Sanctity Unveiled. The Holy Fool in *Apophthegmata Patrum* (Gk. Syst.) VIII 32

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Introduction

Preserved among the more than thousand anecdotes and sayings collected in the *Apophthegmata Patrum (Sayings of the Desert Fathers)*, is an enigmatic short story which recounts how a monk, residing in an anchoritic community in Palestine, feigns madness.[1] His true identity as a pious holy man is perceived by Abba Silvanus, who at first appears embarrassed by the monk's presence. The anonymous monk is described as a *salos*, a fool.[2] Stories of concealed sanctity, which feature holy persons who pretend to be something they are not, were commonplace in the hagiographic literature of Late Antiquity.[3] Some

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[1] For bibliographic details, see footnote 14, below. The redaction of the Greek collections of sayings is commonly dated to the fifth or sixth century.

[2] For the meaning "silly, imbecile" and two collected examples, see H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek–English Lexicon*, 9th ed. with a revised supplement, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1996, s.v. σαλός. The interpretation of the word *salos* has been a matter of scholarly controversy. It is variously translated in modern editions, generally conveying the original sense of genuine stupidity and foolishness. See also footnote 27, below.

[3] A recent survey of the concept of secret holiness appears in Britt Dahlman, *Saint Daniel of Sketis. A Group of Hagiographic Texts Edited with Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Studia Byzantina Upsaliensa, 10), Uppsala: Uppsala University Library

stories, such as this one, describe men and women who act as *saloi*, or fools, an ascetic practice characterized by deviant behaviour (often ostensibly immoral or offensive acts), which serves to conceal his or her true identity. The fool is a secret saint, hiding his piety from the world by way of humiliating himself in the eyes of the world. Despised by the crowd, his/her true holiness is perceived only by the few. The broader theme of secret holiness encompasses a number of other characters who act as the secret servants of God. The concealment of the true identity of outcast members of society and the discovery of holiness where it can least be expected to be found, especially in the eyes of the public, are elements which many of these stories share. It is therefore appropriate that the story of the laughing monk appears in chapter eight of the Greek Systematic Collection of the *Apophthegmata Patrum* (*APsys*), entitled "On ostentation", as the disclosure of the true nature of the monk, a brother hitherto derided by the community as an embarrassing outcast, offers a lesson in humility to Abba Silvanus as well as the readers, ancient as well as modern.

In a recent study devoted to the early tradition of holy foolery, Andrew Thomas attempts to narrow down the relevant source texts to stories which include characters that conceal their sanctity by feigning madness and are expressly referred to as *saloi/-ai*.[4] His investigation yields as little as two pre–seventh-century stories (in addtion to the story of the laughing monk): 1. The story of Abba Mark the fool, active in the city of Alexandria and pretending to be a fool at the baths of Hippo, where he was discovered by Abba Daniel of Sketis.[5] 2. The legend of a nameless Egyptian nun, who eventually became known as Isidora in the Latin tradition. She suffered abuse by her fellow nuns for her apparent madness until her holiness was revealed by an angel, upon which she fled into the desert. The story, recounted by Palladius (early fifth century) in his *Historia Lausiaca*, is set in the cenobitic nunnery of Tabennisi in Upper Egypt. It has been suggested that the

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2007, chapter two. Cf. also Derek Krueger, *Symeon the Holy Fool: Leontius' Life and the Late Antique City*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1996, chapter four.

[4] Andrew Thomas, *The Holy Fools: A Theological Enquiry*, [s.l.: s.n.] 2009 (unpublished PhD, University of Nottingham), [10].

[5] Text-critical edition, translation and commentary of this story to be found in Dahlman, *Saint Daniel*, 78–80, 120–25, 196–205.

Isidora tradition is the origin of the Cinderella story. The first full-length *vita* of a holy fool, Symeon, a former monk purportedly active in the Syrian town of Emesa in the sixth century, was composed by the Cypriot bishop Leontius of Neapolis in the mid-seventh century.[6]

Thomas cautiously states that "[t]he delimiting of this field has caused enormous problems in the secondary literature, and any preliminary definition of holy fools is bound to rule out or include figures that are relevant."[7] While Thomas' method is by no means arbitrary, his definition certainly excludes several stories equally relevant to the study of the early tradition of holy foolery, some of them appearing in the collections of *Apophthegmata Patrum*.[8] In these stories, *salos* is generally employed in a pejorative sense, as an insult to describe someone as utterly foolish.[9] Yet one saying in particular stands out as describing a *salos* – in this case Abba Ammonas – as someone that attempts to conceal his holiness by deliberately appearing as a fool. In this brief saying, being a *salos* is seen as something positive, as noted by Britt Dahlman in her discussion of the use of *salos* in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*.[10] In yet another story, that of

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[6] English translation in Krueger's *Symeon*, based on the critical edition of the Greek text by Lennart Rydén in his *Das Leben des heiligen Narren Symeon von Leontios von Neapolis* (Studia Graeca Upsaliensa, 4), Uppsala/Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell 1963 (also published in *Léontius de Néapolis: Vie de Syméon le Fou et Vie de Jean de Chypre*. Édition commentée par A.J. Festugière en collaboration avec Lennart Rydén (Bibliothèque archéologique et historique, 95), Paris: Geuthner 1974).

[7] Thomas, *The Holy Fools*, [10].

[8] *Salos* appears nine times in five sayings in *APsys*: VIII 4 (Eulogius), VIII 13 (Moses 8), VIII 32 (N 408), XIV 5 (John, the disciple of Paul 1) and XV 13 (Ammonas 9).

[9] In Thomas' view, the "desert fathers [...] clearly do not adopt the lifestyle of a holy fool" in these sayings. As these instances "do not describe a holy man or woman pretending to be mad for any long time, we can [...] discount them from our description of holy foolery" (*The Holy Fools*, [10]). José Grosdidier de Matons, in his extensive survey of a number of texts related to the fools of Christ in the Eastern tradition, likewise considers the instances of *salos* found in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* to generally characterize persons dont la stupidité n'a rien de factice ni de volontaire" ("Les Thèmes d'Édification dans la Vie d'André Salos", *Travaux et Mémoires* 4 (1970), 277–328, (281–282)).

[10] *APsys* XV 13 (Ammonas 9). Dahlman's comments appear in her article "Från dold helighet till helig dårskap", *Meddelanden från Collegium Patristicum Lundense* 23 (2008),

Eulogius and his visit to Abba Joseph of Panepho, the word *salos* is used rather incidentally to describe a minor character in the story. Yet the narrative contains elements of willful deceit and serendipitous discovery of holiness, both features essential to tales of holy foolery.[11] Several other examples could be adduced, but I believe these two are sufficient to show that a number of texts – albeit still quite few – are of relevance to the pre-seventh-century tradition of holy foolery. Having said that, the story of the laughing monk is by far the most complex story of holy foolery to appear in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, and it must undoubtedly be considered as one of the earliest preserved tales of a holy fool in action, regardless of genre. Considering the overall paucity of sources related to holy foolery in the centuries prior to Leontius' *vita*, the story preserved in *APsys* VIII 32 has attracted surprisingly little scholarly interest. As noted by Derek Krueger in his edition of Symeon's *vita*, "[t]he passage is rarely included in discussions of holy folly in Late Antiquity and merits further study".[12]

Holy foolery traces its roots to desert monasticism. The phenomenon did not, however, remain confined to the monastic settlements of the deserts of the East. It spread to other regions imbued with Byzantine Christianity, most notably to Russia, where 'foolishness in Christ' took on a life of its own and developed into a significant counterculture. Having provoked the animosity of ecclesiastical authorities and the Czarist government, the Russian fools were eventually persecuted and suffered wholesale suppression from the 18th century onwards. In spite of this, holy foolery survived as a popular cultural phenomenon, leaving an indelible impression on Russian orthodoxy.

31–40 (35–36). In this saying, the actions of Abba Ammonas are described by the verb μωροποιεῖν. He is referred to as being *salos* by an unnamed woman in conversation with her neighbour. Her remark is overheard by Abba Ammonas. The great Russian scholar Sergey Ivanov considers this as possibly "the first example of holy foolery as it was to become in its heyday" (*Holy Fools in Byzantium and beyond* (Oxford Studies in Byzantium), Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006 (1st edition in Russian 1994), 37). He concludes by noting that "the story looks somewhat odd".

[11] *APsys* VIII 4.

[12] Krueger, *Symeon*, 58, n. 4.

Holy foolery is by its very nature paradoxical: If the holy fool voluntarily chooses to disrobe herself of her disguise of madness, she subverts her ascetic calling – yet life as a madwoman can serve no edifying purpose unless her sanctity is somehow revealed to the public. Holy foolery thus requires an audience acutely perceptive to the notion of holiness.[13]

Confining my study to the saying *APsys* VIII 32, I seek to explore how this ambiguity, inherent in the ascetic practice of holy foolery itself, is resolved in the text. How, exactly, is sanctity unveiled in this story? Before attempting to answer this question, a short synopsis of the saying's narrative is in place. This is followed by a brief outline of the pre-seventh-century tradition of holy foolery.

"Do not take them to the brother who is a fool"[14]

The story is set near the village in Palestine where Abba Silvanus lived.[15] One of the brothers of the anchorite community, whose

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[13] This and a number of other paradoxes inherent in the concept of holy foolery are discussed by Ivanov, *Holy Fools*, 1–3.

[14] All quotes are taken from the lucid translation of John Wortley in *The Book of the Elders: Sayings of the Desert Fathers. The Systematic Collection* (Cistercian Studies, 240), Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical press 2012, 131–32. This saying also appears in the Anonymous Collection of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. It is labelled N 408 in the recent edition and translation by JohnWortley in *The anonymous Sayings of the Desert Fathers: A select Edition and complete English Translation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2013. A text-critical edition of the Greek Systematic Collection in its entirety has been published in three volumes by J.-C. Guy; this saying is to be found in the first of these volumes: *Les Apophtegmes des pères: Collection systématique. Chapitre I–IX* (Sources Chretiénnes, 387), Paris: CERF 1993. Guy's critical edition, which includes a facing French translation, is based on 11 mss, ranging in date from the ninth to the twelfth centuries, seven of which include this particular saying. The textual variants recorded by Guy are of no significance to the present study. F. Nau appended the Greek text of the saying to his edition of John of Maiouma's *Plerophoriae* in *Patrologia Orientalis* 8 (1912), 178–179, his text based on a single ms. (Coislin 127). The story is briefly discussed by José Grosdidier de Matons, "Les Thèmes d'Édification", 285–286. Paraphrases of the saying appear in Krueger, *Symeon*, 58 (somewhat inaccurate and misleading) and Ivanov, *Holy Fools*, 35–36.

[15] The name Silvanus occurs many times in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. It is linked to monastic communities in Egypt (Sketis), Sinai and Palestine.

character remains nameless throughout the story, "was pretending to be insane" (προσποιούμενος μωρίαν).[16] His aberrant behaviour is briefly described: He continually laughs whenever meeting fellow brothers. Three fathers (πατέρες) call on Silvanus and express their wish to visit all of the brothers in their cells. Silvanus heeds their request, but instructs their guide – one of the brother anchorites – not to lead them to the cell of "the brother who is a fool (τὸν σαλὸν ἀδελφόν), so as to avoid his visitors being scandalized".[17] The three fathers repeat their request to visit all brothers to the brother assigned to guide them. He, however, follows Silvanus' orders. After their tour of the cells, the three visitors take their leave of Silvanus. As they set off, the three fathers tell Silvanus that they are saddened by the fact that they have not met all the brothers of the community. The fathers express their sorrow and depart without having met the mad brother. Upon their leaving, the narrator recounts how Abba Silvanus reflects upon what has passed and sets out to visit "the brother who was pretending to be insane" in his cell.[18] Opening the door silently, Abba Silvanus "took the brother by surprise" and finds him sitting with two baskets in front of him, one to his left, the other to his right. Silvanus asks him to explain his action. The monk, however, resumes his aberrant behaviour and laughs in his face. Silvanus admonishes him, telling him how he has interrupted his weekly routine to see him in the middle of the week. "My God has sent me to you", Silvanus says. This statement evidently affects the monk, who, now fearful, experiences a change of mind, *metanoia*.[19] The two characters now engage in conversation, and as the dialogue unfolds in the cell, no hint of the brother's previous aberrant behaviour is evident. Obediently he asks for forgiveness and proceeds to explain his actions to Silvanus:

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[16] All references to the original text are from Guy's edition (cf. n. 14). A variant expression of feigning madness is used in line 30; ὑποκρινόμενον τὴν μωρίαν.

[17] Lines 12–14: Βλέπε μὴ λάβῃς αὐτοὺς πρὸς τὸν σαλὸν ἀδελφὸν ἵνα μὴ σκανδαλισθῶσιν.

[18] Lines 28–30: διακρίνας καθ' ἑαυτὸν ὁ γέρων τὸ γεγονὸς ἀπέρχεται πρὸς τὸν ἐκεῖνον τὸν ἀδελφὸν τὸν ὑποκρινόμενον τὴν μωρίαν.

[19] Lines 39–40: Φοβηθεὶς οὖν ὁ ἀδελφὸς ἐποίησε μετάνοιαν.

> Forgive me, Father; in the morning I sit with these pebbles
> before me, and if a good *logismos* comes into my mind, I throw a
> pebble into the right-hand basket. If an evil one presents itself, I
> throw [a pebble] into the left-hand basket.

Counting the pebbles at the end of the day, he would only eat if the good thoughts outnumbered the bad. The following day, if struck by a bad thought, he would remind himself of its consequences. Upon hearing this, Silvanus is amazed. The ostensibly insane brother is revealed as a person of great virtue. In his final soliloquy, Abba Silvanus reflects that the visiting fathers were indeed "holy angels wishing to make the brother's virtue known."[20]

The Pre-seventh-century Tradition of Holy Foolery

What typifies the phenomenon of holy foolery in this early period, roughly from the fifth to the sixth centuries? Rather than attempting to survey this vast field on my own, I will summarize the opinions of two major scholars whose recent contributions offer somewhat differing perspectives on the phenomenon of early Byzantine holy foolery. Both comment briefly on the story of the laughing monk.

Derek Krueger, in his introduction to his translation of the *Life of Symeon the Holy Fool*, regards these early texts as primarily "a cursory attempt to explain the unusual behavior described".[21] He cautions against interpreting these stories as actual records of "real" monks, and expresses his skepticism of "the possibility of reconstructing a history for a type of actual ascetic practice engaged in by 'real' historical persons." Commenting briefly on the tale of the laughing monk, Krueger notes that "Rufus [sic] appears more than anything else to be constructing an apology for the sorts of peculiar figures engaging in cenobitic life in Late Antiquity". Krueger cautiously suggests that "a tradition of tales of folly existed as an identifiable genre by Leontius' time [i.e. the seventh century]", and contends that these stories form

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[20] Lines 49–51: Ὄντως οἱ παραβαλόντες πατέρες ἅγιοι ἄγγελοι ἦσαν, τὴν ἀρετὴν τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ θέλοντες δημοσιεῦσαι.

[21] The following outline of Krueger's views is primarily based on chapter four of his *Symeon*: "Holy Fools and Secret Saints."

part of "a continuum of strange behavior in Late Ancient hagiography." None of the stories demonstrate, in his view, a "developed sense [...] of feigned madness as a well-defined form of spiritual expression", and consequently "the concept of feigned madness was as such quite fluid." These early tales, then, can only serve to explain the pretense of folly as a *literary device* in the period prior to the seventh century. Krueger finds in Diogenes (fourth century B.C.E.) and the Cynic tradition the true precursors of the much more extreme foolishness performed by Symeon. This Cynic influence thus creates a dual legacy for the "foolishness in Christ" in the hagiographical tradition from the seventh century onwards. Symeon is a hybrid fool, who embodies Christian virtues, while at the same time his foolish acts can only be fully understood in a Cynic context. The teachings of Christ and Diogenes converge in the holy fool.[22]

The Russian cultural historian Sergey Ivanov adopts a somewhat different approach, examining holy foolery as a cultural and historical phenomenon.[23] In his extensive discussion on the origins of holy foolery, Ivanov points to the desert monastics of Egypt as highly important precursors of the developed phenomenon of holy foolery. Monasticism as it evolved in Egypt represented a "model for the type of self-abasement from which holy foolery was later to evolve." Drawing on a wide range of sources, Ivanov describes it as a phenomenon spreading from "monastery to monastery, from Egypt to Syria and thence into Asia Minor", through the wandering monks of Byzantium, the *gyrovagoi*. Throughout his discussion of these early texts, he notes the inoffensive attitude of the characters – these "fools" are never portrayed as the initiators of provocation, rather their actions are defensive in character.

Ivanov regards the text in question as curious in two respects: First, the term *salos* is only used in direct speech, and the narrator points out

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[22] It stands to reason that Leontius did not intend his audience to imitate the acts, "but rather that the example of the Cynic philosopher might assist them to discern the path to a life of virtue, simplicity and civic responsibility" (Krueger, *Symeon*, 128). Krueger's view on the Cynic legacy of holy foolery has met with criticism.

[23] My summary of Ivanov's views is chiefly based on the first two chapters of his *Holy Fools*.

that his madness is simulated before the pretence is revealed.[24] Second, Ivanov notes that the virtue of the fool has no apparent connection with his role-playing, "and [his virtue] is certainly not derived from it". As these judicious remarks by Ivanov clearly touch upon the questions I propose to answer, they serve as a fitting introduction to the final part of this paper, in which the relation between folly and sanctity is explored. How, precisely, is sanctity unveiled in this story?

Identifying Holiness in *Apophthegmata Patrum* (Gk. Syst.) VIII 32

Identifying true holiness, and the problems associated therewith, are recurring elements in tales of concealed sanctity and regularly form the climax of the stories.[25] In this text, Abba Silvanus admits to his former ignorance and his concluding remarks make it apparent that he now realizes the true nature of what has come to pass. In contrast, the readers are informed of his true nature as holy by the incipient statement that the monk only *acts* foolishly – his madness is apparent, not real. As the story unfolds, the superior Abba Silvanus appears as actually less knowledgeable than the common reader. This adds an ironic twist to the text. Stories of secret saints require such an element of "human blindness".[26]

At first glance, the acts of the monk all seem to contribute to his feigned madness, his throwing of pebbles as well as his laughter. Everything seems to testify to his "peculiar behaviour", in Krueger's words.

The monk's incessant laughter when meeting others, even a monastic superior such as Abba Silvanus, stands out as *the* conspicuous act of madness in this text. Second, the use of the term *salos* (which recurs three times), serves to establish him as a fool. Krueger makes a good case, in my view, against the notion that this term should be understood as the equivalent of "holy fool" per se in Late Antiquity, at least not when used in the early period to which this

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[24] In fact, Ivanov's observation is not entirely correct: σαλός appears in indirect speech in line 17 (Guy's edition).

[25] Krueger, *Symeon*, 71.

[26] Ivanov, *Holy Fools*, 55 (commenting on the "Isidora story").

story belongs. Its etymology and origin remain unclear.[27] Overall, the evidence adduced supports the cautious view of Krueger that this term cannot be equated with feigned madness as a developed concept of ascetic practice. In Leontius' seventh-century *vita* of Symeon, the important addition διὰ Χριστόν is recorded for the first time – "fool for Christ's sake", implying, possibly, a theologically more developed concept of holy foolery. By itself, the inclusion of the term in this story is of slight importance to assess the early tradition of holy folly. It is conspicuously *not* used by Silvanus when confronting the monk, and I am not aware of any texts where it is used *after* sanctity has been revealed.

Several elements combine to reveal the holiness of the monk. First, the visit of the three fathers (i.e. senior monastics or elders) precipitates the unveiling of sanctity. This visitation alludes to the Biblical story of Abraham receiving the three guests, whose appearance permits Abraham to take part of God's will in the promise of a son and heir.[28]

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[27] In Krueger's view, "[e]xtreme caution is warranted with regard to the term *salos*, usually used to describe holy folly in both the modern scholarly literature and the Orthodox churches" (*Symeon*, 63). Its origin and the history of its use are discussed by Lennart Rydén, "'... så blive han en dåre, för att han skall kunna bliva vis.' Om helig dårskap i bysantinsk tradition", *Religion och Bibel*, 39 (1980), 53–62 (54), abridged English version: "The Holy Fool", in: S. Hackel (red.), *The Byzantine Saint*. University of Birmingham Fourteenth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies (Studies Supplementary to Sobornost, 5), London 1981, 106–113 (107, with n. 4); and by Grosdider de Matons, "Les Thèmes d'Édification", 279–292. As noted by Krueger (*Symeon*, 64, footnote 17), the word appears once in a private letter from Oxyrhynchus, where it is used in a colloquial sense (*P.Oxy.* LVI 3865.57).

[28] Genesis 18. Biblical allusions, imagery and language permeate the sayings. In his examination of the use of Scripture in the Greek Systematic Collection of sayings, Per Rönnegård uncovered manifest use of Biblical material in 155 out of a total of 1190 sayings, this instance not being counted among them. Rönnegård, however, confines his study "to those [sayings] that use the Bible in a way where it is obvious that it is the Bible as text that is being referred to, not just a general Christian discourse using biblical language and ideas" (*Threads and Images. The Use of Scripture in Apophthegmata Patrum* (Coniectanea biblica. New Testament series, 44), Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns 2010, 25). A reference to Genesis 18 is recorded in saying I 18 (Guy's edition). Nau, on the other hand, regards the visit of the three fathers as a reference to the Genesis passage and remarks on the geographic proximity between the community of Abba Silvanus and

Their status in our story as "holy angels" (ἅγιοι ἄγγελοι), and thus as intermediaries possessing divine knowledge, is explicitly admitted by Abba Silvanus in his concluding remarks, where the purpose of their visit is clarified: to make public the virtue of the monk. As in the story of Abraham, their host shows his guests great hospitality, yet quite unlike the Biblical story Silvanus uses deception, albeit in what he believes is their own best interest ("so they not be offended").

Turning to Abba Silvanus' confrontation with the monk, we are introduced to what initially appears to accentuate the impression of feigned madness: the monk's dividing of pebbles into baskets. The brief comments I have cited on this text, seem to suggest that this act serves to underpin the portrayal of the character as foolish. The text does not indicate whether the act was meant to represent the folly or the sanctity of the monk. The explanation afforded by the monk is intimately connected to the act, and "Abba Silvanus was amazed when he heard this", as he discovers the true nature of the monk's holiness. [29] This act is in my view the key element in the disclosure of sanctity in this story.

First, the author devotes ample space to this encounter (lines 31–48) and provides us with an elaborate description in indirect speech, whereupon the monk offers his explanation. Recurring in both is the right-left symbolism, which associates the good with the right hand side and the bad with the left ("sinister") hand side. This opposition of right and left, which forms part of ancient and modern cultures and societies alike, was incorporated in the Christian tradition and forms an intrinsic part of Christian culture and iconography. [30] The adherence to this culturally inherited symbolism is in my view of some import, and particularly so if it were included to express some form of deviant behaviour befitting a *salos*: If an act of madness were to be portrayed,

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Mamre, where the Biblical encounter is said to take place (*Patrologia Orientalis*, 8 (1912), 178).

[29] Lines 48–49: Ἀκούσας δὲ ταῦτα ἀββᾶ Σιλουανὸς ἐθαύμασε.

[30] C. McManus, *Right Hand, Left Hand. The Origins of Asymmetry in Brains, Bodies, Atoms and Cultures*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson 2002, 29: "The Christian Church provides a mass of symbolic associations with right and left, and the Bible is full of expressions involving both." McManus furnishes numerous examples of the use of the right – left divide in Christian iconography.

one would expect a symbolic inversion in the text. This, however, is not the case.

Second, the Bible makes frequent use of expressions involving the right–left divide. Perhaps the most striking use of right and left in the New Testament is the scene of the Last Judgment (Matt 25.33–34), where the people of the earth are to be divided in two: The sheep, symbolizing those who are to be saved, are placed on the right hand side, while the goats, condemned to eternal damnation, are set to the left.[31] The good ones to the right, the bad ones to the left, as with the pebbles sorted by the monk. As shown by Per Rönnegård, Scripture is used and interpreted in a variety of ways throughout the collections of Sayings. Could the literary representation of the enigmatic act of the monk somehow be influenced by this Bible text? Clearly, the eschatological motif of Matthew has been abandoned, and the narrative frame thus differs significantly. The use of imagery in Matthew is superseded by a description of a naturalistic – and quite credible – act of throwing pebbles into two baskets. The division is performed by Christ ("Son of Man") in Matthew, whereas the saying leaves this to the monk, in what appears as a routine of daily piety based on his self-examination, his personal moral qualities being typified by good and bad thoughts. In conjunction with the analogous use of the right–left divide in these two texts, this in my view suggests some form of elusive borrowing of Biblical imagery from chapter 25 of Matthew (calling this an allusion would, however, be an overstatement). The image of dividing into left and right has been divorced from its eschatological connotations and contextualized in an entirely different genre, that of the sayings. As the majority of the monastic readers of these stories were deeply immersed in the Bible, the Biblical antecedent provided for the monk's act would hardly elude them, albeit it is obliquely expressed and transformed into an act of daily piety.

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[31] It is noteworthy that two fifths of the Biblical quotations, paraphrases and allusions identified by Rönnegård in the Greek Systematic Collection derive from only two books of the Bible, one of them being the Gospel of Matthew (*Threads and Images*, 132). Admittedly, this lends by itself only very slight support to a Matthean antecedent. The Gospel of Matthew is considered by Rönnegård to be the gospel "most fitting for a Christian ascetic tradition, since it contains some of the sayings of Jesus most congruent with such a movement" (ibid. 132).

The description of the act itself is thus founded on Biblical imagery. Why, then, is this Biblical reference important? I believe the answer to this lies in a point touched upon by Krueger in his description of the literary typology of stories of concealed sanctity in general: The literary representation of deception by way of feigning madness (or performing other acts) suggests the acceptance of role playing, acts which, in whatever form, could ultimately lead the readers to "infer (heretically) that Christ was only playacting in taking the form of a human".[32] There thus exists a fine line between folly and sanctity in literary representations of holy fools, and to transgress this boundary could prove detrimental to the image of Christ, the imitation of whom was envisaged as an ideal throughout the *Apophthegmata Patrum* (and ascetic literature in general). Deception presents a moral problem, and if readers were to be edified by these stories, the distinctions could not be blurred, as this might have obviated readers to perceive the holiness of the characters involved. The connection between the 'fool' and the divine must not be severed, at least not entirely. Neither this nor later texts on holy foolery seek to sanctify deviance or role playing *as such*. The author of this text carefully avoids this by distinguishing between the foolishness represented by laughter – easily exposed as deviance – and a solitary act of piety, whose ambiguous imagery is probably quite intentional.

Broadly speaking, secret saints were revealed by someone chancing upon them praying at night: "Under cover of darkness, their sanctity is visible."[33] This text however, employs a much more refined and carefully crafted technique to bridge the gap between the appearance of folly and the true nature of virtue, by transposing an act of insanity into an act of piety, the pious element being reinforced by the ensuing explanation offered by the monk, while at the same time this explanation serves to distance role playing and folly from sanctity and virtue – it serves to draw the line, so to speak. Sanctity is made visible by way of a complex literary technique.

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[32] Krueger, *Symeon*, 70–71. Krueger's discussion of Jesus as a prototype for asceticism is in my view highly relevant to a number of early stories of holy foolery (*Symeon*, chapter seven: "Symeon in Emesa, Jesus in Jerusalem").
[33] Krueger, *Symeon*, 71.

Who, then, are allowed to perceive this display of true virtue? The perception of holiness in this text is restricted to superior monastics – the abba and the three visiting fathers all represent the spiritual leadership of the monastic movement. This is hardly coincidental. Why is this important? Because, as in many tales of concealed sanctity, the story confirms that knowledge is the prerogative of persons of authority.[34] By acknowledging the apparently mad monk's true status as a holy man, the narrator elevates not only the monk's status, but also that of Silvanus, as he possesses the ability to discern between the apparent and the real. The monastic virtue of obedience to superiors, fundamental to the later rules of the East and the West, and a virtue rooted in the early monastic communities of the desert, is evident in the change of mind, *metanoia*, of the monk, and serves to reinforce the emphasis on the preservation of hierarchy evident in the story.

The climax of revelation in this story, however, involves not only the foolish monk. Reading the text as a witness to the early tradition of holy foolery, it is easy to ignore that Silvanus' final insight is not confined to the laughing brother's holiness. On the contrary, his astonishment is equally directed towards the three fathers. This insight was not openly revealed to the readers beforehand (apart from the allusion to the Genesis passage), and Silvanus' concluding remark underscores that their visit has indeed been edifying and that he has benefitted spiritually from their visit. Silvanus' final statement accords well with the genre of the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, whose stories and sayings were ultimately intended "to school those who are desirous of successfully pursuing the heavenly way of life and willing to travel the road to the kingdom of heaven by emulating and imitating them", as stated in the prologue to the Systematic Collection.[35]

Conclusion

Not much ink has been spilt on this text in previous studies of holy foolery. In many ways, this story reveals as much about Late Anti-

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[34] As Krueger dryly notes, "this knowledge is power" (*Symeon*, 60). Even the quintessential fool Symeon's *vita* was composed by a person of authority – the bishop Leontius.

[35] Wortley's translation (*The Book of the Elders*, 3).

quity's quest for sanctity as it does about the early tradition of holy foolery itself. As Silvanus is forced to admit, holiness can be found where it is least expected. Some concluding remarks: As is the case with a number of sayings, this story is saturated with Biblical material. It contains many literary elements and characteristics typically found in Late Antique tales of concealed sanctity, some of which I have indicated above. Through its insistence on obedience, the saying affirms traditional monastic values. As in other early texts, folly appears as wholly inoffensive, in stark contrast to what was to come later through the richly constructed *vita* of Symeon, where shamelessness and outrageous transgressions abound, traits which are prevalent in the later Byzantine and Russian literary tradition.

My interpretation of the admittedly idiosyncratic act performed by the monk in his cell not as an act of role playing, but rather as an act which permitted the reader to connect the monk with some form of pious behaviour, suggests that the author painstakingly sought to distinguish between apparent madness and true sanctity. The monk is not perceived as holier by Silvanus *because of* his affliction – in this story, at least, folly does not add to sanctity. The paradoxical nature of holy foolery demanded a literary portrayal of fools who committed ambiguous acts – acts that are outwardly "foolish" and realistic, yet at the same time contain sufficient clues for the reader to discern the true nature of the fool. Rather than reading this tale as a blunt description of peculiar figures and odd behaviour, I believe it testifies, through its subtle unveiling of sanctity, that a highly developed understanding of the genuinely paradoxical nature of holy foolery existed as early as the fifth century.

Abstract:

Only a small handful of pre-seventh-century texts shed light on the early tradition of holy foolery, an ascetic practice in which a holy man or woman conceals his or her true identity by feigning madness. This paper explores how the sanctity of an anonymous monk who plays the fool is discovered in one of the least studied texts from this period (APanon N 408 / APsys VIII 32 of the Apophthegmata Patrum*). The analysis of this brief narrative text reveals that a nuanced understanding of holy foolery existed at a very early date.*