

# A Holy Maiden Made Mother: Reframing Mary's Characterization in Romanos the Melodist's *On the Annunciation I*

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*This article examines the narratological concept of focalization as a structuring principle of characterization in Late Antique liturgical poetry. Using Romanos the Melodist's (ca. 485–560 CE) kontakion On the Annunciation I as a case study, it argues that Romanos' exegetical storytelling is driven not only by imagined speech, but by the interplay of diverging character perspectives. While previous scholarship has fruitfully explored the gendered dynamics of Romanos' dialogical style – particularly Mary's rhetorical agency – such analyses often treat characterization as static and isolate speech from broader narrative functions.*

*By foregrounding focalization – the mediation of narrative information through the perceptions of characters – this study demonstrates how Romanos constructs dynamic character arcs. Over the course of “On the Annunciation I,” Mary's characterization evolves from that of a reserved maiden to an articulate theological interlocutor, shaped by her internal deliberations and her shifting perception of Gabriel's authority. Gabriel, in turn, is portrayed as uncertain and unprepared, grappling with the paradox of Mary's multifaceted identity as both virgin and Theotokos. These conflicting characterizations, generated through divergent focalizations, do not merely enrich the characters; they constitute the theological core of Romanos' retelling, allowing the kontakion to function as a dramatic, exegetical engagement with Scripture. In this context, focalization emerges as a powerful tool through which Romanos models interpretive inquiry for his audience – making characterization an act of theological reflection as much as literary construction.*

## Introduction

This article aims to explore the narratological concept of focalization as a governing principle of characterization in late antique liturgical poetry.<sup>1</sup> For this purpose, I will present the kontakion *On the Annunciation I* by Romanos the Melodist (circa 485–560 CE) as a case study.<sup>2</sup> Romanos' kontakia retold bib-

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1 My thanks go to Margaret Mullett and Markéta Kulhánková for their indispensable feedback regarding my article.

2 I will transliterate the terms kontakion and its plural form kontakia (κοντάκιον/κοντάκια) without italicizing them for convenience. My translations of the kontakion *On the Annuncia-*

lical events in liturgical settings that are connected to feast days disseminated throughout the year. These retellings were dialogical, relying on imagined speech ascribed to biblical characters. According to his hagiographical tradition, Romanos was a deacon of the Church of the Mother of God (*Theotokos*) in Constantinople.<sup>3</sup> Approximately sixty kontakia have been attributed to Romanos.<sup>4</sup>

In his retelling of the Annunciation, Romanos presents Mary's inner monologues and her subsequent debate with the Archangel Gabriel upon receiving the news of the Incarnation and her virgin birth. The story then continues as Mary relates what has transpired to Joseph and Joseph attempts to make sense of Mary's transformation from a simple maiden to the future *Theotokos*. This article will solely focus on the dialogic interaction between Mary and Gabriel. The treatment of the Annunciation narrative through imagined speech is hardly a unique aspect of the liturgical literature of the age. Homilies attributed to Proclus of Constantinople (390–446 CE) and Sophronius of Jerusalem (560–638 CE) also treat the Annunciation narrative dialogically.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Syriac liturgy boasted a long tradition of liturgical poems in a form that grants biblical characters voices.<sup>6</sup> In this tradition, while some dialogic treatments of the

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*tion I* depend on the edition of Grosdidier de Matons: *Romanos the Melodist*, José Grosdidier De Matons (ed.), IX. Hymne de l'annonciation, in: *Romanos le Mélode. Hymnes IX-XX, tome II*, SC 110, Paris 1965, 20–41. However, I will adopt the titles of all the mentioned kontakia from Maas' and Trypanis' edition. These titles are not found in the manuscripts but were assigned by Maas and Trypanis according to the theme of each kontakion: *Sancti Romani Melodi Cantica: Cantica Genuina*, P. Maas – C. A. Trypanis (eds.), Oxford 1963.

- 3 J. GROSDIDIER DE MATONS, *Romanos le Mélode et les origines de la poésie religieuse à Byzance*, Paris 1977, 163. No complete single vita of Romanos has survived in the manuscript tradition. What we have are bits and pieces of information in *synaxaria* and *menologia*. The information provided in these collections has led to the conclusion regarding the existence of one or multiple vitae. GROSDIDIER DE MATONS, *Romanos le Mélode*, op. cit., 159–198, esp. 159–161.
- 4 The exact number of surviving kontakia that can be genuinely attributed to Romanos is a point of debate in the scholarship. For a detailed discussion, see: U. HOLMSGAARD ERIKSEN, *Drama in the Kontakia of Romanos the Melodist: A Narratological Analysis of Four Kontakia*, (PhD diss., Aarhus University 2013), 19–23.
- 5 For the homily attributed to Proclus, see the text, French translation, and commentary: *Proclus of Constantinople*, F. J. Leroy (trans.), *L'homilétique de Proclus de Constantinople*, (StT, 247), Vatican 1967, 273–327. For the Greek text of Sophronius' homily, see: *Sophronius of Jerusalem*, J. P. Migne (ed.), *Oration II*, PG 87/3, Paris 1860, cols. 3217–3288. For a joint consideration of both homilies, see: P. ALLEN, Portrayals of Mary in Greek Homiletic Literature (6<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> Centuries), in: L. Brubaker – M. B. Cunningham (eds.), *The Cult of the Mother of God in Byzantium: Texts and Images*, Vermont 2011, 69–88.
- 6 For a discussion of dialogue in Syriac liturgical poetry, see: K. UPSON-SAIA, Caught in a Compromising Position: The Biblical Exegesis and Characterization of Biblical Protagonists in the Syriac Dialogue Hymns, *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 9/2, 2018, <https://hugoye.bethmardutho.org/article/hv9n2upsonsaia> (retrieved July 27, 2024).

Annunciation narrative were anonymous, others were ascribed to well-known figures such as Romanos' older contemporary Jacob of Serugh (451–521 CE).<sup>7</sup> All these examples present Mary as interacting with either Gabriel or Joseph.

In broad strokes, other retellings of the Annunciation narrative depict a more passive Mary, either being schooled by a wise Gabriel, as in Proclus' narrative, or being abruptly cut off by an impatient Gabriel in the middle of her objections, as in Jacob's narrative.<sup>8</sup> In both cases, Mary's position as a timid maiden is emphasized, with a clear vertical power relationship between her and Gabriel. Mary is expected to accept her role in the salvation story without resistance. Romanos' Mary, however, puts up fierce resistance, turning her interaction with Gabriel into a debate and demanding to know who Gabriel really is. Romanos' portrayal of Mary is unique compared to other dialogic treatments. Such compelling imagined speech has given rise to a broad range of analyses of Mary's gendered characterization. With due acknowledgement that imagined speeches are mere representations of gendered voices at the hands of male authors, interpretations have varied from playful erotic insinuations between Mary and Gabriel to an outspoken or even argumentative characterization of Mary who subverted or transgressed her gendered limitations.<sup>9</sup>

While this article does not aim to challenge the above studies, it posits that we should not focus only on imagined speech to explore characterization; rather, we should also consider the performative context of kontakia and the ways in which imagined speech relates to other aspects of the narrative. As Romanos' liturgical poetry presented religious models to a live audience, the imagined speech had to be plausible, requiring characters to have the appropriate narrative context and emotional coloring to react affectively.<sup>10</sup> Consequently,

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7 For anonymous dialogue poems, see: S. P. BROCK, *Mary and Joseph, and Other Dialogue Poems on Mary*, New Jersey 2011, 9–47. For Jacob's related liturgical poem, see: *Jacob of Sarug's Homilies on the Nativity*, T. Kollampampil (trans.), in: *The Metrical Homilies of Mar Jacob of Sarug*, S. P. Brock – G. A. Kiraz (eds.), fasc. 18–20, (Texts from Christian Late Antiquity, 23), New Jersey 2010.

8 For the translation of relevant passage from Proclus, see Allen's article: ALLEN, Portrayals of Mary, op. cit., 77. For Jacob, see lines 209–218: *Jacob of Sarug*, Kollampampil (trans.), 34.

9 T. ARENTZEN, *The Virgin in Song. Mary and the Poetry of Romanos the Melodist*, Philadelphia 2017, 46–86. S. GADOR-WHYTE, *Theology and Poetry in Early Byzantium: The Kontakia of Romanos the Melodist*, Cambridge 2017, 115. G. FRANK, Singing Mary: The Annunciation and Nativity in Romanos the Melode, in: T. Arentzen – M. B. Cunningham (eds.), *The Reception of Virgin in Byzantium: Marian Narratives in Texts and Images*, Cambridge 2019, 170–179. Although she does not directly treat the kontakion *On the Annunciation*, Erin Galgay Walsh's doctoral thesis is informative regarding Romanos' use of transgressive/bold gendered characters: E. GALGAY WALSH, *Sanctifying Boldness: New Testament Women in Narsai, Jacob of Serugh, and Romanos Melodos*, (PhD diss., Duke University 2019), 242–261.

10 See for example a discussion of how Romanos presents religious models of compunction: D. KRUEGER, *Liturgical Subjects: Christian Ritual, Biblical Narrative and the Formation of the Self in Byzantium*, Philadelphia 2014, 29–65.

characterization depends not only on what a character says but also on how their reactions relate to the overall story. Focalization, the perspective from which the events are viewed by the narrator(s) or characters in a given story, is a useful tool for examining these relationships. This article will explore how Mary continuously negotiates her gendered limitations through imagined speech, gradually becoming bolder against a Gabriel who is himself unsure about the exact nature of the Incarnation. It aims to demonstrate how focalization offers a nuanced and dynamic approach to understanding characterization.

In the following, I will first explore characterization while establishing its relation to the narrative context and explain how focalization is a useful tool for analyzing both in tandem. Next, I will discuss Romanos' methodology in composing his own retelling of the Annunciation narrative in conjunction with the performative flow of the liturgy and the scriptures. Finally, I will analyze the role of focalization in the kontakion *On the Annunciation I*.

### **Characterization, the literary tradition and focalization**

Uri Margolin observes that while there is a strand of scholarly perception that narrative entities are as complete in their story worlds as we are in ours, the amount of information communicated about them through stories is limited.<sup>11</sup> Thus, characterization can be defined as the sum of specified information about a narrative entity; this applies not only to characters but also to inanimate objects or abstract concepts.<sup>12</sup> In this article, I will focus on the characters. The information does not only depend on what a character says; silence or gestures can also convey information, as we shall see.<sup>13</sup> The information can be communicated by the narrator, by the characters themselves, or by the perception of other characters of the object in the story. Each liturgical participant in Romanos' live audience would have their own conceptions of the characters based on the information presented, and on the earlier knowledge they might have about the biblical narrative and its characters.<sup>14</sup> While I occasionally refer to the per-

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11 U. MARGOLIN, "Character," in: D. Herman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, New York 2007, 73. For more information on how characters are perceived within the spectrum from complete literary entities to mere words, see: F. JANNIDIS, "Character," in: Peter Hühn et al. (eds.), *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, Hamburg 2019, paragraphs 9–13, <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/focalization> (retrieved August 22, 2024).

12 There are examples of Romanos giving voice to personifications of death (Hades) and evil (Satan) in his kontakia, see: *Kontakia of Romanos, Byzantine Melodist*, M. Carpenter (trans.), Missouri 1970, 217–225.

13 See for example how silence can characterize Mary in Romanos' kontakia: FRANK, *Singing Mary*, op. cit., 171–175.

14 For a detailed discussion of possible reception processes of characters, see: R. SCHNEIDER, *Toward a Cognitive Theory of Literary Character: The Dynamics of Mental-Model Construction*, *Style* 35, 2001, 607–639.

ception of the live audience, a thorough exploration of the audience reception lies outside the scope of this article. Instead, I will focus on the dynamics of the narrative in communicating the properties of different biblical characters.

Romanos engages with the rhetorical practice known as *êthopoia* (ἠθοποιία), which specifically refers to characterization through imagined speech. According to Aphthonius' fourth-century progymnasmata, *êthopoia* involves the "imitation of the character of a proposed speaker."<sup>15</sup> This imitation is highly dependent on the narrative context to achieve plausible characterization. Exercises in *êthopoia* typically combine a character with a specific narrative situation. The titles of progymnastic exercises from the fourth-century rhetorician Libanius illustrate this practice. These exercises often involve imitating the speech of characters in particular narrative contexts.<sup>16</sup> Sometimes the exercises put forward well-known characters asking, "What words would Achilles say over the dead Patroclus?"<sup>17</sup> Other times both the characters and the narrative situations were highly abstract, such as "What words would a painter say upon painting a picture of a girl and falling in love with her?"<sup>18</sup> Although it is not definitively established that Romanos underwent rhetorical training, one cannot deny his wide application of *êthopoia* to portray different biblical characters throughout his corpus.<sup>19</sup>

Embedded in this literary tradition, Romanos skillfully employs various narrative junctures from the scriptures to present Mary in multiple, sometimes paradoxical, ways. The Virgin emerges as a versatile figure in Romanos' retellings. On one hand, he preserves and celebrates the majesty of the Theotokos and her unique role in the salvation story. On the other hand, he depicts the Virgin Mary in deeply human and relatable terms.<sup>20</sup> Romanos' *Kontakion On the Nativity II* exemplifies these dual portrayals. Within a single liturgical poem, he creates a narrative where Mary serves both as an intercessor and a mother. This dual role is highlighted in a powerful scene where Mary intercedes for

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15 *Progymnasmata: Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric*, G. A. Kennedy (trans.), Leiden 2003, 115.

16 *Libanius of Antioch, Libanius' Progymnasmata: Model Exercises in Greek Prose Composition and Rhetoric*, C. A. Gibson (trans.), (Writings from the Greco-Roman World, 27), Atlanta 2008, viii-ix.

17 *Libanius*, Gibson (tr.), 365–367.

18 *Libanius*, Gibson (tr.), 423–425.

19 Thomas Arentzen argues that Romanos must have had a rhetorical education, see: ARENTZEN, *Virgin in Song*, op. cit., 30, 121. However, that does not have to be the case as Romanos might have also learned *êthopoia* through simple embeddedness in the literary tradition of the age. See Laura S. Lieber's discussion about the general literary embeddedness of different performers across a wide variety of socio-economic contexts and geographies: L. S. LIEBER, *Staging the Sacred: Theatricality and Performance in Late Ancient Liturgical Poetry*, New York 2023, 28–36.

20 For an article exploring various characterizations of Mary, see: S. GADOR-WHYTE, *Changing Conceptions of Mary in Sixth-Century Byzantium: The Kontakia of Romanos the Melodist*, in: B. Neil – L. Garland (eds.), *Questions of Gender in Byzantine Society*, New York 2016, 77–92.

Adam and Eve, requesting their salvation from the infant Jesus in the cradle whom she tenderly caressed at the start of the kontakion.<sup>21</sup> Such nuanced characterizations of the Virgin are prevalent throughout Romanos' corpus.<sup>22</sup> Romanos' varied and dynamic portrayals of Mary, framed within appropriate narrative contexts, reflect a broader shift in Marian devotion during the sixth century. During this period, Mary transitioned from a passive participant in the Incarnation to a multifaceted object of devotion with a rich and complex religious persona.<sup>23</sup>

The exercise of *êthopoiia* is significant not only for writing in the persona of another character but also for advancing a story through the perspectives of characters. My analysis of the focalization in this kontakion will focus on two interrelated concepts: the manipulation of information and the point of view of characters. Narratology introduces the terms "narrator" and "focalization" to analyze who is telling the story, how it is told, and the distribution of knowledge among the characters. The term narrator distinguishes between the author and the storyteller, who can be either within the story (homodiegetic narrator) or outside of it (heterodiegetic narrator).<sup>24</sup> Focalization refers to the viewing of the events by the narrator(s) or the characters in a given story. Therefore, it creates a distinction between who sees the events (focus) and who transmits them (voice).<sup>25</sup> This distinction allows for narrative situations where a character's perspective is mediated by a narrator or another character.<sup>26</sup> Such a discussion naturally involves examining the proximity of the represented perspectives to the characters and the various effects this has on the live audience. Since the time of Plato and Aristotle, a fundamental distinction in storytelling has been drawn based on the nature of the speaker: either the storyteller speaks in their

21 See strophes 2, 3, 15: *Romanos the Melodist*, Carpenter (tr.), op. cit., *On the Nativity II*, 13–21.

22 See for example, strophes 1-3, 16: *Romanos the Melodist*, Carpenter (tr.), op. cit., *On Mary at the Cross*, 193–203. See strophes 3-4, 8, 9. *Romanos the Melodist*, Carpenter (tr.), op. cit., *On the Presentation in the Temple*, 35–45.

23 M. B. CUNNINGHAM, *The Virgin Mary in Byzantium, c. 400–1000: Hymns, Homilies, and Hagiography*, Cambridge 2021, 13. ARENTZEN, *The Virgin in Song*, op. cit., 39–43. For further articles that discuss the evolution of the Marian cult in sixth-century Constantinople, see: A. CAMERON, *The Theotokos in Sixth-Century Constantinople: A City Finds Its Symbol*, *The Journal of Theological Studies* 29/2, 1978, 79–108. A. CAMERON, *The Virgin's Robe: An Episode in the History of Early Seventh-Century Constantinople*, *Byz* 49, 1979, 42–56.

24 For a review of a narrator's relation to a story within framework of Romanos' kontakia, see: ERIKSEN, *Drama in the Kontakia of Romanos the Melodist*, op. cit., 83–84, 103–108.

25 The terms in brackets are used by Genette, see: G. GENETTE, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, Jane E. Lewin (trans.), New York 1980, 186. Manfred Jahn stresses that how these terms need not be strict binaries: M. JAHN, *Windows of Focalization: Deconstructing and Reconstructing a Narratological Concept*, *Style* 30, 1996, 241–267.

26 Anne Alwis' discussion of this concept in Byzantine hagiography is also applicable to Romanos' kontakia, see: A. ALWIS, *The Hagiographer's Craft: Narrators and Focalization in Byzantine Hagiography*, in: C. Gray – James Cork-Webster (eds.), *The Hagiographical Experiment: Developing Discourses of Sainthood*, Leiden 2020, 308–315.

own voice (*diēgēsis*), or they imitate the voice of a character within the story (*mimēsis*).<sup>27</sup> When characters convey their own perspectives through devices like direct speech, the resulting illusion of unmediated transmission fosters a more relatable and engaging characterization.

As Jahn succinctly states, “focalization is the submission of (potentially limitless) narrative information to a perspectival filter.”<sup>28</sup> Gérard Genette distinguishes between these perspectives concerning the dispensation of narrative information. If a narrator knows more than the characters, including their thoughts, the story is transmitted with “zero focalization,” allowing the narrator to convey the maximum amount of information to the audience. When the story is told through the perspective and thoughts of a character, it employs “internal focalization,” restricting narrative information to the perception of one or more characters. If the story is conveyed solely through the expressed speech of the character or a third person narrator, it is termed “external focalization.”<sup>29</sup> External focalization allows the most limited narrative information as it reports only the observable details akin to a camera. I should note here that Mieke Bal reconfigures Genette's methodology which, is now widely accepted by scholars. Rather than emphasizing the organization of narrative information as a key principle of focalization, Bal redefines focalization in terms of the relationship between the subject (the focalizer, whether external or internal) and the object (the focalized). While I find Bal's reconfiguration more precise for exploring characters' points of view, within the framework of Romanos' *kontakia*, the dispensation of narrative information to characters remains a crucial aspect of his storytelling.<sup>30</sup>

As these positions of information control the flow of information in the story, the choices in focalization dictate the narrative structure and characterization.<sup>31</sup> At times, characters ascribe qualities to one another through their own focalization. If the audience finds such focalization unconvincing, it can influence the perceived characterization of the focalized figure. This, however, is rarely an issue in Romanos' *kontakia*. Because Romanos grants his biblical characters focalizing agency, their perceptions are conveyed directly to the audience and imbued with a sense of authority.

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27 U. HOLMSGAARD ERIKSEN, *Dramatic Narratives and Recognition in the Kontakia of Romanos the Melodist*, in: Ch. Messis – M. Mullet – I. Nilsson (eds.), *Storytelling in Byzantium: Narratological Approaches to Byzantine Texts and Images*, Uppsala 2018, 95–96.

28 M. JAHN, *Focalization*, in: Herman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, op. cit., 94.

29 GENETTE, *Narrative Discourse*, op. cit., 10–11, 189–192. M. BAL, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, Toronto 1997, 133–148. For a discussion on different approaches to focalization, see: B. NIEDERHOFF, *Focalization*, in: Hühn et al. (eds.), *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, op. cit., paragraphs 9–18, <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/focalization> (retrieved July 29, 2024).

30 JAHN, *Focalization*, op. cit., 98.

31 I. NILSSON, *Narrative: Theory and Practice*, in: S. Papaioannou (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Literature*, New York 2021, 226–227.

## From Scripture to Romanos' retellings: fashioning Biblical stories

Romanos' kontakia were assigned to related feast days based on the lectionary cycles of the liturgical year. The liturgical feast for the Annunciation, celebrated on March 25, was developed in the first half of the sixth century, making it contemporary with Romanos. In fact, Romanos' kontakion *On the Annunciation I* is probably the earliest extant work specifically dedicated to this festival.<sup>32</sup> Within the flow of a given feast day, the kontakion was performed after the reading of appropriate antiphonal or responsorial psalmody, odes, and scriptural passages.<sup>33</sup> The lectionary sources closest in time to the kontakion assign Luke 1:24/26–38 – the dialogue between Gabriel and Mary – for the feast of the Annunciation before the performance of the kontakion.<sup>34</sup> It is highly likely that the audience would hear the Lukan narrative before Romanos' retelling. As a result, Romanos' kontakion *On the Annunciation I* is tied to the Lukan narrative both in its derivation and its performative context.<sup>35</sup>

32 The Patmos *kontakarion* (A manuscript listing kontakia according to their liturgical occasion) lists Romanos' kontakion *On the Annunciation* under the festival of Annunciation, see: GROSIDIER DE MATONS, *Romanos le Mélode*, op. cit., 83. A letter from Justinian dated to the 560s argued for placing the feast for Annunciation on March 25 in reference to the date of the Nativity on December 25, see: M. VAN ESBROECK, La lettre de l'empereur Justinien sur l'Annonciation et la Noël en 561, *AnBoll* 86, 1968, 351–371. M. VAN ESBROECK, Encore la lettre de Justinien. Sa date: 560 et non 561, *AnBoll* 87, 1969, 442–444. P. F. BRADSHAW – M. E. JOHNSON, *The Origins of Feasts, Fasts, and Seasons in Early Christianity*, Collegeville 2011, 205–206.

33 G. FRANK, Romanos and the Night Vigil in the Sixth Century, in: D. Krueger (ed.), *Byzantine Christianity: A People's History of Christianity* 3, Minneapolis 2006, 66. For a general discussion on the liturgical context of kontakia, see: A. LINGAS, The Liturgical Place of the Kontakion in Constantinople, in: C. C. Akentiev (ed.), *Liturgy, Architecture and Art of the Byzantine World: Papers of the XVIII International Byzantine Congress (Moscow, 8–15 August 1991) and Other Essays Dedicated to the Memory of Fr. John Meyendorff*, St. Petersburg 1995, 50–57.

34 The lectionary sources closest to the sixth-century Constantinopolitan rite are the expanded Georgian lectionary of Jerusalem through the fifth and eighth centuries and the *Typikon* of Constantinople dated to the tenth century. These sources give Luke 1.26–38 and Luke 1.24–38 as scriptural readings on the feast day of the Annunciation, see: *Le grand lectionnaire de l'église de Jérusalem (v<sup>e</sup>-viii<sup>e</sup> siècle)*, M. Tarchnischvili (ed., trans.), v. I, Leuven 1959, 41. *Le Typicon de la Grande Église: MS Sainte-Croix n.40, X<sup>e</sup> siècle. Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes par Juan Mateos. Tome I: Le cycle des douze mois*, J. Mateos (ed., trans.), (OCA, 2), Rome 1962, 255. Mary Cunningham sees the Lukan narrative as the inspiration for most of the hymns and homilies about the Annunciation in the fifth and sixth century, see: CUNNINGHAM, *The Virgin Mary in Byzantium*, op. cit., 77–93. Also see: ARENTZEN, The Dialogue of Annunciation, op. cit., 151.

35 The kontakion also refers to a previous encounter between Gabriel and Zachariah. Moreover, there is a dialogue between Mary and Joseph. These references are likely based on Luke 1.1–24 and Matthew 1.18–25. However, the former biblical reference is a mere mention in the kontakion to make a point whereas the latter biblical reference has a completely different premise in the kontakion from Matthew's Gospel. Therefore, for the purposes of this article I will focus on the Lukan narrative.

When it comes to the dialogical exchange between Gabriel and Mary, Romanos' kontakion unfolds in the following steps: Strophe 1: Romanos' metaleptic introduction and invitation of the live audience and praise of Mary. Strophe 2: Gabriel comes to Nazareth. Strophe 3–5: Gabriel's proclamation of the Annunciation and Mary's inner deliberations about the news. Strophe 6: Mary's first voiced resistance to Gabriel questioning the nature of the news and Gabriel's identity. Strophe 7–8: Gabriel's inner monologue about his surprise at the resistance and his voiced reply to Mary, providing an Old Testament typology to convince her. Strophe 9: Mary's second voiced resistance, questioning the typology. Strophe 10: Gabriel's exegetical answer. Strophe 11: Mary's acceptance of the news upon recognizing Gabriel's identity and by extension the truthfulness of his news.<sup>36</sup>

A comparison between the narrative structure of Romanos' kontakion and the Gospel of Luke will give us clues about the ways in which Romanos' retelling was shaped. The Lukan narrative is told in the following steps:

- 1) Gabriel's salutation of Mary as God's envoy: "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."
- 2) Mary is troubled about this salutation as she does not know the exact nature and meaning of this salutation.
- 3) Gabriel, perceiving Mary's trouble, explains the nature of the greeting by informing her of the virgin birth and the Incarnation.<sup>37</sup>
- 4) Mary's vocal resistance: "<sup>34</sup>'How will this be,' Mary asked the angel, 'since I am a virgin?'"
- 5) Gabriel's answer:<sup>35</sup> "The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So, the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.'"<sup>38</sup> Upon this explanation,
- 6) Mary concedes to the will of Gabriel as a proxy for the will of God stating, "May your word to me be fulfilled."<sup>39</sup>

Luke 1:34–35 highlights the starkest differences between the Lukan narrative and Romanos' kontakion, which also has a significant impact on the characterization of Mary and Gabriel. The encounter between Mary and Gabriel unfolds in two narrative junctures encompassing strophes 3–10. First, in Romanos' kontakion, instead of outright stating that she is a virgin, Mary ponders why Gabriel is unaware of this fact. This lack of information on Gabriel's part allows Mary the space to resist his message and to inquire about his identity and, by extension, the exact nature of his message. Second, as Thomas Arentzen observes, unlike the Lukan narrative, the Holy Spirit is completely absent in

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36 *Romanos the Melodist*, Grosdidier de Matons (ed.), IX. Hymn on the Annunciation, op. cit., strophe 10–11, 20–32.

37 Luke 1.28–30 (All NT quotations are based on NIV).

38 Luke 1.34–35.

39 Luke 1.36.

Romanos' *Kontakion*. Arentzen interprets this omission as Romanos' attempt to give Mary and Gabriel the center stage.<sup>40</sup> Building on Arentzen's observation, I suggest that this omission also renders Gabriel without an explanation to convince Mary about the nature of the virgin birth and the Incarnation. Without such an explanation, Mary again acquires the narrative space to resist. These two points of resistance create the tension in the dialogical exchange between Gabriel and Mary.

### Mary, Gabriel, and the Annunciation: a story of focalization

Romanos' story begins with an invitation to the story world, as is the case in several of his other kontakia:<sup>41</sup>

Come let us go with the Archangel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary,  
And let us greet her as the mother and the nurse of our life;  
For it is not only fitting for the general to greet the empress,  
But also for the lowly, it is possible to address her,  
Whom, as the Mother of God, all the people call the Blessed and proclaim:  
Rejoice, undefiled one, rejoice, divinely called maiden,  
Rejoice, holy one, rejoice, beautiful one,  
Rejoice, unsown one, rejoice, uncorrupt one, rejoice, mother without a husband,  
*Rejoice, O unwedded bride.*<sup>42</sup>

Romanos' invitation to accompany Gabriel on his way to Nazareth collapses the distance between the story and the live audience, drawing them into the story world to witness the interaction between Gabriel and Mary firsthand. The rhetorical construct that creates this effect is called *metalepsis*, which refers to the conflation of the story world with the context in which the story is told, effectively breaking the "fourth wall."<sup>43</sup> *Metalepsis* facilitates a different type of perception, making it seem as if the story is unfolding before the audience's eyes. This perception enables the audience's comprehension to bypass the heterodiegetic narrator (Romanos' persona telling the story) as they are now directly witnessing the events, although the narrator remains present in the text. Such a perception combined with imagined speech is helpful as it enables

40 ARENTZEN, *The Virgin in Song*, op. cit., 56.

41 See for example the first strophe of Romanos' kontakia *On the Ascension*: "Abandoning on earth the things of earth, / (...) / now, let us come to our senses and raise on high our eyes and minds. / Mortals, let us make our sight together with our senses fly to heaven's gates. / Let us imagine we are standing on the Mount of Olives." *St. Romanos the Melodist, Kontakia. On the Life of Christ*, E. Lash (trans.), (The Sacred Literature Series), New York 1995, 194.

42 *Romanos the Melodist*, Grosdidier de Matons (ed.), IX. Hymn on the Annunciation, op. cit., strophe 1, 20–22.

43 ERIKSEN, *Drama in the Kontakia of Romanos the Melodist*, op. cit., 103–104. See also Barkhuizen's article who delineates between the liturgical level and the story level in his discussion of kontakia: J. H. BARKHUIZEN, *Romanos Melodos: Essay on the Poetics of His kontakion 'Resurrection of Christ'*, *BZ* 79/1, 1986, 17–28.

the live audience to internalize the focalization of the characters. This concept aligns with the ancient notions of *energeia* or *ekstasis*. While it is difficult to provide a precise translation, both terms refer to bridging the gap between the things represented in the text and bringing them to the audience's senses.<sup>44</sup>

After Romanos' invitation to the lowly, the live audience proclaims the Mother of God for what she is: a pure maiden and the mother of God. This praise practically summarizes the moral of the story. The live audience knows the story and reiterates it through their praise. Moreover, they have already heard the story before the performance of the kontakion during the readings of the Lukan narrative. This knowledge creates engagement with the kontakion, as Romanos subverts the expectations of the audience in his characterizations. The live audience might even be acquainted with Romanos' style throughout the liturgical year. Romanos alters the biblical stories while adhering to the main narrative points in the scriptures. Such familiarity creates suspense as the live audience follows the highs and lows of the story, which are ultimately resolved in the way the scriptures dictate.<sup>45</sup> Romanos even points to the Lukan account in the beginning of the second strophe to strengthen this effect: "The leader of the heavenly hosts, when he received the signal of benevolence towards men, hastened to declare the news to the Virgin, as it is written (ὡς γέγραπται)."<sup>46</sup>

As Gabriel makes his way to Nazareth, the live audience that has been invited to follow him is informed of Gabriel's inner disposition:

And having come to Nazareth, towards the shack of Joseph, he was astounded (ἐξεπλήττετο) at

How the Most-High One desires to join himself with lowly ones.

"The entire Heaven," he said, "and the fiery throne, cannot contain my Lord,

And how does this simple woman receive him?

(He is) awe-inspiring above (Ἄνω φρικτός) and how (will he be) visible below (κάτω πῶς ὀρατός)? (It is) altogether as he wills it.

So why do I stand still and do not fly and tell the maiden:

*Rejoice, O unwedded bride.*<sup>47</sup>

The heterodiegetic narrator points out Gabriel's astonishment, or rather, through the metaleptic introduction, the live audience observes Gabriel's astonishment. Moreover, the Archangel states his astonishment through direct speech, revealing his internal focalization. He focalizes the humble house of Joseph where Mary resides and, by identifying the modest accommodation with Mary's

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44 R. J. ALLAN – I. J. F. DE JONG – C. C. DE JONGE, From Enargeia to Immersion: The Ancient Roots of a Modern Concept, *Style* 51/1, 2017, 34–51.

45 For more on the general narrative structure of Romanos' kontakia, see: M. SCHROEDER, Romanus the Melodist: Drama as an Instrument of Theology, *Logos: A Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 43–45, 2002–2004, 212–220. ERIKSEN, Drama in the Kontakia of Romanos the Melodist, op. cit., 109–111.

46 *Romanos the Melodist*, Grosdidier de Matons (ed.), IX. Hymn on the Annunciation, op. cit., strophe 2, 22.

47 *Ibid.*

simple status as an ignorant maiden, Gabriel gives the first snippets of Mary's characterization. To strengthen this characterization, Gabriel utters a paradox, asking how God, who is uncontainable, can be contained in Mary's womb. Paradox is a powerful tool to communicate the incomprehensible. From the Gospels to early Christian theologians, paradoxes have been used extensively to convey the miraculous aspects of Christian doctrine, becoming a discourse to relate Christian mysteries including the virgin birth and the Incarnation.<sup>48</sup>

Late antique liturgical poetry is not exempt from this discourse. Sarah Gador-Whyte observes how paradoxes have been widely used in retellings of the New Testament narrative both in Syriac liturgical poetry and in Romanos' oeuvre.<sup>49</sup> The incomprehensibility of the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection has been conveyed through paradox by the liturgical poets. For example, in the *Kontakion On the Passion of Christ*, Romanos as the author/narrator utters the paradox "The Thunderer stands silent, the Word is without a word" to voice the incomprehensibility of God being crucified.<sup>50</sup> But what happens when it is a character in the story that utters the paradox? Through the paradox, Gabriel does not only communicate his perception of Mary but also his own bewilderment. Thus, the Archangel characterizes himself as someone possessing insufficient information to comprehend the Incarnation. This might also signal to the live audience the magnitude of Incarnation. Even an Archangel is having difficulty comprehending such a miracle. By communicating Gabriel's insufficient knowledge, Romanos foreshadows (*prolepsis*) Gabriel's future troubles and creates anticipation.<sup>51</sup> Compared to the Gabriel of the Lukan account, who is able to explain the mechanics of the Incarnation to Mary, Romanos' Gabriel is at a disadvantage. The bewilderment contained in Gabriel's focalization towards characterizing Mary will be an enduring theme throughout the *kontakion* which also has a pastoral aspect for the live audience, as we shall see.

In the third strophe, Gabriel enters the house and directly exclaims the news to Mary: "Rejoice! The Lord is with you!"<sup>52</sup> Upon such an entrance, the live audience observes Mary's body language through the narrator's words. Mary perceives the shining form of the Archangel and reacts by lowering her head, not responding immediately. This reaction signifies shyness, perhaps even

48 A. CAMERON, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse*, Berkeley 1991, 156–160.

49 GADOR-WHYTE, *Theology and Poetry in Early Byzantium*, op. cit., 35–38, 109–121.

50 The translation is quoted from: GADOR-WHYTE, *Theology and Poetry in Early Byzantium*, op. cit., 37.

51 In narratology, *prolepsis* refers to events that will happen later in the story being mentioned in advance, see: GENETTE, *Narrative Discourse*, op. cit., 40.

52 *Romanos the Melodist*, Grosdidier de Matons (ed.), IX. Hymn on the Annunciation, op. cit., strophe 3, 24.

propriety, as Mary finds herself sharing a space with a supernatural stranger who appears to be male, adding an inappropriate feel to the scene.<sup>53</sup> However, the gesture of bowing her head also turns out to be a gesture of contemplation:

Meaning she joined with meaning (Νοῦν δὲ συνῆψεν εἰς νοῦν), she put thought together with thought (φρένα εἰς φρένα), exclaiming:

“What is this I see? What shall I think?”

The one who is (present) before me has an appearance of fire, (yet) the voice of a man.

And he both confuses me and gives me confidence (θαρρύνει με) because he says this to me:

*Rejoice, O unwedded bride.*<sup>54</sup>”

Romanos' choice of words, such as “idea” (νοῦς) and “thought” (φρήν), and their successive repetition drive the point starkly. Upon encountering Gabriel in her own domestic space, Mary acts as expected: shy and unwilling to engage with a stranger. Arentzen notes how Mary is described similarly to a Constantinopolitan girl in Romanos' kontakia. Mary lives a sheltered life and is betrothed to Joseph.<sup>55</sup> Thus, this unwillingness to engage with a stranger may be seen as an appropriate gendered reaction by the live audience. However, the Virgin also uses this proper reaction to assess the situation. Compared to the Mary of the Lukan narrative, who simply stays silent and wonders at Gabriel's salutation until he reassures her, Romanos' Mary has the opportunity to share her inner disposition. This allows Romanos to nudge Mary's characterization slightly outside of the expectations of the live audience set by the Lukan narrative. Mary prepares herself to give a less gender appropriate reaction in the following parts of the kontakion through her internal contemplation facilitated by a very gendered gesture. Mary's internal focalization and her perception of Gabriel oscillate between suspicion and excitement. After all, she openly states that Gabriel's proclamation gives her confidence (θαρρύνει με). On the one hand, the limited information available to her causes uncertainty about the situation. On the other hand, she is aware that something significant is about to happen to her.

As Mary contemplates these things, Gabriel breaks the stalemate by blowing (ἐνέπνευσεν) on her to break her unwillingness to engage in the fourth strophe. Gabriel is not aware of Mary's inner thoughts, but he anticipates her perception of him and assumes she is afraid of his fiery appearance. When Gabriel blows onto Mary, Romanos refers to him as the “fiery one” (ὁ πύρινος), further communicating how Mary perceives him. Rather than focusing on his appearance, Gabriel wants her to concentrate on God's message: “You (will) give birth (τίκτεῖς) to the Lord. / Why are you frightened of a servant of the

53 See for such a reading of the scene: ARENTZEN, *The Virgin in Song*, op. cit., 59–60.

54 *Romanos the Melodist*, Grosdidier de Matons (ed.), IX. Hymn on the Annunciation, op. cit., strophe 3, 24.

55 ARENTZEN, *The Virgin in Song*, op. cit., 33–34, 52.

same master?" Gabriel focalizes Mary as a timid maiden and encourages her to break her silence and accept his message instead of remaining silent: "What I have been entrusted, and confided with, these things I came to tell you. / *Rejoice, O unwedded bride.*"<sup>56</sup>

When Mary hears Gabriel's words delivering the news of the Incarnation, she expresses her confusion through an inner monologue: "I heard the first things, and I did not comprehend (συνῆκα) them. / So how shall I understand (μάθω) the following words."<sup>57</sup> Mary finds herself at a loss because there are many unanswered questions. Her information about what is going to happen is insufficient. As the live audience adopts Mary's focalization, these questions might also resonate with them. Indeed, how should the news proclaimed by Gabriel be understood? Thus, Mary's future inner deliberations and voiced resistance takes on a pastoral nature. Being unsure about the extent of Gabriel's knowledge, Mary asks herself:

And behold, he placed another shocking thing into my ears.  
For he said: 'You are carrying and giving birth to a son.'  
And yet, I do not know a man (ἄνδρα οὐ γινώσκω).  
Perhaps he has not learned (τάχα οὐκ ἔμαθεν) that I am sealed.  
Is he unaware that I am a virgin? Truly, I am not convinced.  
If he did not know, and was unaware, he would not have come and told me:  
*Rejoice, O unwedded bride.*<sup>58</sup>

Throughout strophe five, verbs of knowing (γινώσκω) and learning (μανθάνω) dominate Mary's reflections, highlighting her perception of Gabriel's knowledge. Mary weighs possible scenarios in her mind. Is the one in front of her really an emissary of God? He certainly seems so on account of his fiery appearance. But if that is the case, how does he not know that she is a virgin? Shouldn't he know if what he is saying to her is true? Mary is yet to transgress her boundaries, but it is clear she is a cognizant maiden.

The internal focalization of Mary is the first major deviation from the Lukan narrative, as her suspicions about Gabriel's extent of knowledge allow her the space to resist the Archangel's message. In the end, Mary decides to voice her suspicions and try to find an answer to her internal questions in strophe six:

How will this be that you speak of (Πῶς ἔσται τοῦτο ὃ λαλεῖς)? Explain to me now what you are? Should I call you an angel or a human (ἄγγελον ἢ ἄνθρωπον εἶπω)? (Are you) from the heavens or the earth (οὐράνιον ἢ γήινον)? Explain to me who you are and what you have said?  
For if I come to understand who is the one speaking, I shall certainly grasp what is being spoken.

56 *Romanos the Melodist*, Grosdidier de Matons (ed.), IX. Hymn on the Annunciation, op. cit., strophe 4, 24.

57 *Ibid.* strophe 5, 26.

58 *Ibid.* strophe 5, 26.

And therefore, tell me where are you from: Did you come from above or below (ἄνωθεν ἤλθες ἢ κάτωθεν)?

I have now seized boldness, having acquired much frankness (πολλὴν παρρησίαν κεκτημένη), I shall debate with you.

This news that you have spoken of, where was it proclaimed? Do not conceal it from me.

Was this proclaimed about me in heaven? So why don't you tell me that you are an angel and not a man who says to me:

*Rejoice O unwedded bride.*<sup>59</sup>

Mary relates Gabriel's identity to his message. From her perspective, if she can ascertain Gabriel's identity, she can also understand the nature of his tidings. Her speech is characterized using seemingly opposing pairs of words – such as human (ἄνθρωπος) versus angel (ἄγγελος), from heaven (οὐρανός) versus earth (γῆινος), from above (ἄνωθεν) versus below (κάτωθεν) – to emphasize this point. These oppositions are central to Gabriel's identity. Either Gabriel is an emissary of God, and his tidings are true, or Gabriel is from the earth and is trying to trick Mary. The oppositions are also relevant for Mary in the context of the Incarnation. It is a transformative experience for Mary from a maiden to Theotokos, a double characterization that is at the core of Incarnation.

Mary recognizes that her knowledge is insufficient, just as Gabriel's is. This narrative situation levels the playing field, allowing Mary to delve into the heart of the matter and openly declare her reservations. However, she is also conscious that her behavior deviates from the norms expected of a maiden in her context. Moreover, both Romanos and the live audience were likely aware that such a characterization of Mary diverges from other liturgical treatments of the Annunciation and the Lukan narrative. Mary admits to having acquired boldness (*παρρησία/parrhēsia*) to pose these inquiries, which often resemble demands. Erin Galgay Walsh explores the dialogical use of the term *parrhēsia* by various biblical women in Romanos' kontakia, demonstrating that Romanos employs this term to signify unreserved speech, frequently used to alter hierarchical positions that hinder free communication.<sup>60</sup> Thus, Mary's inquiry is an attempt to shift the hierarchy of her status, enabling open dialogue with Gabriel and expressing her doubts. It is crucial to note that Mary did not suddenly find her voice. Her direct speech is the result of a careful retelling of the Lukan narrative, where Romanos lets Mary identify a potential gap in Gabriel's knowledge. Her decision to act follows prolonged internal deliberation. Furthermore, Gabriel's (faulty) perception of Mary as a simple and timid maiden is communicated to the audience from the beginning of the kontakion, making Mary's direct speech and characterization more dramatic as it challenges Gabriel's expectations.

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59 *Ibid.* strophe 6, 26.

60 See for example the chapters on Romanos' portrayal of the Sinful Woman and the Samaritan Woman: WALSH, *Sanctifying Boldness*, op. cit., 246–250.

The fact that Gabriel does not expect such resistance from Mary is clear in strophe seven. Rather than directly answering Mary, Gabriel deliberates within himself. The heterodiegetic narrator openly communicates that this is a conscious choice by Gabriel: “Immediately upon hearing these words, Gabriel was troubled within himself. / At any rate, he did not utter a harsh word to the one who gives birth to the Lord.”<sup>61</sup> The narrator points out to the audience alternative scenarios. Gabriel could have rebuked Mary on account of her frank resistance. But he does not do so. Romanos drives this point even further: Gabriel remembers how he prevailed over the prophet Zachariah when he did not believe the news of his barren wife Elizabeth’s pregnancy.<sup>62</sup> Then, Gabriel simply muted Zachariah’s voice, but now he cannot do the same: “Nevertheless, I cannot, I dare not give proof (οὐ τολμῶ ἀποφίνασθαι). / I cannot bind her voice as I did the old man’s.”<sup>63</sup> Zachariah’s doubt of Gabriel did not go unanswered, but now he is reluctant to confront Mary’s doubt equally forcefully. This comparison between Zachariah and Mary, from Gabriel’s perspective, is revealing. Although Mary is a maiden and her demand for frank dialogue might be seen as transgressive, she is also the one destined to give birth to Gabriel’s master. Unlike Zachariah, who lost his voice for his transgression, Mary’s position compels Gabriel to engage with her and accommodate her request for answers. The question arises: why did Romanos choose to explicitly depict Gabriel’s thought process in accepting Mary’s demand for answers? As mentioned, it is likely that Romanos recognizes this as a significant departure from the Lukan account and perhaps from contemporary liturgical literature. Thus, he felt compelled to elucidate Gabriel’s motivations for engaging in this debate. As a result, Gabriel’s inner monologue serves to explain his behavior and his uncharacteristic response. Gabriel’s inner monologue also serves to characterize Mary. Gabriel’s relational position compared to Mary is complicated. As mentioned, Mary is on the cusp of a transformative experience. Once again Gabriel’s inner monologue serves to remind his struggle with Mary’s double characterization as both a maiden and the mother of God as was emphasized in strophe six.

Gabriel continues to express his reluctance to engage in debate both through his inner and direct speech in strophe eight. He accepts Mary’s invitation not because she demands it, but rather out of fear of his master:

And (Mary) asks (demands) of me (ἀπαιτεῖ με) who I am and what I am saying,  
and although I do not want to, I endure  
Lest the one residing within her, being angered, destroys me

61 *Romanos the Melodist*, Grosdidier de Matons (ed.), IX. Hymn on the Annunciation, op. cit., strophe 7, 28.

62 As mentioned, the reference to Zachariah is derived from earlier parts of the Lukan narrative, see: Luke 1:1–24.

63 *Romanos the Melodist*, Grosdidier de Matons (ed.), IX. Hymn on the Annunciation, op. cit., strophe 7, 28.

As once from heaven He threw fallen angels into Hades.  
So remaining steadfast, I acquiesce, and I respond to the one debating.  
'How will this be?' what I say, O undefiled one.  
How did the sea appear dried up to the people and again as sea?  
In this manner it happened in the womb, so that everyone may say to you:  
*Rejoice O unwedded bride.*<sup>64</sup>

Gabriel's reluctant acceptance and possible frustration with Mary's demand indicate that his perception of her has not evolved since the beginning of the kontakion. Although he shows due reverence to Mary, he still perceives her actions as transgressive for a maiden and a mortal being. This is partly because Gabriel lacks the information needed to answer Mary's questions. He cites Mary's reaction from strophe six: "How will this be (Πῶς ἔσται τοῦτο)?" Gabriel is indeed contemplating an answer to address Mary's inquiries. The question also resonates with the live audience as they have been searching for an answer with Mary, hoping that Gabriel will be able to provide that answer. Unlike the Gabriel of the Lukan account, Romanos' Gabriel does not have an answer. Instead, he responds with a typology, referring to Moses' parting of the sea in Exodus.<sup>65</sup> The metaphorical connection is between the sea and Mary's womb. Old Testament typologies are a common feature in late antique liturgical poetry.<sup>66</sup> Typology links examples from the Old Testament to foreshadow or prophesize events in the New Testament.<sup>67</sup> Gador-Whyte notes that another kontakion attributed to Romanos, *On the Annunciation II*, employs three successive typologies. In the prooemium of this kontakion, upon witnessing Mary's "unsown pregnancy," Joseph recognizes "the rain on the fleece / the bush unconsumed by fire / the budding rod of Aaron."<sup>68</sup> Although Gabriel lacks sufficient information to explain the conception in Mary's womb, he uses examples of God's past miracles to reassure Mary of future ones. From here on, the debate between Gabriel and Mary becomes one of different interpretations of scriptural exegesis. In the course of the debate, the different interpretations of Mary and Gabriel through their focalizations continue to be of a pastoral nature for the live audience.

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64 *Ibid.* strophe 8, 28.

65 Exodus 14:15–29.

66 See for example Jacob of Serugh's Mariological typologies: J. PUTHUPARAMPIL, *Mariological Thought of Mar Jacob of Serugh (451–521)*, Piscataway 2012, 44–55, 172–224.

67 For more information on Romanos' use of typology, see: R. J. SCHORR, Typology in the Kontakia of Romanos, *Studia Patristica*, 6, 1962, 211–220. R. J. REICHMUTH, Typology of the Genuine Kontakia of Romanos the Melodist, (PhD diss., University of Minnesota 1975).

68 GADOR-WHYTE, *Theology and Poetry in Early Byzantium*, op. cit., 130. For the Greek Text, see: *Romanos the Melodist*, Grosdidier de Matons (ed.), XII. 3<sup>e</sup> Hymne de la Nativité, op. cit., proem, 118.

In strophe nine, Mary remains unconvinced. She is uncertain whether Gabriel's reference is a typology foretelling the virgin birth and Incarnation or merely an analogy. Thus, she undermines the typology of Gabriel by pointing out there is no intermediary. Consequently, she persists with her inquiry:

Wishing to comprehend his words clearly, the Holy One cries back to the angel:  
 “The sea you have mentioned to me, the prophet broke through with his rod.  
 For this wonder did not happen without an intermediary.  
 But there was first Moses, then the prayers, and the rod as an intermediary.  
 (But) now, there is nothing in between, how will this be,  
 since I do not know a man?  
 As an untilled (and) unplowed field.  
 I will give fruit without receiving a seed or one who sows?  
 Tell me this, explain this to me, you who stand there and tell me:  
 Rejoice *O unwedded bride*.<sup>69</sup>”

Mary's response reveals how she can push the boundaries of their conversation upon Gabriel's acceptance of her *parrhēsia*. This opportunity allows Mary to express her thoughts more freely, evolving her characterization into a witty and capable debater. While Gabriel wants Mary to focus on the miracle of Incarnation itself, by making use of Gabriel's own typology, Mary brings the attention back to the intricacies of human reproduction. Arentzen notes that this response can be interpreted as a Freudian double entendre, particularly with the emphasis on the rod and the intermediary.<sup>70</sup> Mary deliberately interprets Gabriel's typological example as a simple analogy that has nothing to do with the salvation story. From her perspective, if Gabriel's example is just an analogy, she can counter it with other (impossible) analogies. Thus, she offers examples such as an untilled field, a fruit without a seed, and someone to plant it as counterparts to Gabriel's analogy. Her response is an attempt to test Gabriel's narrative and scriptural knowledge. Surely an emissary of God can interpret the Old Testament more effectively and persuade Mary. The heterodiegetic narrator clarifies that Mary's response stems not from stubbornness but from a genuine desire to understand the nature of Gabriel's message.

In strophe ten, Gabriel meets Mary's verbal challenge with success. The Archangel clarifies that his initial example of the Red Sea is not merely an analogy but a typology, heralding the joyous news of the Incarnation:

He (Gabriel) among the most high, who had been entrusted with the greetings,  
 not the childbirth (θαρηθεις τὸν ἀσπασμόν, οὐ τὸν τόκον) of the all-holy Mary,  
 When he heard what the Virgin said, he answered to her:  
 “As you said, O holy one, that the past events had an intermediary,  
 The present (event) is greater, for which reason there is no need of a mediator.

69 *Romanos the Melodist*, Grosdidier de Matons (ed.), IX. Hymn on the Annunciation, op. cit., strophe 9, 30.

70 ARENTZEN, *The Virgin in Song*, op. cit., 63–64.

I am an angel, and I am not entrusted to mediate such a thing.  
So how will a miserable man mediate for you?  
Once the rod and prophet Moses were types (τύποι ἐγένοντο).  
Now the truth will shine upon you, for which reason I came to say to you:  
*Rejoice O unwedded bride.*<sup>71</sup>

Gabriel asserts that the present event involves God directly, eliminating the need for a mediator. He emphasizes that the events of the Old Testament are typologies (τύποι), highlighting the fulfillment of prophecies regarding the Incarnation. These typologies, Gabriel argues, are fundamentally different from the mere analogies Mary had suggested. Like a preacher, Gabriel educates Mary – and by extension, the live audience witnessing this didactic scene – on the nature of these typologies.<sup>72</sup> The resistance of the Virgin that is carefully brought about based on Gabriel's insufficient knowledge regarding Incarnation leads to a debate on scriptural exegesis presenting a model on how to understand Incarnation. The virgin birth and the Incarnation represent a miraculous series of events that, while prefigured by the miracles of the Old Testament, surpass them in their magnitude. For Gabriel, this surpassing nature is both a crucial characteristic and a significant proof of the authenticity of the forthcoming New Testament events. As a result, Gabriel invites Mary to take her place in these events.

Strophe eleven marks the end of the dialogue between Gabriel and Mary. Gabriel's exegetical comment on typologies convinces Mary of the Archangel's identity: "You truly came from above. Forgive me now I have recognized you. / (...) / If you were not from above, you would not interpret the words of the scripture (τὰ τῆς γραφῆς ῥήματα οὐ διερμήνευες). / But as you are from the light, you have smoothed out all the obscure things."<sup>73</sup> Previously, in strophe six, Mary had connected Gabriel's message to his identity. For Mary, if Gabriel's message is true, so must his identity be, and vice versa. She interprets Gabriel's explanation of typologies as an exegetical lesson – an interpretation of "the words of the scripture." This includes not only the scripture of the Old Testament but also the narrative of the New Testament, which is being created in front of the live audience through the performance of this kontakion. Gabriel's words convey information about his identity to Mary; thus, Mary's focalization characterizes Gabriel through his own words. It is important to point out that, at the end of the dialogical exchange Mary's focalization of Gabriel is

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71 *Romanos the Melodist*, Grosdidier de Matons (ed.), IX. Hymn on the Annunciation, op. cit., strophe 10, 30.

72 For a discussion of the didactic value of dialogical presentation, see: M. B. CUNNINGHAM, *Dramatic Device or Didactic Tool? The Function of Dialogue in Byzantine Preaching*, in: E. Jeffreys (ed.), *Rhetoric in Byzantium, (Papers from the Thirty-fifth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Exeter College, University of Oxford, March 2001)*, Vermont 2003, 101–113.

73 *Romanos the Melodist*, Grosdidier de Matons (ed.), IX. Hymn on the Annunciation, op. cit., strophe 11, 32.

resolved and she recognizes Gabriel as a messenger of God. However, Gabriel's focalization and his struggle in characterizing Mary is not resolved. Gabriel's bewilderment in reconciling Mary's characterization as a simple maiden on the one hand and the Theotokos on the other continues to endure. This is likely a deliberate choice. As mentioned, Mary became a figure with many facets to her religious persona in sixth-century Constantinople, and Romanos utilizes these multiple characterizations. There is a pastoral message for the live audience on how to understand the Virgin, indicating that Mary is both a simple human and Theotokos simultaneously.

## Conclusion

Embedded in the literary culture of the age, Romanos' use of imagined speech allows him to advance a story from the perspectives of different characters. Such storytelling creates dynamic characterizations as the biblical characters convey narrative information to the live audience in real time. In *On the Annunciation I*, Romanos is methodical in this approach: each time, both Mary and Gabriel begin with an inner deliberation, sharing their internal focalization and degree of narrative knowledge to clarify their motivations before engaging in direct speech. The motivations of the characters and their reactions to the unfolding story are possible only because of the alterations to the Lukan narrative. Without the careful adaptation of the Lukan narrative, which created characters with limited narrative knowledge, the dialogical clash between Mary and Gabriel would not have occurred.

In essence, Mary's dynamic characterization revolves around her evolution from a timid maiden to an outspoken and capable debater upon acquiring *parrhēsia*. Such characterization aligns with the theme of the Annunciation narrative, representing a transformative experience for Mary as she transitions from a mere mortal to take her place in the salvation story. Both Gabriel's and Mary's focalizations are attempts to come to terms with this dual characterization. Gabriel's perspective reveals that he views Mary as a simple maiden, leading him to struggle to understand Mary's resistance, which seems beyond her gendered and mortal boundaries. Meanwhile, Mary's perspective shows her personal evolution. She first notes Gabriel's potential lack of knowledge regarding the mechanics of the Incarnation and then gains the confidence to resist, doubting Gabriel's identity. This difference in how the characters perceive each other based on the narrative knowledge available to them creates the friction that drives the story forward as they try to understand each other's identities.

Romanos' handling of point of view and the distribution of knowledge creates dynamic and plausible characterizations. These characterizations are also effective in conveying exegetical lessons to the live audience. *On the Annunciation I* suggests that Mary possesses multiple facets in her religious persona, ranging from a maiden to the Mother of God. While this double characterization

may seem paradoxical and might cause hesitation – just as Gabriel hesitated when Mary resisted – the paradox itself underscores the profound nature of both Mary's religious persona and the event of the Incarnation.

As a final word, I believe this methodology is applicable not only to the remaining sections of *On the Annunciation I* but also to Romanos' other kontakia. I will be analyzing the full text of *On the Annunciation I* in my PhD dissertation. The concept of double characterization is particularly promising for further study, as Romanos often portrays biblical figures as individuals who are physically close to the miracles yet do not fully understand their mysteries. He presents them with a deeply human and relatable character, making it easy for the audience to identify with them. While this observation has been made by several scholars working on Romanos, focalization offers a valuable tool for exploring *how* he achieves this effect.

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