Edited with Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala University, 2007), esp. 79–89.

and her/his father are structured on the equivocation of her/his gender, to the extent that it confers to the narrative the character of a Christian “novel,” with a theatrical touch in the final recognition scene (the ἀναγνώρισις or ἀναγνωρισμός).<sup>7</sup> Notwithstanding the resolution to keep her/his identity secret, in a few cases it is evident that the protagonist of the story wishes to be recognized as a woman either postmortem or on her deathbed. When Euphrosyne/Smaragdus realizes that s/he is about to die, s/he assertively tells her/his father: “I am the miserable one, but behold! You have seen me and you are fully assured, but, for now, nobody should know this, and do not permit that someone else shroud my body, but do it yourself.”<sup>8</sup> With this assertion, the saint requires, out of modesty, that her female body should not be touched by the brethren, and it is clear that she intends to be recognized by her father, Paphnutius. This is also the case of Athanasia/Athanasius, wife of the money-changer Andronicus, who, after having concealed her identity to her husband, leaves a letter for him to be read after her death where s/he reveals that s/he was his wife. In both cases the protagonist intends to be recognized as a woman by her father and husband, respectively.

This aspect is also significant in other hagiographical legends of female saints disguised as male monks, where the recognition of female identity is a fundamental element, without which the narrative cannot function. The act of transvestism plays a particularly important role in the legend of Theodora of Alexandria, who negates her femininity because it was the origin of her adultery. She not only disguises herself as a man, but when she cuts her hair and dismisses her female attire, she wears her husband’s clothes, as a sort of “retribution” or as an act of expiation. The same happens with the former courtesan Pelagia, who disguises her/himself as a man by wearing the tunic of Nonnus, the bishop who converted and baptized her.

The importance of the narrative mechanisms of transvestism and concealment is obviously related to the fictional nature of all the hagiographical works concerning holy women disguised as monks, which, not coincidentally, often show theatrical features in the dialogues and in the structure of the narrative as well.<sup>9</sup>

I hope to make it clear that I am not suggesting any clear-cut solution in terms of terminology. What is important is to underline that the definitions mentioned above should not be interpreted as brutally dismissive, nor as disrespectful, but maybe just as approximate or incomplete, given that this category of saints is so rich in nuances. On the other hand, the expression “transgender saints” seems to

<sup>7</sup> On the theme of the scenes of recognition in hagiography, see Pascal Boulhol, *Αναγνωρισμός. La scène de reconnaissance dans l’hagiographie antique et médiévale* (Aix-en-Provence: Université de Provence, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> Anatole Boucherie, *Βίος και πολιτεία τῆς ὁσίας Εὐφροσύνης καὶ τοῦ ταύτης πατρὸς Παφνουτίου* in *AB* 2 (1883) 196–205 at 204 (my translation).

<sup>9</sup> Even though it is undisputable that all these narratives are fictional, as Betancourt mentions (99), it cannot be denied that the practice of cross-dressing was more widespread than the texts alone may imply, as it seems to be implicit in imperial law codes and Church councils’ regulations prohibiting this practice.



be equally inaccurate and as reductive as the other definitions, especially with regard to the idea that the ascetic practice of abstaining from food was a way to bring about the transition to a gender different from that assigned at birth. More specifically, what Betancourt suggests is that extreme fasting was pursued in order to transform female bodies into more masculine forms, as a result of amenorrhea (102–6). In the clinical picture of anorexic young women, it is widely documented that one of the most common side effects is the interruption of the menstrual cycle, which disappears because of the physiological weakness caused by starvation.<sup>10</sup> The question is: Is this an indication that girls with eating disorders perceive themselves as male persons? Perhaps in a few cases, but certainly not always. The main issue here is the refusal of femininity, sexuality, and of the bodily dimension in general, an aspect which is also at stake in the case of the holy women.<sup>11</sup> In this respect it seems appropriate to remind ourselves of the portrait Gregory of Nyssa gives of his sister Macrina, which then became paradigmatic for subsequent depictions of female holiness: besides chastity, the other fundamental virtue praised by the Cappadocian father is his sister's extreme asceticism and detachment from earthly matters. In Gregory's narration, the stunning beauty of the young Macrina—which used to attract legions of suitors—is gradually destroyed by her rigorous asceticism, as well as by her disease (possibly breast cancer) that eventually causes her death. However, at the same time, this self-inflicted strict discipline allows her to “surpass the limits of human nature” and to become “an angel.”<sup>12</sup> Not by chance, Macrina becomes an example of perfect virtue while she is on her deathbed: the price she has to pay in order to achieve sanctity is the annihilation of her *female* body.

This element especially applies to the story of Pelagia/Pelagius and Mary of Egypt, because they are converted prostitutes, and also to the *Life* of Theodora of Alexandria, since she is an unfaithful wife. Precisely because of their sexual sins, the aspect of the μεταβολή concerns both their soul and their physical appearance. Repentance leads to conversion and represents the mechanism that enacts a process of rejection of the female nature as intrinsically sinful. This obviously implies self-contempt on behalf of the female protagonist. It is worth mentioning the description of the actress Pelagia when she enters Antioch as a prima donna: she is barefoot, unveiled, with her court of servants, covered in pearls and golden jewels and sprinkled with intoxicating fragrances. She visually represents the epitome of the heavily made-up woman, as described by Tertullian in his *De cultu foeminarum* as the “door for the devil” (*diaboli ianua*).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> One of the most cited works is J. P. Feighner, “Diagnostic Criteria for Use in Psychiatric Research,” *Archives of General Psychiatry* 26 (1972) 57–63. Amenorrhea is included among the six most common symptoms for diagnosing nervous anorexia.

<sup>11</sup> A classic reading on this theme is Rudolph M. Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

<sup>12</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita Macrinae*, in *Gregorii Nysseni: Opera Ascetica* (ed. Werner Jaeger, et al.; Leiden: Brill, 1952) 395 (ll. 20–21), 396 (ll. 1–2) (=PG 46, 981D–984A).

<sup>13</sup> Tertullian, *Cult. Fem.* 1.1, 2.



In a deeply misogynistic culture, where every woman is considered to be a potential Eve, leading men to the destruction of their souls with her sexual enticements, the theme of contempt for the female body is an obvious consequence of the mentality of the time: female saints reject their femininity, not only because it is virtually sinful, but also because it is physically and morally inferior, compared to the more authoritative masculine holiness. Does this necessarily imply that the holy cross-dressers (or the holy transgendered, to use Betancourt's terminology) perceive themselves as male? Or do they simply aim to become "superior" and to be asexual and disembodied as angels? Of course, it depends on each case, which should be examined analytically.

Moreover, the masculinization of the female ascetic is achieved by wearing male attire and by fasting—this is undeniable—but we do not have evidence corroborating the statement that these saints perceived themselves as men. Furthermore, we need to ascertain that they make a choice, whereas in most cases (though not all, for instance not Theodora of Alexandria or Pelagia), the female saint is forced to change her physical appearance: for example, Euphrosyne/Smaragdus, in order to avoid a forced marriage; Matrona, to protect herself from an abusive husband; Mary/Marinus, in order not to be abandoned by her father; and Anastasia/Anastasius, as a way to flee her powerful stalker, none other than Emperor Justinian, who was chasing her since he wanted her to be his mistress. In these cases, the "transition" is not a free choice but sheer necessity: it is the only way to avoid an unwanted fate. How can this also imply a change of gender identity? This statement is difficult to prove. I am not, however, suggesting that this possibility should be categorically excluded, but it seems that more caution should be required in interpreting the hagiographical sources, as the risk is that one forces an interpretation onto the texts.

Another pivotal theme in the legends of the cross-dressing saints is the refusal of male authority, which is particularly evident in the story of Euphrosyne/Smaragdus. As already mentioned, the protagonist does not have any alternative. She explicitly asserts: "if I go to a female monastery, my father, searching for me, shall find me and drag me away."<sup>14</sup> Thus, the only chance the young woman has to avoid an imposed marriage and to follow her spiritual inclination is to become a man. Certainly, this is a paradox. But saints' stories are often based on paradoxes, and I would go so far as to say that both Christianity generally and Byzantine spirituality specifically, are based on a paradox.<sup>15</sup> The refusal of marriage is explicitly stated, as is the conflict with paternal authority. In addition, there is another significant aspect of female empowerment. Not only does Euphrosyne/Smaragdus possess her/his own money and make a donation to the monastery when s/he enters it, but also on her/

<sup>14</sup> Boucherie, Βίος, 199–200 (my translation).

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse* (Sather Classical Lectures 55; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), esp. 155–88.

his deathbed, s/he states: “I told the *hegoumenos* that I possess plenty of money.”<sup>16</sup> She subsequently instructs her father on how to distribute the family wealth, in a dramatic reversal of roles: now it is Paphnutios, the father, who obeys his daughter. Not all cross-dressing saints are rebels, but certainly Euphrosyne/Smaragdus is. I am not sure whether we do her justice by making her a transgender saint, thus completely erasing her female identity. I would rather be inclined to consider her as a determined, brave girl who refuses to be subjected to male authority by resorting to the escamotage of assuming the aspect of a man.

To conclude, the particular value of Betancourt’s important study lies in the light it casts on the heterogeneity of Byzantine society that included a plurality of nonbinary and nonnormative sexual identities, diverse ethnic and racial identities, and variegated minority voices. It urges us to be more attentive with respect to normative readings, which, rooted as they are in our culture, may prevent us from fully appreciating the existence of lesser-known social identities in the medieval world. Moreover, it reminds us that gender fluidity is not a modern construction but has always existed as a concrete reality.

<sup>16</sup> Boucherie, *Bios*, 204.