

Paul Halsall

Wedded to Christ: Nuptiality and Gender Reversal
in the Lives of Byzantine Male Saints

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Introduction

In recent years scholars have explored the gendering of Byzantine female saints.¹ The notable disparity between numbers of new male and female saints during the Byzantine period;² the continued use of the trope of the "virile woman"; and the often noted crop of married women saints in the ninth to eleventh centuries,³ are all phenomena which have provoked questions about the role of gender in female sanctity.

¹ See Evelyne Patlagean, "L'histoire de la femme déguisée en moine et l'évolution de la sainteté féminine à Byzance", *Studi Medievali* ser. 3, 17 (1976), 597-625, repr. In *Structure sociale, famille, chrétienté à Byzance IV^e-XI^e siècle*, (London: Variorum, 1981), XI; Alice-Mary Talbot, "General Introduction", in *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints' Lives in English Translation*, ed. Alice-Mary Talbot, (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1996), vii-xvii, esp, x-xv; and most recently see Lynda Coon, *Sacred*

Fictions: Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

² The percentages of new saints who were female saints as follows:

Century	Total No. of Saints	No. of Female Saints ^a	Percentage of Saints Who Are Female
6	47	10	21.23
7	19	1	5.26
8	37	5	15.51
9	61	8	13.11
10	43	6	13.95
11	17	1	5.88
12	15	1	6.67
13	10	1	10.00
14	28	1	3.57
15	8	0	0.0
TOTALS 7-15 C	238	24	10.5

The figures are derived from the *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca* 3 vols., 3rd ed., ed. François Halkin, *Subsidia Hagiographica*, 8^a, (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1957), 3 Vols.; and its supplement, *Novum Auctarium BHG*, *Subsidia hagiographica* 65, (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1984). The actual numbers of both male and female saints may have been slightly larger than those in the cohort drawn from the *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca*.

³ Alexander P. Kazhdan, and Giles Constable, *People and Power in Byzantium: An Introduction to Modern Byzantine Studies*, (Washington DC.: Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies, Trustees for Harvard University, 1982), 73-75.; Lennart Rydén, "New Forms of Hagiography: Heroes and Saints", in *The 17th International Byzantine Congress: Major Papers*, Dumbarton Oaks/Georgetown University, Washington D.C., August 3-8 1986, (New Rochelle. NY.: Aristide D. Caratzas. 1986), 540;

With men the situation is very different. While it has long been recognized that, as Christian heroes, male saints reversed standard classical tropes of masculinity,⁴ the essential masculinity of male saints has been largely unquestioned.⁵ This is a commonplace of modern historiography - women figures have "gender", while maleness is unproblematic.

In this paper I seek to place the masculinity of male saints in Byzantium under the sign of gender. For, I propose that, just as female saints were often masculinized in the hagiographical literature, male saints *could be* feminized. Such feminization, or gender reversal, might be interrogated in a number of ways - the themes of penetration in martyrs' bodies, the abandonment of familial social roles by monks -- but here I focus on a hitherto unexamined, and perhaps minor, theme in male saints' *Lives*: the nuptial relationship of male saints and Christ. In this task two types of texts have proved to be of interest: the use of nuptial, and "near nuptial", imagery in hagiography, and texts by mystical writers which envision a marriage of their souls to Jesus.

Preliminaries

As participants in a culture permeated with Christian imagery, we may not always be aware of the startling nature of some Christian themes and images. My students at Fordham are often bemused, for instance, when I seek to convey the embarrassment of the crucifixion by asking them if they would wear an electric chair, or a syringe, around

⁴ Unlike the classical hero's body, which is a source of power and independence, the saint's body is penetrated and destroyed in the case of martyrs, or deliberately weakened by ascetics. Cf. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 19, 434.

⁵ But see Nonna Verna Harrison, "The Feminine Man in Late Antique Ascetic Piety", *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 48: 3-4 [<http://www.columbia.edu/~usqr/harrison.html>] for a recent discussion of male gendering in some Late Antique philosophers and fathers.

their necks if Jesus had been executed in modern America.⁶ They simply “forget” that the cross represents a violent form of capital punishment. In the same way, bridal imagery -- in first communion ceremonies for Roman Catholics and in relation to women religious -- is extremely familiar. But the very familiarity of the image should not obscure the fact that we have a universal human institution, defined by erotic and sexual interaction between the parties, being taken as a model for a Christian's relationship to Christ.

The use of nuptial imagery to describe relationships with Christ goes back to the *Song of Songs*, allegorized by Christians authors as a series of metaphors for the relationship between the soul and God, and to the New Testament, where marriage, and the figure of Christ as the Bridegroom, is used in both the gospels and epistles to refer to Christ's relationship with the Church.⁷ The comments of St. Paul in 2 Cor. 11:2 were also important - that "I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ".

Although such nuptial images were also commonly used to describe the relationship of the Church and Christ, I am here concerned only about their use to in reference to individual people. It seems to have been Origen, in his discussion of the *Song of Songs*, who first made prominent the idea that the relationship between Christ and the individual soul was as between a Bridegroom and bride.⁸ Tertullian was the first

⁶ For the embarrassment of the cross see Athanasios of Alexandria, *The Life of Anthony*, trans. Robert C. Gregg, (New York: Paulist, 1980), #74-75.

⁷ Jesus is referred to as a "bridegroom" directly or indirectly numerous times in the New Testament. The gospels all use the term: see, Mt 9:15, 25:1-10; Mk 2:19-20; Lk 5:34-35; Jn 3:29. Although the Pauline epistles do not use the term bridegroom, they do invoke nuptial imagery: in 2 Cor. 11:2, Paul refers to Christ as a husband (ἀνερ) with whom he has joined Christians a "pure virgin brides"; In Eph. 5:23-25 Paul describes Christ's relationship to the Church as that of husband and wife. Rev. 21:2 presents the union of the bride and husband as the consummation of all things.

⁸ Pierre Adnès, "Mariage Spirituel", *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, (Paris: Beauchesne, 1980), Vol 10, col. 391; Brown, *Body and Society*, 274.

to employ the term “sponsa Christi” for consecrated virgins;⁹ and the idea was rapidly taken up by Greek writers, so much so that Peter Brown argues that by the fourth century Origen’s use of the term “bride” for the souls of males and females had given way to its almost exclusive use for virgin women.¹⁰ The term was rapidly applied to female saints such as Thekla,¹¹ and “bride of Christ” remained very common, although not ubiquitous, in reference to female religious figures - both nuns and female saints throughout the Byzantine period.¹²

Nuptiality: Male Saints' Lives

Wedded to Christ

What is less well known is that images of nuptiality pervade some texts representing male saints’ relationships - with Christ and with each other. This imagery is not present in all, or even most, male saint’s lives, but is present in enough that it cannot be dismissed as one writer’s eccentricity. In all the texts I examined Christ is the bridegroom but the role of the saint varies: in most cases he is given a female role, but a few are “bridegrooms of Christ”. The texts which present male saints or religious figures as “brides of Christ” perform a gender reversal familiar in western medieval sources.¹³

As Brides

So let me give some examples:

⁹ Adnès, “Mariage Spirituel”, 393.

¹⁰ Brown, *Body and Society*, 259-274.

¹¹ E.g. *Life of Thekla*, in *Vie et miracles de sainte Thècle*, ed. and French trans. Gilbert Dagron, *Subsidia hagiographica* 62, (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1978), #26 (p.274).

¹² E.g. Elizabeth of Herakleia, [Talbot, *Holy Women*, 127]; Theodora of Thessalonika, [Talbot, *Holy Women*, 200]; Irene of Chrysobalanton [*The Life St. Irene, Abbess of Chrysobalanton*, ed. and trans. Jan Olof Rosenqvist, (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1986), #3, (p.12)]. For repeated use about a living woman, see Gregory Palamas, “To the Most Reverend Nun Xenia”, English trans. in *The Philokalia*, ed. G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware, (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), Vol 4, 293-322.

¹³ The Western sources are usually of a later date than the Byzantine texts I am discussing here. See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*,

Methodios of Olympus, in the late third century, is the earliest person I can find who describes a man as a "bride of Christ". The saint in question is Paul of Tarsus, who Methodios sees as both a bride of Christ and a spiritual mother.¹⁴

In the *Symposium* 3:9. Methodius writes of Paul that "When he had grown to manhood and was remade and fully developed in spiritual perfection, he had been made into a helpmate (βοηθός) and bride (νύμφη) of the Word (τῶν λόγων)".¹⁵ The context here is Methodios' discussion of how a Christian helps the Church grow through teaching. Keeping to his theme, Methodios adds that Paul "receiving the seed of life and conceiving, he who had before been called a child, now became Church and mother."

The ancient passion of the martyrs Sergios and Bacchos, dated uncertainly to the fourth century, describes their forced humiliation when they were dressed in women's clothes and paraded through the streets.¹⁶ The pair chant acceptance of their feminization for God: "You...have covered us with the robe of righteousness; as brides you have decked us with women's gowns, and joined us to you."¹⁷

(Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), esp. Chapter IV: "Jesus as Mother and Abbot as Mother: Some Themes in Twelfth-Century Cistercian Writing".

¹⁴ Methodius of Olympus, *Symposium*, ed. and French trans. by Herbert Musurillo, as *Methodius of Olympus, Le Banquet*, Sources chrétiennes 95, (Paris: Cerf, 1963). English trans. Herbert Musurillo, as St. Methodius, *The Symposium, a Treatise on Charity*, Ancient Christian Writers 27 (Westminster MD: 1958). See Harrison, "Feminine Man" for a discussion of the text.

¹⁵ Methodius of Olympus, *Symposium*, 3.9

¹⁶ "Passio Antiquior SS. Sergii et Bacchi", *Analecta Bollandiana* 14 (1895), 373-95, trans. John Boswell, *Same Sex Unions in Pre Modern Europe*, (New York: Villard, 1994), 375-90. See Boswell's discussion of the date, p. 147n172. The Bollandist editors did not assign a date, while Enrico Lodi in *Enchiridion Euchologium Fontium Liturgicorum*, (*Bibliothecae Ephemerides Liturgicae*, Subsidia 15 [Rome: 1979]) dates it to the early fourth century.

¹⁷ "Passio Antiquior SS. Sergii et Bacchi", 381. "ὁ νύμφας κατεκόσμησας ἡμᾶς γυναικεῖαις στολαῖς". Although the story of the saints being paraded through the streets in women's clothes was preserved in the Metaphrastic version of the life, the use of the term "brides" was not. See PG 115:1009D.

In the fifth-century *Philotheos Historia* (or *History of the Monks of Syria*).¹⁸ Theodoret of Cyrrhus does not hesitate to present his Syrian monks as related to Christ in string of explicitly nuptial allusions.

Drawing on the *Song of Songs*, Theodoret has this to say about Peter the Galatian's love for Christ:

"As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved (ὁ ἀδελφιδοῦς μου) shadow I yearned and sat, and his fruit was sweet in my mouth" [Song 2:3]. this divine man [Peter] did nothing unreasonable when he fell in love (ἔρωτος) with the same bridegroom and used the words of the bride, "I am wounded with love (ἀγάπης)" [Song 5:8]."¹⁹

And, commenting on his monks as a whole, Theodoret says:

...they did not grasp honor from men. Instead they transferred all their love (τὸ φίλημα) to the Bridegroom, like modest women who are eager to be loved (φιλεῖσθαι) and praised by their spouses but despise adulation from others.²⁰

Theodoret clearly found this language congenial. Long passages in his *Epilogue on Divine Love*, written later, are devoted to exploring the theme of nuptial imagery.²¹

The case of Theodoret is particularly interesting for Byzantinists because we know it was widely read and copied throughout Byzantine history. At least forty-two manuscripts which contain the full text of the *Philotheos Historia* are known (dating from the 10-17th centuries), not to mention multiple manuscripts with excerpts, as well as translations in Syriac, Georgian, and Arabic. We do not have here some obscure patristic

¹⁸ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Philotheos Historia*, ed. with French trans. by Pierre Canivet and Alice Leroy Molinghen, as *Histoire des Moines de Syrie*, (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1977), 2 vols.; English trans. by R. M. Price as *A History of the Monks of Syria*, (Kalamazoo MI: Cistercian, 1985). References are to standard text divisions. English translations are Price's.

¹⁹ Theodoret, *Historia*, 9.2.

²⁰ Theodoret, *Historia*, 15.6.

²¹ Theodoret, *Historia* 31. See esp. 31:5-6, 19, 21. Theodoret uses a variety of words to refer to this love - agape, eros, pothos, philtorn, philia - but, as pointed out by R. M. Price, "there is no difference in meaning between them" . (*History of the Monks of Syria*, 206n1).

reference, but a text which we know fired the later religious imagination of Byzantine readers.²²

Although he does not specifically call any monks or saints "brides", in his *Life of John the Almsgiver*, Leontius of Neapolis does have St. John invoke the Pauline text [2 Cor 11:2] in an address to monks, and effectively turn them into brides in relation to God.

For if, having legally married a wife in this world of the flesh, we are forbidden by God and by the laws to desert her and be united to another woman, even though we have to spend a long time separated from her in a distant country, and shall incur punishment if we violate our vows, how then shall we, who have been Joined to God through the Orthodox faith and the Catholic Church-as the apostle says: "I espoused you to one husband that I might present you as a pure virgin to Christ" [2 Cor. 11:2].²³

As Bridegrooms

Other texts denote male saints as the bridegrooms [νύμφοι] of Christ. Although not common, this usage occurs in widely varied hagiographic contexts. This usage is not seen in western sources.²⁴

A fifth century enkomion of St. George by Theodotos of Ankyra is replete with nuptial imagery.²⁵ I have only been able to locate surviving Coptic and Ethiopic [Geez]

²² Canivet and Leroy Molinghen, *Histoire*, Vol 1, 57-63.

²³ Leontius of Neapolis, *Life of John the Almsgiver*, trans. Elizabeth Dawes, in *Three Byzantine Saints: Contemporary Biographies of St. Daniel the Stylite, St. Theodore of Sykeon and St. John the Almsgiver*, (London: 1948), 251.

²⁴ I have not been able to locate any instance in which a male saint is called a "sponsus Christi". The entire *Patrologia Latina Database* had not one instance. Even after Theresa of Avila and John of the Cross popularized the notion of "spiritual marriage", Western writers preserved an exclusively feminine identity in relation to the Bridegroom: examples include Bernard-François de Hoyos (d. 1735), Paul of the Cross (d. 1775) and Nicholas Factor (d. 1583) who were all "brides". To preserve heterosexual roles, some Western male religious figures contracted marriages with a female person - divine Wisdom: examples include Henry Suso (d. 1366) and Laurent Justinien (d.1456). For discussion see Adnès, "Mariage Spirituel", col. 388-408.

²⁵ Ernest A. Wallis Budge, ed and trans., *The Martyrdom and Miracles of St. George of Cappodokia. The Coptic Texts*, (London: D. Nutt, 1888).. See also Ernest A. Wallis Budge, *George of Lydda: The Patron Saint of England. A Study of the Cultus of St. George in Ethiopia. Translations of the Ethipic Texts as found in the Manuscripts from the Makdala*, (London: Luzac, 1930).

translations of the text, but it does seem to have been widespread in a variety of forms, and to have been translated into a number of languages.

I want to stress that Theodotos presents George in conventional masculine terms as a an "athlete" and "warrior". But from the outset George, surely the most celebrated of all martyr saints, is feminized in some ways. He is repeatedly described as "beautiful" and his physical presentation emphasized.²⁶ George is killed a number of times in the text: and in both texts and in illustrations his body is repeatedly penetrated and violated. In a very real sense he is made a subject of rape. None of this is especially unusual with male martyrs.

What interested me was Theodotos' presentation of George's relationship with Christ. Christ awards George the crown of martyrdom, but not as the judge of the athletic contest, rather George "receives the crown from the true and Holy Bridegroom, Our Lord Jesus Christ".²⁷ George had been promised in marriage to a woman, a marriage which was never accomplished: Theodotos comments that "he did not know that Christ was keeping him a pure virgin bridegroom for himself".²⁸ When George actually dies his reception in heaven is quite extra extraordinary. Christ himself, not an angel, retrieves his soul, and utters a long salutation:²⁹

Hail My George! Hail Beloved of myself and my angels! Hail, champion of the kingdom of Heaven! Blessed art thou this day, O George My Beloved.³⁰

and later,

²⁶ Cf. Christopher Walter, "The Origins of the Cult of St. George", *Revue des Études Byzantines* 53 (1995), 295-326. On p. 320. Walter discusses the mixture of femininity and masculinity in the Byzantine images of George, a mixture which he says "resists androgyny".

²⁷ Wallis Budge, *Martyrdom and Miracles*, 276.

²⁸ Wallis Budge, *Martyrdom and Miracles*, 282.

²⁹ Wallis Budge, *Martyrdom and Miracles*, 323.

³⁰ Wallis Budge, *Martyrdom and Miracles*, 320.

I swear by my right hand, O my beloved one, that I will establish a covenant with thee...all the saints shall know thee by reason of the honor which I will show thee, O my beloved and they shall know that thou art George the beloved of God.³¹

Theodotos presents the relationship between Jesus and George in unambiguously erotic terms. Christ wins George's love from a potential wife, and refers to him repeatedly as his "beloved". George is given special prominence among all other saints. When George dies he is welcomed into heaven by Christ and awarded a special convenantal closeness to Christ.

I suppose this text could be dismissed, especially given its translation history, so let me turn to a more mainstream writer, Leontios of Neapolis. Writing in the seventh century Leontios of Neapolis seeks to use nuptial and fraternal imagery in his portrayal of the sixth-century Syrian "holy fool", Symeon of Emesa.³²

After Symeon and John have deserted their families to pursue an ascetic life, they spend some time in a monastery where they are tonsured together and undergo some sort of brotherhood rite.³³ Desiring to leave for the desert Leontios names them as they depart as "the pure bridegrooms of Christ" (οἱ νυμφίοι δι' καθαρὸν τοῦ Χριστοῦ).³⁴

We again find the imagery used about St. Athanasios of Constantinople in the fourteenth century, when Athanasios is called a "truly spiritual bridegroom".

³¹ Wallis Budge, *Martyrdom and Miracles*, 321.

³² Leontios of Neapolis, *Life of Symeon the Fool*; ed. Lennart Rydén in *Das Leben des heiligen Narren Symeon*, (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1963); Rydén's ed. repr. in *Léontios de Néapolis: Vie de Syméon le Fou et Vie de Jean de Chypre*, ed. A.J. Festugière, (Paris: Guethner, 1974), with an French translation by A.J. Festugière. For English translation see Derek Krueger, *Symeon the Holy Fool: Leontios' Life and the Late Antique City*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 131-71.

³³ Earlier on in the text Leontios had mixed discourses. After recounting how Symeon was deemed worthy of adoption as a *son*, he has Christ apply to the soul the verses of the Song of Song [4:7] "you are all fair, my love; there is no flaw in you". [Leontios of Neapolis, *Life of Symeon the Fool*, ed. Lennart Rydén, 123].

Alice-Mary Talbot, who edited and translated the text, suggested to me that "bridegroom" here might simply be a reference to Athanasios' role as bishop.³⁵ But on closer examination it is clear that the author is using the term independently of the episcopal office. Theoktistos the Stoudite, the author in question, begins his *Oration on the Translation of The Relics of Our Holy Father Athanasios*,³⁶ by weaving together a variety of nuptial and "shining" metaphors -- he casts his own text as the "ill-clad guest" at the wedding banquet and Athanasios as a disperser of "sunny rays".³⁷ And thus, when he eventually says of the Patriarch that "the truly spiritual bridegroom, like a great sun after its plunge to earth...lights up the whole earth sending forth miracles like sunbeams",³⁸ there is no doubt that we have here another instance of a saint being presented as the bridegroom of Christ.

United to Christ

As readers may have noted there is a large gap in the examples cited above between the late antique and pre-iconoclastic texts and St. Athanasios in the fourteenth century. And I admit that the Dumbarton Oaks Hagiography Database did not pull up any male bridegrooms of Christ for the centuries it covers. I propose, however, that some writers remained interested in presenting their saintly subjects as more closely related to Christ than merely as servants of Christ, although for perhaps the majority of saints that is the highest level of intimacy their biographer assigns to them. We have a number of case what I have called "near-nuptial" imagery.

³⁴ Leontios of Neapolis, *Life of Symeon the Fool*, ed. Lennart Rydén, .133.

³⁵ Personal email communication 7/23/1997.

³⁶ Theoktistos the Stoudite, *Oration on the Translation of The Relics of Our Holy Father Athanasios*, Patriarch of Constantinople, ed. and trans. Alice-Mary Talbot, *Faith Healing in Late Byzantium: The Posthumous Miracles of the Patriarch Athanasios I of Constantinople by Theoktistos the Stoudite*, (Brookline MA: Hellenic College Press, 1983).

³⁷ Theoktistos the Stoudite, *Oration*, 1.

Peter of Atroa was a wonder-worker who died in 837. His dossier includes both a Life, a reedited Life, and a compilation of posthumous miracles.³⁹ In seeking to express Peter's power and closeness to God, the author of the posthumous miracles notes that after he had left his body he "was established with his desired one (ποθούμενος) the Lord Jesus Christ, conversing with him as a friend (φιλικῶς) face to face."⁴⁰

Perhaps St. Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022) is the most well-known of Byzantine saints in the modern world. I shall return to his use of nuptial imagery in mystical writing in a moment. His biographer Niketas Stethatos does not use any variant of "νύμφη" about him, but he does have Symeon take on the procreative (with the Holy Spirit) role Methodios of Olympus had earlier assigned to Paul. At one point Symeon says "Come then, my children, my brothers and my fathers whom I have assembled with Christ my God, and whom I have engendered through the Holy Spirit in my teaching of the divine word".⁴¹

Finally Nicolaus Kataskepenos, the twelfth-century author of the *Life of St. Cyril of Philea* has Cyril teach about intimacy and prayer in this interesting passage:

There are seven manners and seven kinds of prayers, as says the Abbot Anastasios. Three of them exist under the rule of fear and chastisement; the four others are used by those who are assured of their salvation and have a share in the kingdom of God. When a man is plunged into voluptuousness he holds to a prayer as a man condemned and without confidence, as a man touched by the pain of

³⁸ Theoktistos the Stoudite, *Oration*, 4.

³⁹ See *La vie merveilleuse de Saint Pierre d'Atroa*, ed. and trans. Vitalien Laurent, *Subsidia Hagiographica* 29, (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1956), and *La vita retracta et les miracles posthumes de Saint Pierre d'Atroa*, ed. and French trans. Vitalien Laurent, *Subsidia hagiographica* 31, (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1958).

⁴⁰ Laurent, *Vita retracta*, 89, p. 135.

⁴¹ Niketas Stethatos, *Vie de Syméon le Nouveau Théologien (949-1022) par Nicéas Stéthatos*, ed. Irénée Hausherr, and French trans. P. Gabriel Horn, *Orientalia Christiana* 12, (Rome: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1928), #64 (p. 86).

death; in the second manner, a man takes himself before God and speaks to him as a debtor; the third manner differs from the two preceding, for one presents oneself to the Master as a slave, but a slave remains under the rule of fear and the fear of blows; in the fourth, the man carries himself in regard to God as a freed [?] servant, freed from servitude and waiting to receive a recompense because of the mercy of God; in the fifth manner [of prayer], better than the first four, one holds oneself before God and speaks to him as a friend; in the sixth manner, superior to that, the man speaks to God in all confidence as a son "for I have said that you are of the gods, you are of the son of the Most High", you all who want it; in the seventh manner, which marks a progress and which is the best of all, one prays among those who have undergone *adelphopoia* with Christ [or "among the adopted brothers of Christ"].....⁴²

And later, in the course of a long sermon, Stethatos has Cyril take up a specifically nuptial theme, without naming himself as "bride".

The Lord has need of such servants who abstain from passions and dress in the nuptial robe (ἐνδύμα τοῦ γάμου). Believe that the nuptial robe, indicated by the divine words of Christ, is the grace of the Holy Spirit: he who is not fit to be so dressed may not be a participant in the celestial marriage (τοῦ ἐπουρανίου γάμου) and the spiritual feast.⁴³

These three examples from later Byzantine texts are not exactly "marriage" with Christ, but they do, I suggest approach nuptiality in different ways. Peter now lives face to face with his "desired one". And Symeon "engenders" his followers with, if not Christ, the Holy Spirit. Finally Cyril of Philea argues that the highest state of intimacy with Christ is to have undergone "adelphopoia", here distinct from both friendship and adoption, with him.⁴⁴

⁴² Nicolaus Kataskepanus, (d. ca. 1143), *La vie de Saint Cyrille le Phileote, moine byzantine (+1110)*, ed. and French trans. Étienne Sargologos, *Subsidia hagiographica* 39, (Brussels: Société de Bollandistes, 1964), 9:2. (Greek text, pp. 73-74 and French trans. pp. 295-69). The English here is obviously dependent on Sargologos' French.

⁴³ Kataskepanus, *Saint Cyrille*, 47:6. (Greek text, pp. 73-74, and French trans. pp. 455).

⁴⁴ See John Boswell, *Same Sex Unions*, for an extended discussion of the *adelphopoia* ceremony. Boswell's views have been severely criticized. In this case I am merely suggesting a connection with nuptiality: on this issue see the careful review by Philip Lyndon Reynolds, "Same-sex unions: What Boswell didn't find -- Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe by John Boswell", *Christian Century* 112:2 (Jan 18, 1995) 49-54.

An additional example of male religious figures being presented in nuptial relationship with Christ derives from canon law. In discussing monks who leave the monastic state in order to marry, the canon lawyers repeatedly assert that such a monk is subject to the penalties for adultery.⁴⁵

Discussion: How Significant Are These Texts?

So what is going on here? What do these texts mean? Although one could argue that references to “bridegrooms of Christ” are mere grammatical curiosities, nuptial imagery is so common I think that what we have here is a persistent effort by authors to find a way to represent both intimacy and saintly power.

The point about saintly power should be clear. The hagiographer is proposing his subject as a powerful intercessor. The claim that a saint has a special relationship with Christ is specifically connected with claims for the saint’s power to intercede.⁴⁶

These goals of presenting intimacy and power are related, and both called for emphasizing the closeness of the saint to Christ. But why not do this in some other way? I suggest that the desire to represent intimacy with Christ in saint’s lives can be seen as part of a wider problem with how to represent intimacy and closeness.

As has been noted by David Konstan friendship was problematic social construct for Christian writers, and it remained so in Byzantium.⁴⁷ But without friendship how to discuss intimacy and equality between two men? I suggest that some authors seized on

⁴⁵ Cf. *Council in Trullo*, canon 44 and related commentaries by Byzantine canonists, in Balsamon, (Theodore), *Opera* in J.P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Series Graeco-latina, (Paris: 1857-66), vols. 137-138, see also G.A. Rhalles & M. Potles, *Sintagma ton theion kai `ieron kanonon ktl*, 6 vols., (Athens: 1852-59). Thanks to Patrick Viscuso for this information.

⁴⁶ See for example the cases of Peter of Atroa and George discussed above.

⁴⁷ David Konstan, "Problems in the History of Christian Friendship", *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4:1 (1996), 87-113; Margaret Mullet, "Byzantium: A Friendly Society?", *Past and Present* 118 (1988), 3-23.

image of Christ the Bridegroom, to do so. Marriage to Christ, even at the cost of making the saint female, was a rhetorically powerful way to achieve the authors' goals.

Before coming to any more conclusions, let me point to two other areas where nuptial or near nuptial language was also used -- the writings of male mystics and hagiographers' attempts to represent intimacy between saints.

Impregnated Souls: Mystics

Contrary to Peter Brown's suggestion that Origen's use of nuptial language about the soul was displaced onto the body of the consecrated virgin women,⁴⁸ and well before the use of the image in the West, Byzantine mystical writers were willing turning themselves female in order to be a bride to Christ the Bridegroom. In the writings of such authors a heterosexual model of human relationships required that in relationship to the male Christ, the saint or mystic assume an a female role. In the mystical writers this becomes overtly erotic with the male Christ being said to penetrate the "female" soul of the mystic. Let me give just two examples:

Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022), writes:

76. The grace of the Holy Spirit is given as a pledge to souls that are betrothed to Christ: and just as without a pledge a women cannot be sure hat her union with a man will take place, so the soul will have no firm assurance that it will be joined for all eternity with its Lord and God, or be united with him mystically and inexpressibly, or enjoy his unapproachable beauty, unless it receives the pledge of his grace and consciously possess Him within itself.

78. It is as if the contact were written through the practice of the commandments and then signed and sealed by the virtues. Only the does Christ the bridegroom give his ring- the pledge of the Spirit - to the soul that is His bride to be.

79 Before the marriage the bride-to-he receives nothing but the pledge given by her future husband; she waits until after the marriage to receive the dowry that has been agreed upon and the gifts promised with it. So the Church - the bride-to-be

⁴⁸ Brown, *Body and Society*, 274.

composed of all the faithful- and the soul of each of us first receive from Christ the bridegroom-to-be, only the pledge of the Spirit....

81 Should the bride-to-be transfer her love from the man to whom she is affianced to another, sharing his bed, whether publicly or not, not only does she not receive anything of what her betrothed had promised her she might rightly expect censure and punishment.. The same is true in our case. If someone shifts the love he has for Christ, his betrothed, to the desire for some other thing.. he will become hateful and abhorrent to Christ and unworthy of being united with Him for it is written "I love (agapao) them that love me (phileo)" (Prov 8:17).⁴⁹

Niketas Stethatos (d.post 1076), a disciple of Symeon, is much more explicit in *On the Inner Nature of Things*:

48 There is nothing so kindred to the divine Logos as the soul's purity and chastity. Their mother is a devout all-embracing self control; and the father of this is fear For once fear has changed to longings and is imbued with desire for things divine, it makes the soul not only fearless and full of love for God, but also the very mother of the divine Logos

49 Once impregnated by fear, the soul becomes through repentance pregnant With the Logos of divine judgment the birth-pangs of hell encompass it, heartfelt anguish and travail afflict it as it reflects on the retribution hut for the evil it has done. Then, having through copious tears and labours gestated in the mind's womb the Spirit of salvation it has conceived, it brings it forth into the world of the heart. Thus liberated from the pangs of hell and the anguish of judgment, the soul is joyously filled with longing for the blessings in store for it; purity and chasteness attend on it and, spurred by intense desire, unite it with God. Through this union it experiences an ineffable delight and sheds the sweet pleasurable tears of compunction. Exempt from the ordinary forms of perceptions and as though in ecstasy following the bridegroom, it cries voicelessly, I pursue Thee in the fragrance of thy myrrh; tell me, O Thou whom my soul loves, Where Thou feedest Thy flock....Once the bridegroom has led the soul into the sanctuary of His hidden mysteries, He will initiate it with wisdom into the contemplation of the inner essences of created things.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Symeon the New Theologian, *One Hundred and Fifty-three Practical and Theological Texts*, 76-82, trans. in *The Philokalia*, ed. Palmer et al., Vol. 4., 40-41.

⁵⁰ Niketas Stethatos, *On the Inner Nature of Things*, 48-49, trans. in *The Philokalia*, ed. Palmer et al., Vol. 4., 120.

Let me emphasize that these are by no means isolated examples: Theoleptos of Philadelphia (c.1250-1322),⁵¹ Gregory of Sinai (1265-1346),⁵² and Gregory Palamas (1296-1359),⁵³ all make use of the imagery.

Nuptiality: United to Each Other

Saints lives do not only discuss the saints' intimate relationship with Christ. A number also discuss intimacy between the saints, texts which I can only signal here:.

For example:

Sergios and Bacchus in their Passion narrative.⁵⁴

Eusebonas and Abibon were founders of a "retreat of philosophy" which Symeon Stylites joined after their death, in Theodoret, *Philotheos Historia*.⁵⁵

Euthymios and Theoktistos in Cyril of Scythopolis, *Lives of the Monks of Palestine*.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Theoleptos of Philadelphia, *On the Inner Work in Christ*, trans. in *The Philokalia*, ed. Palmer et al., Vol. 4., 183.

⁵² Gregory of Sinai, *On Commandments and Doctrines*, trans. in *The Philokalia*, ed. Palmer et al., Vol. 4., 233.

⁵³ Gregory Palamas, *Topics of Natural and Theological Sciences*, trans. in *The Philokalia*, ed. Palmer et al., Vol. 4., 367.

⁵⁴ See the "Passio Antiquior SS. Sergii et Bacchi", cc.19-20, trans. Boswell, *Same Sex Unions*, 385. "Meanwhile the blessed Serge, deeply depressed and heartsick over the loss of Bacchus, wept and cried out, 'No longer, brother and fellow soldier, will we chant together, 'Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!' You have been unyoked [ἀπεξέυχθης] from me and gone up to heaven, leaving me alone on earth, bereft [literally, "made single"], without comfort." After he uttered these things, the same night the blessed Bacchus suddenly appeared to him with a face as radiant as an angel's, wearing an officer's uniform, and spoke to him. "Why do you grieve and mourn, brother? If I have been taken from you in body, I am still with you in the bond of union [τῷ τῆς ὁμολογίας συνδέσμῳ], chanting and reciting, 'I will run the way of thy commandments, when thou hast enlarged my heart.' Hurry then, yourself, brother, through beautiful and perfect confession to pursue and obtain me, when finishing the course. For the crown of justice for me is with you." At daybreak when he rose he related to those who were with him how he had seen the blessed Bacchus in the night and in what sort of garb."

Boswell's translation of this passage has been criticized, but the nuptial language is clearly present, a theme maintained in the Metaphrastic version of the life, where Bacchus calls Sergios "ὁ γλυκὺς ἐταῖρος καὶ ἐραστής" - his sweet companion and lover. See PG 115: 1024B. Although Boswell in *Same Sex Unions* takes as his main evidence for the rite 11th century and later liturgical manuscripts, it is well represented in the hagiography. See, for instance for the sixth century, the *Life of Symeon of Emesa* [next note], and *The Life of Theodore of Sykeon*, 134: and for the seventh century the *Life of John the Almsgiver*, 4.

⁵⁵ To describe their intimacy, Theodoret says that: "Having shared throughout life the same convictions and the same habits, and displayed as it were, one soul in two bodies, they made many love the world as they did." [Theodoret, *Historia*, 26: 4.]

⁵⁶ "He [Euthymios] had as neighbor an inspired man called Theoktistus. He came to love him and grew so united to him in spiritual affection that the two became indistinguishable in both conduct and thought and displayed, as it were one soul in two bodies". See Cyril of Scythopolis, *Lives*, ed. E. Schwartz, *Kyrrillos von Skythopolis*, Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur, 49:2

Symeon of Emesa and John in *Leontios Life of Symeon the Fool*.⁵⁷
 In the *Life of Mary the Younger*⁵⁸, intimacy between males is twice discussed in erotic and/or nuptial terms. In chapter 1, Mary's brother-in-law, Vardas Vratzes forms a relationship with one Nikephoros.⁵⁹ Later the focus shifts to Vaanes, Mary's son and also a saint in modern calendars.⁶⁰

This theme of male intimacy is often expressed in a particular way. The saints -- two men -- are said to have "two souls in one body".⁶¹ The phrase seems to originate as a Greek description of "philia", and is taken up by Aristotle in that light. It is used for a number of other relationships: brother-sister, the ecclesial community, mother-son, and sometimes for a close marriage as well.⁶²

Interpretations

How could Byzantine writers cast male saints and, in the case of mystics, even themselves in a bridal relationship to Christ?

(Leipzig: 1939). Trans. by R. M. Price, as *Lives of the Monks of Palestine*, (Kalamazoo MI: Cistercian 1991): Euthymios 7.

⁵⁷ Leontios of Neapolis, *Life of Symeon the Fool*, ed. Lennart Rydén, 134-137.

⁵⁸ *Vita Mariae Junioris, Acta Sanctorum*, (Brussels, etc.: 1643-) Novembris IV:692-705. English trans. by Angeliki Laiou, in *Holy Women of Byzantium*, ed. Talbot, 239-289. Laiou notes the nuptial connotations of the language used - see p.246, p.256n52, and p.284n142.

⁵⁹ "As with time their friendship grew even stronger, Vardas was eager to make it even closer: so he devised a firm and unbreakable bond. Once, as he was talking with Nikephoros, he said 'Since, of dearest of men, we have been connected and bound together so intimately, I think it proper to make this bond of love more forceful and perfect by adding to it the ties of a marriage alliance' [with Mary the Younger]". See *Vita Mariae Junioris* 2.

⁶⁰ Vaanes' relationship with another man is described as follows: "As his associate and helper in all his excellent exploits he had a certain Theodore, who succeeded his father as *tourmaches*, a man brave and robust in military matters, but braver still in the ways of God. Vaanes was yoked (*συζευχθεῖς*) to him like a pedigreed young bull, and together they plowed in themselves as though in a fertile land, and they sowed the seeds of virtue like the best of farmers". See *Vita Mariae Junioris* 30.

⁶¹ The phrase has a long history. Euripides [Orestes, l. 1046], has the phrase "one soul" - Elektra to Orestes describing their [brother-sister] relationship. Aristotle [Nic.Eth. 1168b] cites "mia psuche" as a saying. The Loeb renders this [the context is the nature of Philia], 'friends have one soul between them'.

Diogenes Laertius [Vita 5.19.12, l.20] says that in answer to the question "what is a friend", Aristotle replied "a single soul dwelling in two bodies". Anna Komnene [*Alexiad* 3:6] relates a document of Alexios Comnenos in which he states, in describing his relationship with his mother, "One soul in separate bodies". Michael of Ephesus [12th cent], in a Commentary on the Nic. Ethics, notes that in an epitaph for Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian [ie Nazianzus] had noted "one soul in two bodies". Cassian uses the same phrase for himself and his friend with whom he visits the eastern monasteries.

⁶² Praetextus: *Inscription on his Wife Paulina* [4th Cent.] "To you I could entrust the fast-closed depths of my own mind/And so as friends we have been joined in trust,/ By Long acquaintance, by shared

Let us review the evidence here. We have: male saints who are depicted as brides and bridegrooms, or in some other nuptial relationship to Christ: mystical writers who present their souls as female, so that they can describe their relationship with Christ in nuptial terms. On the other hand we also have (and this would be another paper): myriad cases of female saints being said to have a “man’s soul in a woman’s body”, for instance Gregory of Nyssa’s sister Makrina and Mary the Younger;⁶³ And let us not forget the innumerable “brides of Christ” who are also female.

In sum we now have a situation in which females saints are often said to have "male souls", while some male writers, who became saints, are often willing to say that their souls are female; and both males and females may be married to Jesus. I do not think it is going to far to assert that gendered imagery, far from being a pre-occupation of the modern academy, was a major category through which Byzantine authors discussed relationships with Christ and God..

One could argue that nuptial images simply feminize the male saint, just as female saints are masculinized as "athletes" and "warriors", and that what we see are the workings of some Gnostic desire for an original state of androgyny. The imagery of male saints, however, does not just mirror that of females: the masculinity of male saints, unlike the femininity of females, is well maintained by other metaphors (fatherhood, athletics, soldier status, public power).

I proposes that, in addition to considering the efforts of Byzantine writers to express types of human-divine and human-human relationships which approached

initiations of the gods./All in one bond of faith, one single heart, united in one mind.” See H. Dessau. *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae*, cited in Brown, *Body and Society*, 15.

equality, another approach to understanding the nuptial imagery in male saints *Lives* may be fruitful: examination of the working of erotic and gendered imagery in religious texts.

Consider first, for example the image of "bride of Christ" in reference to women. It is the very familiarity of the term which makes it work: familiarity with an image normalizes it even as the image retains its power because of the (hetero-)sexual role proposed. Christians can gaze upon the image and completely ignore the sexual aspect in a swirl of rhetoric about virginity and "angelic" lifestyles. The *topos*, though, continues derives its power from bringing to the user a direct image of a erotic relationship between Christ and the saint, an image which maintains its power but can be coped with only by a gaze which sees but does not acknowledge.

I suggest that the nuptial language about male saints and used by male mystics is not that different from the bridal imagery of female saints. Let us be frank, what they propose is a conjugal relationship with Christ, but, as with female "brides of Christ", a commonplace no-one finds shocking, it is possible for a culture to use a shocking image, which continues to derive its power from its shockingness, but nevertheless to normalize the image. What is proposed directly (since I see no feminization of Christ in these texts)⁶⁴ is some sort of same-sex nuptial connection, a proposal which I think is powerful, but "occluded" -- that is, obscured or psychologically put out of view -- for both the writer and his reader by its very impossibility.

⁶³ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of St. Macrina*, trans. Kevin Corrigan, (Toronto: Peregrina, 1987), 26, 32.: *Vita Mariae Junioris* 3.

⁶⁴ Christ is always the Bridegroom, and this is consistent in all the texts I have examined. Although arguments have been made that Christ is feminized in Christian art, I have not come across texts for this study in which Christ is feminized in metaphor as bride, although he is sometimes made into a passive "beloved" cf. Theodoret, *Historia*, Prol. 5, in which the monks are described as the lovers (*erastai*) of the beauty of God, and God, or Jesus, is described as the "beloved" (*eromenos*). For Christian art see Thomas F. Matthews, *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 119-141.

So here is the paradox. I simply did not believe that Byzantine authors would willingly propose male-male conjugal union as an image of a man's relationship to Christ. But then why did I believe that they would willingly propose an erotic relationship of female saints [or nuns] and Christ? In both cases they were prepared to use images which did precisely this.