On the Stage of *Eros*: Two Rhetorical Exercises by Nikephoros Basilakes*

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Sometime in the late 1130's or early 1140's, Nikephoros Basilakes (*ca.* 1115–after 1182), a prominent Constantinopolitan rhetor and *Teacher of the Epistles* in the Great Church, composed a series of rhetorical exercises, the so-called *Progymnasmata*.¹ Neither the exact date, nor the precise purpose and intended audience of these texts are known to us. One might assume that, like other such *progymnasmata*, these rhetorical pieces were part of Basilakes's educational programme and rhetorical display in Constantinopolitan schools and the *theatra* of the aristocratic elite.² Of these rhetorical exercises special attention has been drawn to those that treat the quite risky – for a Byzantine context – subject of *Eros*.³ For Byzantine discourse had a troublesome relationship with the erotic.

* I would like to thank Michael Putnam, whose work sparked many of the ideas discussed here, Debby Boedeker and David Konstan for their comments, and also Michael Grünbart.

1 For Basilakes's career see P. Magdalino, *The Bagoas of Nikephoros Basilakes: A Normal Reaction?*, in: L. Mayali/M. M. Mart (eds.), *Of Strangers and Foreigners (Late Antiquity – Middle Ages)*, Berkeley 1993, 47–63 with A. Garzya, *Storia e interpretazione di testi bizantini (Variorum Reprints CS 28)*, London 1974, VII–XII and XVI–XVII. For the likely date of Basilakes's *Progymnasmata* (A. Pignani, *Niceforo Basilace. Progimnasmi e monodie [Byzantina et neo-hellenica neapolitana 10]*, Naples 1983) see C. Cupane, *Metamorphosen des Eros: Liebesdarstellung und Liebesdiskurs in der byzantinischen Literatur der Komnenenzeit*, in: P. A. Agapitos/D. R. Reinsch (eds.), *Der Roman im Byzanz der Komnenenzeit. Referate des internationalen Symposiums an der Freien Universität Berlin, 3–6 April 1998 (Meletemata 8)*, Frankfurt am Main 2000, 25–54, at 33–34; Basilakes himself speaks of his “sweet-spoken *schedike*” as an early product of his rhetoric (Prologos = Or. A.3; Nicephori Basilacae orationes et epistolae, ed. A. Garzya, Leipzig 1984, 3.12–28).

2 Basilakes claims that his rhetoric drew a “great following around him” (Prologos = Or. A.3; 3.24–26). For *Progymnasmata* in general see H. Hunger, *Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur der Byzantiner* (HdAW XII, *Byzantinisches Handbuch* 5.1.2), Munich 1978, 192–120; R. Webb, *The Progymnasmata as Practice*, in: Y. L. Too (ed.), *Education in Greek and Roman Antiquity*, Leiden/Boston 2001, 289–316; and G. A. Kennedy, *Progymnasmata: Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric. Translated with Introductions and Notes (Writings from the Greco-Roman World 10)*, Atlanta 2003.

3 See e.g. R. Beaton, *The Medieval Greek Romance*, London/New York 1996, esp. chapter 2, and, recently, P. Roilos, *Amphoteroglossia: a Poetics of the Twelfth-Century Medieval Greek Novel* (Hellenic Studies 10), Washington, D.C. 2005, 32–40.

The subject of heterosexual and, even more so, same-sex erotic desire virtually ceases to exist in Byzantine discourse after the sixth century; that is, after the gradual disappearance, in terms of production, of the late antique novel and Greek erotic poetry.⁴ Eros, of course, never departed from the Byzantine psyche and imagination; and notable exceptions of erotic writing do exist.⁵ In comparison, however, to its Greco-roman predecessor, the Byzantine discursive production on the subject of eros appears meager. The 1140's, Basilakes's time, materializes a spectacular change in this respect.⁶ Eros is now a prominent theme and romantic fiction reappears, fusing erotic prose with poetry.⁷ Basilakes's rhetorical exercises on erotic topics are the first instances of this new discourse; his erotic progymnasmata are the first Byzantine erotic fictional texts since late antiquity and, therefore, deserve close scrutiny.

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- 4 See, e.g., H. G. Beck, *Byzantinisches Erotikon*, Munich 1986, *passim* with C. Cupane, *Byzantinisches Erotikon: Ansichten und Einsichten*, in: *JÖB* 37 (1987) 213–233; A. Kazhdan, *Byzantine Hagiography and Sex in the Fifth to the Twelfth Centuries*, in: *DOP* 44 (1990) 131–143; and C. G. Angelidi, *Αισθήσεις, σεξουαλικότητα και οπτασίες*, in: K. Nikolaou (ed.), *Ανοχή και καταστολή στους μέσους χρόνους. Μνήμη Λένου Μαυρομμάτη (Διεθνή Συμπόσια 10)*, Athens 2002, 221–229.
 - 5 Pagan erotic prose and poetry were often read in Byzantine educated circles; see P. A. Agapitos, *Narrative, Rhetoric, and 'Drama' Rediscovered: Scholars and Poets in Byzantium interpret Heliodoros*, in: R. Hunter (ed.), *Studies in Heliodorus* (Cambridge Philological Society. Supplementary Volume 21), Cambridge 1998, 125–156 on the reading of erotic prose and M. D. Lauxtermann, *Byzantine Poetry from Pisides to Geometres: Texts and Contexts. Volume One* (WBS XXIV/1), Vienna 2003, 98–107 and *passim* on the reading of erotic poetry. For a brief period, in the late ninth century, Byzantine authors even *produced* erotic poetry; see M. D. Lauxtermann, *Ninth-century classicism and the erotic muse*, in: L. James (ed.) *Desire and Denial in Byzantium* (Society for the Promotion of Byzantine Studies 6), Aldershot 1999, 161–169. To these, one must add the discourse of homosocial desire as evidenced in Byzantine letter-writing (see M. Mullett, *From Byzantium with Love*, in: L. James [ed.], *Desire and Denial in Byzantium*, Aldershot 1999, 3–22) and the highly eroticized discourse of Symeon the New Theologian and, especially, Michael Psellos.
 - 6 Whether or not this change was radical and/or unique within the history of medieval Byzantium is a question that cannot be addressed here. For an approach in the right direction see Agapitos, *Drama* (see n. 5).
 - 7 For Eros' prominence in the twelfth century see P. Magdalino, *Eros the King and the King of 'Amours': Some Observations on 'Hysmine and Hysminias'*, in: *DOP* 46 (1992) (= *Homo Byzantinus: Papers in Honor of Alexander Kazhdan*) 197–204 with C. Cupane, *Έως βασιλεύς: La figura di Eros nel romanzo bizantino d'amore*, in: *Atti dell' Accademia di scienze, lettere e arti di Palermo* 33/2 (1973–74) 243–297 and eadem, *Metamorphosen des Eros* (see n. 1). For the revival of romantic fiction see Beaton, *The Medieval Greek Romance* (see n. 3) with P. A. Agapitos/O. L. Smith, *The Study of Medieval Greek Romance: A Reassessment of Recent Work*, Copenhagen 1992, Roilos, *Amphoteroglossia* (see n. 3), and S. Papaioannou, *Performance as Mimesis: From Political to Fictional Discourse in Medieval Byzantium*, in: M. Mullett (ed.), *Performing Byzantium: Papers from the Thirty-eighth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies*, Queen's University, Belfast, March 2005, Aldershot 2007 (forthcoming) with further bibliography.

In what follows, I offer a translation and a close reading of two of Basilakes's *progymnasmata* that deal with erotic desire, specifically with incestual desire. If eros is a taboo in Byzantium, incest is *the taboo of taboos*. Incest is a topic rarely discussed; to my knowledge, it is talked about only in legal texts that signal the prohibition and, as one might expect, its severe punishment.⁸ That Basilakes dares to dramatize this risky topic is telling of both the new freedom of Byzantine discourse and, as we shall see, the accentuation of old constraints in the twelfth-century. Basilakes, as I wish to argue, turns the narrative of eros into a debate about the very possibility of narrating or, indeed, *staging* love.

Diēgēma and Ēthopoia

Basilakes's two *progymnasmata* derive their topic from the mythological story of Myrrha. Myrrha or, in some versions of the story, Smyrna was a legendary Levantine beauty who fell in love with her father, named Theias of Assyria in some versions as in Basilakes, or Cinyras of Cyprus, as e.g. in Ovid's famous reworking of the story. Escaping her father's anger with the help of the Gods, Myrrha was transformed into a tree whose bark weeps the eponymous *myrrh*. Later, Myrrha gave birth to the product of her incestuous affair, Adonis, who became the object of Aphrodite's desire and, in some versions, Ares's jealousy. As far as I can tell, Basilakes is the first to treat Myrrha's incest story in a *Progymnasma*.⁹ Indeed, after Hellenistic mythography as reported in Roman Greek scholarship, Basilakes is the first in premodern Greek discourse to devote a

8 See, e.g., Epanagoge 40.61 (ed. Zepos). On incest in Byzantium see J. Herrin/A. Kazhdan, Incest, in: ODB; on the western Middle Ages see, e.g., M. McLaughlin, Abominable Mingling: Father-Daughter Incest and the Law, in: Medieval Feminist Newsletter 24 (Fall, 1997) 26–30. The biblical incest story of the deception of Lot by his daughters (Genesis 19.30–38) does not figure much in Byzantine writing; in the middle Byzantine period, it is rarely mentioned – cf. Theodoros Studites, Μεγάλη κατήχησις 29 (ed. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, 208.2–15) and, notably, Theodoros Prodromos in his short poem Εἰς τὴν μέθην Λῶτ καὶ τὴν μετὰ τῶν θυγατέρων αὐτοῦ μίξιν (see G. Papagiannis, Jambische und hexametrische Tetrasticha auf die Haupterzählungen des Alten und Neuen Testaments [Meletemata 7,1–2], Hamburg 1997).

9 Adonis's story, nevertheless, was reworked in rhetorical exercises; Aphthonios (late fourth ce.) gives an example of the Adonis story for his definition of *narrative* (diēgēma); see his *Progymnasmata* 3 (ed. Rabe) to be read with the comments of Ioannes of Sardeis (ed. Rabe 1928; 32–33); cf. Kennedy, *Progymnasmata* (see n. 2), 96–97 and 192–193. See also Prokopios of Gaza (A. Garzya/R.-J. Loenertz [eds.], Procopii Gazaei epistolae et declamationes [Studia patristica et byzantina 5], Ettal 1963), who in the late fifth century made repeated references to Adonis in his rhetorical exercises, and Photius, Bibliotheca (ed. Henry; e.g. cod. 190), who in the ninth century has read such Adonis-related material.

text exclusively to Myrrha – if, that is, we leave aside *scholia* to the Hellenistic texts and a few references to Myrrha in patristic texts.¹⁰

The first exercise translated below is a *diēgēma*, a narrative, and the second exercise is an *ēthopoia*, a character-making or characterization. In late antique rhetorical handbooks, with which Basilakes must have been familiar, the *diegēma* is defined as “an exposition of an action that has happened or as though it had happened.”¹¹ It is the most elemental *progymnasma* that may belong to any of three types, namely “dramatic” (*i.e.* fictional), “historical”, or “political”¹² narrative, and that should display the virtues of “clarity, brevity, persuasiveness, and hellenism [*i.e.* proper, Attic diction].” The *ēthopoia* is a more elaborate rhetorical exercise, an “imitation of the character of a proposed speaker”.¹³ It too is divided in three types: “pathetical”, namely stressing the emotions of the speaker, “ethical”, focusing on character, disposition and will, and “mixed”, a combination of the previous two. The treatment of “characterization” requires the rhetor to keep his style “clear, concise, fresh, pure, free from any inversion and figure”, namely “vigorous ... extemporaneous ... in short phrases”, as Ioannes of Sardeis, a ninth(?)-century commentator, explains.¹⁴ Basilakes follows these generic requirements; he produces a “fictional”, brief, and clear narrative, and an ‘ethical’ characterization written in short phrases that imitate oral extemporaneous utterances.

10 For Hellenistic mythography in Roman Greek discourse see below n. 25. For references to Myrrha in patristic texts where one encounters an emphasis on morality see below n. 29; notably, in his tirade against Greek mythography in his second speech against Julian, Gregory of Nazianzus disparages stories of *metamorphosis* (Or. 5.32; nominal reference to the transformation of *Daphnē*). In the immediate aftermath of Basilakes’s rhetoric, Myrrha is mentioned at least three times: in the works of Basilakes’s student Ioannes Kinnamos (Ethopoeia 32–36; ed. Bánhegyi), in Eustathios of Thessalonike, Comm. on the Iliad 1.551.15–16 and 4. 275.11–17 (ed. van der Valk), and in Nicetae Choniatae orationes et epistolae, recensuit I. A. van Dieten (CFHB III – Series Berolinensis), Berlin/New York 1972, or. 6 (53.1–9).

11 Here, I cite Aphthonios, the late antique rhetorician who was most widely copied and read in Byzantium, Progymnasmata 2–3 (on narrative) and 34–36 (on characterization) (ed. Rabe) with Kennedy, Progymnasmata (see n. 2), 96–97 and 115–117.

12 With “political” Basilakes would have most likely understood “rhetorical” in the wide sense of the word: from judicial to epideictic rhetoric; for this development of the definition of “political” rhetoric see Papaioannou, Performance as Mimesis (see n. 7) and Basilakes, Or. B1 20 (ed. Garzya 18.19–19.2) with his *Bagoas* = Or. C, Protheōria 1 (ed. Garzya, 92.6–14).

13 On *ēthopoia* see recently E. Amato/J. Champ (eds.), Ethopoeia. La représentation de caractères entre fiction scolaire et réalité vivante à l’époque impériale et tardive, Salerno 2005. On Basilakes’s *ēthopoiiai* see S. Averincev, Zu den Ethopoiien des Nikephoros Basilakes, in: Eikon und Logos. Beiträge zur Erforschung byzantinischer Kulturtraditionen, Halle 1981, 9–14.

14 Ed. Rabe, 208–209 with Kennedy, Progymnasmata (see n. 2), 217 and 173–175.

Here are the texts:¹⁵

Progymnasma 23 (ed. Pignani, 99–100)

Narrative about Myrrha

Myrrha, the daughter of Theias, was graced by nature in her figure [*morphē*], yet was forced by Eros to transgress nature's law. She gazed at her father with the eyes of eros working them around his beauty. In appearance, she was cuddling him as her father, in truth she was embracing him as a beloved. [5] Thus she was nurturing Eros in the quarters of her soul; for to bring it to light posed not a small threat of danger. But as she could no longer bear Aphrodite's fire, she dares something, a scheme against her father. Being herself drunk in love, she devised another sort of drunkenness as a help to Eros. [10] Lighting up all the mixing bowls of wine with the fire of Dionysus, she studies [*meleta*] to burn Theias's soul asunder. Filled with drunkenness, the father becomes a lover and lets his daughter approach him as his beloved. He did not consider nature, he did not think of the evil. Yearn and wine were tossing his mind in waves – eros and wine, those two thieves of human souls. [15] The one, gushing in like a sweet friend,¹⁶ whirled Theias's head like a traitor. The other put to sleep Theias's mind, namely the guardian sitting in his head as if in the city's fortress; for eros, finding the gates of his soul wide open, set up a trophy against self-mastery [*sōphrosynēs*]. [20]

Yet the daughter came back again to her senses, and losing Aphrodite's drunkenness now considers the future, thinks of her father's anger, expects to suffer the worse, and, before Theias wakes up from his stupor, prays to the gods to change her nature. And the gods, having sympathy for the girl, change her into a tree. [25] Still, Eros's work did not end up into nothing, even if the girl ended up as a tree. When the time of labor came, the bark breaks apart, and some creature of irresistible beauty, Adonis, shines forth and Aphrodite's love-game begins.

Progymnasma 51 (ed. Pignani, 207–210)

What Eros might say upon seeing a wood-cutter attempting to cut Myrrh(a) while she is still pregnant with Adonis.

Hold, o wood-cutter, your axe! Hold it! Do not strike your iron against Myrrha. She is not an oak, a tree of the mountain-dweller Pan, so that she might lie exposed to the

15 Pignani offers a translation in Italian for both texts; see: Pignani, Niceforo Basilace. *Progimnasmī e monodie* (see. n. 1), 281 and 354–355; for a review of Pignani's and Garzya's edition of Basilakes see the remarks by D. R. Reinsch in: *BZ* 80 (1987) 84–91.

16 For the friend as "sweet" see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1108a27–28 with Aspasius, *Comm. on the Nicomachean Ethics* 158 (ed. G. Heylbut, *Aspasii in ethica Nicomachea quae supersunt commentaria*, Berlin 1889) and Michael Psellos, *De omnifaria doctrina*. Critical Text and Introduction by L. G. Westerink, Utrecht 1948, 80.

stroke of oakcutters. Nor is she an ashtree, the favorite of Ares,¹⁷ so that she might be cut by iron yet still grow back a sharp weapon. [5] Rather, she is a *drama* of Eros and Aphrodite's stage. She is a beautiful girl that has put on the mask [*prosōpeion*] of a tree. She is afraid of her father's threat; she has taken on the figure [*schēmatizetai*] of an insensate nature.

What? You are to become even worse than her father Theias? Why do you threaten so harsh an iron against so soft a girl? Heed to what is holy for Eros: Honor Hyacinth, [10] do not cut Narcissus, both of whom nature adorned, both of whom Eros planted. Respect beautiful Daphne, oracular Daphne, Apollo's Daphne, Daphne, Laurel of Eros. If you see an 'apple-tree of bright fruit'¹⁸ remember the golden apple together with Aphrodite, and admire the beauty of the fruit, and [15] worship Eros. If you see an Assyrian palm-tree,¹⁹ know that he, though a tree, is not insensate to Aphrodite. And if, finally, you see Myrrha, let your hand drop, let the iron go. Her outside skin is a minor barrier; inside there flourishes a great garden of beauty. I am Eros, the wise one, [20] and I stage a performance [*drama*] of love.²⁰ I am Eros, the skillful one and the beautiful, the young one as well as old, sending forth my arrows while also smiling – what hearts must not be without love, neither should what gladdens be without pain. I grafted this tree with wine. It shall bear its fruit, a child of Aphrodite's fire. Aphrodite, the mother, will drink this cup. [25] She will forget her love for Ares. This is how I will dance the mother to her fall, this is how I will fight against Ares.

Myrrha was beautiful. Her father was beautiful too, no less than the daughter. Yet, he was following the laws of nature, [30] ignoring *my* laws. He failed to see how it is Eros who produces nature, it is Eros from whom all generation stems. Zeus might be the father of men and gods, yet I am the forefather of Zeus himself, more ancient than Kronos, more primal than Ouranos. The lot of Zeus is the heavens, of Poseidon the sea, and Hades rules things under the earth. [35] But it is I who rules over everything altogether. The 'all-subduer god',²¹ thus I am known. Inescapable a winged one, invincible an archer, infallible a torchbearer I am. I travel through everywhere with my wings. I strike everyone with my arrows, even when they attempt to hide under darkness. My fire is inexhaustible and I hunt the fleeing man down. [40] Myrrha's fa-

17 Cf. Hesiod, Works and Days 143–147, on the “brazen race, sprung from ash-trees”, men who ... “loved the works of Ares”.

18 Cf. Homer, Odyssey 7.115 (cf. 11.589), where a description of the courtyard of the Phaeacians. See also Ioannes Geometres, Progymnasmata 4.14 (ed. A. R. Littlewood, The Progymnasmata of Ioannes Geometres, Amsterdam 1972), and Nikephoros Basilakes, Progymnasmata 55.7f.

19 Cf. Galen, De locis affectis 428.5–6 (ed. Kühn), Philostratus, Imagines 1.9.6 (eds. Bendorff/Schenkl), and, especially, E. Vilborg [ed.], Achilles Tatius, Leucippe and Clitophon (Studia Graeca et Latina Gothoburgensia 15), Stockholm 1962, 117.

20 “Of love” translates “φιλοτήσιον”; cf. Lexicon in carmina Gregorii Nazianzeni (cod. Paris. Coislin. 394), phi 44 (D. Ch. Kalamakes, Λεξικά τῶν ἔπων Γρηγορίου τοῦ Θεολόγου μετὰ γενικῆς θεωρήσεως τῆς πατερικῆς λεξικογραφίας, Athens 1992).

21 As far as I can tell, it is Nonnus (fifth ce.) who first speaks of Eros as the all-subduer (usually an attribute of Hypnos or Chronos); cf. Dionysiaca 2.223, 3.171–172 (ed. Keydell). Cf. Agapetus (sixth ce.), Capitula admonitoria 68 and, notably, Constantine Manasses, Aristarchos and Callithea 95.1 (O. Mazal, Der Roman des Konstantinos Manasses [WBS IV], Vienna 1967), on Eros, with Theodoros Prodromos, Carmina historica 18.71 (W. Hörandner [ed.], Theodoros Prodromos. Historische Gedichte [WBS XI], Vienna 1974), on the emperor John Comnenus.

ther failed to see these things. He revered the gods of family,²² he put Zeus the god of fatherhood first.²³ He guarded his daughter within the virgins' quarters, but neglected the beauty he was holding in his house. He did not gaze upon her as a lover, but, like a father, kept his daughter within the house. Well, at this point, I provide Bacchus as an ally to the girl. I divide the war in a double fire [45] – both a child has now her soul burning in the father's desire, and a chaste father is rendered bacchic by his daughter's wine. When my war was over and done with, I raise the girl as its trophy. Whenever one might see this very Myrrha, now a tree, he will remember this battle, he will marvel its strategist. [50]

Are you, farmer, not scared when tearing up a trophy of a great god? Don't you perceive the bow of the myth-lover god, the archer god, when attempting to cut a myth so beautiful?

It is you, o Ares, who are being unjust by being jealous to the baby before its birth; you are being unjust to the mother herself [55] by cutting the roots of her child before its sprouting. Why do you arm a tree-cutting hand into bloodthirsty murder? You will – I know this well –, you *will* kill Adonis, yet only after his birth, only after Aphrodite desires him, only after he reaches adolescence. Then, jealousy will nibble you, so that thorn might nibble [60] Aphrodite and her blood, streaming, might color the rose in its purple. For it is from the gods and their stream of blood that all the perfect things are to grow: Aphrodite among the gods, Man among the animals, Rose among the trees. Then you will kill your opponent lover, you will guard your beloved, you will become 'the bane of mortals'²⁴ beyond doubt. [65] What a decline, if now your man-killing turns into tree-cutting and you lose your ancient and dear title, while you also deprive me of this my all-beautiful and great *drama*, deprive the Graces of the infant child, Aphrodite of her desire, beauty of her rose, deprive the Muses of their song. [70]

Yet you are not allowed to both rule over the Goddesses of Fate and put me, Eros, to flight. For I need to also emit my arrows against the mother so that she knows what kind of a child she carries. For all this, I produced a plant out of heaven, and will straightaway deliver a man from a tree.

The Stage of Eros

The first of these two pieces, the "Narrative about Myrrha", rehearses the Myrrha story as we know it from Hellenistic mythography – most likely Basilakes knew the Hellenistic story as this survived in Roman Greek writing and medieval com-

22 A classical Greek expression (see e.g. Plato, *Laws* 729c and 881d) employed by such late antique authors as Julian (e.g. *Περὶ τῶν τοῦ αὐτοκράτορος πράξεων ἢ περὶ βασιλείας* 28; ed. Bidez), but rarely used in medieval Greek texts; for an exception see Ioannes Zonaras, *Epitome of Histories* 2.102.24–27 (ed. Dindorf).

23 Cf. e.g. Julian, *Letters* 89b97–98 (ed. Bidez) and previous note.

24 This is the epithet of Ares in Homer; see e.g. *Iliad* 5.518 and 846.

mentary tradition.²⁵ Myrrha falls in love with her father; at first, the desire remains only in her mind, she then proceeds to deceive her father, and act upon her desire, and her father finally sleeps with her. Myrrha realizes what she has done; in fear of her father's reaction, she seeks refuge with the gods who feel mercy for her and transform her into a tree. Later, Myrrha, now a tree, gives miraculously birth to Adonis and this birth sets the beginning of a new love-story, that between Adonis and Aphrodite. At first glance, this outline shares with the traditional Hellenistic narrative two basic points: (a) Myrrha is responsible to a great degree for her disastrous passion, while her father is – in most versions – free of guilt and (b) the focus of the story is the fate of Myrrha, *her* illicit action and *her* consequent transformation into the betwixt – neither animate nor fully inanimate – condition.

Basilakes, however, omits two important elements from the traditional story, introduces one new feature, and slightly shifts the emphasis of the narrative. He does not mention the place and time of the event²⁶; the placement of the story in the East, and in the distant past, was an essential aspect of the original narrative that Basilakes has omitted. Basilakes also does not allude to any moral failure on the part of Myrrha.²⁷ He, rather, attributes Theias's misconduct to the drinking of wine²⁸ and introduces Eros as the primary origin of Myrrha's action. The effect of these nuances is significant. Basilakes does not defamiliarize the event by setting it at a safe distance from its readers. And by not foregrounding the *illicitness* of

25 See Pseudo-Apollodorus (first two centuries CE?), *Bibliotheca* 3.181–186 (ed. Wagner) – the text was read by Photius (cod. 186) and used by Ioannes Tzetzes in the twelfth century – and Antoninus Liberalis (second century CE?), *Metamorphoseon synagoge* 34 (Antoninus Liberalis, *Les métamorphoses*. Texte établi, traduit et commenté par M. Papatomopoulos, Paris 1968) – the text survives in a single ninth century manuscript; cf. J.-C. Carrière/B. Massonnie, *La bibliothèque d'Apollodore: traduite, annotée et commentée* (Annales littéraires de l'Université de Besançon 443), Paris 1991, esp. 17–19 and 113–114, F. Celoria, *The Metamorphoses of Antoninus Liberalis: A Translation With Commentary*, London/New York 1992, esp. 14–17 and 93, and A. Cameron, *Greek Mythography in the Roman World*, New York/Oxford 2004. See further Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 19.94–98 (ed. Niese) (a reference to a mime performance of the Myrrha story! Cf. K. M. Coleman, *Fatal Charades: Roman Executions Staged as Mythological Enactments*, in: *JRS* 80 [1990] 44–73, at 64 with H. H. Chapman, *Spectacle and Theater in Josephus's Bellum Judaicum*, Dissertation Stanford University 1998, esp. 64 n. 218) and Lucian, *De Saltatione* 58–59 (ed. Harmon). For the *scholia* tradition – usually on Ps.-Lycophron (second ce. BCE), *Alexandra* 828–830 where a passing reference to Myrrha (ed. Mascialino) – see, e.g., *Scholia in Lycophron* 829 (ed. Scheer). Notably it is only in the *scholia* to Lycophron's *Alexandra* that the names of Daughter (Myrrha) and Father (Theias) correspond exactly with Basilakes's version of the story.

26 Even if a 'narrative' according to late antique rhetorical theory required spatial and temporal indications; see Kennedy, *Progymnasmata* (see n. 2), 96–97.

27 Nor does he mention the old nurse who, according to some versions of the original story, helped and supported Myrrha in deceiving her father.

28 Cf. how Prodrornos similarly attributes Lot's incest to wine: Theodoros Prodrornos (see. n. 8).

Myrrha's desire, Basilakes deemphasizes the supposed female natural deviousness in the original story. Her actions are not a result of *her* immorality, but of the invincible force of Eros.

With these changes to the original story, Basilakes sets the background for his "characterization", the speech that Basilakes has Eros deliver "upon seeing a wood-cutter attempting to cut Myrrha while she is still pregnant with Adonis." Facilitated by the conventions of the *ēthopoia*, Basilakes sets the story in the present tense. Thereby, he now familiarizes the myth by addressing the speech to "a wood-cutter" who could momentarily be anyone in Basilakes's audience or readership. He makes Eros – and, as we shall see, several other male figures – the main focus, indeed the protagonist(s) of the story. Myrrha is no longer the center of the narrative; at its center are Eros, his performance (*drama*), his male agent (Theias), his male audience, the wood-cutter, and (later in the text) Ares.²⁹ Furthermore, by having Eros, the one who provoked the incestuous desire and staged the illicit affair, speak in the first person singular,³⁰ Basilakes removes any reference to morality. Eros speaks of his absolute power, not caring about his immorality or, as in the original story, the immorality of his agents.

The familiarization of the myth, the focus on Eros, and the avoidance of the moral connotations of incest have several effects in the levels of meaning that Basilakes sets in motion in the *ēthopoia*. There are two such levels that I wish to discuss here: (a) the selfhood and (b) the aesthetics that Eros projects by speaking in the first person singular.

Let us look at selfhood first. As already noted, Myrrha is no longer the main character in the story. She is transformed into a mere object, a passive inanimate creature, that merely implements the will of Eros. She tries to escape the anger of

29 It is noteworthy that, in the Christian references to the Myrrha story, it is the moral failure of the *father* that is highlighted; see especially Cyril of Alexandria, Comm. on Isaiah 440.41–55 at 43–45 (PG 70): τὴν τοῦ Κινύρου τινὸς θυγατέρα, ὃς δὴ καὶ ἀχαλίνους ὁρμαῖς ταῖς εἰς φιληδονίαν ἡττώμενος, συνεπλέκετο μὲν ἀσελγῶς τῇ ἰδίᾳ θυγατρὶ. See also Prokopios of Gaza (see n. 9), Comm. on Isaiah 2137.47–54 (PG 87) with Pseudo-Nonnus (sixth ce.), Scholia on Gregory of Nazianzus's Orations, 5.38 (ed. Nimmo Smith); cf. J. Nimmo Smith, A Christian's Guide to Greek Culture: The Pseudo-Nonnus 'Commentaries' on Sermons 4, 5, 39 and 43 by Gregory of Nazianzus (Translated Texts for Historians 37), Liverpool 2001, 123 and Arethas(?), Scholia on Clement of Alexandria 338 (eds. Stählin/Treu).

30 That Eros is speaking here in the first person singular is not a common literary trope. For a rare similar case see Lucian, Dialogues of the Gods (ed. Macleod) with D. Konstan, Enacting Eros, in: M. C. Nussbaum/J. Sihvola (eds.), The Sleep of Reason: Erotic Experience and Sexual Ethics in Ancient Greece and Rome, Chicago 2002, 354–373. As far as the genre of the *ēthopoia* is concerned, the single other instance where Eros is introduced as the speaking subject is to be found in an *ēthopoia* poem: Palatine Anthology 9.449 (ed. Beckby); for such *progymnastic* poems see L. Rossi, Composition and Reception in AP 9.1–583: Aphegheseis, Epideixeis and Progymnasmata, in: M. A. Harder/R. F. Regtuit/G. C. Wakker, (eds.), Hellenistic Epigrams (Hellenistica Groningana 6), Leuven 2002, 151–174.

her father, and, now as a tree, is about to suffer the violence of yet another man, the wood-cutter. Myrrha is weak, soft, “her outside skin is a minor barrier” (51.18). Her subjectivity is thus rendered mute, subjected as she is to a male-dominated world. Eros might not be accusing Myrrha for immorality or female weakness (the underlying theme of the earlier versions of the story); yet neither is Eros pro-female. His concern is not to protect Myrrha or the natural world that she represents, but to protect, as he says (51.48), his “trophy”, his work.

In contrast to Myrrha, Eros, the *I* of the story, imagines himself to be in control. *His* subjectivity is portrayed as encompassing the two primary features of the active and, therefore, masculine self: wisdom and power.³¹ In this capacity, Eros suggests that he is the one who invents, sets the script, and directs the drama of Myrrha (51.5 and 19–20). He is the one who sets the rules, the “laws”, in the world in general (51.29–31). And Eros is not alone in his masculinity, for he recapitulates the features of some of the other male figures in the story. Eros shares, for instance, his military prowess with his main opponent in the story, Ares.³² Ares too is presented with an active, powerful self, since he will eventually win against and kill Adonis. And the wood-cutter also, Eros’s initial addressee, is presented as one about to act, about to exercise violence.

The masculinity of these selves, however, is not an unconstrained one. Another male figure in the story, Theias, Myrrha’s father, sets the tone. Theias is also an active self. He too – as implied in the story – has threatened to try his sword on his daughter (Eros compares Theias to the wood-cutter: “You are to become even worse than her father Theias? Why do you threaten so harsh an iron against so soft a girl?”).³³ Theias thus possesses the will to power – he tries to guard his daughter, he tries to enforce the laws of Zeus, the laws of parenthood. His power, however, is a somewhat failed one; his selfhood, as it were, is limited by the superior selfhood of Eros. Indeed, at a closer look, Theias’s failure infects all male subjects in the story. For everyone (Eros, Ares, the wood-cutter, Theias, Zeus, Adonis) is depicted in the *ēthopoia* as *willing to* or *about to* do things rather than actually *doing* anything. Every male is caught in a state of incom-

31 On power see, e.g., above n. 21; on Eros’s wisdom see especially line 19 (“I, the wise one”) with Ps.-Lucian, *Erotes* 23 (ed. Macleod), Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe and Clitophon* (ed. Vilborg), 5.27, and, notably, Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* 7.110 (ed. Keydell) as well as Michael Psellos, *Philosophica minora* I 49.7 (ed. Duffy), a quotation from the sixth-century Neoplatonist David, *Prolegomena philosophiae* 1.8–9 (ed. Busse).

32 Eros is portrayed also in martial metaphors: “how I will fight against Ares” ... “I divide the war” (51.26–27 and 44–45).

33 Notably, the punishment that Byzantine legal texts prescribed for incest was to be performed “with a sword”; see above n. 8.

pleteness: Eros has not completed his drama,³⁴ Ares has not yet conquered his enemy, the wood-cutter has not yet decided on the blow of his ax, Theias has not punished his daughter, Adonis has not conquered Aphrodite. None, that is, has complete authority. Adonis is defeated by Ares, Theias is subdued by Eros, the wood-cutter is a mere agent of Ares, Ares has temporarily submitted to Fate, and Eros, despite his grand proclamations, will *not* eventually be victorious because Ares will destroy Adonis (Eros's product). Basilakes's text is thus populated by selves that are either passive and instrumental, namely the female figure of Myrrha,³⁵ or incompletely active, namely male figures whose authority is at stake and at risk.

Along with selfhood, aesthetics is a main theme in the speech of Eros. Eros is proud of his sophistry, his drama, staging, and mythmaking. He is, as he proclaims, a "lover of myth [*philomythos*],"³⁶ and a "skillful [*deinos*]" rhetor.³⁷ The appearance of his story matters to him. Notably, the structures of passivity and incomplete activity which, I suggested, define Eros's conception of selfhood, seem to be operative in his aesthetics as well. For two distinct entities comprise Eros's image of his art. First, there is the performance and story itself. The drama (*both* performance *and* narrative) is a passive entity, just like Myrrha. It possesses beauty, but not power. Eros makes this clear by equating Myrrha with his performance in a brilliant instance of metonymy: "Are you, farmer, not scared when tearing up a trophy of a great god? Don't you perceive the bow of the myth-lover god, the archer god, when attempting to cut a *myth* so beautiful?" (51.51–54). Myrrha, the tree, is equal to "Myrrha", the myth. The wood-cutter is about to cut not simply a tree, but also a myth. This myth is produced by another, and is also at the hands of another; the myth is not self-subsistent, nor does it define its destiny.

The second entity of Eros's aesthetics is comprised by those who vie to control the story: the producer and the recipient(s) of the Myrrha story. As one might

34 In the Eros *ēthopoia*-poem from the Palatine Anthology (9.449 [ed. Beckby], see n. 30), Eros's rule is also contested: Eros speaks as if he *himself* has fallen in love!

35 And that of Aphrodite, for that matter.

36 Aristotle (Metaphysics 982b11–21), Synesius (Letter 105; Synesii Cyrenensis epistolae, A. Garzya recensuit [Scriptores Graeci et Latini], Rome 1979, 188.17–189.1) and Michael Psellos (Philosophica minora [ed. Duffy], I 43.8–12) speak of the philosopher as *philomythos*, Synesius (e.g. Dion 4.31–32; [ed. Terzaghi] and others describe children as lovers of myth, and, finally, Achilles Tatius, Leucippe and Clitophon [ed. Vilborg], 5.5) writes of the *philomython* gender of women.

37 *Deinos* is a word that, most significantly, implies rhetorical skill; cf. Hermogenes, On the Forms, passim (ed. Rabe). Note also how the verb *meletaō* that Eros uses in the first person singular (line 20) indicates in Basilakes's texts both devising – usually an act of a god – and rhetorical declamation; see *Progymnasmata* 49.22–23, 54.50–51 (ed. Pignani) with Prologos = Or. A.13 (ed. Garzya, 9.5).

expect, these are male figures; either the author/speaker/director or the reader/listener/viewer of the passive text/myth/drama is a man. It is clear who the male author is; it is, of course, Eros. It is less clear who the male addressee might be. Initially, it is the wood-cutter; then it is Ares. Theias too is, to a certain extent, the addressee since he witnesses the beauty of Myrrha and receives her subduing wine. Ultimately, the receiver, the implied “you” of Eros’s speech, is anyone in Basilakes’s – mostly male – audience,³⁸ who must decide on its meaning and future fate.

Now, these male figures who produce and receive the story are, again, not unrestrained. Basilakes sets his author and reader in a competing relationship. We do not know who ultimately controls Myrrha, the text/myth/drama. The author and his audience, just like Eros and Ares or Eros and the wood-cutter, battle for the control of the story and this battle is left without a winner. Ingeniously manipulating the first-person narrative, Basilakes leaves the fate of Myrrha, the tree *and* the story, open-ended. As no action *in* the story is completed, so also *outside* the story no writing or reading, performing or viewing, is finalized. The author Eros does not know whether he will be able to create another myth, nor has the reader, listener, or viewer formulated an opinion. One is left wondering whether Eros will continue his myth-making performance or if his addressee will accept or reject this performance, if, that is, the recipient of the myth will lower his ax against it.

Synkrisis

In order to explicate this parallel configuration of selfhood and aesthetics in Eros’s speech, it is worth setting Basilakes’s *ēthopoiia* in a further comparison with the most well-known Myrrha narrative, namely the Myrrha episode in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (10.298–502).³⁹ The point of this comparison is not to suggest any relationship of influence of the Roman poet to the Byzantine rhetor – it is highly unlikely that Basilakes was aware of Ovid’s version. Rather, my aim is to illuminate further Basilakes’s approach to the Myrrha story, which is – one should keep in mind – an *illicit type of story*, namely a fictional story, about an *illicit type of desire*, incestual desire. As is apparent, Ovid’s discourse presents its

38 Basilakes makes this identification easier by introducing the “wood-cutter” as the initial addressee; he is the only *real* – i.e. not mythological – human within the text.

39 For another such comparison between Basilakes and Ovid see Garzya, *Storia e interpretazione* (see n. 1), XVII = Ovide, Nicéphore Basilakès et le mythe de Pasiphaé, in: *Latomus* 26 (1967) 477–479 and idem, *Une rédaction byzantine du mythe de Pasiphaé*, in: *Le parole e le idee* 9 (1967) 222–226.

reader with its own multiple layers of meaning; my comparison here will briefly touch upon some main issues.

Ovid's and Basilakes's treatment of the Myrrha narrative are remarkably similar in at least two ways. First, they both elaborate further and dramatize the myth of Myrrha and, secondly, they cultivate carefully the story's meta-discursive potentials. Basilakes, as we noted, alters and elaborates the original story; he re-familiarizes the myth, de-moralizes its emphasis, and refocuses the narrative upon the male figures (actors, authors, readers). Basilakes turns the story into a performance by Eros. Ovid too dramatizes the myth, alternating his register from third person narrative, to first-person discourse (Myrrha's own speech), and dialogue (between Myrrha, her father, and the nurse). Now, Ovid, unlike Basilakes, retains the safe distance that is to separate Myrrha from Ovid's readers. The story takes place in the East (cf. 10.476–478). It also takes place in a distant past that is, notably, narrated by an internal narrator, Orpheus, and *not* Ovid himself.⁴⁰ Ovid also retains Myrrha's centrality; as in Hellenistic mythography, in Ovid too the narrative is about Myrrha and not, as in Basilakes, about Eros. Indeed, in Ovid the story is still about a *woman* – and, for that matter, femaleness in general; the nurse, absent from Basilakes's version, plays a major role in the realization of the incestuous affair. Yet, like Basilakes, Ovid too departs in significant ways from the original story.⁴¹

The main departure, in my view, is the foregrounding and exploration of what was an underlying focus of the original myth: female desire vs. morality. Piety is a repeated reference in Orpheus's narration (cf. lines 10.302–303; 345–355). This piety, however, is not uncontested. Ovid undermines the moral authority of his narrator; Orpheus is himself morally ambiguous.⁴² Then, Ovid (and this is his innovation) lets us hear – always of course through Orpheus's song – Myrrha's internal thought-process. In Ovid – not so in Basilakes – Myrrha *speaks*.⁴³ Her *discordia mentis* (445) becomes the center of the narrative. In fact, Ovid does not

40 As Michael Putnam notes, Myrrha's story is "the longest of the tales that Ovid has Orpheus chant to his gathering of trees, beasts and birds"; M. C. J. Putnam, *Ovid, Virgil and Myrrha's Metamorphic Exile*, in: *Vergilius* 47 (2001) 171–193, at 171. On Ovid's Orpheus see C. Segal, *Orpheus: The Myth of the Poet*, Baltimore/London, 1998.

41 For discussion of Ovid's departure from Hellenistic mythography see W. S. Anderson, *Ovid's Metamorphoses*, Books 6–10: Edited, with Introduction and Commentary, Norman 1972, 501–517; cf. also Cameron, *Greek Mythography* (see n. 25), 272 n. 78.

42 As Anderson, *Ovid's Metamorphoses* (see n. 41), 503 remarks, "Orpheus, who advocates pederasty, somewhat 'puritanically' criticizes Nature for permitting incest and then assumes a self-righteous air as a Thracian free of such corruption ... Ovid may well be poking fun at his chosen narrator."

43 *Metamorphoses* 10.320–355; this is Myrrha's "long speech of alternate self-condemnation and self-justification", to cite G. Tissol, *The Face of Nature: Wit, Narrative, and Cosmic Origins in Ovid's Metamorphoses*, Princeton, N.J. 1997, 38.

simply focus on Myrrha's in-between position; he makes it the point of the story. The indeterminate internal condition of Myrrha's desire is left unresolved in her final transformation, a transformation presented both as a punishment as well as a blessing (499–502).⁴⁴ Thus, Ovid foregrounds morality – just like Basilakes foregrounds the masculinity of the male figures in the story – , only in order to render it permanently ambiguous, indeterminate, undefined.⁴⁵

Ovid knows well that indeterminacy is always also a *linguistic* issue. As has been noted, Ovid makes language part of the Myrrha's drama, where the indeterminate use of language and ambiguous meanings of words are essential to Myrrha's permanently transient condition. I will not go into the details of Ovid's meta-discursive use of Myrrha's story here – this is a feature well analyzed by others⁴⁶; what I simply wish to point is how Basilakes operates in a similar fashion. For Basilakes too makes discourse, as performance and as myth-making, part of the story. As remarked above, the fate of Myrrha's *drama*, just like the fate of Myrrha's tree, remains unresolved, suspended between Eros's self-proclaimed authorial power and the reader's yet undecided ax.⁴⁷

There exists a third, deeper, layer in which Ovid's and Basilakes's writing meet. It has been rightly suggested, in reference to Ovid's Myrrha narrative, that there are significant parallels between the in-between, exile-like condition of Myrrha's metamorphosis and Ovid's presentation of his own exilic experience

44 See, e.g., B. R. Nagle, Byblis and Myrrha: Two Incest Narratives in the 'Metamorphoses', in: CJ 78 (1983) 301–315, at 301 with C. Segal, Ovid's Metamorphic Bodies: Art, Gender, and Violence in the *Metamorphoses*, in: Arion 5 (1998) 9–41, at 29–31 and Putnam, Ovid, Virgil and Myrrha's Metamorphic Exile, (see n. 40), esp. 175.

45 See Tissol, The Face of Nature (see n. 43), esp. 41–42. Indeed, it is an astonishing coincidence that, in his *ēthopoia*, Basilakes dramatizes *in extenso* a metaphor that Ovid employs in order to depict Myrrha's indecisiveness (verses 372–376): "... quid agat, non invenit utque securi / saucia trabs ingens, ubi plaga novissima restat, / quo cadat, in dubio est omnique a parte timetur, / sic animus vario labefactus vulnere nutat / huc levis atque illuc momentaque sumit utroque"; in Philip Ambrose's translation (Ovid. The Metamorphoses [Focus Classical Library]; Newburyport, MA 2004): "without discovering what to do, and just as a large tree struck by an axe, when just the final blow remains, is unclear where it will fall and thus is feared on every side, so her mind faltering from diverse blows, flits hither and thither, impelled in both directions at once."

46 See especially Tissol, The Face of Nature (see n. 43), 36–52 and *passim*; cf., e.g., J. T. Dyson, Myrrha's Catabasis, in: CJ 94 (1998–1999) 163–167, at 166, Nagle, Byblis and Myrrha (see n. 44), 308, n. 22, or S. Raval, 'A Lover's Discourse': Byblis in Metamorphoses 9, in: Arethusa (2001) 285–311.

47 It might be useful to note that while drama as theater is contested in Basilakes, Ovid plays with the language of ritual; cf. Anderson, Ovid's Metamorphoses (see n. 41), 502–503 (cf. above n. 41) ad 10.300–303 with M. Lowrie, Myrrha's Second Taboo, Ovid 'Metamorphoses' 10.467–468, in: CP 88 (1993) 50–52 and Putnam, Ovid, Virgil and Myrrha's Metamorphic Exile (see n. 40), 171 and n. 1.

and poetic achievement.⁴⁸ Behind Myrrha's indeterminate fate, that is, there lies an authorial persona, Ovid's persona, whose own fate via his poetic creation is equally indeterminate. In this respect too, Basilakes resembles Ovid. If we turn to Basilakes's other works, either fictional (such as the rest of the *Progymnasmata*), semi-fictional (like the *Bagoas*), or autobiographical (such as his *Prologos* to his edition of his own works), we will discover some of the main themes of his Myrrha *ēthopoia* anew.

In many of his rhetorical exercises, Basilakes explores the fluid boundaries of gender, especially the fragile nature of masculinity. As in the speech of Eros, so also in other *Progymnasmata*, Basilakes displays men challenged or even feminized by the workings of desire.⁴⁹ These workings are presented as artistic or discursive creations, simulations and performances (*schēma*, *mimēsis*, and *drama* are some of the recurrent terms), that aim at subjecting their audiences.⁵⁰ Discourse and art, that is, along with gender, are dramatized, and, consequently, problematized in Basilakes's rhetorical world. Never criticized directly, feminization and performative sophistry are exposed, brought to the surface, and, thus, momentarily entertained in these rhetorical texts; yet always, as with Eros's speech, they are also projected as ambiguous, if not dangerous.

Later in his career, Basilakes adopts a seemingly more conservative stance. In his *Bagoas*, written in 1157, Basilakes offers a fierce criticism of feminization and theatrical rhetoric. The text, which has been well analyzed by Paul Magdalino, is a highly sophisticated *psogos* of a fictional persona, namely *Bagoas*.⁵¹ This *Bagoas*, who is, quite possibly, a guise for one of Basilakes's contemporaries, is portrayed by Basilakes as an incarnation of failed masculinity and theatrical behavior. He, like Eros, is a "skillful sophist", a devious "general" that devises destruction, an ambiguous man that pursues pleasure, creates dramas, and "theatricizes", a man that puts on the mask of a woman.⁵² Yet what appears as Basilakes's self-defense – that, as Magdalino suggests, aims at aligning its author with those normal Byzantines "men of good background, native Byzantines and sexually pure, orthodox in their traditional piety"⁵³ – may be somewhat less straightforward. The text's sophisticated style, full of quotations to secular authors, and fictionality (for Basilakes assures his readers that he has "invented" the text "out

48 Putnam, Ovid, Virgil and Myrrha's Metamorphic Exile (see n. 40).

49 Cf. e.g. *Progymnasmata* 11, 12, 23, 30, 32, 48 (ed. Pignani).

50 Cf. *Progymnasmata* 19 and 54 with 4, 15, 17, 52 (ed. Pignani).

51 See Magdalino, *The Bagoas* of Nikephoros Basilakes (see n. 1).

52 *Bagoas* = *Or. C, Meletē* 8 (ed. Garzya, 97.19–21), 10 (99.3–4), 5–6 (96.4–97.5), 14–15 (101.3–33), 13 (101.1–2), 18 (103.30).

53 Magdalino, *The Bagoas* of Nikephoros Basilakes (see n. 1), 62.

of nothing”⁵⁴) destabilize the very ethics that Basilakes promotes. Is Basilakes accusing Bagoas or merely “staging” an accusation? The two, I believe, are not the same. Indeed, what are Bagoas’s seminal negative features are elsewhere presented positively by Basilakes.⁵⁵ Most tellingly, Basilakes presents himself in the *protheōria* to the *Bagoas* as a successful “general” of rhetoric, like Eros and like Bagoas.⁵⁶

In autobiographical texts, Basilakes creates a similarly ambiguous persona. On the one hand, Basilakes claims that he abides with traditional Byzantine values, especially in what regards pretentious intellectuality and theatrical rhetoric which he opposes. His most ostensive gesture in this respect is his self-censured “edition” of his works that he narrates in the well-known *Prologos* (after 1157; Philippopolis); in such a self-authorized edition, performative and fictional rhetoric cannot have any place.⁵⁷ On the other hand, even in the *Prologos* itself, Basilakes cannot hide his pride for his “theatrical” rhetoric.⁵⁸ Rhetoric, its fictions, pleasures, and dramas are too important for Basilakes to simply silence them.⁵⁹ Nor does Basilakes wish to silence his somewhat fragile psyche. The self that he wishes to project is one that, in a moment of separation, will not refrain from claiming it is “feminized” (and, for that matter, dramatized). As Basilakes writes in one of his letters, “my kin has rendered me female and I pray the prayer of Antigone ...”⁶⁰

Therefore, as with Ovid, behind Basilakes’s dramatization of Myrrha’s story lies a rhetorical practice and an authorial persona. Basilakes’s own rhetoric and self-representation exhibit the same anxieties over the nature and fate of dis-

54 Bagoas = Or. C, *Protheōria* 1 (ed. Garzya, 92.12–14): ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων ὄντα πλάττεσθαι. Notably, the text is transmitted immediately after Basilakes’s *Progymnasmata* in its single testimony, *Vindobonensis Phil. gr.* 321 (late thirteenth ce.), ff. 296–302; cf. H. Hunger, *Katalog der griechischen Handschriften der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek I: Codices historici. Codices philosophici et philologici* (Museion 4, Veröffentlichungen der Handschriftensammlung 1), Vienna 1961, 409–418.

55 Cf., e.g., Bagoas = Or. C, *Melētē* 16 (ed. Garzya, 101.34–102.2) with Or. B4.7 (79.16–18), *Monody* (on his brother Constantine Basilakes) 219–231 (ed. Pignani), and *Progymnasma* 54.75–90 (ed. Pignani).

56 Bagoas = Or. C, *Protheōria* 3 (93.12–16) with *Meletē* 8 (99.3–4) and *Progymnasma* 51.47–50. It is also noteworthy that Bagoas is praised by Basilakes for his *rhetoric*: *Meletē* 13 (100.19–21).

57 Cf. *Prologos* = Or. A.6 (ed. Garzya, 4.32–5.5) with Or. B1.20–21 (18.19–19.24).

58 *Prologos* = Or. A.3 (3.18–20 and 25–28) and, especially, A.12 (7.15–8.13).

59 Basilakes speaks repeatedly of the mixture of rhetoric and philosophy (e.g. B1.19 [18.14–18], B4.5 [78.10–17]) or of form and content (B1.17 [17.2]). He also flirts with myth even in explicitly non-fictional texts (see, e.g., B1.1–2 [10.1–11.17]) and plays with the idea of fashioning his discourse as “drama” (B1.16 [16.16]). He repeatedly praises the exteriority of discourse, what he calls *glōtta* (B1 *passim*), and insists on pleasure as the effect of speech (e.g. B1.16 [16.30–31] and 24–25 [20.20–21.7]).

60 Ep. 3 (ed. Garzya, 114.4–5).

course, over the nature and fate of the masculine self. Neither masculinity nor discourse are for Basilakes stable, uncontested, easily definable practices.

Liminal Rhetoric, Old Constraints

The striking similarity between Basilakes and Ovid in their approaches to the story of Myrrha accentuates the kind of discursive liberties that Byzantine writing was ready to take in twelfth-century Constantinople. This was a freedom to talk about an illicit desire (incest) in an illicit fashion (fiction). And this was a remarkable freedom, if compared, for instance, with western medieval approaches to Myrrha and incestual desire. There – most characteristically in Dante – , the emphasis on morality, while dramatized and problematized by Ovid, returns with full force: Myrrha is treated as a symbol of female desire that threatens “patriarchal culture” and that is to be banished and replaced by the divine passivity of the ideal female, Mary.⁶¹ Basilakes will have none of that. He, like Ovid before him, is ready to use the Myrrha story in order explore *Eros* and reactivate his performative rhetoric. In effect, and this is my concluding argument, Basilakes is ready to use erotic fiction in a manner that tests – even if it does not transgress – foundational cultural values of contemporary Byzantium.

What are these values? In my view, there are at least two which Basilakes negotiates: (a) androcentric authority along with the system of moral, political, and religious values that support this authority; (b) the understanding that proper discursive performance must be order-inducing. At the time of Basilakes, authority was conceived in primarily masculine terms; power was founded upon *andreia*,

61 For this reading of Dante (*Inferno* 30.37–41) see primarily R. Jacoff, Transgression and Transcendence: Figures of Female Desire in Dante’s *Commedia*, in: K. Brownlee/M. S. Brownlee/S. G. Nichols (eds.), *The New Medievalism*, Baltimore/London 1991, 183–200 with S. Spence, Myrrha, Myrrha in the Well: Metonymy and Interpretation in *Inferno* XXXIV, in: *Dante Studies* 103 (1985) 15–36. Generally, incestual desire is posed in medieval western literature (following to some extent Ovid) as a problem of *nature*; for texts and further bibliography see M. S. Brownlee, Language and Incest in *Grisel y Mirabella*, in: Brownlee/ Brownlee/Nichols, *The New Medievalism*, 157–182; on ‘nature’ see Boccaccio’s *Decameron* 4.1, cited by Brownlee on pages 158–159. It should also be added that in western medieval writing, ca. 1190 e.g., Myrrha figures among the list of exemplary evil women, a model of ‘unnatural lust’; see G. McLeod, *Virtue and Venom: Catalogs of Women from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, Ann Arbor 1991, 49–50. On the medieval *moralizing* reading of and yet simultaneous infatuation with Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* see V. Gillespie, *The Study of Classical Authors from the Twelfth Century to c. 1450*, in: A. Minnis/I. Johnson (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism II: The Middle Ages*, Cambridge/New York 2005, 145–235, at 186–206. See also G. W. Grocock, Ovid the Crusader, in: C. Martindale (ed.), *Ovid Renewed: Ovidian Influences on Literature and Art from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge/New York 1988, 55–69 and C. W. Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, New York 2001, 86–92, 98–101, and 180–189.

namely the ability to master others as well as oneself. This conception of authority – that, needless to say, had deep roots in premodern Greek discourse – is recurrent in texts of the late eleventh and early twelfth century.⁶² It is a conception supported by an emphasis on familial genealogy (based on fatherhood⁶³) and Christian piety (based on the tradition of the Fathers⁶⁴). Also, in the late eleventh and early twelfth century, discursive performance is to be regulated by truth and morality; performance is to be regulated in ways that aim at reproducing social order while effectively eradicating and precluding all fiction.⁶⁵

Basilakes's Eros and his performance challenge such conceptions of authority and discourse: Eros opposes the patriarchal laws of nature,⁶⁶ replaces Christian religious discourse with his own,⁶⁷ and foregrounds his artistic performance (an

62 See, e.g., Euthymios Zigabenos who in the introduction to his *Dogmatic Panoply* (ca. 1100) dedicated to the emperor Alexios Comnenus insists on metaphors of military prowess (in: PG 130.20d–24b). *Andreia* is a necessary constituent of authority also in Anna Comnena's *Alexiad* (even if her text should not be read in a straightforward manner; see the essays in T. Gouma-Peterson [ed.], *Anna Komnene and Her Times*, New York/London 2000). On *andreia* in this period see P. Magdalino, *Honour Among the Romaioi: the Framework of Social Values in the World of Digenes Akrites and Kekaumenos*, in: BMGS 13 (1989) 183–218 (= idem, *Tradition and Transformation in Medieval Byzantium*, Aldershot 1991, III).

63 It is not a coincidence that Anna usually pairs *andreia* with *genos*; see *Alexiad* 5.7.3, 6.13.1, 10.5.10, 12.5.1, and, most eloquently, 10.3.6 (ed. Reinsch). See also Nikephoros Bryennios, *Historical Material* (written after 1118) 1.6.18 (ed. Gautier).

64 See, again, Euthymios Zigabenos, *Dogmatic Panoply* (see n. 62) with P. Magdalino, *Digenes Akrites and Byzantine Literature: the Twelfth-century Background to the Grottaferrata version*, in: R. Beaton/D. Ricks (eds.), *Digenes Akrites: New Approaches to Byzantine Heroic Poetry*, Aldershot 1993, 1–14, esp. 12–13. See also above ns. 10 and 29.

65 Aversion to “mythos” is a recurrent theme in Zigabenos's *Dogmatic Panoply* (see n. 62), e.g., 130.29d citing Gregory of Nazianzus – perhaps the most cited author in the *Panoply* –, Or. 39.3; on Gregory see above n. 10) or in Theophylact of Ochrid's discourse *Πρὸς τοὺς αὐτοῦ μαθητὰς ἀτακτήσαντας* II (ed. Gautier), esp. 148.15–149.16. For Byzantine order-inducing understandings of performance see further Papaioannou, *Performance as Mimesis* (see n. 7).

66 See, e.g., *Progymnasma* 23.1–2: “Myrrha, the daughter of Theias, was graced by nature in her figure [*morphē*], yet was forced by Eros to transgress nature's law: Ἐρῶς δὲ παρανομεῖν εἰς τὴν φύσιν ἠνάγκασεν; or 52.28–30: “Myrrha was beautiful. Her father was beautiful too, no less than the daughter. Yet, he was following the laws of nature, ignoring *my* laws”. For the former phrase, Pignani cites Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe and Clitophon* 1.11 (ed. Vilborg): ἀνάγκη μάχεται καὶ φύσις. Notably, this passage in Tatius is part of a first-person utterance, in which Clitophon, the male protagonist of the story, debates whether he should submit to the will of his father (πατήρ) and thus follow nature (φύσις) or to the force and necessity (ἀνάγκη) of Eros (Ἔρως). It is also relevant to Basilakes's rhetoric of metamorphosis that Clitophon (1.5.4–7) founds his desire at its very start upon listening to a song of Apollo's eros (whom Clitophon aspires to imitate) for Daphnē and her transformation into a plant.

67 Eros's phrase, e.g., “I produced a plant out of heaven” (φυτὸν ἐξ οὐρανοῦ παρήγαγον) is a Platonic phrase (Timaeus 90a), adopted by Philo (Quod deterius potiori insidari soleat 85; ed. Cohn) and then Christian discourse (see, e.g. Nemesios, *De natura hominis* 1.450 [ed. Einarson] or Michael Psellos, Or. min. 37.134–137) in reference to God's creation of humanity, as God's “divine plant”. See also P. Gautier (ed.), *Théophylacte d'Achrida* (CFHB IX – Series Bruxellen-

explicit *myth* that is predicated on Eros's own will, not on nature, morality or truth). In effect, Basilakes discovers and, momentarily, dwells in a site that, for his contemporary culture, is liminal. This liminal site is not simply mythological, but a site of illicit desire and illicit narrative, where the boundaries between masculine and feminine power and between natural and artistic production become confused while their traditional hierarchies are temporarily overturned.⁶⁸

It would take a different and much lengthier study to explain the set of historical conditions that allow Basilakes this freedom. The Byzantine twelfth century, with the Comnenian dynasty's assertion of authoritarianism and the new cultural trajectories, presents us with an ambiguity that still escapes us.⁶⁹ Here I can but merely allude to the intertextual references of Basilakes's writing, namely the literary tradition that influences him.⁷⁰ In this paper, I set out, rather, to read closely the theoretical and literary implications of Basilakes's daring discourse, a

sis), Brussels 1975, 46.15 where, citing Plato, Theophylact employs the same phrase in its Christian meaning, while earlier he has made reference to Hesiod's "brazen race" (Works and Days 143–147), also referenced by Basilakes (see above n. 17). Finally, in his romance that postdates Basilakes, Constantine Manasses suggests that man is *not* a "divine plant" but a "game in the hands of God and *Tyche*" (Aristarchos and Callithea 159); cf. above n. 21.

68 On the concept of the "liminal," that which lies in a boundary, see V. Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: the Human Seriousness of Play*, New York 1982, 20–60. It is a matter of course that a story about incest lends itself to the exploration of *liminal* space, since the taboo of incest delimits precisely those boundaries separating nature from culture; see, e.g., S. Freud, *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (first edition 1930), in: *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur und andere kulturtheoretische Schriften* (Einleitung von A. Lorenzer/B. Görlich; Frankfurt am Main 1994; first edition, 1930) esp. 68–69. For theories of incest see R. Fox, *The Red Lamp of Incest*, New York 1980, cited by Jacoff (*Transgression and Transcendence* [see n. 61], 197 n. 15).

69 An ambiguity masterfully analyzed by Paul Magdalino in his *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos, 1143–1180*, Cambridge/New York 1993. In this respect, one might note the strikingly similar exilic experience that intellectuals like Ovid and Basilakes tend to suffer in highly autocratic regimes as well as the similar intellectual position that such intellectuals tend to adopt: while externally they seem to follow the regime's ideological tropes, they, simultaneously, subtly distance themselves from the norm; on this aspect of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* see C. Segal, *Myth and Philosophy in the Metamorphoses: Ovid's Augustanism and the Augustan Conclusion of Book XV*, in: *AJPh* 90 (1969) 257–292 as well as idem, *Ovid's Orpheus and Augustan Ideology*, in: *TAPA* 103 (1972) 473–494.

70 I have already mentioned two such inter-texts: Achilles Tatius and Nonnus (see above ns. 19, 21, 31, 36, and 66). To these one should add late antique *progymnasmatic* tradition of *ēthopoiiai* – in which, more than often, subversive voices are explored – as well as the dissident discourse of Michael Psellos. For relevant examples of *ēthopoiiai* see, e.g., Libanios, *Progymnasmata* 11, sections 1–8, 10–12, 14–27 (ed. Foerster) with R. Hawley, *Female Characterization in Greek Declamation*, in: D. Innes/H. Hine/C. Pelling (eds.), *Ethics and Rhetoric: Classical Essays for Donald Russell on his Seventy-fifth Birthday*, Oxford/New York 1995, 255–267. Notably, Byzantine aesthetics was especially fascinated by Libanios's "fictional" *logoi*: cf. Photios, *Bibliotheca* 90.67b (ed. Henry) with Ioannes Doxapatres, *Prolegomena to Aphthonios's Progymnasmata* 136.14–137.21 (ed. Rabe); for Libanios in general see G. Fatouros/T. Krischer (eds.), *Libanios* (WdF 621), Darmstadt 1983. For Psellos see E. N. Papaioannou, *Michael Psellos's Rhetorical Gender*, in: *BMGS* 24 (2000) 133–146.

discourse often referred to precisely for its novelty, though rarely studied *in and for* itself.

There is, nevertheless, a final remark that I would like to make. Basilakes' freedom may also be an elusive one. In Basilakes's *progymnasmata*, one encounters, inscribed in them, a slight shift away from the freedom momentarily entertained. Basilakes presents the story, but leaves its fate undecided; Eros's power to feminize his subjects and to produce artistic performance is exposed, but left undetermined. Basilakes does not affirm (as Ovid before him does⁷¹) the transgression of gender and the creation of fiction. Eros and his story are left to the hands of Basilakes's primarily male, aristocratic audience. Basilakes finds himself bound by old constraints, namely the attempt to control erotic discourse transferred from the fear of erotic *desire* – a theme as old as Plato's *Symposium* or Plato's *Phaedrus*.⁷² It is, thus, at the juncture of freedom and constraint where Basilakes's *progymnasmata* are ultimately located. The rhetorical exercises remain for him *exercises*. The *progymnasmata* offer to the Byzantine rhetor possibilities of play, yet not so that he might remain in the playing, but so that he might learn the rules of rhetoric. These prescribed rules, whether adhered to or not, are none other than the rules of his culture: the androcentric and anti-performative rules of Byzantium.

71 And, I believe, Michael Psellos as well; for some discussion see Papaioannou, *Performance as Mimesis* (see n. 7). On Ovid's transgressions see, e.g., L. Enterline, *The Rhetoric of the Body from Ovid to Shakespeare*, Cambridge/New York 2000, esp. 1–90 with Segal, *Ovid's Metamorphic Bodies* (see n. 44).

72 See D. M. Halperin, *Plato and the Erotics of Narrativity*, in: J. C. Klagge/N. D. Smith (eds.), *Methods of Interpreting Plato and his Dialogues* (Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy Supplementary Volume), Oxford 1992, 93–129 = R. Hexter/D. Selden (eds.), *Innovations of Antiquity* (New Ancient World), New York 1992, 95–126 and idem, *Love's Irony: Six Remarks on Platonic Eros*, in: S. Bartsch/T. Bartscherer (eds.), *Erotikon: Essays on Eros, Ancient and Modern*, Chicago 2005, 48–58 on the *Symposium* and G. R. F. Ferrari, *Listening to the Cicadas: a Study of Plato's Phaedrus* (Cambridge classical studies), Cambridge/New York 1987 on the *Phaedrus*. Ovid's *Byblis* dramatizes the very same problem of how to speak desire; see *Metamorphoses* 9.450–665 with Raval, *A Lover's Discourse* (see n. 46).