

Kassia: A female hymnographer of the 9th century
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Introduction

For over 1.000 years many men and a few women wrote hymns in Byzantium. Their contribution to world literature and to Greek letters constitutes a vast and priceless treasure of sacred poetry. It's impossible to exaggerate the value of this hymnography, since it expresses, as nothing else can, the spiritual riches, faith and beauty of Eastern Christendom. Some of these hymns are still chanted today in many languages in Orthodox Churches in every part of the world. Others remain unknown. Hidden in manuscripts stored in monastic libraries, they wait to be discovered and to be edited.⁷⁸

It's obvious that the Byzantine female hymnography was not flourished especially in Byzantium. We have the names of hundreds male hymnodists who came from all parts of the *oikoumene*, from Greece, Italy, Palestine, and Syria, as well as from the islands of Cyprus, Crete and Sicily. These hymnodists came of all classes of Byzantine society, from the obscure man who signed his hymn *ὁ ἁμαρτωλός* (the sinner) to the Emperor Justinian (527-565), who wrote in imperial red ink the troparion *ὁ μονογενὴς υἱός*, and then ordered its insertion into the Divine Liturgy. Despite the great number of male hymnodists, we know only six feminine names that composed hymns: Γρηγορίς, Μάρθα, Θεοδοσία⁷⁹, Θέκλα⁸⁰, Κασσία and Παλαιολογίνα.⁸¹ The fame of Kassia the Melodist outshines by far all other women writers in both medieval and Modern Greek writers.

⁷⁸ For an introduction in Byzantine Hymnography there is a vast bibliography. Cf. e.g. N. B. Thomadakis, *Βυζαντινὴ Ὑμνογραφία καὶ Ποίησις*. Thessaloniki 1993; K. Metsakes, *Βυζαντινὴ Ὑμνογραφία*. Athens 1986; Barry Baldwin, *Anthology of Byzantine Poetry*. Amsterdam 1985; C.A. Trypanis, *Medieval and Modern Greek Poetry: An Anthology*. Oxford 1951; Edgon Welleszcz, *A History of Byzantine Music and Hymnography*. Oxford 1961

⁷⁹ E. Kataphygiotou-Topping, 'Theodosia: Melodos and Monastria', *Diptycha* 4(1986-1988), pp. 384-405.

⁸⁰ E. Kataphygiotou-Topping, 'Thekla the Nun: In Praise of Women', *GOTHr* 25(1980), pp. 353-370

⁸¹ E. Kataphygiotou-Topping, "Women Hymnographers in Byzantium", *Diptycha* 3(1982-83), 98-110. Topping has refuted older opinions, that Kassia was the only woman hymnographer in Byzantium.

Kassia's Life and Work

Kassia⁸² was born between 805 and 810 in Constantinople into an aristocratic family. Three Byzantine chroniclers--Pseudo-Symeon the Logothete⁸³, George the Monk⁸⁴ (a.k.a. George the Sinner) and Leo the Grammarian⁸⁵, claim that she was a participant in the "bride show" organized for Theophilus by his stepmother Euphrosyne.⁸⁶ Smitten by Kassia's beauty the young emperor Theophilus approached her and said, "Through a woman trickled forth the baser things [referring to the passions coming as a result of Eve's transgression]." Kassia responded by saying, "But through a woman came the better things [referring to the blessings resulting from the Incarnation of Christ]." His pride wounded, Theophilus chose another bride, Theodora.

About Kassia's life and her unsuccessful effort to be married with Theophilus, we have many sources from both Byzantine and the modern times⁸⁷. In this paper we will present the sources from the Byzantine era and especially a source from the first half of the 12th century and the second one a poem from the 14th century in 29 iambic verses.

The first source is from John Zonaras' *Epitome Historiarum*, in which he narrates us the marriage of Theophilus with Theodora, the unsuccessful attempt of Kassia to marry Theophilus and Kassia's decision to build a convent.

Γυναῖκα δ' ἑαυτῶ εἰσοικίσασθαι βουληθεῖς ὁ Θεόφιλος, πολλὰς πολλαχόθεν ὠραίας κόρας συνήγαγεν, ἐν αἷς ἦν καὶ ἡ Εἰκασία, παρθένος καὶ τὸ εἶδος καλὴ καὶ τῶν λοιπῶν ὑπερφέρουσα καὶ λόγοις ὠμιληκυῖα καὶ τὸ γένος ἐπίσημος. περιῆει γοῦν

⁸² For an introductory article about Kassia, cf. G. Schirò, 'La seconda leggenda di Cassia', *Diptycha* 1(1979), 303-315

⁸³ Ed. Im. Bekker, Symeon Magister, CS(1838), 624-625

⁸⁴ Ed. Muralt, Georgii Monachi dicti Hamartoli, Chronikon ab orbe condito ad annum p. chr. n. 842 et a diversis scriptoribus usque ad a. 1143 continuatum, Saint Petersburg, 1859 p. 700

⁸⁵ Ed. Im. Bekker, Leonis Grammatici Chronographia, CS(1842), , 213-214

⁸⁶ W. Treadgold, 'The Problem of the Marriage of the Emperor Theophilus', *GRBS* 16(1975), PP. 325-341. In this article there is an analytical explanation of Theophilus' marriage with Theodora, which is dated exactly on 5 June 830 and not in 821, as Brooks Bury etc. have claimed. The episode with Kassia is acceptable by Treadgold. Cf. also, IDEM, 'The Bride Shows of the Byzantine Emperors', *Byz.* 49(1979), 395-413; E.W. Brooks, 'The Marriage of the Emperor Theophilus', *BZ* 10(1901), 540-545

⁸⁷ About these sources, cf. Ph. Blachopoulou, 'Βιβλιογραφικό δοκίμιο για την Κασ[σ]ία-Κασ[σ]ιανή', *Byzantinos Domos* 1(1987), pp. 139-159 (here 147-148)

ταύτας θεώμενος καὶ μῆλον κατέχων χρυσοῦν, ἴν' αὐτὸ ἐπιδῶ τῇ δοξάσῃ αὐτῶ ἀρεστῇ· ἐπεὶ δὲ ἦλθε κατὰ τὴν Εἰκασίαν περιῶν, θαυμάσας ἐκείνην τῆς ὠραιότητος ἔφη *“ἐκ γυναικὸς ἐρρύη τὰ φαῦλα.”* ἢ δ' ἡρέμα καὶ μετὰ σεμνοῦ ἐρυθθήματος εὐστόχως πως ἀπεκρίνατο *“ἀλλὰ καὶ διὰ γυναικὸς πηγάζει τὰ κρείττω.”* ὁ δὲ καταβροντηθεὶς ὥσπερ τῶ τῆς παρθένου λόγῳ τὴν μὲν παρῆλθε, τὸ μῆλον δὲ τὸ χρυσοῦν τῇ ἐκ Παφλαγονίας Θεοδώρα παρέσχετο. ἢ δ' Εἰκασία τῆς βασιλείας ἀποτυχοῦσα μονὴν ἐδείματο, ἢ τὴν ἐκείνης κλῆσιν ἔσχεν ἐπίκλησιν, καὶ ἐν αὐτῇ μονάσασα ἑαυτῇ ἔζη καὶ τῶ θεῶ, τῆς λογικῆς παιδείας μὴ ἀλογήσασα. ὅθεν καὶ συγγράμματα ἐκείνης εὐρίσκονται εὐπαιδευσίας χαρίτων οὐκ ἄμοιρα. καὶ ἢ μὲν οὕτω διέθετο τὰ καθ' ἑαυτὴν καὶ ἀτευκτῆσασα βασιλέως φθαρτοῦ τῶ παμβασιλεῖ ἑαυτὴν ἐμνηστεύσατο; καὶ ἀντὶ γεηρᾶς βασιλείας τὴν ἐπουράνιον ἐκληρώσατο. ὁ βασιλεὺς δὲ Θεόφιλος τὴν Θεοδώραν ἑαυτῶ συνοικίζει καὶ ὁμοῦ ταύτην καὶ τῶ γαμηλίῳ στεφάνῳ καὶ τῶ βασιλικῶ ταινιοῖ διαδήματι καὶ τοὺς γάμους τελεῖ.⁸⁸

The second source is from someone monk Ephraim in the 14th century, who has written a world chronik.

Θεόφιλος σχεῖν αὐζυγον βίου θέλων
κοινωνὸν ἅμα τοῦ κράτους καὶ τοῦ λέχους,
χορὸν συνῆξε παρθένων πολλαχόθεν,
καλῶν ἀπασῶν, ὄψιν εὐπρεπεστάτων.

2315 ἐν αἴσπερ ἐξέλαμψε τῶν ἄλλων πλέον,
οἶος σελήνης πλησιφαοῦς τις κύκλος.
Σώματος ὠρα, λαμπρότητι τοῦ γένους
καὶ μαρμαρυγαῖς τῶν λόγων Εἰκασία.
χρυσοῦν τι μῆλον ἀμέλει φέρων ἄναξ

2320 περιπολῶν ἦν τὸν χορὸν τῶν παρθένων,
μνηστρον σκοπῶν δοῦναί τι τοῦτο φιλτάτη.
ὡς οὖν θεᾶται παριῶν Εἰκασίαν,
κάλλους περιπτοῦ θαυμάσας κόρην ἔφη
«διὰ γυναικὸς φαῦλα πάντ' ἀπερρῶη»

2325 ἢ δ' ἡρέμ' ἀντέφησεν εὐστόχως ἄγαν
«ἀλλ' ἐκ γυναικὸς πηγάζει καὶ βελτίω».
ὁ δ' αὖ παρῆλθε θαυμάσας τὴν παρθένον,

⁸⁸ Ioannis Zonarae epitome historiarum libri XIII-XVIII, ed. Th. Bütner- Wobst, Bonnae 1897, 354 f.

καὶ δούς τὸ μῆλον παρθένω Θεοδώρα,
 χώραν ἔχουση πατρίδα Παφλαγόνων

2330 πλὴν εὐπατριδῶν πατέρων κατηγμένη,
 κοινωνὸν αὐτὴν ἄγεται κράτους λέχους,
 τὴν Εἰκασίαν παραβλέψας, ὡς ἔφην.
 ἢ μὴ τυχοῦσα κοσμικῆς ἐηουσίας σκηπτουχίας
 οὐ νυμφίου τε γηγενοῦς βασιλέως

2335 πλουτεῖ νοητὸν παντάνακτα νυμφίον
 καὶ βασιλέως οὐρανῶν κληροουχίαν,
 μονάσασα δὲ καὶ μονὴν δειμαμένη
 ἡσκειτ' ἐν αὐτῇ, προσλαλοῦσα ταῖς βίβλοισ·
 ἥς μεστὰ συγγράμματα χαρίτων ἔφν.

Kassia found a convent in 843 in the west of Constantinople near the walls of Constantine and became its first abbess.⁸⁹ *Πάτρια Κωνσταντινουπόλεως*,⁹⁰ a chronicle from the 14th century, informs us about Kassia's convent: *Ἡ μονὴ τὰ Εἰκασίας ἐκτίσθη παρὰ Εἰκασίας μοναχῆς εὐλαβεστάτης καὶ σεβασμίας γυναικός, ὠραίας τῷ εἶδει· ἦν δὲ κοσμικὴν οὖσαν Θεόφιλος ὁ βασιλεὺς ἰδὼν λαβεῖν γυναικὰ ἠθέλησεν, εἰπὼν ὡς ἄρα «διὰ γυναικὸς ἐρρῦη τὰ φαῦλα». Ἐπεὶ δ' ἐκείνη σοφωτάτη ἦν, μετ' αἰδοῦς πῶς ἀντέφησεν· «ἀλλὰ καὶ διὰ γυναικὸς πηγάζει τὰ κρείττονα». Ταῦτα ἀκοῦσας ὁ Θεόφιλος ταύτην μὲν εἶασε, Θεοδώρα δὲ ὁ ἐπεφέρετο χρυσοῦν μῆλον δεδώκει⁹¹. Ἡ οὖν Εἰκασία τῆς βασιλείας ἀποτυχοῦσα τὸ τῶν μοναζουσῶν ἐνδιδύσκειται σχῆμα, κανόνας πολλοὺς καὶ στιχηρὰ καὶ ἄλλα τινὰ ἀξιοθαύμαστα ποιήσασα. Although many scholars attribute this to bitterness at having failed to marry Theophilus, a letter from Theodore the Studite indicates that she had other motivations for wanting a*

⁸⁹ I. Rochow, *Studien zu der Pesron, den Wirken und dem Nachleben der Dichterin Kassia*. Akedemie Verlag, München 1967, pp. 26-29.

⁹⁰ Ed. Th. Preger, 2[Leipzig, 1907], 276 f.

⁹¹ Ath. Markopoulos, 'Βίος τῆς Αὐτοκράτειρας Θεοδώρας/BHG 1731', *Symmeikta* 5(1983), pp. 249-285(text 257-271). A detailed account which there is in no other primary source about Theodora's choice, in whom Theophilus offered the golden apple. According to Markopoulos who also points to the acceptance of 830 about Theophilus' marriage, «μόνο ἡ Θεοδώρα προβάλλεται καὶ τιμάται ιδιαίτερα[...]ἐνῶ γιὰ τὴν Κασσιανὴ δὲν ὑπάρχει καμμιά συγκεκριμένη ἀναφορὰ κάτι ποῦ ἔκανε τὸν Melioransky (VV 8, 1901, 12-13) νὰ θεωρήσει τὸ κείμενο αὐτὸ πολεμικὴ ἐναντίον τῆς Κασσιανῆς». Cf. about the theme of the apple as an erotic symbol A. R. Littlewood, 'The Symbolism of the Apple in Byzantine Literature', *JÖB* 23 (1974), 33-59; IDEM, 'The erotic Symbolism of the Apple in late Byzantine and meta-Byzantine demotic Literature', *BMGS* 17(1993), 83-103.

monastic life.⁹² It had a close relationship with the nearby monastery of Stoudios, which was to play a central role in re-editing the Byzantine liturgical books in the 9th century and the 10th century, so were important in ensuring the survival of her work.

Kassia's poetical oeuvre

Kassia has composed an extended number of liturgical hymns which are concluded in the liturgical books of Eastern Christendom, such as the Menaia and the Triodion. Tradition and manuscript authority ascribed to Kassia 49 religious hymns and 261 secular verses in the form of epigrams and gnomic verses or moral sentences (e.g. I hate the rich man groaning as if he were poor). These works are found in numerous manuscripts dating from the 11th to the 16th century and bear the name Kassia, or Eikasia or Ikasia. According to Antonia Tripolitis, 'Manuscript scholars suggest that Eikasia and Ikasia are copyist's errors that resulted from the annexation of the feminine article 'ν', a common mistake of the scribes'.⁹³ The most widely-spread Kassia's hymn is the troparion *Κύριε ἡ ἐν πολλαῖς ἀμαρτίαις* and is sung in the Vesper service of Holy Tuesday.⁹⁴ Other great poems of Kassia are the huge *Kanon for the Repose of the Dead*, the sticheron, *On the Birth of Christ* (otherwise, "When Augustus reigned»), the sticheron, *On the Annunciation*, stichera on various saints etc.⁹⁵ A hypothesis that Kassia authored the *Akathistos Hymn* has no scholarly justification.⁹⁶

Kassia's troparion *Κύριε ἡ ἐν πολλαῖς ἀμαρτίαις...*

- 1 Κύριε ἡ ἐν πολλαῖς ἀμαρτίαις περιπεσοῦσα γυνή,
- 2 τὴν σὴν αἰσθομένη θεότητα
- 3 μυροφόρον ἀναλαβοῦσα τάξιιν,
- 4 ὀδυρομένη μύρον σοι πρὸ τοῦ ἐνταφιασμοῦ κομίζει.
- 5 οἶμοι! λέγουσα, ὅτι νύξ μοι ὑπάρχει,
- 6 οἷστρος ἀκολασίας ζοφώδης τε καὶ ἀσέληνος,
- 7 ἔρωσ τῆς ἀμαρτίας.
- 8 δέξαι μου τὰς πηγὰς τῶν δακρῶν
- 9 ὁ νεφέλαις διεξάγων τῆς θαλάσσης τὸ ὕδωρ.

⁹² The letters of Theodore the Studite to Kassia reprinted in Rochow 1967, pp. 20-22

⁹³ A. Tripolitis, *Kassia: The Legend, the Woman, and her Work*, New York- London, 1992, xi-xii

⁹⁴ For this hymn there is an extended analysis below.

⁹⁵ About these hymns as also about epigrams and gnomai, cf. A. Kazhdan, pp.320-326. About the whole text of these hymns, epigrams and gnomai, cf. A. Tripolitis 1992, passim.

⁹⁶ Cf. A. Kazhdan, *A History of Byzantine Literature. (650-850)*. The National Hellenic Research of Foundation. Institute of Byzantine Research, Athens 1999, p. 322, footnote. 15.

- 10 κάμφθητί μοι πρὸς τοὺς στεναγμοὺς τῆς καρδίας
 11 ὁ κλίνας τοὺς οὐρανοὺς τῇ ἀφράστῳ σου κενώσει·
 12 καταφιλήσω τοὺς ἀχράντους σου πόδας,
 13 ἀποσμήξω τούτους δὲ πάλιν
 14 τοῖς τῆς κεφαλῆς μου βοστρύχοις·
 15 ὦν ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ Εὐὰ τὸ δειλινὸν
 16 κρότον τοῖς ὠσίν ἠχηθεῖσα τῷ φόβῳ ἐκρύβη·
 17 ἁμαρτιῶν μου τὰ πλήθη καὶ κριμάτων σου ἀβύσσους
 18 τίς ἐξιχνιάσει, ψυχοσῶστα σωτήρ μου;
 19 Μή με τὴν σὴν δούλην παρίδης
 20 ὁ ἀμέτρητον ἔχων τὸ ἔλεος.

ENGLISH TRANSLATION ACCORDING TO ANDREW R. DYCK'S
 TRANSLATION

Lord, a woman who fell into many sins,
 Recognizing Your Divinity,
 Took up the myrrh-bearer's office,
 With tears brought you myrrh before your entombment.
 "Ah me!" she said, "night is upon me,
 The goad of incontinence, gloomy and moonless,
 To lust after sin.
 Receive my streams of tears,
 You who use clouds to draw the water of the sea;
 Bend to my hearts groans,
 You who bent the heavens with your ineffable abasement.
 I shall cover with kisses
 And wipe again
 With the hair of my head
 The immaculate feet of You,
 Whose footfalls echoing in her ears,
 Eve in paradise at even-tide hid herself in fear.
 Soul-saving savior, who will track down
 The numbers of my sins and the depths of your judgment?
 Do not overlook me yours servant
 You who have pity without measure."

Kassia's literary fame rests on her sticheron of troparion, formally known by its first line: *Κύριε ἡ ἐν πολλαῖς ἁμαρτίαις* (Lord, she who had fallen in many sins). In the manuscripts medieval scribes entitled: *Εἰς τὴν πόρνην* (To the Harlot). To many generations of Greek Orthodox it is familiar known as *Τὸ τροπάριον τῆς Κασσιανῆς*

(The troparion of Kassia). Admired, popular and beloved, this hymn is universally acknowledged to be a masterpiece of religious poetry. This hymn republished, translated and ingeniously commented on by Professor A. R. Dyck⁹⁷. It is not the first time that the «sinful woman» of the Gospel of Luke (7.37-48), appears in Greek poetry: Romanos the Melode devoted to her a *kontakion*⁹⁸. According to Russian Byzantinist Alexander Kazhdan, the hymn is referred not to Mary Magdalene, as Mary's name never being mentioned. Whereas Romanos, according to Dyck, follows the plot of the Gospel, Kassia, on the other hand, turns from the sphere of human morals to the metaphysical relation between the sinner and God: the heroine of her hymn cherishes no claim to the better than anybody else (a pharisee, for instance), but in the humbleness she genuflects before the Lord and asks for His forgiveness.⁹⁹ The language of the troparion is a mosaic composed of words, phrases, and echoes from the Scriptures, especially the Psalter. The hymn is consecrated, intense and brief, consisting of a little more than 100 words. Yet the Byzantine nun-hymnographer portrays in it universal human emotions, the fundamental Christian drama of sin and salvation. The troparion possesses both beauty and richness of meaning. One scholar appreciated "The way in which dramatic and narrative elements are blended, and the final player, wherein the need of one sinner is absorbed into the cry of a whole suffering world [...]"¹⁰⁰.

The structure and style of Kassia's troparion are influenced by the seven Penitential Psalms (6, 31, 37, 50, 101, 129, 142), three of which (37, 50, 142) are chanted during the Orthros of Holy Wednesday. Like these psalms the troparion is addressed to God, praises His mercy and contains confession and prayer. Kassia, however, was no mere imitator of the Psalmist. Her troparion is more complex in structure, more subtle in its psychology and more dynamic in movement. Hers is a new song, a distinctly Byzantine Lenten psalm, inspired by the prose of Saint Luke.

According to A. Dyck, the "sinful woman" of Luke's Gospel (7, 36 ff.) appears not for the first time as a poetic subject. Cassia's troparion has points of contact with Romano's poetry and especially with his tenth *kontakion*, including the metaphor of

⁹⁷ A. R. Dyck, "On Cassia ΚΥΡΙΑ Η ΕΝ ΠΟΛΛΑΙΣ...", *Byz* 46(1986), pp. 63-76. Professor Dyck's study will be our guide for our commentary.

⁹⁸ Cf. Ilse Rochow 1967, p. 42 and K. Krumbacher, "Kassia", *SBBAW*, philos.-philol. und hist. Cl. (1897), 1, 322-323. Romanos also alludes to the harlot at *canticum* 52, α', 3: ἐν ἀντῶ γὰρ (sc. τῶ ἰατρείῳ τῆς μετανοίας) ἡ πόρνη ὑγίανεν.

⁹⁹ Dyck 1986, p. 66 f.

¹⁰⁰ H. J. W. Tillyard, 'A Musical Study of the Hymns of Cassia', *BZ* 20(1911), 420-485 (here p. 433)

night to describe the woman's state: Romanos, *prooemium* II.1: ἐν κατανύξει *ibid.*, stanza 6, 1.4: ἦν ἐν σκοτέει καὶ ἤλθεσ ἰδεῖν με τὸν ἥλιον: (7): Kassia, lines 5-6: ὅτι νύξ μοι ὑπάρχει,/ οἴστρος ἀκολασίας ζοφώδης τε καὶ ἀσέληνος.

Kassia's troparion consists of a single strophe in which two different voices are heard.

First, the sacred poet herself speaks in a brief introduction. Then in the longer dramatic portion we hear the voice of the Sinful Woman disclosing the pathos of her life, the change from *hamartia* (sin) to *soteria* (salvation). The poem opens with a short, four-line preamble: the woman fallen into many sins brings Christ myrrh for burial. In the preamble, we are at the end of the story, Christ is dead, and Mary assists at his burial.

The introduction to the woman's speech is framed by the two longest lines of the poem (verses 1 and 4; 18 syllables each). We begin with a description of the woman's sinful state (1, 5-7); the turning- point, expressed in the second line, is not so much restated as dramatized in the speech as a whole. Then follows the woman's acceptance of service as a step in her redemption (3-4 and 12-14). The word *Κύριε* (Lord), with which the poem begins, sets the tone. Addressing the Lord, the sacred poet presents her hymn to Him. At the same time she summarizes the story first told by St. Luke, all the while subtly refining and deepening it. With a long dignified phrase Kassia the Nun introduces her subject: ἡ ἐν πολλαῖς ἀμαρτίαις περιπεσοῦσα γυνή (a woman who fell into many sins). There is here a difference between the other hymnographers and Kassia, as to the woman's characterization: the hymnographers insist on calling the sinner a πόρνη, Kassia, nevertheless vividly describes the woman's utter degradation. It is the very onset of spiritual perception (note aorist *αἰσθομένη*) in l. 2, which makes the darkness surrounding the woman in ll. 5-7 seem so oppressive.¹⁰¹ The woman's acceptance of the office of myrrh-bearer (ll. 3-4) is an outward sign of an inner change. One reading this line for the first time might be tempted to refer these words to the purchase of myrrh prior to the woman's acceptance at Simon's house, a scene dramatized, after Ephraim the Syrian, by Romanos (*cant.* 10, stanzas 9-10). The

¹⁰¹ The harlot's change of heart appears as a reaction against her previous way of life in the anonymous hymn for the Wednesday of Holy Week printed at *Analecta sacra spicilegio solesmensi parata*, ed. J.B. Pitra, 1(Paris, 1876), 478-480, stanza β': ἡ πρώην ἄσωτος γυνή/ ἐξαίφνης σώφρων ὠφθη/ μισήσασα τὰ ἔργα/ τῆς αἰσχρᾶς ἀμαρτίας/ καὶ ἡδονὰς τοῦ σώματος/ διενθυμουμένη/ τὴν αἰσχύνην τὴν πολλήν/ καὶ κρίσιν τῆς κολάσεως,/ ἦν ὑποστῶσιν πόρνοι καὶ ἄσωτοι[...]. Cf. also the oppressive darkness conjured by Aristophanes' choir of birds. *Aves*, stanzas 693-695: Χάος ἦν καὶ Νύξ Ἐρεβός τε μέλαν πρῶτον καὶ Τάρταρος εὐρύς, γῆ δ' οὐδ' ἀήρ οὐδ' οὐρανός ἦν· Ἐρέβους δ' ἐν ἀπείροσι κόλποις τίκτει πρῶτιστον ὑπηνέμιον Νύξ ἡ μελανόπτερος ὦον [...] (Ed. F. W. Hall- W. M. Geldart, *Aristophanis Comoediae- Tomus I*, OCT, Oxford 121967).

“office of myrrh bearer” conjures another New Testament scene, that in which the Magi present myrrh, among other gifts to the infant Jesus. In fact, the myrrh will be needed for embalming the body of the crucified Christ. In all these three cases, which were mentioned, the gift of myrrh represents an honor, which flows from the spiritual insight mentioned in l. 2 (τὴν σὴν αἰσθομένη θεότητα).

After this brief yet suggestive introduction, the second voice enters the troparion. From the lips of the Sinful Woman herself we hear her confession and prayer. The cry οἶμοι with which the woman begins is unexpected. “Woe’s me!”, a loan from ancient tragedy frequently employed by hagiographers and hymnographers about to mention some frightful fact or situation Cassia uses it to make the goad of sin palpable. The imagery of darkness in ll. 5-6 includes a metaphorical application of ἀσέληνος, which is ordinarily an epithet of night.¹⁰² According to Kazhdan, “the epithets of darkness, an obvious characteristic of night, are extended in the poem to the sensual desires of the sinful woman. [...] It seems at this point Kassia turns to the episode of Simon’s banquet: the streams of tears, the kisses, the wiping of feet with the locks of her hair—all these actions are borrowed from the Gospel, but in the poem they acquire a specific role [...]”¹⁰³.

Lines 8-14 comprise a statement of her offerings. Each offering involves a part of her—the streams of her tears, the groans of her heart, the kissing of His feet, and wiping of them with the hairs of her head: what she is offering is herself. Though in lines 8 and 9 her tears are by rhetorical hyperbole streams, He can receive them since He fills the sea with water. The bending to an individual is easily compared to the bending of the heavens (ll. 10-11; cf. *Ps.* 17,10).¹⁰⁴ She asks God to “bend” toward her sorrowing heart. Confession, tears and prayer to a merciful God begin to heal the Sinful Woman, to liberate her from her sin-filled past. Looking now to the future, she promises Christ to kiss His feet again and to dry them with her hair. Divine love has erased the “moonless night” of guilt and sin. We must also note the contrast of ll. 9 and 11: it is as

¹⁰² Cf. Dyck 1985, p. 69 (footnote 23), where Dyck explains the term ἀσέληνος.

¹⁰³ A. Kazhdan, 1999, pp. 318-319.

¹⁰⁴ For the phraseology of ll. 8 and 10 (τὰς πηγὰς τῶν δακρῶν[...]πρὸς τοὺς στεναγμοὺς τῆς καρδίας cf. Andrew of Crete, *Great Canon*, ll. 183-84: Τὰ δάκρυα, σωτήρ, τῶν ὀμμάτων μου καὶ τοὺς ἐκ βάθους στεναγμοὺς/ καθαρῶς προσφέρω βοώσης τῆς καρδίας [...]). For lines 9 and 11 (ὁ νεφέλαις διεξάγων τῆς θαλάσσης τὸ ὕδωρ; ὁ κλίνας τοὺς οὐρανοὺς τῇ ἀφράστῳ σου κενώσει) note E. Norden, *Agnostos Theos. Untersuchungen zur Formengeschichte religiöser Rede*. (Leipzig- Berlin, 1913), pp. 175 ff., esp. 201 ff., 220 ff., who contrasts forms of divine predication current in Greek paganism and in Oriental religions or religious influenced by Oriental conceptions, including Christianity.

an explosion of water filling the sea is opposed to an implosion when a void is left by the κένωσις.¹⁰⁵

At this point and while we would expect a penitential conclusion, Kassia's Sinful Woman recalls Eve, the first woman who sinned. The introduction of Eve has caused difficulty. Tillyard found Eve's presence in the poem a "pedantic" intrusion. Eve had run *from* God, the Sinful Woman *to* Him. Her trust had vanquished all fear. Both Eve and the subject of Kassia's poem are sinful women, but their behavior in their presence of their God is totally opposite. Eve attempts to be hidden, the other, pours out tears of repentance. Topping points to the contrast of Eve the disobedient and the repentant harlot in Lenten sermons and hymns as precedent for the allusion to the first sinful woman. She says that in the Great Canon of Andrew of Crete "upbraids his soul for imitating Eve rather than the *porne*"¹⁰⁶. The reference to the *porne* is as follows: *Τὰ δάκρυα τὰ τῆς πόρνης, οἰκτίρμον, κἀγὼ προβάλλομαι· ἰλάσθητί μοι, σωτήρ, τῇ εὐσπλαχνίᾳ σου* (ll. 57-58; cf. ll. 307 ff.) Another source for Kassia's troparion is the oration on the sinful woman by Amphilochius of Iconium, a cousin of Gregory Nazianzen.¹⁰⁷ Dyck asserts that "the pure feet of Christ serving as the link between the scenes at Simon's house and in the Garden of Eden"¹⁰⁸. Both Eve and the subject of Kassia's poem are sinful women but their behavior in the presence of their¹⁰⁹ God is

¹⁰⁵ Κένωσις- according to A. Kazhdan- designates 'emptiness', and Kassia evidently played on its double meaning. The confirmation of our explanation is found in the anonymous drama *Christus Patiens* (vers. 2418-2420: [...] ὡς Μαγδάλ' εἶπε Μαρία πιστουμένη, πρώτη δραμοῦσα, πάντ' ἀκριβωσαμένη καὶ τὴν κένωσιν μηνύσασα τοῦ τάφου; Grégoire de Nazianze, *La Passion du Christ. Tragédie*, Introduction, texte critique, traduction notes et index de André Tuillier, Le Éditions du Cerf No 149, Paris 1969, p. 324) in which Mary Magdalene is said to be the first to have arrived at Christ's tomb and to have witnessed its κένωσις: by having emptied His grave (i.e. by being resurrected), says Kassia, Christ bent the heavens. Cf. τάφου κένωσις in Photios, *Homily XII on Holy Saturday*, ed. B. Laourdas, *Φωτίου Ὁμιλίαι*, Thessalonike 1959 [Ἑλληνικά. Παράρτημα 12], 123.14: [...]καὶ γὰρ διὰ σὲ καὶ τάφου κένωσις καὶ θανάτου νέκρωσις καὶ Ἰδου καθαίρεισις καὶ τριήμερος ἔγερσις[...].

¹⁰⁶ E. Catafygiotou-Topping, 'Kassiane the nun and the sinful woman', *GOThR* 26,3(1981), pp. 201-209 (here 206 f.)

¹⁰⁷ PG 39, 71B ff. Cf. K. Hall, *Amphilochius von Ikonium in seinem Verhältnis zu den großen Kappadoziern*. (Tübingen and Leipzig, 1904), p. 61, 63.

¹⁰⁸ Cosmas of Jerusalem alludes to the 'pure feet' of Christ in connection with the harlot; but this reference is for the sake of a contrast along the lines of that of Romanos: *τῶν ἰχνῶν σου ἐπελάβετο τῶν ἀχράντων κεχραμμέναις παλάμαις* (PG 98, 476 A). Cf. Amphiloch . Icon., PG 39, 77B and 80A and the anonymous hymn (n. 12 above), stanza α'.

¹⁰⁹ With the word 'their' I mean that both Kassia and the sinful woman sense God as their personal God.

totally opposite: the one attempts to hide (Gen. 3, 8), the other pours out tears of repentance. If we follow Professor Dyck's opinion, "The two women become for all mankind negative and positive exempla of the behavior of a sinful mortal"¹¹⁰. Eve and the sinful woman don't follow a pious life and they both remember God and their sins, only after they hear His footsteps.

The verb ἐξιχνιάσει in l. 18 suggests a link between the two couplets comprised in ll. 15-16 and 17-18. God did indeed "track down" Eve, in spite of her vain and foolish effort to hide. The rhetorical question [...] κριμάτων σου ἀβύσσους/ τίς ἐξιχνιάσει; is modelled on Rom. 11, 33: ὦ βάθος πλούτου καὶ σοφίας καὶ γνώσεως θεοῦ· ὡς ἀνεξερεύνητα τὰ κρίματα αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀνεξιχνίαστοι οἱ ὁδοὶ αὐτοῦ¹¹¹. We can say that Eve's and Kassia's sins are related here. Then follows the phrase ψυχοσῶστα σωτήρ μου, the first invocation of the Deity within the woman's speech. According to Professor A. Dyck "with its doubling of the σω-element it seems like other figures of repetition, to heighten the *pathos* still further".¹¹²

The troparion then concludes with the Sinful Woman's last petition: Μὴ με τὴν σὴν δούλην παρίδης ὁ ἀμέτρητον ἔχων τὸ ἔλεος (Do not overlook me yours servant, You who have pity without measure). The imitation of the penitential Psalms, though palpable, is integrated seamlessly into the new context: Ps. 50,3: ἐλέησόν με, ὁ θεός, κατὰ τὸ μέγα ἔλεός σου καὶ κατὰ τὸ πλῆθος τῶν οἰκτιρμῶν μου ἐξάλειψον τὸ ἀνόμημά μου; Kassia, ll. 19-20: Μὴ με τὴν σὴν δούλην παρίδης ὁ ἀμέτρητον ἔχων τὸ ἔλεος.¹¹³ The Sinful Woman now addresses God as her personal Redeemer, ψυχοσῶστα, Σωτήρ μου (Savior of souls, my Savior). Thus the prayer, which begun with a cry of despair and guilt, ends with a statement of faith and hope. The hymn which begun with an image of a lost soul ends with the image of that soul redeemed by God's infinite loving mercy, as Topping points out.¹¹⁴

To conclude: the poem on Mary, as Dyck correctly stresses, begins on a milder note which then rises sharply with the onset of the actorial speech and continues to ascend

¹¹⁰ Dyck 1986, p. 72

¹¹¹ Cf. also Ps. 35,7: τὰ κρίματά σου ἄβυσσος πολλή. Cf. also Kassia's *Canon for the Dead*: Ὑψος καὶ βάθος τίς ἐκφράσαι δύναται/ τῆς σῆς σοφίας, Χριστέ[...];

¹¹² Dyck 1986, p. 73 (cf. note 40)

¹¹³ For the petition μὴ με... παρίδης cf. Andrew of Crete, *Great Canon*, 1.76 (μη ὑπερίδης με). Kassia, *Canon for the Dead*: τῶν δούλων σου πάριδε/ τὰ ἐν ἀγνοίᾳ, σωτήρ,/ καὶ γνώσει πταισμάτα./ Ὡς ἔχων μακρόθυμε,/ φιλανθρωπίας ἄπλετον πέλαγος,/ τῶν πρὸς σὲ μεταστάντων μὴ στήσης ὄλωσ τὰ παραπτώματα/ ἐν τῇ ἐτάσει/ αὐτῶν κατὰ πρόσωπον[...].

¹¹⁴ Topping 1981, p. 209

until it comes to the climax. Troparion's language is simple and direct, the use of rhetorical figures restrained. At several points metrical correspondance underlines parallelism of sense. Elements taken from literary models (scriptures, Romanos, Church Fathers) are not carelessly pasted on but made to form an organic part of their new environment. The Old Testament type (Eve), forms an apt contrast with the sinful woman and points a moral.

According to Ilse Rochow¹¹⁵ the form of the «sinful woman» is appeared also in other Eastern Christendom hymns, which are sung on Holy Wednesday and are ascribed by mistake to Kassia. These hymns are in the following way:

- i) Inc. Σὲ τὸν τῆς παρεθένου υἱόν, πόρνη ἐπιγνοῦσα Θεόν... is ascribed from the manuscripts to Kosmas of Maïouma
- ii) Inc. Τὸ πολύτιμον μύρον..., is ascribed also to Kosmas Maïouma
- iii) Inc. Ὅτε ἡ ἁμαρτωλός..., is ascribed in part to Kosmas Maïouma, as also in part to John the Monk. According to Rochow it can not be ascribed to Kassia, because this hymn is confirmed already from the 7th century¹¹⁶
- iv) Inc. Ὡ τῆς Ἰούδα ἀθλιότητος..., is ascribed either to Kosmas Maïouma or to John the Monk
- v) Inc. Ἡ ἁμαρτωλός..., is ascribed also to Kosmas Maïouma or to John the Monk
- vi) Inc. Ἡ βεβυθισμένη..., is ascribed to John of Damascus
- vii) Inc. Σήμερον ὁ Χριστός..., is ascribed to someone Byzantios
- viii) Inc. Ἐπλωσεν ἡ πόρνη..., is ascribed either to John of Damascus or to John the Monk
- ix) Inc. Προσήλθε γυνή..., is ascribed to Byzantios
- x) Inc. Ἡ ἀπεγνωσμένη..., is supposed to be John of Damascus' hymn¹¹⁷

Conclusion

¹¹⁵ Rochow 1967, pp. 56-57.

¹¹⁶ Rochow 1967, p. 57.

¹¹⁷ Cf. Rochow, p. 235, footnotes 522-534 for the bibliography about these hymns.

Across the more than ten centuries which separate us from the Byzantine nun, Kassia the Melodos communicates the reality of the christian passover from death to life, as well as her serene belief in the transformnig grace of divine *philanthropia*. Cassia invites such identification by presenting her situation with such vividness and pathos. Cassia can be said to have laid bare the human soul in a poem of extraordinary concentration and power.-