

# Temptation in the Cell: Dangerous Closeness and Redeeming Love in a Byzantine Narrative of Paired\* Monks



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## Abstract

The close relationship of a pair of monks, an elder and a young disciple, is analyzed from a recently published apophthegm in an eleventh-century Greek manuscript in Uppsala, Sweden. This narrative is simple in style, but rich in implications for the window it opens on Christian ethics in a semi-solitary monastic context. Human failure highlights patience and forgiveness within a loving relationship. Careful handling of the crisis by the young disciple succeeds in granting the tempted elder, through God's grace, eternal salvation.

### Keywords

Christian ethics  
Monasticism  
Narratives  
Asceticism  
Eleventh Century

## Tentación en la celda: proximidad peligrosa y amor redentor en una narración bizantina de monjes compañeros

## Resumen

La amistad estrecha entre dos monjes, el uno viejo y el otro un discípulo joven, viene sometida al análisis basándose en un apotegma recién publicado que se encuentra en un manuscrito griego del siglo XI, ahora en Uppsala, Suecia. La narrativa, aunque de estilo sencillo, es rica en implicaciones, gracias a la visión que ofrece acerca de una ética cristiana desarrollada en el contexto del monasticismo semisolitario. Las fallas humanas subrayan la necesidad de la paciencia

### Palabras clave

ética cristiana  
monasticismo  
narrativas  
ascetismo  
siglo XI

\* The powerpoint that accompanied the delivery of this paper at the Second Byzantine Colloquium at the University of Buenos Aires illustrated this narrative through the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516), specifically details from his *Cardinal Grimani's Altarpiece: Visions of the Hereafter* (Venice, 1505-1510), the *Temptations of St Anthony* in the version at the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon (c. 1500), the *Hermit Saints Tryptich* (Venice, 1495-1505), and *The Haywain Tryptich (The Path of Life, 1512-1515)* in the Museo del Prado, Madrid. These visionary works demonstrate the same concerns with temptation and salvation as the narrative here discussed. They are available online in high resolution and with full explanations, so that they do not need to be reproduced here. Since the Colloquium, I presented the paper for discussion at the Uppsala Byzantine Narratology seminar. I would like to thank the following scholars for their helpful comments: Derek Krueger, Markéta Kulhánková, Ingela Nilsson, Anthony Lappin, Myrto Veikou.

y del perdón dentro de una relación de amor. El comportamiento compasivo y cauteloso del joven supo atravesar la crisis representada por la tentación del viejo, y le confirió, ayudado por gracia de Dios, la salvación eterna.

Finding love in the arid world of the desert, rather than buying wholesale its dryness, has been the hallmark of recent scholarship on ascetic literature. Whether it is by highlighting the sensual components of the desert experience,<sup>1</sup> or by teasing out the complex *double entendres* of early hagiographical narratives (Burrus, 2004:19-52), the revival of the erotic in a world of denial has been carried out not only to pique curiosity and play in the hands of modern standards of liberalism, but also to ask profound questions of the intense relationship between sanctity and *eros* as driving forces in humanity. Such aspiration at philosophical depth finds its beginning in Platonic readings<sup>2</sup> and is sustained in dialogue with contemporary thinkers writing on these issues, primarily Foucault (1978, 1985, 1986) and Laqueur (1990)<sup>3</sup>. The results are in constant tension with, and at times display scarce attention towards, the religious dimension in which these texts originated and continued to operate, reflecting instead modern skepticism and fragmentation, or championing current political agendas (notably, Boswell, 1994). Nevertheless, the historically central question as to whether Christianity changed, or merely accepted, ancient sexual mores – a question Burrus boldly raises before Foucauldian interpreters (2004:2)<sup>4</sup> – must undoubtedly pass through such a reappraisal of the role of sex in Christian literature.

Especially when placed side by side recent reevaluations of Stoic views on sociability, marriage, and self-introspection,<sup>5</sup> Christian attitudes do not seem to propose anything at all that is new or unusual. Rather, such comparisons would seem to confirm Foucault's provocative assertion that "The so-called Christian morality is nothing more than a piece of pagan ethics inserted into Christianity" (Foucault, 1980, quoted in Burrus, 2004:2). This statement leaves an impression of wooden assimilation, limiting the creative process of cultural elaboration. Such a picture is luckily undermined by the narrative twists that Christian literature employs to fan out its sphere of influence beyond a neatly packaged ethics of good *versus* evil. As Burrus concludes after the fireworks of her literary analyses, "Christianity did indeed change the state of things in the history of Western sexuality, with its sternly ecstatic revising of lives translated into holiness at the shifting borderlines of sexual difference, in the movement of *eros* across the constructed limits of subjectivity" (Burrus, 2004:162).<sup>6</sup>

Here I would like to probe this understanding of Christian morality through the reading of a story found in the very last pages of a beautiful, small eleventh-century codex now in the Carolina Library in Uppsala.<sup>7</sup> One can imagine this elegant book held in the hands of its medieval reader, likely a learned monk in a monastery for eunuchs, as I have argued from the selection of texts in this ascetic collection (Crostini, 2017:193-196). The narrative is presented in the manner of an extended apophthegm, so that, whether or not the text circulated at an earlier time than the present medieval copy – so far the only extant – the ambiance evoked is that of the classical setting of the desert fathers. The text (Crostini, 2017:200-206)<sup>8</sup> exhibits, in fact, that continuity of tradition across the Byzantine period, which Claudia Rapp emphasizes in her recent monograph on the world of paired monasticism (Rapp, 2016:161-179): a continuity that, however, could signal harmony in understanding more than identity of

1. Among the growing literature in this field, see the essays from the Dumbarton Oaks 2014 symposium now published by Harvey and Mullett (2017).

2. See especially the essays in Part I of Burrus; Keller (2007); Nilsson (2009).

3. For a recent critique see the article by Cahana (2016).

4. "What revisions and interruptions in ancient Mediterranean conceptions of erotic pleasure and sexual ethics were introduced with the rise of the church?"

5. Reydams-Schils (2005). Reading Hierocles, a source not widely exploited in this book, further strengthens the impression of similarity. See the recent edition with translation and commentary by Ramelli (2009).

6. "(This, finally, is my answer to Foucault's evocatively ambiguous rhetorical question)".

7. MS *Upsaliensis graecus* 5: Rudberg (1954); Ampelarga (2002:145-150).

8. The Greek text is not without difficulties: its transitions are at times elliptical and abrupt, and faults of itacism and other spelling irregularities, as well as the poor preservation of the last folio where the text is rubbed and the parchment holed, cause problems of word reconstruction that are not entirely solved.

practice.<sup>9</sup> The diachronic perspective imposed by the manuscript's date does raise the question of how these ancient sources continued to live in the minds of their medieval readers, about the way and the extent to which such retellings could speak across time and address the real needs of very different individuals and communities.

9. For a criticism of the continuity argument that telescopes Byzantine history, see Crostini (2017a).

## Summary of the Narrative

The story told in this longer apophthegmatic narrative is for many aspects typical of the exchanges in desert father stories: set in a cell apart from a cityscape, it stages the interaction of two men engaged in ascetic practices and struggling against temptation at its most common, the sexual appetite. The narrative focuses on one such critical moment at the heart of the established relationship between such a monastic pair. By articulating this experience with dialogue and in gestures, the story nuances the dynamics between sin and its causes, and their implications for salvation. Its culminating in death is at once sad and happy for the actors involved, and both a warning and a sign of hope for the readers and potential onlookers.

The eschatological perspective articulated in the title, "About the *géron* who risked damnation at the point of death", emerges only very gradually in the account. Though itself the overarching motivation in the choice of monastic life, the equation between sexual abstinence and salvation is not drawn neatly, or moralistically, but explored through the existing relation to the cell-partner which the narrative highlights as key in the process of redemption. Thus, while on the surface the story seems in line with attitudes in pre-Christian Egypt, where specific sexual acts automatically amounted to exclusion from paradise after death,<sup>10</sup> sin through same-sex cohabitation was presented as a risk worth running. It was offset by the many beneficial aspects<sup>11</sup> of cultivating long-standing committed relationships for the purposes of human development. While warning that no amount of asceticism can stand as a guarantee of immunity from sin and a seal of perfection, this tale at the same time tells of the extraordinary power of mutual care as extending an even more invincible safety net between man's weakness and the attainment of the divine. If we leave Pachomian rules (Rousselle, 1988:155-156; Rousseau, 1985:121-122) and Shenoute's obsessions (Brakke, 2006:97-124) aside as representative of an entirely different phase in the history of the monastic ascetic movement, the collections of *Apophthegmata* to which this text loosely belongs portray a world in which sexual temptation and sin are hardly the worst things that can happen to the ascete.

10. Rousselle (1988:153) referring to masturbation and same-sex relationships.

11. Gould (1993) is a precursor in stating the importance of community interaction for desert asceticism.

The couple is introduced as sharing a living space,<sup>12</sup> having done so for many years. Drama unfolds in their cell in what retrospectively appear as the last hours of the elder's life: temptation by the devil introduces sexual desire in the seasoned friendship and threatens to undo a lifetime's effort of ascetic practices. In entering this closed scene, the reader is admitted into the monks' ethical world. It is a private world at the same time as a communal one: the narrative captures a few telling details and with deceptively simple rhetorical skill the narrator paints the picture beyond the fact and the event, conveying in action the complex background of relationship and feeling that reverberates out of the cell onto the audience of this story. What does this manner of narration highlight of the bond between these paired monks? What does it tell us

12. Τις γέρον ἐμεινεν μετὰ εὐλαβοῦς ἀδελφοῦ μοναχοῦ; rather than 'remained' (Crostini 2017:201, l. 1) the verb should be simply translated 'lived with'. Cfr. the expression μεθ' ἀλλήλων καθίσαι meaning 'to live with each other': Krueger (2011:34 and n.15, citing Wortley's translation of John Moschos, *Spiritual Meadow*, 110, 91).

more generally about Christian morality and its self-representation in the world of desert and monastery?

### Asymmetrical symmetry

The relationship between the two men of this story is based on trust: despite disparity in age, the *géron* is described as having total trust in his younger companion, who is called at once 'brother' and 'monk' (ἀδελφοῦ μοναχοῦ). This reduplicated expression appears to seek purposely (though somewhat unusually) to clarify and dispel any ambiguity that could imply a reference to blood family ties (Rapp, 2016:7-8).<sup>13</sup> It both establishes a priority for the father, while at the same time avoiding the identification of the disciple with a spiritual 'son' in a way that would consolidate an established, expected hierarchy (see Rapp, 2016:140). Thus, these designations open the way for the other unusual and striking feature of this story, namely, the role reversal that takes place in the process of temptation and redemption.

13. On the semantic transfer between biological and spiritual ties, see Krausmueller (2013).

The verb describing their mutual relationship has biblical resonance and may wish to designate more than its overt meaning: "ἐπληροφορεῖτο δὲ καὶ ὁ γέρον εἰς τὸν ἀδελφόν" [the *géron* had total trust in his brother]. Πληροφορέω indicates a plenitude of satisfaction that could both indicate full assurance of the other's behavior and utter fulfillment of one another's needs and daily care. In *Romans* 4:21, trust is associated with the other's (in this case, God's) unflinching promise, a use which allows us to infer an intended background of commitment that relies on an agreement or pact. In this context, it is possible that the verb adumbrates the existence of a 'brother-making' agreement<sup>14</sup> underlying the living arrangements of these two monks.

14. Following Rapp's terminology.

The syntax around this key verb is elliptical. While the first statement is clear, the next clause ("ὥσπερ εἰς ἴδιον πατέρα"), without any explicit subject, creates a parallel between the *géron's* trust in the younger brother and the *géron's* (former?) trust in his own (spiritual?) father. Although the comparison sounds at first unusual, to the extent that the possibility that the text has omitted the change of subject to the brother can be entertained, nonetheless the chosen parallelism makes sense in view of the development of the story. As we shall see, the brother will be called to play father to the *géron*.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, he will show that the *géron's* confidence in his augmented status was not misplaced. In singling out the *géron's* confidence alone for comment, the narrative voice produces unmistakable dramatic irony: it will be precisely the *géron* who, staging the first role reversal, will be the one to fail his companion in both words and deeds.

15. According to Derek Krueger (private communication), a pointed reversal of the Socrates-Alcibiades exchange that is paradigmatic of same-sex relations.

The narrative further strengthens this asymmetrical interpretation by recording that the brother was worthy of the *géron's* trust because he 'had a perfect understanding and the gift of the spirit' ("τέλειον ... φρόνημα ... καὶ πνευματικὸν χάρισμα"). The truth of this statement is what the story illustrates. In other words, the symmetry of roles, and thus -in modern terms- the degree of equality between the two monks is so strong that it points forward to a significant reversal of the traditional roles. Such uncommon subversion culminates in the active management by the younger brother of the older monk, contrary to hierarchical expectations of desert experience.

The equality introduced by the reciprocal exchange of functions in the story brings a further reflection concerning the philosophical presuppositions of this narrative. The dialogue staged between the two monks is in part a diatribe, and in its use of sustained metaphor and scriptural quotations (as we will see below in greater detail) it is fashioned in a rhetorically sophisticated and literary style unusual for monastic exchanges. This aspect of dialogic intercourse is especially interesting when we consider the view that “both Platonic and Christian asceticisms participate [...] in a problematically elitist politics of philosophical truth positioned in opposition to the democratic politics of rhetoric and debate” (Burrus in Burrus; Keller, 2007:xvi). It would seem that, despite the apparent refusal of ‘sex and the city’ by these desert monks, their strategies for defining relationships and dealing with love are closer to those of a democratic exchange than to the Platonic model of an elitist ascent.

### The devil’s companionship

Enter the devil. His constant presence at the cell is recorded – as expected (Valantasis, 1992:42) – in the persistent work of disruption of the path of salvation undertaken by the two men living together. Until then, however, the devil had not succeeded in its evil purpose. This purpose is described as that of separating the monks from each other, of destroying both the love and the promise of concord that the pair had undertaken and had so far managed to live out: “πολλὰ οὖν μηχανησάμενος ὁ διάβολος χωρῆσαι αὐτοὺς ἀπ’ ἀλλήλων, καὶ μὴ δυνηθεὶς παρεχωρήθη...” [although the devil had contrived many times to separate them from each other, and had not been able, he had given up].

Discord and schism are consistently presented in the *Apophthegmata* narratives as the greatest evil. Even trivial disagreements can be deeply disruptive, as in the case of the two monks who quarreled over the correct identification of a bird they had seen and were only reconciled when they could finally agree on the statement that they had both seen a creature with wings.<sup>16</sup> Underlying such disputes is the deeper question of self-affirmation. The virtue of humility is paramount in making any relationship work. Not only is the value of obedience to the other’s command necessary for the smooth running of living together, but even submission to the other’s judgement, in the form of compromise with the other’s opinion, is also placed as a condition, since it is recognized as presenting a more subtle and insidious cause of trouble.

The hardships of sharing a confined living space and limited supplies are further highlighted by other stories that demonstrate that the living out of these relationships was not made of lofty ideals, but of daily gestures of caring for the other, sometimes at one’s own concrete expense. Unanimity between brothers is therefore strongly underscored as itself a victory against the devil, and monastic pairs are pointedly described as “one soul in two bodies”.<sup>17</sup> The existence and open declarations of such strong bonds of affection, where love between the pair motivates and sustains a choice of common life, often culminating in common death arrangements also (Rapp, 2016:148-157), has enabled scholars to equate these monastic pairs with a form of spiritual marriage (Elliott, 1993).

The devil now appears in this story to grab his last chance, as it were. Although, as Krueger has shown (Krueger, 2011:51-52; Rousselle, 1988:147-149), the disruptive potential of such sexual contact between men and men, and men

16. Rapp (2016:136) quoting the Alphabetical Collection: Niketas 1, PG 65, 312 B-C.

17. Krueger (2011:31); the quote is from the *Life of Simeon the Elder* by Theodoret, ch. 4, where it applies to the abbots of Teleda, Eusebonas and Abibion; see Doran transl. (1992:71).



18. Examples in Rapp (2016:149-151).

and children (young boys), was openly considered, the more common narrative of sexual disruption among paired ascetics seems directed to women. In fact, bearing with the other's sexual sin and sharing its burden was the hallmark of several striking narratives where the bond of the monastic couple is miraculously unharmed even by the surprising turn of events.<sup>18</sup> This story is dealing with a rare instance, presenting an actual sexual assault between a monastic pair.

That "sex with a woman represents the worst imaginable transgression for the monk", as Rapp states (Rapp, 2016:149), is notably counteracted by these tales of shared responsibility, or, again in Rapp's terms, "vicarious penance". The worse possible sin is in fact the termination of the monastic bond, the fraternal agreement that entrusts each man to the other's care. The heroic patience and forbearance displayed in these narratives underlies the attitude of the younger brother also in the *Upsaliensis* text. As Rousselle notes

nothing, and particularly not the commission of a [sexual] sin, should turn the monk away from his goal, which was a life of solitude with God. So, after reminding their readers that it was wrong to judge the brothers who had sinned, even those who were homosexual [Macarius 21, Alph], they described the experiences of those who had made a new start on the life of solitude and chastity (Rousselle, 1988:149).

Our text strikes a similar note of forgiveness and hope.

### The *géron's* temptation

Sinful disruption hit this pair today. Despite his old age and consummate asceticism, the *géron* of this cell has been assailed by the demon of fornication: the enemy of concord and peace has finally succeeded in finding a way into even such a tried and tested heart. The devil's assault is accurately mapped out in the account. The 'enemy of life' takes possession of the *géron's* mind by instilling into it desire for the illicit pleasure. Having changed for the worse the perceptions ("τὰς αἰσθήσεις") of his soul ("τῆς ψυχῆς") and of his body ("τοῦ σώματος") – and we may note that both are taken into account – the *géron* became other than himself ("ἄλλος ἀντ' ἄλλου γενόμενος"). The *géron* is here called *πρεσβύτης*, to emphasize his old age and probably also his priestly function, magnifying his lapse. In this altered state, the old man in turn assailed the younger monk: the verb used, *ἐπέρχομαι*, is the same as for the devil's assault upon him, thus mirroring the two actions as specular to each other. The *géron's* desire is made explicit. He wants to have sex ("θέλων συγγενέσθαι") with the 'pious brother' 'as it is not fitting ("ἀπρεπῶς"). Such explicit chronicling an episode of homosexual rape in the monastic cell in a beneficial tale is perhaps unique. Nonetheless, the story is not unfitting, and could be easily imagined, for example, in a setting such as the cave of Sergius and Paul.<sup>19</sup>

19. The latest translation by H. Arneson, *The History of the Great Deeds of Bishop Paul of Qentos and Priest John of Edessa* (Piscataway, NJ, 2010), is not available to me. For a summary I rely on Rapp (2016:143-145).

### Sharing the burden of sin

The young monk is called upon to react to the situation. Rather than look for personal safety and take flight, or take a reproachful stand against the other,

his choice is surprisingly that of throwing himself down in repentance (“βάλλων μετάνοιαν πλεονάκις”). In this position of humility, he speaks to the *géron* thus: ‘Lord Father (“κυρι ἀββά”), do not fall into such a sin (“ἀμαρτίαν”); it is another (i.e. the devil) who drags you to such evil (“κακόν”). Return into yourself and put the devil to flight!’. The action of bending down to his knees at once achieves the physical self-protection of the disciple, and signals his spiritual attitude. Although he himself has nothing to be blamed for, he takes the initiative of displaying self-abasement and to beg forgiveness for the sake of the other, performing a familiar gesture of repentance that signals their common goal of submission to God. The young monk’s words attempt to shake the other back to his senses; but they also continue the distancing discourse between the *géron*’s true self and the wicked passion that has taken hold of him and distorts his very being, manifesting itself in this disruptive behavior. Quite literally, the devil is accused of his physical arousal: “ὁ διάβολος πρὸς τὸ αἰσχρὸν ἐρεθίζη σε” [it is the devil who has roused you to shame].<sup>20</sup> The disciple exhorts him to fight back. He does not spend even one word concerning himself and his unbecoming and unwanted predicament. While the room gets crowded by presences – the *géron*, the devil, God’s hand – the disciple is engaged in a process of voluntary self-effacement.

The discourse that the *géron* answers back is quite extraordinary. Effectively he argues against his disciple that he is fully conscious and utterly willing to commit the deed in that way out of his own volition (“θέλω ἐκουσίως τὸ πρᾶγμα ποιῆσαι”). Here the verbal exchange moves the scene from one of passion to one of reasoned discourse. To demonstrate that he is still in charge, the *géron* resorts to imperatives, appealing to the brother’s sense of duty and inferior status as the one who has to be obedient. He requests that the brother let him out of the cell, because he wants to go to the nearby village (“εἰς τὴν κώμην”).

This injunction is quite abrupt and the command elliptical. The meaning of this request can be inferred from the wider context of desert father stories, in which the return to the world is synonymous with the satisfaction of carnal desires. Presumably, having failed rape on his home ground, the *géron* is now set to satisfy his desire elsewhere. This more frequent pattern of flight from the cell usually takes the shape of temptation from a woman,<sup>21</sup> but it is here left unsaid whether a gender transition is or is not contemplated or required. Exiting the cell would more significantly mark a rupture in the relationship of the two men, by the distance that would come to separate them in the displacement.<sup>22</sup> As the narrative voice tells us later, at the drama’s culmination, in a matter-of-fact tone, the village was 28 miles away from the cell. A long way for desert conditions.

## Obedience, responsibility and memory

Rather than unlock the doors to let the elder out as he is commanded, the assaulted brother, with a ‘natural’ gesture (“ἐφύωζ”), stands up and bolts the doors instead, ‘making safe’ (“ἠσφαλίσατο”) the two men inside. There is a paradox in this self-inflicted ‘safety’. Instead of fleeing for his own good, as might have been reasonable in the circumstances, the young monk took it upon himself to manage the difficult situation of a respected elder fallen prey to temptation. He shows that he is good at it, that the *géron*’s trust in his ability of discernment was not at all misplaced. By this physical securing, he accepts to play out the struggle between damnation and salvation alone, between himself and his abba in the secrecy of their cell. Having shut out any

20. Ed. Crostini (2017), l. 26, 200. The verb ἐρεθίζω, found in LSJ with the meaning ‘rouse to anger’, seems to have taken on by the eleventh century specifically sexual connotations. It is found used in this way also in the *Romance of Barlaam and Joasaph*, 30.33-35, a passage quoted in Nilsson (2017:244-245).

21. See Nilsson (2017:244) on the gender of temptation.

22. On the wandering demon, see Evagrius Ponticus, *Sur les pensées*, p. 180, ll. 1-4 (ed. P. Géhin and C. & A. Guillaumont, Sources chrétiennes 438, Paris, 1998). This reference was suggested by the anonymous reviewer.

potential interference, and shut in the restless *géron*, he attends to restoring both the safety of their abode and the salvation of their souls.

Although this scene hints at the elder's physical weakness because it shows that he needed help in order to stand up, open the door, and go out towards the village, one must note that the younger man's bodily strength plays no active part in the denouement of the action. However, despite the gentle tip-toeing (and knee-bending) that the disciple displays for the reader, in the perception of the elder he is a violent, disobedient mate, forcing him to be constrained unfairly.

As naturally as he had stood up, the young monk returns to sit down by the *géron*, and begins talking to him, insisting once more that it is the devil, and not the abba himself, who devised such an evil deed. He asks rhetorically, "εἰ γὰρ ἀφ' ἑαυτοῦ εἶχες ἐμπαθῶς τὸ πρὶν πρὸς τὴν ἀμαρτίαν, πῶς τοσαύτα ἔτη ἔζησας μετὰ σωφροσύνης, καὶ θεοσεβείας τελείας καὶ παντοίας ἀρετῆς κρατῶν τὴν ἡσυχίαν σου" [if you had really by yourself wished this act, how could you have lived so many years with temperance mastering your retreated life with perfect piety and all kind of virtue?].<sup>23</sup> One may note here that the brother claims not that the ascetic practice should have made the monk perfect, and thus immune to sin. Rather, the record of his good deeds demonstrates that the current predicament is a one-off, a freak, not in line with his true being (and his choice of being). The young monk thus continues to call the elder respectfully as 'father' ("πάτερ"), acknowledging the persistence of his deeper self.

23. Ed. Crostini (2017), ll. 27-29,202.

The brother exhorts the *géron* to invoke the Lord of Exodus with all his soul: "Lord who crushes enemies, Lord is his name!" (Ex.15:3). While the theme of fighting against enemies is of course typical of the psalms, the more precise reference to *Exodus* reveals an aspect of Scripture reading (Perrone, 2008) that returns as a central point in the following conversation. With this quotation and exhortation to fight back through prayer, the pair is no longer alone, nor alone with the devil's force, but starts calling actively to the God who is the centre of their lives and relationship.

Anger at the situation overwhelms the frustrated *géron*. This shift from lust to rage reflects a psychological pattern in which, as Derek Krueger pointed out in the case of another story, "the inappropriate erotic desire emerge[d] as displaced anger" (Krueger, 2011:52). His accusation is that the younger monk has usurped his teaching role, and further, that he is not absolving his vow of obedience towards him as the elder. On both accounts, the younger monk has a ready answer. For one, he is merely returning the teaching he has received, recalling when the two meditated together on the Scriptures (to which the *géron* retorts a sour reply, 'I regret this!'), and the spiritual care he has benefited from during his apprenticeship with the elder. Thus, he underlines the fact of an exchange and a giving back of what he has received. Cast in terms of appropriate 'payback', the value of his contribution is implicitly diminished. However, the new equality generated by the present role reversal acquires depth against the foil of their past life.

As to the second point, the brother would be inclined to obey if he knew that the command really came from the father he knew so well, and not from Satan (*sic*). Thus, the devil's work does not only psychologically differentiate the action of the monk's self from that of the tempter, but also ethically justifies responding to its consequences as if they did not apply to the principal (or apparent) agent. The brother's spiritual discernment consists precisely in this sure knowledge, that what he sees is no ordinary expression of the person he



has before him, or of his usual behavior. That agent's powers are 'upset and dimmed by the power of the enemy' ("διαστραφέντι καὶ σκοτισθέντι ὑπὸ τῆς τοῦ ἐχθροῦ ἐνεργείας")<sup>24</sup> to the extent that the memory of his past self cannot be identified with the present agent.

24. Ed. Crostini (2017), ll. 49-50, 202.

## Final thrust

The prayer of the young monk then explicitly turns to invoke help from the Lord Jesus Christ before escalating into a series of biblical images and allusions. He styles the devil as the destroyer of the vineyard (Apoc. 14:18) and the wild boar of the psalms (Ps 79:14), and finally calls for God to extend his hand to his servant in the same way as he saved the apostle Peter when he was drowning on water (Mt 14:30-32). Peter is here (as often) the paradigm of human weakness in lacking faith at a key moment. Jesus's saving hand stretches out despite Peter's doubting to save him from drowning because of his limited understanding. Although metaphors of fire are more common in describing sexual temptation and the burning of desire,<sup>25</sup> images of drowning are also found in the *Apophthegmata* with reference to losing one's soul in damnation.<sup>26</sup> Here water is the chosen paradigm: drowning in desire and temptation, and being overwhelmed by rage, are the consequences of disrupted peace and lost *hesychia* of the inhabitants of this cell. Later, 'the fire of the body is tamed' by God's grace ("ἡ χάρις τοῦ Θεοῦ ... τὴν πύρωσιν τοῦ σώματος κατήγγισεν").<sup>27</sup>

25. GS-Wortley V.4b speaks of the 'fiery seething of nature'. Fire literally burns the fingers of the monk who is avoiding temptation: see Nilsson (2017:245 and n. 44).

26. GS-Wortley V.34 speaks of *porneia* as shipwreck.

27. Ed. Crostini (2017), ll. 69, 71, 204.

At this, the *géron* received new strength to get up in the midst of his rage. Finding the doors locked, he felt trapped and shouted even more loudly at his brother. But the young monk did not react, nor shout back. He continued sitting down next to the agitating elder, and lit a lamp 'as is usual for one who is possessed by demons' ("ὡσπερ ἐπὶ δαιμονιζομένου").<sup>28</sup> I have not found a reference to this particular custom, but the passage recalls the evangelical character of the Gerasene demoniac on whom Jesus had mercy (*cfr.* Mk 5:1-17). Then follows a hiatus in which no ritual prayer is said and no food is consumed, because of the terrible sadness of the situation. This long pause, like a kind of mourning, lasted for two days in which the brother continued his ongoing inner prayer on behalf of the elder, talking calmly about temperance by the light of the lamp.

28. Ed. Crostini (2017), l. 59, 204 (the misprint "ἐπιδαιμονιζομένου" in one word is corrected here).

## Silence and concord

The silence and inactivity of this pause prepares the way for a solution to the crisis. The sharing of the burden of sin on the part of the sinless brother demonstrates the concept that unconditional mutual love eventually leads to common salvation. Claudia Rapp likens the value of such 'vicarious penance' on behalf of the sinful brother to the opening of a shared bank account containing spiritual capital, wherein efforts of salvation and credentials for the afterlife can be pooled by the team of monks, no matter which one makes the greatest effort. Rapp stresses that

the intention of these tales of vicarious penance in the face of the danger of women and of the city is to teach their audience a lesson in the importance of mutual support in the pursuit of Christian asceticism. It is remarkable that the ideal social setting to illustrate such support in action is the one-on-one

relationship of paired monks (Rapp, 2016:151).

In fact, on the evidence of the *Upsaliensis* story among others, one could argue that these episodes go well beyond the necessity of 'mutual support'. It is true that the brother's prayer, together with his preventative actions and continued calm, help (or even force) the *géron* to refrain from perpetrating his sexual assault, fleeing the cell, and showing his deranged behavior to the full, but this success is not really the point of the story. Rather, the *géron's* failure is the opportunity for the brother's own salvation, as he lives up to a new and unexpected challenge precisely from the source that, until then, had been sustaining his vocation. Conversely, temptation comes to the *géron* as his chance of showing resistance and achieving a deeper conversion at the brink of his own existence. As Valantasis claims in the case of devils, the presence of other men and their weaknesses provides the necessary material for forging one's own salvific story (Valantasis, 1992:53-57; Messis, 2014:194-195; Nilsson, 2017:248 and n. 56).

### A good end / happy ending

However, the conversion of the elder monk back to his ascetic ways is, in our story, not an optional extra. Therefore, the climax of this story is the moment of conversion. In the middle of the night, 'the grace of God came upon the *géron* and ... put to flight the tempting devil from him' ("ἦλθεν ἡ χάρις τοῦ Θεοῦ ἐπὶ τὸν γέροντα καὶ ... ἐφυγάδευσεν ἀπ'αὐτοῦ τὸν πειράζοντα δαίμονα").<sup>29</sup> The *géron* has become the battleground for higher forces contending for his human soul. The distancing device of the devil's intervention allows room for man to continue trusting in his own capacity to live in a righteous way and do good, and prevents him from despairing no matter how serious or recurrent his faults; at the same time, it creates a space for which relationships can be restored effectively with no one left to blame. Yet the ultimate achiever of anything good is God who, by bestowing his grace, opens up the channels for repentance and enables a return to harmony.

In a story of abba Apollo, the temptation of a young monk was transferred onto the elder who, instead of giving him hope, had made him feel guilty about his carnal desires and turned him away from the monastery. Coming to the succor of that elder too, abba Apollo's speech declares that

Nobody can withstand the onslaughts of the enemy, neither quench nor contain the fiery seething of nature, unless the grace of God were protecting [our] human weakness. So then, since that saving dispensation has been accomplished for us, let us beseech God in common prayer to turn away the scourge that has been let loose upon you, for it is he who makes one suffer and sets one up again; he struck and his hands healed; he humbles and exalts; he puts to death and gives life; he leads down to Hades and leads back up (GS-Wortley V.4b).

The monk's experience of God's mysterious and all-powerful presence is like that of Job, independent of any claims to self-rigtheousness.

In the continuation of our tale, fire and water return to mark the quenching of the passion and the tears of repentance, as both abbats find themselves genuflecting before each other in simultaneous repentance and thanksgiving. The trust that the elder had towards his younger disciple, and that the disciple

29. Ed. Crostini (2017), ll. 69-70, 204.

managed to maintain even at the moment of the *géron's* doubting, paved the way for God's grace to re-descend among them and dispel the darkness of the temptation. There is not a whiff of judgement in this re-encounter, because the self-acknowledgement of the passing fault is accompanied by the extreme longing not only for the former harmony, but for future eternal salvation that is foreshadowed by the 'commitment to mutual fidelity' (Krueger, 2011:35). It is a moving moment, but no one is there to watch. The prayer that flows out from the *géron's* lips shows that he can again converse with Christ, asking for reconciliation and begging for life despite his fall, praying, crying and beating his breast. Then, tired of such tumult, the elder retreats to his 'inner cell' and stretches out on his bed. Soon after, he dies.

## Death of the *géron*

When day came, the brother came to him and found him dead. And he took his knees and stretched his hands, then he began to thank God. And he carried him into the church of the Lavra. And the burial of the *géron* took place with psalms and prayers, as was the custom (Crostiti, 2017:206, ll. 88-90).

Suddenly, the isolation and seclusion of the cell is broken and the reality revealed of a scattered community, a Lavra,<sup>30</sup> living around the paired monks, totally ignorant of the struggle fought at the *géron's* last hours. Order is restored, and the abba's body honoured with the Christian burial rites in the communal church.<sup>31</sup> Here, the joy of the younger brother to see the salvation of the elder, conquered last-minute because of the successful invocation of God, is self-fulfilling, and the simple reference to the customary burial ritual equivalent to the assurance of a happy ending.

Appropriate touch between the two men is restored in the composure of the elder's limbs by his companion. Knees and hands are singled out for the preparations. Only after this final gesture is recorded, the dead body is lifted up and carried out of the cell, the place of their salvation.

## Gender and death

This first analysis of the *Upsaliensis* apophthegmatic narrative has, I hope, demonstrated the richness of this new source for the further study of Byzantine paired monasticism, while clearly not exhausting its possible readings. In these conclusions, I wish to connect the strands that I have sought to unpack with current concerns while pushing further the question of the problematizing of relationships that the anecdote offers to its readers in narrative form.

According to Rapp, "paired monasticism was able to lend respectability to male-male relations, regardless of the impetus that led to their formation" (Rapp, 2016:147). As an exploration of Christianity, desert asceticism breaks with all accepted social conventions precisely in order to create new ethical standards according to which human life can be lived as a preparation for death and union with God. It would be peculiar to consider that such choice of life, and the literature to which it gives expression, be intended to justify socially condemned mores: respectability is hardly what the desert ascetics advertise. If Rapp intended this statement to apply to the pedigree that present-day gay

30. Defined as "A collection of monastic cells along a path" by Krueger (2011:34). The term is absent from Rapp's index.

31. On psalm chanting at Christian funerals, see Rebillard (2009:130-131).

rights movements source in order to claim a moral continuum with such past paradigms, then again, perhaps, the word 'respectability' strikes too superficial a cord.

Nor is it obvious that same-sex affection and its demonstration in established relationships was always regarded with suspicion, requiring special justification. Rather, the premiss for same-sex communities builds on fundamentally unproblematic standards of homogeneity and accepted homosociability. Moreover, as is often noted, parallel women-to-women cases mirror and enlarge the desert fathers' collection of stories. Thus, the existence of ascetic communities is predicated on a comparable outlook for both men and women (Crostini; Parrinello, 2018:3-6).

From a contemporary perspective, the urgency of gender issues makes a non-gendered outlook very nearly impossible. The tangled exegetical history of the Pauline *locus classicus* of gender denial, Galatians 3:28, "[There will be] no male and female", demonstrates how difficult it is to make sense of such an erasure in a Christian context.<sup>32</sup> In its refusal of culturally determined differentiations, including gender, as well as in the abstinence from sexual practices that re-instantiate of necessity a sex/gender issue, monastic life upheld (and perhaps sometimes realized) an equality that even modern feminist theory, operating within socio-political constraints, is hard put to articulate.<sup>33</sup> As Mary Midgley exposes the problem (Midgley, 1997:58), "The supposed gender-division of moral labour is, and always was, a lie", in particular one created and sustained by post-Enlightenment intellectuals who worked for the emancipation of men alone. On the contrary, her concept that 'both sexes need, and can practice, all the virtues' underlies the history of monasticism. But if gender differentiation is accidental to the monastic vocation, then one wonders whether gender identity, where it is encountered, matters at all.

The lens through which male-to-male relations are retrospectively read may wish to accentuate an aspect that is not particularly significant, even when it is sexual attitudes that are in focus. As we have seen, a number of different issues are explored by this narrative, and the narrative perspective itself, through which essential ideas are articulated, is privileged precisely in order to provide potentially endless ramifications – including modern literary criticism – for the simple pattern of a story.<sup>34</sup> Read in a male monastery in Byzantium, possibly specifically for eunuchs,<sup>35</sup> the delicate, unexpected episode of the younger disciple saving his elder through persistent dedication problematizes relationships of love and obedience, in particular addressing the bonds of spiritual fatherhood still relevant in the eleventh-century context.<sup>36</sup> Although nothing in the text justifies reading the elder's temptation as make-believe, it is just possible that the purpose of the narrative is to highlight testing for both elders and younger brothers as a rite of passage, opening a path for grace to trickle down through human frailty. At the moment of crisis, the disciple's behavior is truly Christ-like, because of the long-standing practices of meditation on Scriptures and the daily exercise of a loving relationship with the elder. At the *géron's* death, the brother's standing is authorized by his feat of patience, salvation conquered at once before death and with respect to the continuation of life. This salvific message of cultivating patient relations of love with one's brothers continued to be heard in a very different time and place from where it had first begun.

To return briefly to the comparison with Stoic ethics, then, such Christian associations as those of paired monks defy the ideal of a harmony of sages, an

32. Martin (2006:77-90) recapitulates interpretations while refusing to accept the historico-critical method as conducive to a 'good' explanation.

33. Despite progress in many areas, feminist attempts at equality often amount to claiming man-likeness for women, paradoxically restating the aspiration to be male as the highest achievement a human being can aspire to. Thus, the ancient male standard of perfection is hardly challenged by this modern outlook.

34. On the function of stories in ethics, see Nussbaum (1990); on the re-evaluation of emotion in moral philosophy, see Johnson (1993; 2016).

35. On this topic, see Tougher (2006; 2008).

36. For a problematic approach, see Morris (1993); on Symeon the New Theologian, Alfeyev (2000).

encounter of philosophical wisdoms by chance realized in temporary, concrete bodies, as well as offer important variants on the theme of gendered love. For the essence of Christian asceticism is not predicated on the sharing of an anodyne perfection in blameless mores, but consists precisely in maintaining a loving relationship in the face of the other's inadequacy. That monks are not angels because of their practices seems the more urgent lesson that these strange tales wish to tell. Monks are not and do not want to be perceived as such, because Christian morality is not about being perfect, but about being loving subjects.

In the Gospel episode of Matthew the tax collector, we hear the following story:

While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Mt 9:10-13)

As in the desert stories, murmuring and judgement come to grief before Jesus's subverted expectations. The Incarnation is only actualized in a world of real human beings and all-too-human behavior.



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