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BOOK REVIEWS

Thomas Arentzen, *The Virgin in Song: Mary and the Poetry of Romanos the Melodist*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017, xiii + 265 pp., 10 black and white figures, ISBN: 978-0-81-224907-1.

Arentzen's book is based on his PhD dissertation in the University of Lund. His research focuses on Mariology and the representations of Theotokos in the hymnographic works of Romanos the Melodist (ca 485-560). Studies on this excellent Early Byzantine era poet, famous for his hymns (*kontakia*) are quite extensive; however in his review *The Virgin in Song*, consisted of four chapters, Th. Arentzen attempts a re-examination of Romanos' references to Theotokos in his *kontakia*.¹

In chapter one, "The Song and the City" (pp. 1-45), Arentzen introduces his readers to the 6th century historical, social and liturgical environment, an era during which Romanos the Melodist lived and composed his *kontakia*. Thus, Arentzen makes special mention to the hymnographer and the nature of his hymnographic works as well as the city of Constantinople, where Romanos lived and produced his work. He also talks about the liturgical space and time, as they were formed in the 5th and 6th centuries, as well as the ceremonies in the Byzantine capital. Special reference is made about the use of *kontakia* in ecclesiastical services, while the author also deals with the practices of rhetoric (such as *ethopoiia*) frequently used by Romanos, the audience of Constantinople, the social position of women and the perception of virginity during the 6th century. Arentzen is impressed by some vivid images in Romanos' *Kontakia*, used by the poet to connect with the public (for example "on the Massacre of the Innocents" and "on the Raising of Lazarus").² Finally, there's a special reference to Mariology and the development of

¹ 2017 may be considered to be a year dedicated to Romanos the Melodist, as, in addition to Arentzen's study, saw the light of publicity the book of Sara Gador-Whyte, *Theology and Poetry in Early Byzantium: The Kontakia of Romanos the Melodist*, Cambridge University Press, 2017.

² See also Barbara Saylor Rodgers, "Romanos Melodos on the Raising of Lazarus", *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 107 (2014) 811-830.

the worship of Theotokos. As the writer notes, “The study tracks three different ways of imagining the Virgin’s corporeal and relational presence in six-century Constantinople with an erotic appeal, with nursing breasts, and with a speaking voice” (p. 44).

Chapter two, “On the Verge of Virginitly” (pp. 46- 86), examines the notion of Mary as “a young maiden”. Analysing the *kontakion* “*On the Annunciation*”, Arentzen chooses to portray the Virgin not as an ascetic model, nor as a vessel or pathway to Christ’s incarnation. On the contrary he emphasizes more her female existence as a virgin, as “the poet builds up an erotic tension with sexual allusions” (p. 65) between the male-shaped figure of Archangel Gabriel and the Virgin, who “does not renounce sexuality or aim to transform herself in any ontological way” (p. 81). Moreover, Arentzen notes that Romanos calls the faithful to see the Virgin “as a source of knowledge and salvation, of fertility and pleasure, of nourishment and intimacy” (p. 81). He points even to the eroticism of certain scenes or verses that highlight the sexuality of the Virgin (e.g. “*On the Harlot*” or “*On the Annunciation*”). In one of the book’s appendices, the author quotes the *kontakion* “*On the Annunciation*” in Greek as well as providing his own English translation. For ease of cross-referencing, it would have been preferable however for the Greek text to be quoted alongside the English one.

In chapter three, “The Mother and Nurse of Our Life” (pp. 87-119), Arentzen discusses the notion of Virgin Mary as a young mother and how she is represented breastfeeding in Romanos’ *kontakia* written for the Christmas Feast (“*On the Nativity I and II*”) and “*On the Nativity of the Virgin*”. Although the pictorial depiction of the Virgin nursing infant Jesus is known in byzantine art by the Greek term *galaktotrophousa*, Arentzen notes that in the early Christian literature, for example in the works of Clement of Alexandria, the Christocentric idea of the God Father who nurses “the Church with the milk that is the Logos (i.e. the Holy Eucharist)” (pp. 101-102, 112-113) is more common. In his detailed analysis on the aforementioned *kontakia* Arentzen shows that Romanos’ approach to the breastfeeding Virgin is quite revolutionary for he is drawing the worshippers’ attention on Mary herself rather than the infant Christ. That is to say Romanos is more interested in showing

not why “He was born” but “that [Virgin] having him at her breast she is being lifted [...] into the divine realm” (p. 102) highlighting her role as a *mediatrix* (μεσιτεύουσα) between God and the whole world.³

Mary’s voice is the theme of chapter four, “A Voice of Rebirth” (pp. 120-163). In this chapter the writer focuses on Mary’s voice and on how it interacts with other characters (divine or human) in Romanos’ works, like “*On the Nativity II*” and “*On Mary at the Cross*”.⁴ As Arentzen notes, people had never heard Theotokos “talking” before Romanos’ innovation to integrate her into his *Kontakia*. Indeed, in the early Christian literature Virgin Mary, as virgin in general, does not speak publicly. The writer points *inter alia* Athanasios’ of Alexandria view, that Theotokos was silent and did not express herself, as well that of Severus of Antioch, that she was silent even during birth.

As it has been already mentioned Theotokos acts as a *mediatrix*, speaking in person to Christ on behalf of all the world; however, according to the writer, this role is just intercessory and doesn’t allow her to express her personality. On the contrary, Virgin in Romanos’ *kontakion* “*On the Marriage at Cana*” receives the questions of the faithful, via the poet’s mediation, and she responds in turn about the miracle of her Son. In his *kontakion* “*On Mary at the Cross*”, Theotokos –as the only one present during the Crucifixion– discourses with Christ or/and on behalf of Christ, as a *mediatrix* between Him and the human kind. In another *Kontakion*, that “*On the Nativity II*” Virgin Mary (as a woman and descendant of Eve) discourses with Adam and explains that she will become a *mediatrix* on his behalf. So through Romanos, “Mary’s voice addressed to the audience”, i.e., the congregation, and converse-

³ The term was used in a Prayer to Theotokos attributed to Ephraim the Syrian (4th century), who calls her “mediatrix of the human race: Ἐπεὶ σὲ προστάτιν καὶ μεσίτιν πρὸς τὸν ἕκ σου τεχθέντα Θεὸν τὸ ἀνθρώπινον γένος, Θεοτόκε, εὐμοίρησε”, K. G. Phrantzoles, *Ὁσίου Ἐφραίμ τοῦ Σύρου ἔργα*, vol. 6, Thessalonike 1995: 5:313 and elsewhere; and again by Basil of Seleucia (5th century) in one of his Sermons («μεσιτεύουσα Θεῶ καὶ ἀνθρώποις»: PG 85, col. 444). Cf. pp. 137-138 in Arentzen’s study.

⁴ For a different reading of the same *kontakion* see also Kristina Alveteg, “In Silence We Speak: Romanos Melodos and Mary at the Cross”, *Studia Patristica* 42. *Papers presented at the Fourteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford 2003*, eds F. Young et al., Leuven: Peeters, 2006, pp. 279-283.

ly “the congregation comes to speak through her voice” (pp. 120-121). Arentzen reminds us that the voice “as authoritative presence was important to Byzantine *rhetois*” (p. 120) and that in Romanos’ *kontakia* “there are two aspects of Mary’s voice ... the *dramatized* voice and the *thematized* voice” (p. 122). Indeed, the various strategies of *ethopoia*, which was part of the preliminary rhetorical education (*progymnasmata*), are used by Romanos to show via speech and gestures Virgin’s presence and character, when she addresses the congregation.

The book ends with the writer’s “Conclusions” (pp. 164-173), two Appendixes (1: “*On the Annunciation*” in Greek with English translation and 2: Catalogue of Hymns Referred to in the Study, in pp. 175-190), Notes (pp. 191-226), Bibliography (pp. 227-253), an Index (pp. 255-262) and Acknowledgements (pp. 263-265). It also contains nine figures.

The author has obviously good knowledge of Greek as he has translated many extracts of Romanos’ *kontakia* into English (necessary for readers unfamiliar with Greek). However, there is no parallel text in Greek, while the translation of certain lyrics has certainly a personal touch. Moreover, an attempt to interpret the persona of Virgin Mary through Romanos’ hymnographic work focuses particularly on the sexual aspect resulting in some cases to the desanctification of Theotokos. In this regard, it should be noted that Greek titles are hardly found in Arentzen’s bibliography, although the work of Romanos the Melodist has been the subject of many studies in Greek.⁵

⁵ See for example: N. B. Tomadakes, «Ρωμανικά μελετήματα. Α’) Ὁ ἐσωτερικὸς διάλογος τῶν Ὑμνων Ρωμανοῦ τοῦ Μελωδοῦ. Β’) Ἀνέκδοτος Ὑμνος Ρωμανοῦ τοῦ Μελωδοῦ εἰς τὸν πατριάρχην Κωνσταντινουπόλεως Ἰωάννην τὸν Χρυσόστομον. Γ’) Ἡ πατερικὴ γνῶσις Ρωμανοῦ τοῦ Μελωδοῦ», *ΕΕΒΣ* 26 (1956) 3-36; K. Metsakes, *Βυζαντινὴ Ὑμνογραφία. Ἀπὸ τὴν Καινὴ Διαθήκη ὡς τὴν Εἰκονομαχία*, Athens, ²2010, pp. 357-509; Th. Detorakes, *Βυζαντινὴ Ὑμνογραφία*, Rethymno: Panepistemiakes ekdosesis Krētes, ²1997, 46-55; A. S. Korakides, *Ρωμανοῦ τοῦ Μελωδοῦ ὕμνος καὶ λόγος: δύο μελέτες*, Thessalonike, 1990; I. G. Kourebeles, *Ἡ Χριστολογία τοῦ Ρωμανοῦ τοῦ Μελωδοῦ καὶ ἡ σωτηριολογικὴ σημασία της*, Thessalonike, 1998 (unpublished Diss.); Idem, *Ρωμανοῦ Μελωδοῦ θεολογικὴ δόξα. Σύγχρονη ἱστοριοδογματικὴ ἄποψη καὶ ποιητικὴ θεολογία*, Thessalonike, 2006, and Idem, “Les expressions christologiques «double par nature» et «Christ invincible dans la nature vaincu» de Romanos le Mélode

Overall, Arentzen has written an informative study that should have broad appeal to those interested in how Christian perceptions about Virgin Mary developed and changed during the early Byzantine period and how Romanos the Melodist's poetry contributed to these.

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par rapport à leur perspective antihérétique”, *Orthodoxes Forum* 19.1-2 (2005) 95-107. See also Eva C. Topping, “The Apostle Peter, Justinian and Romanos the Melodist”, *BMGS* 2 (1976) 1-15.