

# TRANSMISOGYNY, ABLEISM AND COMPULSORY CISNESS: CASE STUDIES FROM BYZANTIUM<sup>\*</sup>

## I

### INTRODUCTION

Trans history enjoys the luxury of disbelief. Premodern trans history is especially rich in this resource. Where a cis reading of a historical figure's gender may be written, reviewed and published without even an explanatory footnote, a trans reading will at least have to reckon with questions of anachronism, the knowability of inner states and the feminist implications of transness existing in the past or present. Fortunately, this rigour will inevitably come to be shared, as the entanglement of cisness and transness becomes impossible to ignore.

The last five years have seen a flurry of publications on premodern trans history.<sup>1</sup> Yet how to recognize transness in the past and what to call it remain questions, even among historians who seriously seek it out. Pioneers like Gabrielle Bychowski have called for 'a trans feminist turn' to our study of literature and history, asserting that 'a variety of trans genres of embodiment existed in the premodern past' and emphasizing that the term 'trans' is no more anachronistic than the term 'medieval'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Dorothy Kim and M. W. Bychowski, 'Visions of Medieval Trans Feminism', *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality*, lv (2019); Simone Chess, Colby Gordon and Will Fisher, 'Introduction: Early Modern Trans Studies', *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, xix (2019); Allison Surtees and Jennifer Dyer (eds.), *Exploring Gender Diversity in the Ancient World* (Edinburgh, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> M. W. Bychowski, 'The Necropolitics of Narcissus: Confessions of Transgender Suicide in the Middle Ages', *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality*, lv (2019), 209.

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By contrast, Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov and Anna Klosowska's *Trans Historical* appears, despite its title, somewhat more muted in its embrace of 'contemporary vocabularies', and questions whether transness, taken as an expression of 'inner truth', is 'ultimately knowable'.<sup>3</sup> In the volume's epilogue, LaFleur warns us that to use modern terminology can mean to import 'a series of twenty-first-century assumptions about what trans experience is or is not', and ultimately to collapse a 'contradictory life into a singular narrative'.<sup>4</sup> Despite this conservative impulse, they go on to ask some important questions: 'Must past trans people announce that their gender presentation bears some sort of relationship to inner truth in order for us to identify or recognize them as part of trans history? Must transness be *permanent*, or *forever*, in order for it to be real?'<sup>5</sup>

These questions can confound, and have confounded, even historians who actively try to write trans-affirming histories. An example from the field of Byzantine studies is Roland Betancourt's *Byzantine Intersectionality*.<sup>6</sup> While it is not the first work to engage with transness in Byzantium, Betancourt's book is the first to name people in the Byzantine world as trans, reframing our perception of the so-called 'transvestite saints' to move us away from one-dimensional explanations of cross-dressing as disguise.<sup>7</sup> Betancourt links hagiographical and historical

<sup>3</sup> Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov and Anna Klosowska, 'Introduction: The Benefits of Being Trans Historical', in their *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality Before the Modern* (Ithaca, NY, 2021), 17: 'Transness is often held up as an expression of an inner truth, but a queer reading critiques the possibility that an inner truth is ultimately knowable or desirable'.

<sup>4</sup> Greta LaFleur, 'Epilogue: Against Consensus', in LaFleur, Raskolnikov and Klosowska, *Trans Historical*, 372–3. The editors of another edited collection published in the same year clarify that they do not take 'transgender' as a term to be 'somehow an ahistorical or historically transcendent framework'. Yet they embrace the transhistorical links created through that term and invite their readers to explore the 'deep structural connections' between 'categories of exceptional life'. See Alicia Spencer-Hall and Blake Gutt, 'Introduction', in their *Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography* (Amsterdam, 2021), 13.

<sup>5</sup> LaFleur, 'Epilogue: Against Consensus', 374.

<sup>6</sup> Roland Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality: Sexuality, Gender, and Race in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> For an earlier article on this topic, see Diether Roderich Reinsch, 'Wer gebiert hier wen? Transsexuelle Phantasie in Byzanz (Zu Psellos, Chronographia VII 144)', *Medioevo Greco*, ix (2009). For a critique of disguise as an explanation, in a Western context, see C. Libby, 'The Historian and the Sexologist: Revisiting the "Transvestite Saint"', *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, viii (2021).

material to medical discussions about castration and gender-affirming surgeries. They offer a reassessment of the gender identities of a number of prominent Byzantine figures, including the eleventh-century polymath Michael Psellos, whom they treat as non-binary.<sup>8</sup> They explore non-Christian transmasculinity through the pagan story of Atalanta and point to the systemic discrimination to which trans or gender-nonconforming people could be subjected.<sup>9</sup>

In doing so, Betancourt can be both far too demanding and far too permissive with their classifications. As was recently argued by Ilya Maude, when it comes to deciding which of the so-called ‘cross-dressing’ saints to recognize as trans monks, Betancourt adopts the sexologist’s gaze. Their trans readings of historical (or even mythical) figures become high-stakes judgments in which the historian is placed in a position akin to that of the psychiatric gatekeeper of the gender clinic. In this framework, those saints who did not repudiate their maleness (even under duress) can be diagnosed as trans men, but for the rest, the time they spent as men supposedly does nothing to complicate their cis womanhood.<sup>10</sup> Betancourt has been more willing to recognize Byzantine figures as non-binary, to proclaim their ‘unsettled gender identity’ and their ‘frustration with assigned gender identity’.<sup>11</sup> Behind both eagerness and reluctance seems to lie an emphasis on statements these figures made about their inner states and a lack of focus on the regulatory forces which may have shaped those statements.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*, 115.

<sup>9</sup> Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*, 116–117.

<sup>10</sup> Ilya Maude, “‘Selective Historians’: The Construction of Cisness in Byzantine and Byzantinist Texts”, *Gender & History*, xxxvi (2024).

<sup>11</sup> Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*, 115.

<sup>12</sup> Those who are keen to avoid the term ‘trans’ can be even more susceptible to such reductionist thinking. As a recent example, see Laura Franco’s overall positive review of Betancourt’s work, which expresses a respectful dissent regarding the terminology ‘transgender monks’; she identifies them instead as ‘holy cross-dressers’ or ‘holy women’. See Laura Franco, ‘Byzantine Lives: Discussing Nonbinary Sexuality, Gender, and Race in Byzantium’, *Harvard Theological Review*, cxiv (2021).

In this article, we place the emphasis not on the question of whether we can call an individual trans but on the forces that produced cisness in Byzantium, and on the discourses, situations and micro-relations through which trans life, cis life and trans desires are negotiated.<sup>13</sup> We take inner states into consideration but do not approach them as stable and essential, nor do we collapse trans desires and trans social positions. We introduce a theoretical framework for understanding how cis and trans identities were formed in Byzantium in negotiation with hegemonic ideals of masculinity and able-bodiedness. By doing so, we uncover a close relationship between ableism and transmisogyny that served, and still serves, to reinforce the subordinate position of disabled and transfeminine people. In what follows, we begin with some definitions and continue by examining the case of a trans girl not mentioned by Betancourt, to offer an alternative reading to their interpretation of Basilakes' story of Atalanta and to revisit their treatment of Psellos' relationship with masculinity and femininity.

## II

### SOME DEFINITIONS

We follow Jules Gill-Peterson in understanding cisness as 'a set of operational norms that we use to discipline people's gender and punish their transgressions'.<sup>14</sup> More specifically, we consider cisness to be a hegemonic ideal which demands a certain congruence between a person's assigned sex and their gendered behaviour; that is to say, it expects someone who is identified as a boy to behave as a boy, and violently punishes them for failing to do so. As such, we consider cisness to be an ideal of gendered behaviour and embodiment which was (and is) navigated by everybody.

<sup>13</sup> For different approaches that focus on objects and the trans stories they can tell us, see Noah Lubinsky, 'Reaching for T in the South African Archives', *Gender & History*, xxxvi (2024); Aixia Huang, 'Trans-Gender Things: Objects and the Materiality of Trans-Femininity in Ming-Qing China', *Gender & History*, xxxvi (2024).

<sup>14</sup> Jules Gill-Peterson, 'When Did We Become Cis?', *Sad Brown Girl* (June 2021), <<https://sadbrowngirl.substack.com/p/when-did-we-become-cis>> (accessed 12 August 2022); Jules Gill-Peterson, 'The Cis State', *Sad Brown Girl* (April 2021), <<https://sadbrowngirl.substack.com/p/the-cis-state>> (accessed 12 August 2022).

We understand transness as transgression of cisness, but we do not see the two as opposites.<sup>15</sup> First, in terms of identities, we follow Stryker in using cis and trans *not* to identify two completely distinct types of people, but ‘to ask *how* somebody is cis (that is, how different aspects of their bodies and minds line up on the gender divisions in privileged ways) and how they are trans (that is, how they cross the boundaries of their birth-assigned gender in ways that can have adverse social consequences)’.<sup>16</sup> This allows for a framework in which trans people can relate to certain aspects of cisness while actively resisting others, and cis people can experience and relate to trans desires. Indeed, in this framework, certain transgressions can be reabsorbed into cisness, becoming acceptably transgressive (e.g., a man wearing a pink shirt), while at the same time expanding, and thus changing, the regulatory forces of cisness itself (i.e., it is now acceptable for a man to wear a pink shirt). We see, then, the relationship between cisness and transness not as a static opposition but as a dynamic negotiation that constantly evaluates which types of transgression are acceptable as part of cisness and which are to be monstered into transness.<sup>17</sup>

Given our method of complicating the relationship between cisness and transness, we take a contextual approach to gendered pronouns which focuses not only on the individual but also on the situations in which they are presented. In this article, we had to choose pronouns for three Byzantine figures: Psellos, Atalanta and Eudokimos. In Psellos’ case, we decided to use they/them, because we do not feel that a more cis presentation will help us engage critically with Betancourt’s argument. ‘They/them’ pronouns can allow more space for different readings of a person’s gender, and thus fit well with our discussion of Psellos’

<sup>15</sup> Transness and cisness are often, negatively and unhelpfully, understood as opposites, in a similar way to the categories of both homosexuality and heterosexuality and disability and able-bodiedness. For the last of these binaries, see Robert McRuer, ‘Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence’, in Lennard J. Davis (ed.), *The Disability Studies Reader*, 5th edn (London, 2017), 398–9.

<sup>16</sup> Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution*, 2nd edn (New York, 2017), 13–14.

<sup>17</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ‘Monster Culture (Seven Theses)’, in Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (ed.), *The Monster Theory Reader* (Minneapolis, 2020).

femininity and relationship with manhood.<sup>18</sup> We are not using them out of a counterfactual notion of what Psellos ‘would have wanted’ had they lived in different times (and therefore been a different person), or as a gender-clinic-style assessment of the true gendered nature of Michael Psellos. We are clearly not using them because Psellos asked us to. Rather, we are using them out of an ideological commitment not to foreclose transness in readings — we do not believe that such an impulse is productive.<sup>19</sup> Unlike Psellos, Atalanta is a mythical figure who has been fashioned and refashioned in different ways, some more trans than others. We can imagine, among the most receptive of the audience of Atalanta’s story, transmasculine people in Byzantium (and today) for whom we could use the pronouns he/him or they/them. We have chosen to use she/her pronouns for Atalanta herself, because our concern in this case is the exercise itself and what its Byzantine author is constructing, imagining and ruling out, not what is there.<sup>20</sup> Finally, we have opted for she/her pronouns for Eudokimos, a choice that clashes with the male form of her name (meaning ‘a boy or man of good repute’). As we will see, Eudokimos does not tell her own story and is forcibly placed outside cisness, after being pathologized and ridiculed for her gender expression. We consider it an act of respect towards her to highlight her transfemininity.<sup>21</sup> In this

<sup>18</sup> At the same time, we accept that in different contexts, using he/him pronouns for Psellos may very well be more appropriate; elsewhere, one of the authors has done so, in order to emphasize how being a scholar consolidated Psellos’ manhood. See Maroula Perisanidi, *Masculinity in Byzantium, c.1000–1200: Scholars, Clerics and Violence* (Cambridge, 2024).

<sup>19</sup> Note also Greta LaFleur’s recent discussion of the impact of pronouns on the research questions we are allowed to ask: ‘The use of *they* — either done in earnestness or with an agenda — does not necessarily name the historical figure as trans, but it *does* name the historian’s assumptions, present in the uncritical use of *he* or *she*, that they are not’. See Greta LaFleur, ‘“What’s in a Name?”: They/Them’, *Journal of the Early Republic*, xliii (2023), 111–112.

<sup>20</sup> We do not believe this is the only way to write or read Atalanta — different framings of language will inevitably produce different emphases and uncover different truths. The field will be enriched when trans readings are no longer subject to scarcity.

<sup>21</sup> For an exploration of ‘they’ as potentially degendering in trans history, see Jamey Jespersen, ‘Female Husbands: A Trans History. Jen Manion’, *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, xvii (2023), 420–24. For a cis interpretation (cont. on p 7)

context, the choice of she/her instead of they/them allows us to err on the side of caution against the degendering of trans women and girls, something that is particularly important in the context of transmisogyny.

Our use of pronouns in this article reflects our judgements as authors but is not the end point of our investigation. In our framework, we put the emphasis on cisness, rather than on cis or trans identities. This allows us to name the forces that maintain cisness, and we find transmisogyny and ableism among them. We understand ableism as a network of beliefs and practices which, in their projection of certain types of bodies as perfect and others as imperfect, come to define some humans as fully human while casting others into a diminished state of humanity.<sup>22</sup> We take transmisogyny to refer to the similar network of beliefs and practices that produces a disparity in the treatment of transfeminine and transmasculine people, rendering the former particularly vulnerable to demonization under patriarchy, not simply for failing to conform to gender norms, but specifically because of the direction of their gender transgression: their seeming rejection of masculinity for a supposedly inferior femininity.<sup>23</sup>

In writing about cisness, we are writing about forces that create gender. These forces have not been the same in all cultural contexts and periods, but have existed in analogous and interrelated forms. We have defined cisness relationally; as such, we understand Byzantine cisness to be different to cisness in the present day, without, however, precluding striking parallels between the two periods of time.

(n. 21 cont.)

of Eudokimos as a boy who prefers feminine games because they allow for less interaction and thus less mockery of her disability, see Véronique Dasen and Dominic O'Meara, 'Jeu et genre: le témoignage de Michel Psellos (*Philosophica minora* II, 19)', *Pallas*, cxix (2022).

<sup>22</sup> Fiona Kumari Campbell, 'Inciting Legal Fictions: "Disability's" Date with Ontology and the Ableist Body of the Law', *Griffith Law Review*, x (2001), 44.

<sup>23</sup> Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Berkeley, CA, 2007); transmisogyny primer: <<https://www.juliaserano.com/av/TransmisogynyPrimer-Serano.pdf>> (accessed December 2023).



## III

## A TRANS GIRL

The possibility of transfemininity conjured by Betancourt's *Byzantine Intersectionality* is often centred on the inner lives of the figures they describe. There are also, however, Byzantine people whose outward behaviour, and not simply their desires or some essential core as expressed in an isolated speech act, could be described as trans. One such example can be found in the treatise *On How Some People Become Intelligent and Others Stupid*, where Michael Psellos theorizes the development of the soul as it enters and inhabits a growing body.<sup>24</sup> According to Psellos' theory, souls in their absolute state do not differ from each other; their differentiation begins through their interaction with the body. Some souls become too corporeal, burying themselves too deep inside the body; others place themselves at the centre of every axis throughout the body; others again ride up to the top of the body and come closer to the divine. This results in more or less corporeal souls existing in more or less harmonious bodies, and has gendered effects. Indeed, the end point of Psellos' discussion was the explanation of the unusual behaviour of a child named Eudokimos, who had been assigned male but engaged in activities expected of girls. We are told that:

He hates men's quarters and gymnasia, hunting grounds or places where the youth gather. He does not want to play with others at either ball or dice; he cannot stand the manly smell of dry sweat. What he likes are the web, the loom, and anything to do with wool-spinning. He spends his time in the women's quarters; he wants to turn the spindle, he wants to ply the loom. When he needs to turn to play ... he fashions dolls, idols, and likenesses, he sets up a bridal chamber; he introduces a groom and has a bride lie next to him; he then stuffs the doll of the bride with some kind of rubbish and thinks that she is

<sup>24</sup> Michael Psellos, *Michaelis Pselli Philosophica minora, vol. II: Opuscula Psychologica, Theologica, Daemonologica*, ed. Dominic J. O'Meara, ii (Leipzig, 1989), 88–93. On Psellos' views on the soul in this and other treatises, see Dominic J. O'Meara, 'Aspects du travail philosophique de Michel Psellus', in Christian-Friedrich Collatz et al. (eds.), *Dissertationum criticae: Festschrift für Günter Christian Hansen* (Würzburg, 1998), 431–9. On intellectual disability in Byzantium, with a mention of this case but no discussion of gender, see Fotis Vasileiou, 'Searching for Intellectual Disability in Byzantium', in Christian Laes and Irina Metzler (eds.), *'Madness' in the Ancient World: Inmate or Acquired? From Theoretical Concepts to Daily Life* (Turnhout, 2023).



pregnant ... When he needs to find pleasure in singing, he does not sing the tragic song of alliances, battles, and trophies of ancient men, but sings like the girls ... about how they are filled with eros.<sup>25</sup>

This is notable as an example of a description of gendered behaviour that falls beyond the bounds of cisness, that is, gendered behaviour that is pathologized and demands explanation. Psellos pathologizes this gender deviation from the hegemonic ideal in two ways. First, as the result of the child's disability: her large head is said to have caused her unusual behaviour. Its size affected the place within the body where her soul could settle, feminizing her. We read:

Do you not see this very pleasing little child, how he was allotted an excessively large head which is in no way smaller than that of a cow and has a face which is more forward than it should be? So what do you reckon? When the intellect is scattered in such a great space, it is loose and weak and the soul is simply feminine (θήλεια ἀτεχνῶς ἢ ψυχῇ). For just as a breath which passes through a wider blowhole is unstable and thin (because due to the breadth through which it flew its natural essence is weakened, whereas the one that goes through narrow passages is nobler when it meets with bodies), so too the breath-borne vehicle of the soul in the head, if it happens to be constrained in a cranium that is of the suitable size, gets compressed into itself and made powerful, but looser and emptier if it is constrained in a head which is massive and enlarged.<sup>26</sup>

Second, the child's behaviour is pathologized by being viewed as a form of intellectual disability.<sup>27</sup> Psellos frames their argument

<sup>25</sup> Michael Psellos, *Philosophica minora*, 93. Translated in Stratis Papaioannou, *Michael Psellos: Rhetoric and Authorship in Byzantium* (Cambridge, 2013), 204–5.

<sup>26</sup> Psellos, *Philosophica minora*, 92: 'ἦ οὐχ ὁρᾶτε τὸ χαριέστατον τοῦτο παιδάριον, ὅπως δὴ ὑπερμεγέθη τὴν κεφαλὴν ἐκληρώσατο τῆς τοῦ βοῦς κατ' οὐδὲν ἐλάττονα, τό τε πρόσωπον μᾶλλον ἢ εἶδει ἐμπρόσθιον ἔχει and τί οὐν οἴεσθε and ἐν τηλικούτῳ μεγέθει σκιδνάμενον ἐντεῦθεν αὐτῷ καὶ τὸ φρόνημα χαῦνον καὶ ἀσθενὲς καὶ θήλεια ἀτεχνῶς ἢ ψυχῇ. ὥσπερ γὰρ τὸ δι' εὐρυτέρων ἀναπνοῶν δικνουόμενον πνεῦμα ἀδρανὲς ἐστὶ καὶ λεπτόν, ὅτι τῷ πλάτει δι' οὗ ἵπταται τὴν οἰκείαν οὐσίαν ἡμύδρωται, τὸ δὲ διὰ στενοτέρων τῶν πόρων διὸν γενναϊότερον προσβάλλει τοῖς σώμασιν, οὕτω δὴ καὶ τὸ ἐν τῇ κεφαλῇ πνευματικὸν ὄχημα τῆς ψυχῆς, εἰ μὲν συμμέτρῳ περισφίγγοιτο τῷ κρανίῳ, πεπύκνεται πρὸς ἑαυτὸ καὶ δεδυνάμωται, εἰ δὲ ὀγκώδει καὶ μεμεγεθυμένῳ, ἀραιότερον γίνεται καὶ χαυνότερον'.

<sup>27</sup> Troublingly, some modern historians have followed Psellos in understanding Eudokimos' actions as the result of intellectual disability, explaining her feminine pastimes as 'infantile' behaviour and proposing hydrocephalus as a possible cause. See Edgar Kellenberger, *Der Schutz der Einfältigen: Menschen mit einer geistigen Behinderung in der Bibel und in weiteren Quellen* (Zurich, 2011), 12–13.

about the soul as a response to ancient Greek theories that attempted to explain why some people were ‘refined in their thinking, intelligent, acute, and with a good memory’, while others were the opposite, ‘gauche, dull, soft, and forgetful’.<sup>28</sup> These intellectual judgements came with moral judgements, as the first group were thought to be naturally attracted to what is good and the second to be wholly absorbed in the sensory world. The first set of qualities were understood to be masculine, and the latter feminine. The child herself is explicitly said to have a soul that suffers from ‘madness’ (ἄφροσύνην), bringing about the ‘feminine quality of the intellect’ (τὸ θῆλυ τῆς φρονήσεως πεποιήκασιν).<sup>29</sup>

The association of queerness with disability is a common mechanism of threat containment which would prove to have a long history. In reference to modernity, McRuer has noted its usefulness for buttressing both heterosexuality and able-bodiedness by containing the threat of deviance inside certain bodies: it is disabled people who are queer, and queer people who are disabled. He writes:

The most successful heterosexual subject is the one whose sexuality is not compromised by disability (metaphorized as queerness); the most successful able-bodied subject is the one whose ability is not compromised by queerness (metaphorized as disability). This consolidation occurs through complex processes of conflation and stereotype: people with disabilities are often understood as somehow queer (as paradoxical stereotypes of the asexual or over-sexual person with disabilities would suggest), while queers are often understood as somehow disabled (as ongoing medicalization of identity, similar to what people with disabilities more generally encounter, would suggest). Once these conflations are available in the popular imagination, queer/disabled figures can be tolerated and, in fact, utilized in order to maintain the fiction that able-bodied heterosexuality is not in crisis.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, Psellos’ treatise conflates transfemininity with disability: people with really large heads are transfeminine, and transfeminine people have an intellectual disability.<sup>31</sup> This association

<sup>28</sup> Psellos, *Philosophica minora*, 88: ‘καὶ οἱ μὲν λεπτοὶ τὴν νόησιν ἀγχίνοι τε καὶ μνήμονες καὶ ὀξεῖς, οἱ δὲ τοῦναντίον ἅπαν καὶ ἐπαρίστεροι ἀμβλεῖς τε καὶ μαλακοὶ καὶ λήθης γέμοντες’.

<sup>29</sup> Psellos, *Philosophica minora*, 92.

<sup>30</sup> McRuer, ‘Compulsory Able-Bodiedness’, 400–401.

<sup>31</sup> The two types of disability invoked in this passage involve, on the one hand, a lack of bodily harmony, and on the other, limited intellectual functioning. Without

(cont. on p 11)

contains transfemininity inside certain bodies and helps maintain the masquerade of cisness 'as the natural order of things' and of masculinity as ideal.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, Psellos' compounding of disability and gender deviance, in a society that was both ableist and patriarchal, participates in what we could call a system of compulsory able-bodiedness and compulsory cisness which 'repeatedly demands that people with disabilities [and transfeminine people] embody for others an affirmative answer to the unspoken question, Yes, but in the end, wouldn't you rather be more like me?'<sup>33</sup>

Psellos' containment appears to be successful. Already at the beginning of the treatise, the student audience is presented as immediately bursting into laughter when informed of the chosen topic of discussion: Eudokimos.<sup>34</sup> This suggests the notoriety of the child's case and reveals that her treatment veered more towards defensive mockery than towards the dread that can be associated with witnessing the feared and despised Other. Similarly, Psellos' ableist description of the child's head as barely smaller than a cow's calls into question her very humanity and acts as a reassurance of the rarity of her existence. Yet even as Psellos attempts to neutralize the threat posed to cisness by Eudokimos' existence and behaviour, new possibilities for gender deviance appear at the edges of the rhetorical defence.<sup>35</sup> Psellos asserts that such congenital conditions are just one of the ways in which one's soul could become more or less corporeal. Other illnesses throughout one's life could also affect one's soul (and thus one's gendered behaviour), as could one's education (παιδείαν) and habits (ἔθος).<sup>36</sup>

(n. 31 cont.)

further evidence, we cannot assume that other types of disability would have had similar associations with queerness. Psellos' own name suggests the presence of a speech difference, which would have been understood very differently from, for example, dwarfism, a condition which would have fitted Psellos' theory of disharmonious bodies.

<sup>32</sup> McRuer, 'Compulsory Able-Bodiedness', 393.

<sup>33</sup> In talking about compulsory cisness and compulsory able-bodiedness we are adapting McRuer's theory of the relationship between compulsory able-bodiedness and compulsory heterosexuality. See McRuer, 'Compulsory Able-Bodiedness', 395.

<sup>34</sup> Psellos, *Philosophica minora*, 88.

<sup>35</sup> Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', 38–9.

<sup>36</sup> Psellos, *Philosophica minora*, 90.

Paradoxically, then, while this treatise presents us with a clear example of a trans girl, it demonstrates the ways that cisness justifies and navigates the existence of transfeminine people, which despite the many attempts at its containment, remains irrepressible.

#### IV

##### ATALANTA

That transmisogyny and ableism were the driving forces behind Eudokimos' treatment becomes even clearer when contrasted with narratives of transmasculinity which associated manhood with able-bodiedness and with praised, rather than pathologized, transmasculine desire. We find such an example in a rhetorical exercise about the mythical figure of Atalanta. In the pagan story, Atalanta, a girl who is fond of hunting and who runs with exceptional speed, decides to get married and organizes a foot race to choose her bridegroom. Whoever manages to overtake her will be deemed worthy of marrying her. Atalanta is victorious over many men and is never physically bested, but is finally outdone by Hippomenes and his trick of dropping golden apples for her to gather, which slows her down. Nikephoros Basilakes (b. c.1115, d. after 1182) wrote two rhetorical exercises based on this story, a Refutation and a Confirmation of the myth's plausibility.<sup>37</sup> Neither can be said to have been Basilakes' own opinion, but both included arguments based on Byzantine understandings of gender that would have been considered plausible by his target audience. As such, they reveal different sets of views that people held during Basilakes' time, views which also had the potential to influence future generations of readers, especially given their most likely context: the schoolroom. Basilakes' exercises, through their discussion of the verisimilitude of Atalanta's story, served to set and control the boundaries of gender intelligibility, and as such have much to tell us about the contours of cisness.

<sup>37</sup> Nikephoros Basilakes, *The Rhetorical Exercises of Nikephoros Basilakes: Progymnasmata from Twelfth-Century Byzantium*, ed. and trans. Jeffrey Beneker and Craig A. Gibson (Cambridge, MA, 2016), 96–127.

In both the Refutation and the Confirmation, Atalanta's masculinity is tied to what were seen as physically demanding masculine pastimes, and by extension to able-bodiedness. The Refutation tells us that Atalanta 'was raised to be manly (πρὸς ἀνδρείαν ἐτρέφετο); she trained in hunting, shot the bow, and emulated Artemis'.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, the Confirmation emphasizes the strength, skill and athletic training that signified her masculinity. Being the child of a heroic father, we are told, it was not surprising 'if Atalanta was somewhat stronger than other women'.<sup>39</sup> The availability of racecourses and her training in hunting did the rest.<sup>40</sup> The result was a child who was said in both the Refutation and the Confirmation to act like a man or even to be made a man (τὴν φύσιν ἡνδρίζετο and καὶ παῖς παρὰ τὰς ἄλλας ἡνδρίζετο and ἀνδριζομένην τὴν παῖδα).<sup>41</sup>

In the Confirmation, Atalanta's masculinity is narrativized within the context of her womanhood, and the threat it poses is limited in its scope. This is most obvious in Atalanta's eventual marriage, which is presented as a sort of inevitability — 'to the extent that she was still a maiden, she proclaimed what a maiden would proclaim, namely marriage' — as well as a culmination of her womanhood — 'and now as a woman I must submit to the ways of women, because nature also wishes this'.<sup>42</sup> We find here something close to a modern-day tomboy narrative.<sup>43</sup> Atalanta is allowed 'to be like a man' for a while, but will eventually have

<sup>38</sup> Basilakes, *Progymnasmata*, 98–9.

<sup>39</sup> Basilakes, *Progymnasmata*, 115.

<sup>40</sup> Basilakes, *Progymnasmata*, 119.

<sup>41</sup> Basilakes, *Progymnasmata*, 100, 114. The verb ἀνδρίζω has a number of meanings that signify a range of levels of proximity to manhood.

<sup>42</sup> Basilakes, *Progymnasmata*, 121. We find the same association in the Refutation, where the myth is disbelieved because no mother would let her daughter out of her sight until the daughter's wedding day (p. 101): 'surely how would her mother — if she did not give the lie to that name — have let her outside the women's quarters and also have released her from her hand, the girl whom she was supposed to train right up to her wedding day?'

<sup>43</sup> The story of Atalanta is reminiscent of the modern concept of the tomboy as a kind of ideal girlhood that is meant to prepare the child for an ideal, adult, procreative womanhood. See Lisa Selin Davis, 'The Racist History of Celebrating the American Tomboy', *Literary Hub*, 11 August 2020, <[https://lithub.com/the-racist-history-of-celebrating-the-american-tomboy/?fbclid=IwAR3STy44\\_Xg2H6Oqr01c5PIPDNznSbtXWTPPhLXV2pFJf7i-By6TgEDUDsKE](https://lithub.com/the-racist-history-of-celebrating-the-american-tomboy/?fbclid=IwAR3STy44_Xg2H6Oqr01c5PIPDNznSbtXWTPPhLXV2pFJf7i-By6TgEDUDsKE)>.

to take her place among women. This is a restrictive narrative that allows for only temporary transmasculinity. Yet it is worth acknowledging that even this brief respite from rigid gender roles was not available to trans girls like Eudokimos. For them, there was no equivalent to the tomboy narrative. Transmisogyny precluded that.

Indeed, transmisogyny imbued not only the suppression of Eudokimos' girlhood but also the conditional acceptance of Atalanta's boyhood. In justifying Atalanta's masculine desire and behaviour, the Confirmation asks: 'And why is it an accusation against nature, if the pursuit of manliness was ever desirable for a woman too? . . . But if you ever faulted the male for his lack of manliness (ἀνδρείαν), make sure that you occasionally admire the female for her manliness (ἀνδρείαν) as well'.<sup>44</sup> Far from being pathologized, Atalanta's transmasculinity, firmly ensconced in womanhood, is tied to a strong, able body, and fear of effeminacy is used to excuse this gender transgression.<sup>45</sup>

Contrary to transfemininity, there are readings of transmasculinity that do not offend the patriarchal value of male superiority. Yet even in those cases we can see a lingering fear of what transmasculine desire might mean. The Confirmation limits this threat through references to Atalanta's exceptionality. For one, we are quickly reminded that she is descended from the gods, and she is likened to other female warrior figures with divine connections, like Artemis and the Amazons.<sup>46</sup> For another, we are told that the female of the species was strong in those days, and as such it may have been possible for a woman at

<sup>44</sup> Basilakes, *Progymnasmata*, 113.

<sup>45</sup> Manliness in women is often praised in order to emphasize or create failures of masculinity in men and those of whom manhood is demanded. For example, Eustathios of Thessalonica, in his account of the Capture of Thessalonica, uses praise for women who have been fighting as a means of denigrating David Komnenos and his followers: 'Those who observed David and the "Davidians" with him . . . might have said that our women had become men, and the "Davidians" among our men, women'. See *Eustathios of Thessaloniki: The Capture of Thessaloniki: A Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, trans. John Melville Jones (Canberra, 1988), 91. A recent example comes from colonial Britain in the period between the 1880s and the 1930s, when women were praised for engaging in activities understood as masculine — such as hunting — because their masculinity was seen not as a threat against British manliness but as a sign of British racial superiority over the colonized. See Mary A. Prociida, 'Good Sports and Right Sorts: Guns, Gender, and Imperialism in British India', *The Journal of British Studies*, xl (2001).

<sup>46</sup> Basilakes, *Progymnasmata*, 99, 115, 117.

that time to successfully hunt beasts without this still being the case in Basilakes' time. We are explicitly asked to believe the story because of Atalanta's uniqueness: 'For if poetry turned all women into soldiers, it would be reasonable to mistrust this unreasonable depiction, but if the phenomenon is rare, the fact that it is surprising does not make it unbelievable'.<sup>47</sup>

That not all women can have Atalanta's bodily capabilities, and thus her manliness, is further emphasized through reference to animals and speed. The Confirmation mentions a version of Zeno's second paradox in which a horse allows a tortoise to have a head start in a race and is shown to be unable to overtake it again. This is a mathematical paradox, but in Basilakes' version, emphasis is placed not on maths but on how training could help us overcome our weaker nature. The reader is asked: 'For how did the tortoise in the fable surpass the horse? Was it not from exercise, not from athletic training, rather than from nature?'<sup>48</sup> A horse and a tortoise — even more so than a hare and a tortoise, the creatures in another fable that Basilakes could have used to make the same claim — have pointedly different natures, with the horse being visibly bigger and stronger. Women, we are asked to believe, are as different from men as a tortoise is from a horse, and therefore would require an extraordinary amount of training to surpass men.

This line of argument can hardly have been intended to encourage women to follow Atalanta's example. Her exceptional strength gestures towards a kind of female masculinity that is both ideal and impossible. Indeed, we can think of the story of Atalanta in the Confirmation as a kind of supercrip narrative. The term supercrip has been used in disability studies to criticize the representation of disability as inspiration porn, as in the case, for example, of a one-armed person who is lauded as extraordinary for playing the violin, overcoming their disability through hard work and perseverance.<sup>49</sup> In Atalanta's case, the

<sup>47</sup> Basilakes, *Progymnasmata*, 113. This bears an eerie resemblance to present-day transphobic narratives of transition which suggest that if there were only fewer trans people, their existence would not be a problem. See, for example, Amelia Gentleman, "'An Explosion': What Is Behind the Rise in Girls Questioning Their Gender Identity?," *Guardian*, 24 November 2022, <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/nov/24/an-explosion-what-is-behind-the-rise-in-girls-questioning-their-gender-identity>>.

<sup>48</sup> Basilakes, *Progymnasmata*, 119.

<sup>49</sup> On the concept of the supercrip, see Sami Schalk, 'Reevaluating the Supercrip', *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, x (2016).



disability to be overcome is her female nature and the weaker female body that came with it.<sup>50</sup> Through physical training (and a host of other exceptional circumstances), Atalanta remains a woman but gains in strength and manages to achieve feats only thought possible for men. As in other cases of supercrips, the audience that is meant to be inspired does not consist of other women (i.e., other disabled people) but of men (i.e., the non-disabled), who are policed with the possibility of shame by comparison or even the threat, made perilous by transmisogyny, of slipping out of manhood.<sup>51</sup> Ultimately, the Confirmation forecloses transness in any direction: transmasculine transition could be discouraged through comparison with Atalanta's exceptional able-bodiedness, while transfemininity is rendered abject through the value that is placed on manhood.

The Refutation of Atalanta's story offers some more space for a continuing transmasculinity.<sup>52</sup> It describes an Atalanta who has literally 'transposed her gender' via an unusual upbringing.<sup>53</sup> We are told that by evading the women's quarters and spending her time hunting with men, being 'female in nature, but male in behaviour' (φύσιν μὲν θήλειαν, τρόπον δὲ ἄρρενα), Atalanta 'throws her gender into doubt' (ἀμφίβολον ποιεῖται τὴν γένεσιν).<sup>54</sup> This transmasculinity, however, is presented as incompatible with the sexual virtue Atalanta would need for marriage. The exercise argues that if she were a good hunter she could not have been beautiful, as the rays of the sun would 'darken' her 'youthful good looks'; and that if she were a good archer, she could not have been virginal, as to practise such manly pastimes implied the company of men and their lustful desires.<sup>55</sup> In the world view of the Refutation, this meant

<sup>50</sup> See also Charis Messis, *Les Eunuques à Byzance: Entre Réalité et Imaginaire* (Paris, 2014), 55–6.

<sup>51</sup> Basilakes, *Progymnasmata*, 113.

<sup>52</sup> The Refutation employs a variety of strategies to discredit the myth. Other arguments call into question Atalanta's transmasculinity. For example, Basilakes states that if she were beautiful 'like a girl' and a warrior 'like a man', she would *still* not have been able to defeat men in a running race, for 'swiftness of feet' is 'the attribute most alien to women'. See Basilakes, *Progymnasmata*, 99, 103.

<sup>53</sup> Basilakes, *Progymnasmata*, 99.

<sup>54</sup> Basilakes, *Progymnasmata*, 98–101.

<sup>55</sup> Basilakes, *Progymnasmata*, 101–2. Basilakes states (p. 105): 'She spent time with men, and this lifestyle is hostile to virginity'. The Byzantine association between

(cont. on p 17)

that Atalanta could not become a bride: 'if she did not have her virginity, marriage was unlikely'.<sup>56</sup> She was, however, more likely to be sexually assaulted. Assuming a scenario in which Atalanta 'was beautiful, like a girl, and a warrior, like a man', the Refutation imagines her as exciting love and even 'violence' among the men of her entourage.<sup>57</sup> For Atalanta's transmasculinity to be believable, it needed to be rendered abject, making her simultaneously sexually available, violable and without beauty. This line of argument defends cisness from the outside. It presents a cautionary tale, warning that although someone might leave womanhood, they would be leaving it for something worse.

Betancourt's analysis of the story of Atalanta discusses only the Refutation. It is there, after all, that we find what they call 'the most striking aspect of Basilakes' account' — that he 'demonstrates his consciousness of people whose birth-assigned sex does not agree with their internal gender identity'.<sup>58</sup> Yet the Confirmation, despite its lack of explicit insights into Atalanta's inner states, has just as much to tell us about transness and the mechanisms that aimed to suppress it. Opening up one's perspective towards these wider regulatory forces can produce very different results. In their reading of the Refutation, Betancourt emphasizes some of the struggles of gender-nonconforming people, including Atalanta's racialization and the threat of sexual violence, and acknowledges Basilakes' Refutation as a 'ferocious attack against gender fluidity'.<sup>59</sup> But they also emphasize 'the ease with which a person could transition genders' and celebrate the fact that such transitions could take place through changes in behaviour and one's upbringing, without the modern need for medicalized procedures.<sup>60</sup> A closer focus on the regulatory

(n. 55 cont.)

femininity and pale skin is reminiscent of present-day misogynoir. See Denise Noble and Lisa Amanda Palmer, 'Misogynoir: Anti-Blackness, Patriarchy, and Refusing the Wrongness of Black Women', in Shirley Anne Tate and Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Race and Gender* (Basingstoke, 2022), 227–45.

<sup>56</sup> Basilakes, *Progymnasmata*, 105.

<sup>57</sup> Basilakes, *Progymnasmata*, 105.

<sup>58</sup> Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*, 118.

<sup>59</sup> Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*, 116–117.

<sup>60</sup> Indeed, one of the reasons given for disbelieving Atalanta's story was that a mother would not let her daughter behave like a boy, 'for one's upbringing confirms

(cont. on p 18)

forces in play and an examination of both the Refutation and the Confirmation belie such a narrative. Basilakes only conditionally allowed for Atalanta's transmasculinity in the Refutation, and absorbed her into cisness in the Confirmation. The Refutation's understanding of transition as possible through upbringing is as disempowering as the 'modern medicalized' notion Betancourt resists.<sup>61</sup> Far from presenting a picture of gendered agency, Basilakes' exercises confront us with transmisogyny, ableism and abjection.

## V

### PSellos' FEMININITY

Both Atalanta and Eudokimos are written about by someone else. By contrast, Psellos offers us an example of someone writing both about others and about their own gender, allowing us to see a more multifaceted negotiation of compulsory cisness.

The modern controversy surrounding Psellos' gender stems from the assertion made in three of their letters that they have a feminine soul, manifested primarily in their effusive expression of emotions.<sup>62</sup> Betancourt has read Psellos' statements as 'candid self-assessments offered with all the sincerity of modern-day self-identification as enby (non-binary)'. They have thus argued that Psellos 'did not believe that their own gender

(n. 60 cont.)

one's gender'; or, in Betancourt's terms, the family acts 'as a form of gender conversion therapy'. See Basilakes, *Progymnasmata*, 99. Betancourt praises the lack of requirement for bodily intervention, calling this conception of transition 'even more progressive than the modern medicalized notion that relies on a transgender person's ability to confirm that they have undergone a nexus of medical procedures'. See Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*, 117, 119.

<sup>61</sup> Betancourt's framing of 'medicalization' with reference to transness can be problematic, as it risks conflating the stigmatized act of altering the sexed body with the medico-legal regulatory systems that such acts typically happen in negotiation with. It groups the oppressor and the oppressed, and produces 'natural' as its opposite. See Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*, 118.

<sup>62</sup> Letter 51 (S 72): 'πρὸς δὲ τὴν φύσιν θήλυς εἰμι'; Letter 128 (S 157): 'Καὶ εἰ μὲν θηλείας τοῦτο ψυχῆς, οὐ πάντι οἶδα.'; and Letter 306 (S 180): 'καὶ τοιοῦτος ἐγὼ τὴν ψυχὴν, θήλυς ἀτεχνῶς καὶ εὐσυμπάθητος.', in Michael Psellos, *Michael Psellus: Epistulae*, ed. Stratis Papaioannou (Berlin, 2019), 113, 334, 717. Letters 51 and 128, as well as Papaioannou's interpretation of Psellos' gender, are discussed in Perisanidi, *Masculinity in Byzantium*, 37–42.

identity matched their assigned sex' and have advocated that, in our gender analysis, we 'look past outward gender presentation alone'.<sup>63</sup>

Indeed, it is interesting that the expression used in one of Psellos' letters to describe their soul ('I am in my soul simply feminine', ἐγὼ τὴν ψυχὴν, θήλυς ἀτεχνῶς) is almost identical to the one they used to talk about the feminine soul of Eudokimos ('the soul is simply feminine', θήλεια ἀτεχνῶς ἢ ψυχὴ).<sup>64</sup> This provides further evidence for reading Psellos as a trans figure, and indeed seems to identify them with transfemininity or trans womanhood. Yet it can be difficult to square the Psellos who describes Eudokimos' femininity as an intellectual disability, which makes one soft, dull and forgetful rather than intelligent and acute, with the Psellos who was very proud of their own intelligence and learning. Still, Psellos did choose to emphasize their femininity, and it is not clear that they had to. Despite the many statements in Byzantine sources that men were not meant to cry, many of them did express strong emotions, and without always apologizing for it.<sup>65</sup> It is reasonable to assume that Psellos actively wanted to express something about their identity by making those assertions.<sup>66</sup>

We want to suggest that what we see in Psellos' case is a fraught personal negotiation between trans desire and compulsory cisness. Surviving under cisness demands having a liveable self-concept under cisness, and this is what Psellos seems to

<sup>63</sup> Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*, 111, 115.

<sup>64</sup> ἐγὼ τὴν ψυχὴν, θήλυς ἀτεχνῶς', Letter 306 in Psellos, *Epistulae*, 717; 'θήλεια ἀτεχνῶς ἢ ψυχὴ', Psellos, *Philosophica minora*, 92.

<sup>65</sup> Byzantine novels include comments that present crying as more appropriate for women, and yet contain as many examples of men crying as they do of women. See Ingela Nilsson, 'Comforting Tears and Suggestive Smiles: To Laugh and Cry in the Komnenian Novel', in Margaret Alexiou and Douglas Cairns (eds.), *Greek Laughter and Tears: Antiquity and After* (Edinburgh, 2017), 307–8. Crying was contextual. Tears could be considered very masculine for ascetic holy men, but emperors could also cry without being effeminized. For scholars, there were many examples of effusive lamentation, both before and after Psellos' time. See Margaret Mullet, 'Do Brothers Weep? Male Grief, Mourning, Lament and Tears in Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Byzantium', in Alexiou and Cairns, *Greek Laughter and Tears*, 312–337.

<sup>66</sup> If Papaioannou explains away the references in letters via literary precedent, the shared language of Psellos' description of Eudokimos' feminine nature and their own feminine nature demands a reconsideration of Psellos' so-called 'rhetorical transvestism'. Papaioannou, *Rhetoric and Authorship*, 210–13, 231.

have developed. It is not enough to perform cisness to others; you also have to find ways of understanding yourself that do not make you a monster in your own mind. That does not necessarily mean understanding yourself exactly as hegemonic cisness would want you to, but it involves a negotiation with hegemonic cisness. Psellos led a life that passed as cis, but also found opportunities to express their own desire for and identification with femininity. And they did so by narrativizing this trans desire as manhood. As one of the authors has argued elsewhere, one way of achieving this was by pairing up expressions of such desire with references to education, tapping into the masculine capital that came with erudition.<sup>67</sup> As we will show here, another way to navigate hegemonic cisness was through references to old age.

Psellos was in their forties (between the years AD 1060 and 1067) when they wrote the letter in which they describe their soul in similar terms to that of Eudokimos.<sup>68</sup> In it, they addressed one of their friends, who held the prestigious position of *krites*, and reported on an encounter with people who had acted as Psellos' host twice before: first when they were young and serving under others and then when serving themselves as a judge.<sup>69</sup> In this letter, Psellos defined themselves as an old man:

Now that they saw me in deep old age, they recognised me without doubt and started telling me stories about my first and second trip there and treated me as their own, in the most brotherly fashion (as true citizens of Phil-adelfhia). One after another, they kissed me all over, rubbed themselves against my feet, smiled pleasant smiles, and wondered how, instead of the blond hair of my youth, my head has turned silver.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>67</sup> 'Michael Psellos: Writing Like a Man, "Throwing Like a Girl"', in Perisanidi, *Masculinity in Byzantium*, ch. 1.

<sup>68</sup> This letter is dated to 1060 x 1067 by Jeffreys and Lauxtermann. Riedinger dates it even later, to the reign of Michael VII (r. 1071–1078). Letter 51 is dated to c.1060–67 by Papaioannou and to c.1063–4 by Jeffreys and Lauxtermann, and letter 128 is dated to c.1074 by Jeffreys and Lauxtermann. See Papaioannou, *Epistulae*, 113; Jean-Claude Riedinger, 'Quatre étapes de la vie de Michel Psellos', *Revue des études byzantines*, lxxviii (2010), 22; Michael Jeffreys and Marc D. Lauxtermann, *The Letters of Psellos: Cultural Networks and Historical Realities* (Oxford, 2017), 345, 387.

<sup>69</sup> Riedinger, 'Quatre étapes', 19–22; Jeffreys and Lauxtermann, *Letters of Psellos*, 400–401.

<sup>70</sup> Letter 306 in Michael Psellos, *Epistulae*, 716–718. For the translation, see Papaioannou, *Rhetoric and Authorship*, 206–7.

It is only after this description that Psellos talks about their feminine soul, stating: ‘They almost brought me to tears. For such is my soul, simply feminine and susceptible to affection’.<sup>71</sup>

Psellos’ presentation of ‘deep old age’ (ἐν βαθείᾳ τῇ πολυᾷ) is important. By that point, they had already become a father and grandfather and had held significant power at court, factors that they elsewhere acknowledged as important markers of masculinity.<sup>72</sup> Perhaps at this later stage of their life, they could be more relaxed about how they expressed and experienced their gender, since they had already passed through so many of the milestones of a successful cis life. That is not to say that Psellos was or was not a man, or that the statements they made about their gendered nature did not reflect a truth about their relationship to womanhood and manhood — rather, that Psellos had negotiated the demand that they be a man by finding ways to relate their gender deviation back to manhood, and in doing so had built a cis life that was tolerable to them.

Indeed, if we look closely at the passage, Psellos’ old age permeates the interaction, as embodiment combines with discourse and situation to create a representation of their experience of gender. In Psellos’ telling, their greying hair presents both an embodied and a symbolic manifestation of their ageing. This does not fail to be commented upon by their interlocutors in the invocation of Psellos’ once-golden (i.e., youthful) hair. Psellos’ hosts share memories of a time past and re-establish closeness with them through acts of familiarity and

<sup>71</sup> Michael Psellos, *Epistulae*, 716–717: ‘μικροῦ δεῖν εἰς δάκρυά με κατήγαγον, ἐπειδὴ καὶ τοιοῦτος ἐγὼ τὴν ψυχὴν, θῆλυς ἀτεχνῶς καὶ εὐσυμπάθητος’.

<sup>72</sup> For a biographical account of Psellos, see Michael Psellos, *Psellos and the Patriarchs: Letters and Funeral Orations for Keroullarios, Leichoudes, and Xiphilinos*, trans. Antony Kaldellis and Ioannis Polemis (South Bend, IN, 2015), 3–10. When talking about the castration of the family members of Emperor Michael V, Psellos emphasized the previous manhood of the Emperor’s relatives in the following way: ‘He compelled to undergo castration all his relatives, most of whom had already reached their full stature and were bearded men, who had become fathers and been entrusted with offices of great dignity in the state, and made of their life a semi-death’. ‘τὸ συγγενὲς ἅπαν, τοὺς <τὰ> πλείω εἰς ἡλικίας ἐληλυθότας ἀκμὴν καὶ ἀκριβῶς γενειάσαντας, πατέρας τε γεγονότας καὶ τάξεις ἐμπιστευθέντας τῶν σεμνοτέρων ἀρχῶν, τῶν παιδογόνων μορίων ἀποτεμῶν ἡμιθανεῖς ἀφῆκε τῷ βίῳ’. See Book 5, Section 42 in Michael Psellos, *Michel Psellos: Chronographie ou histoire d’un siècle de Byzance (976–1077)*, ed. Émile Renauld, i (Paris, 1926), 111.

affection: they kiss Psellos all over (καταφιλοῦντες) and rub themselves (προσκνυζόμενοι) against Psellos' feet. The term προσκνυζόμενοι, with its association with dogs that fawningly approach their masters' feet, demonstrates the great deference that these men showed towards Psellos.<sup>73</sup> Their gestures were felt on Psellos' body, which was in turn moved by affection and almost brought to tears. Although Psellos attributes this response to their feminine soul, they make sure that the passage contains figures who act in an equally emotional way and whose masculinity goes unqualified. Indeed, Psellos presents their own feelings as a bodily *reaction* to the outpouring of affection on the part of their hosts. By implicating others in their own gender transgression, Psellos renders it less threatening. Their account of themselves produces a normal self, whereas the stories of both Atalanta and Eudokimos produce an exceptional Other. As such, Psellos' transgressions have a different effect from those of Atalanta or Eudokimos: they reinforce cisness by expanding it. Psellos' statement of femininity is embedded in a written social context that allows it to exist without threatening their access to manhood. By being couched in the language of old age and reflected in the behaviour of others, Psellos' identification with femininity is normalized. Psellos' desires can be read as transness reincorporating itself into cisness.

Let us now return to Psellos' writing about Eudokimos. If Psellos himself had trans desires, would we not have expected them to be more sympathetic towards a child who acted upon similar desires? By attempting to define the limits of cisness in a way that normalizes their own transgression, while exceptionalizing that of others like them (who share their feminine soul, 'θήλεια ἀτεχνῶς ἢ ψυχῇ'), Psellos plays a game of defensive othering: they ascribe to the hegemonic norm that penalizes transfeminine desire, but only as it applies to others.<sup>74</sup> Psellos denies their affinities with Eudokimos, dissociating themselves

<sup>73</sup> Although the difference in social status between Psellos and these men could also have been a reason for the latter's deference, this is not emphasized in the passage. Indeed, Psellos talks about being received in a brotherly fashion, and their hosts appear to converse with them freely and in terms of familiarity.

<sup>74</sup> For another example of defensive othering in the context of disability, see chapter 3 in Perisanidi, *Byzantine Masculinity*, 'Gregorios Antiochos: Disabled Bodies and Desired Becomings', 93.



from her.<sup>75</sup> This othering reads as Psellos' way of coping with their own tensions with compulsory cisness. The Psellos who expresses their femininity can be no other than the Psellos who expresses their intellectual superiority. There is no contradiction between these positions — they serve to draw the border of cisness, and place Psellos on the right side of it. It is precisely their distancing from intellectual disability, their embrace of able-bodiedness, that allows them to remain safely separated from Eudokimos, whose actions and desires may have appeared particularly threatening because they were not clearly different from Psellos' self-professed soul. Psellos' cisness — Psellos' access to manhood — could only be safely preserved within their ability to perform able-bodiedness.

## VI

### CONCLUSIONS

In all three of the cases discussed in this article, we can see the workings of compulsory cisness. Eudokimos' transfemininity is pathologized as physical and intellectual disability. Atalanta's transmasculinity is rendered beyond reach because of its exceptionality, and made either cis or abject. Psellos' trans desires are normalized and absorbed into cisness. In each case, the fiction of cisness as the natural order of things is reinforced. In this process, ideas about disability and able-bodiedness play a key role. When it comes to Eudokimos' and Psellos' transfemininity, one's 'stupidity' and the other's 'intelligence' serve to safely contain transness inside the disabled body, and to use able-bodiedness as a restrictive shield that allows the expression of only certain kinds of trans desire. When Atalanta's story is presented as plausible, it is her extreme able-bodiedness that

<sup>75</sup> This dissociation from the transfeminine subject by the scholar who fears seeing himself in her is highly reminiscent of the notoriously tyrannical NHS gender practitioner John Randell. A recreational cross-dresser himself, Randell was deeply invested in the distinction between 'transvestites' and 'trans-sexualists', something which informed his choice to terrorize certain patients and withhold care from them. To Randell, hormone therapy was a release valve that might allow heterosexual cross-dressers (his 'transvestites') relief, and prevent them from becoming delusional, homosexual and deceitful trans-sexualists. See Zöe Playdon, *The Hidden Case of Ewan Forbes: The Transgender Trial that Threatened to Upend the British Establishment* (New York, 2021), 107.

renders her case unique and her transmasculinity unattainable. In both cases, able-bodiedness is associated with masculinity, including an acceptably limited imagining of transmasculinity, while transfemininity, and femininity more widely, are linked to diminished abilities. Psellos' case shows us how an individual could use the written text to navigate these regulatory forces to create a liveable life, even if doing so meant making gender variance cis. We have identified two strategies. The first consists of distancing oneself from transness by reinforcing the marginalization of others, as with Psellos' description of Eudokimos. The second involves implicating others in one's transgression in order to normalize it, as in the case of references to old age. Nevertheless, the existence of Eudokimos proves that there were other liveable lives, and that cisness was not total.

In working with 'cisness' as a framework before it was named by the framework of 'transness' in the late twentieth century, we are necessarily dealing with something more slippery and more abstract — we consider this an opportunity. It brings into sharp relief the ways that new kinds of cisness and ways of being cis can be produced in cultures and countercultures, and how new kinds of deviation from cisness can grate against them or be reintegrated into them. As such, we have been writing about cisness and transness as negotiations: not as opposites, or even as incompatible. This approach must not be untethered from the hegemonic forces that structure cisness — including patriarchy, race and, as we have demonstrated here, the ideal of able-bodiedness. Instead, if grounded deeply in analysis of such hegemonic forces, it opens up the possibility of understanding gendered positions and identities as happening in negotiation with, and reaction against, those forces — and allows for an analysis of identity that does not stop at its borders. In this, we seek to lay the groundwork for intersectional readings of cisness that do not ask of an individual: 'was this trans desire, or madness, or disability, or a struggle against the restrictions of patriarchy?', but allow all of these to coexist, intertwined, in a text.

Trans history is often imagined as caught between the nice option and the true option. The former is less rigorous, but is open to interpretations that feel good to trans people today, and that are bestowed upon them by generous and tolerant historians. The latter rigorously rules out the possibility of trans identities in the past but permits occasional ambiguities and

complexity. The former is concerned with inner states, the latter with observable external truths. This dichotomy is a comfortable fantasy.

Our framework does not rely exclusively on statements about inner states; it also does not ignore them. It recognizes the messiness of identity. It allows for contradictions and shifts. It does not demand that someone be trans ‘forever’, nor does it accept the totality of cisness in the absence of the totality of transness. By treating identity as negotiated within a changing body, social role and environment, we demonstrate that rigorous analysis need not stop before the inner state. Identity can be understood as fluid, painful and subject to violent regulatory forces. Furthermore, by analysing the ways a cis identity might be maintained at the expense of both trans figures and the one maintaining that identity, we let go of the dichotomy of the nice, trans-accepting historian and the rigorous truth-teller who disabuses naïve trans people of their anachronistic ideas. In this approach, it is not only trans identities that are subject to scrutiny.

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## ABSTRACT

This article uses case studies from Byzantium to demonstrate a new trans framework for gendered historical analysis that recognizes identity as both fluid and painful. Instead of placing the emphasis on whether or not we can call an individual trans, it explores the forces that produced cisness, and the cis and trans lives people carved out amidst them. We find ableism and trans-misogyny at the heart of three important pieces of trans history from the middle Byzantine period: a description by Michael Psellos of a child whose femininity is framed in terms of disability, Nikephoros Basilakes' Confirmation and Refutation of the story of Atalanta, and Psellos' own expressions of gendered identity in their epistolography. Focusing on the collusion of cisness and able-bodiedness produces a complex image of how some Byzantines could incorporate gender transgression into a cis life, while others negotiated life outside the boundaries of acceptability. More broadly, this framework reveals the entanglements of transness and cisness, which demand that historical analysis does not stop at the borders of inner states.