CHAPTER 1

Michael Psellos
Writing like a Man, 'Throwing like a Girl'

This chapter offers a radical reinterpretation of the gender of Michael Psellos, one of Romanía's most well-known scholars as well as one of few figures from the Middle Byzantine period to have received extensive gender analysis. I start with some biographical information about his education and personal life. Then I examine the role that learning played in his self-definition and his depiction of others, especially in his many encomia. I argue that, in his writings, education and learning could act as 'masculine capital', which, when accumulated, could be used to allow for less masculine behaviours in other areas of life, both propping up and subverting hegemonic ideals of physical strength. Finally, I consider the implications of this for Psellos' work, from his descriptions of hunting and warfare to his emotional life.

Who Was Psellos?

Psellos was born in 1018 to an affluent family in Constantinople.[1] According to his own account, his talent for learning was evident from a young age and his mother, Theodote, quickly recognising this, fostered his genius. His progress from childhood to adolescence was punctuated by different types of instruction, from the *Iliad* to rhetoric and philosophy. This was all knowledge that he would continue to value and utilise throughout his life, notably to facilitate his career at the imperial court, where we find him thriving in his twenties (c. 1043), after previously occupying a less influential administrative position.[2]

[1] For more detailed biographies, see J.-C. Riedinger, 'Quatre étapes de la vie de Michel Psellos', *Revue des études byzantines*, 68 (2010), pp. 5–60; A. Kaldellis and I. Polemis (trans.), *Michael Psellos and the Patriarchs: Letters and Funeral Orations for Keroullarios, Leichoudes, and Xiphilinos* (South Bend, 2015), pp. 3–10; A. Kaldellis (trans.), *Mothers and Sons, Fathers and Daughters: The Byzantine Family of Michael Psellos* (South Bend, 2006), pp. 3–16, and his chapter on Psellos in A. Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 189–224.

[2] Riedinger places him as ἀσηκρῆτις ('imperial secretary') in the reign of Emperor Michael IV (r. 1034–41). During this time, he was not responsible for drafting imperial documents or for participating in

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Psellos was particularly successful during the reign of Konstantinos IX Monomachos (r. 1042–55), and ascribed this success to his rhetorical power – it was 'the grace of his tongue' (χάρις τῆς γλώττης) that won him the emperor's favour.[3] During this time, Psellos had many opportunities to put his eloquence into use, through encomiastic speeches which gained him further imperial support, as well as through numerous lectures on philosophy, theology and science which allowed him to play a formative role for many of the scholars who served Church and state in the following decades.[4]

By contrast to the 1040s, the 1050s were a difficult period for Psellos, both personally and professionally. His daughter, Styliane, died sometime between 1050 and 1054, at the age of nine. His moving funeral oration for her dates from these years and expresses great grief for her loss.[5] His decision to adopt another daughter of the same age very shortly after is also indicative of the void her death must have created.[6] Besides these domestic troubles, Psellos found himself under increasing suspicion at court. Following the departure of his friends Konstantinos Leichoudes (fl. 1059–63) and Ioannes Xiphilinos (fl. 1064–75), he was tonsured monk in late 1054, and joined a monastery on Mt Olympos in Bithynia early the following year. His stay there was very short, lasting only for about a year. But it was probably during this time (1055) that he wrote the encomium for his mother, as well as an oration for Nikolaos, Abbot of the Beautiful Spring.[7]

Psellos came back to the capital as soon as political circumstances allowed it (1055) and, despite his tonsure, resumed political activity. His

the decision-making process. Such greater responsibilities are dated from the reign of Konstantinos IX Monomachos (r. 1042–55). See Riedinger, 'Quatre étapes', pp. 30–7.

[3] All references to the *Chronographia* are to É. Renauld (ed.), *Michel Psellos: Chronographie ou Histoire d'un siècle de Byzance (976–1077)*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1:1926; 2:1928). Here *Chronographia*, Book 6, Section 45.

[4] Psellos was accorded the prestigious title of πρόεδρος τῶν φιλοσόφων ('president of the philosophers'), which transformed him from a private teacher to an imperial dignitary and provided a guarantee of the quality of his teaching; see Riedinger, 'Quatre étapes', p. 44. Attaleiates may have been one of Psellos' students during the reign of Monomachos; see D. Krallis, 'Attaleiates as Reader of Psellos', in *Reading Michael Psellos*, ed. C. Barber and D. Jenkins (Leiden, 2006), pp. 167–91. An example of a religious man who was Psellos' student was Theophylaktos Hephaistos, archbishop of Ochrid, who wrote a letter of consolation after Psellos' death. See M. Mullett, *Theophylact of Ochrid: Reading the Letters of a Byzantine Archbishop* (Aldershot, 1997), p. 143.

[5] Kaldellis, *The Byzantine Family*, pp. 13–14. [6] Kaldellis, *The Byzantine Family*, p. 15.

[7] Kaldellis, *The Byzantine Family*, p. 31; U. Criscuolo, *Michele Psello: Autobiografia. Encomio per la madre: Testo critico, introduzione, traduzione e commentario* (Naples, 1989), pp. 21–7. For an alternative dating of Psellos' encomium of his mother which places the text in the period between 1059 and 1064, see J. Walker, 'These Things I Have Not Betrayed: Michael Psellos' Encomium of His Mother as a Defense of Rhetoric', *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, 22:1 (2004), pp. 49–101, at pp. 64–8.

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Figure 1.1 Michael Psellos (left) in full monastic dress with his student, Emperor Michael VII Doukas (MS Pantokrator 234, fol. 254, Holy Monastery of Pantokrator, Mount Athos, from the late eleventh or early twelfth century)

monastic adventure left upon him fewer marks than we might have expected, but it was not entirely without effect. Michael, the name by which he has become famous, was his monastic name, and the only portrayal of him that survives depicts him in full monastic dress (Figure 1.1).[8] Psellos maintained correspondence with those he had met on Mt Olympos and acted as advisor both to monastic communities and individual monks.[9] It is also unlikely that, once back in the capital, he returned home to live with his wife and adopted daughter.[10] Not an enclosed monk, but also not fully secular, Psellos maintained an ambiguous religious status which he had to defend against criticism.[11]

For the rest of his life, he remained close to many emperors. His learning recommended him as imperial advisor and sometimes as imperial

[8] His given name was Konstantinos.

[9] M. Jeffreys, 'Michael Psellos and the Monastery', in *The Letters of Psellos: Cultural Networks and Historical Realities*, ed. M. Jeffreys and M. D. Lauxtermann (Oxford, 2017), pp. 42–58, at pp. 46, 50–1.

[10] Kaldellis, *The Byzantine Family*, p. 13.

[11] See, for example, his letter to the monk Pherebios (S 167) in M. Jeffreys, 'Summaries', in *The Letters of Psellos: Cultural Networks and Historical Realities*, ed. M. Jeffreys and M. D. Lauxtermann (Oxford, 2017), pp. 151–416, at p. 392; Epistula 275 in S. Papaioannou (ed.), *Michael Psellus Epistulae* (Berlin, 2019), pp. 665–71.

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physician or private tutor to the imperial progeny.[12] Late in the reign of Konstantinos X Doukas (r. 1059–67), he also acted briefly as judge of the Bucellarian Theme, a position that he discusses little in his writings.[13]

Many of his surviving sources date from the post-tonsure period of Psellos' life, including his famous *Chronographia*, a history covering the reigns of emperors from Basileios II to Isaakios (composed in two stages, first in the early 1060s and then in the mid-1070s) and his orations of the Patriarchs (Michael Keroullarios' composed in the early 1060s; Xiphilinos' and Leichoudes' after 1075).[14]

Education and Masculinity

The Birth of an Author

For Psellos, education and learning were of primary importance for the development of his masculine subjectivity. From the first moment of his life, as recounted in the encomium for his mother, he associated himself with writing. There were, we are told, two female children before him. The first was welcomed, and both mother and daughter were praised for their beauty. The second birth, however, was tainted with disappointment:

> once again the child was a girl [θῆλυ]. This fact was not pleasing either to the parents or to the rest of the family, for just as barren women long for a child of whatever gender, in this way did my mother all the more want her second to be a boy [ἄρρενος].[15]

With this explicit mention of the children's sex, the ground was being prepared for the appearance of Psellos himself, a male baby. And how was this male baby described? Psellos continued:

> Since, however, it was necessary for God to listen and respond to her petitions, her womb was made to conceive, and the time of birth drew near. The present author [ὁ συγγραφεύς] then burst out [ἐξερράγη] from nature, preceded by many prayers and hopes.[16]

[12] He acted as physician to Emperor Isaakios Komnenos (r. 1057–9), encouraging his abdication (1059) against the wishes of his wife, and as tutor to Konstantinos X Doukas' (r. 1059–67) son and heir, Michael (see Figure 1.1), for whom he composed several didactic works on legal, historical and scientific topics.

[13] Riedinger, 'Quatre étapes', p. 30.

[14] For these dates, see L. Neville, *Guide to Byzantine Historical Writing* (Cambridge, 2018), p. 139; Kaldellis and Polemis, *Psellos and the Patriarchs*, pp. 11, 28. For the Greek, see I. Polemis (ed.), *Michael Psellus: Orationes Funebres*, vol. 1 (Berlin, 2013), pp. 1–169.

[15] Psellos, *Encomium for his Mother*, Section [4] (d), trans. in Kaldellis, *Byzantine Family*, p. 58; Criscuolo, *Encomio per la madre*, pp. 93–4.

[16] Psellos, *Encomium for his Mother*, Section [4] (d), trans. in Kaldellis, *Byzantine Family*, pp. 58–9; Criscuolo, *Encomio per la madre*, p. 94.

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In modern terms, in finding out about Psellos' birth, the reader is faced with the exclamation 'it's an author!' instead of the usual 'it's a boy!'. Although of course this was Psellos' way of saying that *he* was the baby that he was talking about, his choice of words is telling. Here, and throughout, he sees himself as an 'author', an identity that was gendered masculine both in this specific instance, through the explicit discussion of the baby's sex, and more generally through the association of many genres of writing, including histories and encomia, with men.[17]

Indeed, in the foregoing passage, the gendering of the 'author' as masculine is further reinforced through the use of the verb 'burst out' (ἐξερράγη), which emphasises the manly power involved in bursting out from the mother's womb. This image, which associates learning and violence, is reminiscent of Oration 45 of Gregorios of Nazianzos, where the same verb is used to state that Christ 'having nothing womanly, nothing unmanly, in himself ... cried out and burst (ἐκραγέν) the virginal and maternal bonds with much power'.[18] We know that Psellos read and admired Gregorios, and indeed used Gregorios' expression even more closely in his oration for Nikolaos, Abbot of the Beautiful Spring (1055). As in Gregorios, in this oration for Nikolaos, the active baby, who is not merely pushed out of the mother's womb but forcefully makes his own way out, is explicitly praised for his manliness: 'so too was Jeremiah born before and the Forerunner of the Lord afterwards, and in breaking out (ἐκραγέντες) from the maternal bonds they stripped off for Godly contests in a preternaturally masculine way'.[19] In Psellos' case, this masculine force was associated not with religious power but with authorial status.

[17] Psellos often refers to himself as a συγγραφεύς in his histories. For the only Byzantine female historian whose work has survived, see L. Neville, 'Lamentation, History, and Female Authorship in Anna Komnene's *Alexiad*', *GRBS*, 53 (2013), pp. 192–218, and her chapter 'Why Didn't Greek Women Write History?' in L. Neville, *Anna Komnene: The Life and Work of a Medieval Historian* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 15–29. See also M. Mavroudi, 'Learned Women of Byzantium and the Surviving Record', in *Byzantine Religious Culture: Studies in Honor of Alice-Mary Talbot*, ed. D. Sullivan, E. A. Fisher and S. Papaioannou (Leiden, 2011), pp. 53–84.

[18] For Oration 45, see *PG* 36, col. 641A: καὶ ὅτι μάλιστα μηδὲν θῆλυ μηδὲ ἄνανδρον ἐν ἑαυτῷ φέρον· ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐκραγὲν βίᾳ δεσμῶν παρθενικῶν τε καὶ μητρικῶν, κατὰ πολλὴν ἐξουσίαν. On this passage, see also V. E. F. Harrison, 'Male and Female in Cappadocian Theology', *The Journal of Theological Studies*, 41:2 (1990), pp. 441–71, at pp. 457–8.

[19] P. Gautier, 'Éloge funèbre de Nicolas de la Belle Source par Michel Psellos moine à l'Olympe', *Βυζαντινά*, 6 (1974), pp. 9–69, at p. 37: Οὕτω καὶ Ἱερεμίας τὸ πρότερον τίκτεται καὶ ὁ τοῦ Κυρίου Πρόδρομος ὕστερον, καὶ μητρικῶν ἐκραγέντες δεσμῶν, ἀρρενωπότερον ἢ κατὰ φύσιν πρὸς τοὺς κατὰ Θεὸν ἀγῶνας ἐπαπεδύσαντο.

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Manly Milestones

As Psellos continued to talk about his childhood, he used his educational achievements as milestones. When he was five, he got his first teacher, and his lessons were both easy for him and more enjoyable than any other childish pastime.[20] When he was eight, he took up higher education, and before the age of ten he had not only perfected his orthography but was also able to recite the entire *Iliad*, 'knowing not only the epic verses, but also the figure of speech, style, poetic diction, opportune metaphor, and harmony of composition'.[21] This type of signposting was not limited to the encomium, where Psellos was after all describing the education he had received from his mother, but we find it also in the *Chronographia*. Referring to the reign of Romanos III (r. 1028–34), Psellos used the following terms to claim eyewitness status: 'From now on, the history will be more accurate than before, for the emperor Basileios died when I was a baby, while Konstantinos [VIII] ended his reign just after I had begun my elementary studies.'[22]

This way of signalling one's maturation through educational achievements had specifically masculine connotations. Indeed, Psellos took a different approach when it came to his daughter, signposting her age in her funeral oration in more physical ways. We are told that at the age of six Styliane 'immediately began to speak with great facility', and 'entering her ninth year, her features became more expressive and revealed an even more perfect beauty'.[23] In Psellos' eyes, much of his daughter's growing up was punctuated by her corporeal development, with marital age as an important milestone that Styliane's untimely death did not allow her to reach, but which loomed large in her father's mind.[24] What is more, when talking about himself, Psellos accompanied such references to his intellectual formation with comments about his bodily growth, especially his height and beard, both of which were

[20] Psellos, *Encomium of his Mother*, Section [5] (b), trans. in Kaldellis, *Byzantine Family*, p. 60; Criscuolo, *Encomio per la madre*, p. 94.

[21] Psellos, *Encomium of his Mother*, Sections [5] (c) and [6] (b), trans. in Kaldellis, *Byzantine Family*, pp. 60, 62; Criscuolo, *Encomio per la madre*, pp. 95, 97.

[22] *Chronographia*, Book 3, Section 1: Ἡ δὲ ἐντεῦθεν τῆς ἱστορίας γραφὴ ἀκριβεστέρα τῆς προλαβούσης γενήσεται· ὁ μὲν γὰρ βασιλεὺς Βασίλειος ἐπὶ νηπίῳ μοι τετελεύτηκεν, ὁ δέ γε Κωνσταντῖνος ἄρτι τὰ πρῶτα τελουμένῳ μαθήματα·. For another example, see also Psellos' oration for Leichoudes: 'I had not yet reached puberty when I met both of them, and they had by then matured. At the time I had just barely begun my basic education, while they had entered into the contest of rhetoric.' See Kaldellis and Polemis, *Psellos and the Patriarchs*, p. 136; Polemis, *Orationes Funebres*, p. 87.

[23] Psellos, *Funeral Oration for his Daughter*, Sections [8] and [14], trans. in Kaldellis, *Byzantine Family*, pp. 120, 123; K. N. Sathas (ed.), *Μεσαιωνική Βιβλιοθήκη*, vol. 5 (Paris, 1876), pp. 65, 68.

[24] See, for example, Psellos, *Funeral Oration for his Daughter*, Section [32], trans. in Kaldellis, *Byzantine Family*, p. 130; Sathas, *Μεσαιωνική Βιβλιοθήκη*, pp. 76–7.

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associated with masculinity.[25] For example, when describing himself at the time of his sister's death, he stated: 'I was sixteen years old and tall for my age. I had just completed my study of poetry and had begun to apply myself to the art of rhetoric not without grace.'[26] Similarly, in the *Chronographia*, Psellos referred again to himself as an eyewitness, this time to the funeral of Romanos III, stating: 'I myself saw this funeral procession of the emperor, not having yet grown a beard and only recently having put myself forward for the study of poetry.'[27] The close association of these two types of growth – bodily and intellectual – creates a link between them in the mind of the reader: both come to signify the process of growing up. This is especially the case in the last example, given that there is no other contextual reason for Psellos to mention his education. The reference to 'the study of poetry', then, is best understood as part of the process of becoming a man, and indeed a very specific type of man: a scholar.

To make this point clearer, it is worth comparing the scholar's pairing of bodily and intellectual growth to a description of an emperor's maturation. When talking about the age of Basileios II, Psellos again commented on his beard but combined it this time with military imagery: 'he was just beginning to grow a beard and to gain experience for warfare'.[28] Given that the early part of Basileios II's reign was dominated by civil wars with ambitious generals who contested his power, it is not surprising that *his* growing into a man was associated with learning how to fight. Fighting, sprouting a beard and learning were all signifiers of masculinity, not only through their very association with each other, but also through their exclusion of non-males. In Eastern Roman terms, fighting excluded women; growing a beard excluded both women and eunuchs; while learning, although to some degree a more widely available option, in practice seems to have excluded most

[25] On beards and masculinity, see S. Tougher, 'Bearding Byzantium: Masculinity, Eunuchs and the Byzantine Life Course', in *Questions of Gender in Byzantine Society* (Farnham, 2013), ed. B. Neil and L. Garland, pp. 153–66. Being tall was considered a manly attribute in this period. See Hatzaki, *Beauty and the Male Body in Byzantium*, p. 92. This quotation from Psellos' *Chronographia*, Book 1, Section 15 is an example of the association of height with masculinity: Ἰβήρων τοὺς μαχιμωτάτους φημί, ἀρτιφυεῖς πάντας τὸ γένειον καὶ αὐτὸ δὴ τὸ νεοτήσιον ἀποφύοντας ἄνθος, ὑψηλοὺς καὶ ἰσομέτρους ὥσπερ ὑπὸ κανόνα τὸ μέγεθος, ξίφει καθωπλισμένους τὴν δεξιὰν καὶ τὴν ὁρμὴν ἀνυποστάτους τυγχάνοντας ('The men I mean were the most warlike among the Iberians, all of them just growing their first beard, in the bloom of youth, tall and of equal height as though they had been measured off with a ruler, armed on their right hand with a sword, and irresistible when they charged').

[26] Psellos, *Encomium of his Mother*, Section 15, trans. in Kaldellis, *Byzantine Family*, p. 75; Criscuolo, *Encomio per la madre*, p. 114.

[27] *Chronographia*, Book 4, Section 4: Καὶ εἶδον κἀγὼ τὴν ἐξόδιον ταύτην πομπὴν τοῦ βασιλέως, οὔπω μὲν γενειάσκων, ἄρτι δὲ παραγγείλας ἐς τοὺς ποιητικοὺς λόγους.

[28] *Chronographia*, Book 1, Section 14: ἄρτι γενειάζων καὶ τὴν πρὸς τοὺς πολέμους ἐμπειρίαν λαμβάνων.

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women and eunuchs, especially from its most outward-looking manifestations, including authorship.[29] We should not be surprised, then, to find these educational signposts of manhood in Psellos' writing: in the same way that for a general or an emperor becoming a man involved getting experience of battle, for a scholar it involved passing through distinct levels of learning.

Psellos' Mother and Daughter

While being an author or being learned were primarily male prerogatives, women were not entirely excluded from them.[30] Social status or personal circumstances had a large role to play, as in the case of the historian and imperial daughter Anna Komnene, or of Psellos' mother and daughter. Even then, however, women did not participate in learning as equals, but had to struggle to be allowed to study.[31] As a result, while their individual desire to be taught was praised, learning was often presented as antithetical to their gender.

In Psellos' description of Theodote's childhood, we find a mixture of more traditional expectations and respect for education. Her first traits to be praised were corporeal: the symmetry of her limbs, the fullness of her hair and her radiant complexion.[32] Then we move to her domestic virtues: her skill at the loom or in weaving, in which she compared favourably to famous biblical women as well as the women of her time. Having more than fulfilled her feminine roles, Theodote was also shown to have an interest in learning, but her gender did not allow her to pursue it fully:

> The fact that she happened not to be a man by nature [ἄρρενα τὴν φύσιν] and that she was not allowed to study literature freely caused her anguish. Evading the attention of her mother whenever she could, she picked up the basic principles of letters from someone and soon began through her own

[29] Although there is a lack of eunuchs who have authored texts as eunuchs, there have been recent attempts to argue that famous authors were in fact eunuchs. This includes Symeon the New Theologian and Nikephoros Ouranos. See C. Messis, *Les eunuques à Byzance, entre réalité et imaginaire* (Paris, 2014), pp. 144–8; Tougher, *The Eunuch in Byzantine History and Society*, pp. 111–12; M. Masterson, 'Nikephoros Ouranos, Eunuchism, and Masculinity during the Reign of Emperor Basil II', *Byzantion*, 89 (2019), pp. 397–419.

[30] For female education, see Kaldellis, *Byzantine Family*, pp. 20–1; A. Laiou, 'The Role of Women in Byzantine Society', *JÖB*, 31:1 (1981), pp. 233–60, at pp 253–7; K. Nikolaou, *Η γυναίκα στη Μέση Βυζαντινή εποχή. Κοινωνικά πρότυπα και καθημερινός βίος στα αγιολογικά κείμενα* (Athens, 2005), pp. 185–213.

[31] For example, Tornikes' funeral oration for Anna Komnene relates how she had to acquire her learning secretly and against her parents' wishes. See Neville, *Anna Komnene*, p. 34.

[32] Psellos, *Encomium of his Mother*, Section [2] (c), trans. in Kaldellis, *Byzantine Family*, p. 54; Criscuolo, *Encomio per la madre*, p. 88.

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> efforts to join them together and to form syllables and sentences, without having any need for an instructor in the basics.[33]

The implication of the foregoing passage is that it was exactly because Theodote was not a man that she was not allowed to study.[34] Although Psellos praised his mother's efforts, ultimately he did not advocate for widening participation – this despite the fact that, later on in her encomium, he is happy to relate her views on the equality of the sexes when it comes to *logos*: 'if the two sexes (ἀμφοῖν τοῖν γενοῖν) differ in the tenor of their bodies, nevertheless they possess reason (ὁ λόγος) equally and indistinguishably'.[35] Whether or not he agreed with this statement, Psellos compared Theodote only with other women when it came to her mind:

> there is not a single mortal woman who could compete with her, for I exclude those only who are reputed to be immortal. Who had a more ready mind [γνώμην] than her or a more graceful character [ἦθος], and who a more steady ability to reason [λογισμόν] or a greater discerning sense in both speech [τῶν λαλουμένων] and action?[36]

By contrast, when he described his mother's piety, which manifested itself in her worship of God and her asceticism, he declared her superior to both men and women:

> O, for one who knew nothing feminine, except what was decreed by nature, but had been made in all other respects strong [ῥωσθεῖσα] and manly [ἀρρενωθεῖσα] in soul and even showed herself to be more resilient than the other portion of our species, prevailing over all men and women, over the latter by her incomparability, and over the former by her superiority![37]

[33] Psellos, *Encomium of his Mother*, Section [3] (b), trans. in Kaldellis, *Byzantine Family*, p. 55; Criscuolo, *Encomio per la madre*, p. 90.

[34] For an interesting alternative reading, see Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*, p. 115.

[35] Psellos, *Encomium of his Mother*, Section [25] (b), trans. in Kaldellis, *Byzantine Family*, p. 96; Criscuolo, *Encomio per la madre*, p. 141. Elsewhere, Psellos acknowledged that a speech that is too elevated, with 'a more sophisticated tone', is not suitable for women, unless special circumstances apply. See his comments on the way in which Charikleia from Heliodoros' *Ethiopian Tale* does not speak 'in a womanly or feminine way' in A. Littlewood, 'A Comparison of the Novels of Heliodoros and Achilleus Tatios: Translated with Introduction and Notes', in *Michael Psellos on Literature and Art*, ed. C. Barber and S. Papaioannou (South Bend, IN, 2017), pp. 186–92, at pp. 189–90.

[36] Psellos, *Encomium of his Mother*, Section [7] (a), trans. in Kaldellis, *Byzantine Family*, p. 63; Criscuolo, *Encomio per la madre*, p. 99.

[37] Psellos, *Encomium of his Mother*, Section [7] (b), trans. in Kaldellis, *Byzantine Family*, p. 64; Criscuolo, *Encomio per la madre*, p. 99. Similarly, towards the end of the encomium, in Section [25] (d), we read 'she became a model for both kinds of life to all men and women'.

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Despite her 'manly' soul and her early efforts, Theodote did not manage to get very far with her education. Her main contribution was in promoting the education of her son.[38] In fact, once she turned to more religious interests, Psellos no longer presented her as particularly eager to learn. When, now a bit older, he came back from school full of stories, his mother only 'pretended to listen with pleasure' (προσεποιοῦ ἡδέως ἀκούειν) when he talked about his lessons.[39]

If we now turn to Psellos' daughter, Styliane, we can see that although she had more access to education than her grandmother, she still had to prove that she could do it all, and that learning was not impeding her from developing the skills she needed as a woman.[40] Psellos emphasised this by asking and answering the following question: 'But can one say that she was naturally inclined to learn the rudiments of a literary education, but found it difficult to master the techniques of weaving? One could not say this either.' Not only were the two activities in competition, but only one of them was, properly speaking, 'women's work':

> She herself ordered the times of each day in the most prudent manner, setting aside one portion for education [παιδείας] and another for weaving, while occupying herself with both. So at one time she would be learning her letters and at another she would be performing the women's work [γυναικῶν ἔργα] and the careful labours of the loom.[41]

While Styliane seems to have achieved a perfect balance, there is little doubt that, if time were short, priority would be given not to 'the rudiments of literary education' but to the 'labours of the loom', which were more appropriate for women.

Metaphors of Physical Prowess

Another way in which Psellos associated learning with masculinity was through metaphors of bodily exertion. In the encomium of his mother, he began a section focusing on the role that she played in his education with

[38] On the involvement of mothers in the education of their sons, see also J. Herrin, 'L'enseignement maternel à Byzance', in *Femmes et pouvoirs des femmes à Byzance et en Occident* (VIe–Xe siècles), ed. J.-M. Sansterre, R. Le Jean, A. Dierkens and S. Lebecq (Lille, 1999), pp. 91–102.

[39] Psellos, *Encomium of his Mother*, Section [10], trans. in Kaldellis, *Byzantine Family*, p. 68; Criscuolo, *Encomio per la madre*, p. 105.

[40] On this oration, see also G. Vergari, 'Sull' epitafio pselliano per la figlia Stiliana', *Studi di filologia bizantina*, 3 (1985), pp. 69–76.

[41] Psellos, *Funeral Oration for his Daughter*, Section [10], trans. in Kaldellis, *Byzantine Family*, p. 122; Sathas, *Μεσαιωνική Βιβλιοθήκη*, p. 66.

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a *topos* of modesty in which he declared himself bound to be 'defeated by [his] adversary just like an inexperienced wrestler (παλαιστής)'. The battle was between Psellos, the author, and his topic of writing: the virtues of his mother, which, being 'beyond measure', made the task of praising her adequately near impossible.[42] The same image was used to describe young Psellos' striving for learning: 'As though I were competing in a wrestling match (πάλαισμα), you evaluated me when I expounded the verses, stood by my side and defended me just as if we were in a battle line (συνήσπιζες).'[43] Here, Theodote too seems to have been involved in the fighting, but, as Psellos quickly clarified, her help came in the form of intercessions, matching the more traditional role of women and clergymen in the context of battles: 'striking your chests with clenched fist – for this was your way in prayer – you would draw from above the definitive solution to my difficulties'.[44] Her role was to assure for him God's help; his role was to fight the heroic fight, which in this case involved learning to read, going over his lessons and 'hunting down any aspect of it that was difficult to hunt down' (θηρώμενος εἴ τι τούτου δυσθήρατον).[45] The battle theme continues in this paragraph through references to Homer's *Iliad*. Psellos cast his mother in the role of Athena, the goddess of wisdom, and himself in that of a Greek hero: 'you would lie on the same bed and inspire me with "might and courage," more than "Athena inspired Diomedes"'.[46] Psellos employed Homeric quotations as he associated learning with the heroic values of the Homeric world, and showed off his learning by rehearsing the lessons he had learnt.

He also used the same kind of metaphors in his funeral orations for the patriarchs. For example, in the oration for Leichoudes he talked about education as a form of athletic contest:

> when the first fuzz of his facial hair began to sprout, the others, who had long beards and heads turned silver by the abundance of grey hairs, were all

[42] Psellos, *Encomium of his Mother*, Section [10], trans. in Kaldellis, *Byzantine Family*, p. 68; Criscuolo, *Encomio per la madre*, p. 105.

[43] Psellos, *Encomium of his Mother*, Section [10] (b), trans. in Kaldellis, *Byzantine Family*, p. 69; Criscuolo, *Encomio per la madre*, p. 105.

[44] Psellos, *Encomium of his Mother*, Section [10] (b), trans. in Kaldellis, *Byzantine Family*, p. 69; Criscuolo, *Encomio per la madre*, p. 106. For an example of the perceived importance of clerical intercessions for the outcome of battles, see K. Karapli, 'Η ἀκολουθία ἐπὶ κατευοδώσει καὶ συμμαχίᾳ στρατοῦ', *Βυζαντιακά*, 16 (1996), pp. 69–88.

[45] Or 'tracking down an elusive element of them', in Psellos, *Encomium of his Mother*, Section [10] (b), trans. in Kaldellis, *Byzantine Family*, p. 69; Criscuolo, *Encomio per la madre*, p. 105.

[46] Reference to *Iliad* 5.1–2 from Psellos, *Encomium of his Mother*, Section [10] (b), trans. in Kaldellis, *Byzantine Family*, p. 69; Criscuolo, *Encomio per la madre*, p. 105.

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> defeated by this child. When they joined the greatest contest [ἀγών] and the time came for the race [δρόμου] and the wresting [πάλης] with words, they entered the ring with broad chests and wide shoulders.[47]

Although we are talking about intellectual achievements, these are very much conceptualised in a physical way. Leichoudes too is said to have bravely wrestled and defeated his opponents, despite the differences in age and bodily strength. Later on, when referring to the effect that Leichoudes had on those who listened to him, Psellos continued: 'no one could say that he had vanquished the auxiliary troops, but not Hektor'.[48] Similarly, he described two other scholars and friends devoted to the same studies as 'spear-bearing warriors' (αἰχμητά).[49] Such images of war – and Leichoudes' oration is replete with them – have been repurposed to describe learning as a type of fighting. The fact that they often refer to the *Iliad* and its heroic warriors further reinforces the links between learning and violence. In the process, Psellos casts learning as a manly thing through an association with other manly activities, such as athletic exercise and warfare.

These kinds of metaphors were not unique to scholars but were commonly used for ecclesiastics. For example, in his oration for Keroularios, Psellos employed the image of the athlete:

> But as it was predestined for him to become a perfect athlete [ἀθλητήν] and a martyr, albeit without shedding his blood, God delivered him to the temptations of the Evil One, who had asked for him to be tested, like the great athlete [ἀγωνιστήν] Job.[50]

The metaphor of religious fighting had a long history in both the East and the West, and could involve physical exertions in the form of asceticism and spiritual battles against demons, both associated with masculine self-control and mastery.[51] Given that religious men were prohibited from participating in warfare, these re-imaginings played an important role, allowing them to partake of the wider ideal of physical prowess without compromising their religious status. Similar access could be afforded even to women, with a radical example coming from the *Life* of Mary the Younger, a lay woman and a housewife. The 'arena of virtue', her hagiographer tells us, 'is open to women no less than to men, and God the prize-giver generously grants the rewards and victory crowns to both sexes

[47] Kaldellis and Polemis, *Psellos and the Patriarchs*, pp. 134–5; Polemis, *Orationes Funebres*, pp. 85–6.
[48] Kaldellis and Polemis, *Psellos and the Patriarchs*, p. 136; Polemis, *Orationes Funebres*, p. 87.
[49] Kaldellis and Polemis, *Psellos and the Patriarchs*, p. 136; Polemis, *Orationes Funebres*, p. 87.
[50] Kaldellis and Polemis, *Psellos and the Patriarchs*, pp. 60–1; Polemis, *Orationes Funebres*, p. 10.
[51] See more on this in Chapter 5.

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equally'. These metaphors appear to level the playing field between the sexes, while at the same time maintaining the original association with masculinity. Indeed, Mary's hagiographer prefaced his metaphor with the reminder that 'only men are called to compete in *secular* contests and prove their bodily strength'.[52]

In the examples quoted earlier, Psellos repurposes these images for the benefit of the scholar. Of course, many scholars who were secular men would have been able to fight – indeed, we know of generals who also left us literary writings.[53] But for those, like Psellos, who did not wish to do so, metaphors associating learning and fighting would have provided access to the same masculine ideals espoused by military men. In this way, claiming a scholarly identity could bring together men of different social and religious statuses. Yet for Psellos this did not necessarily mean a mixing of metaphors. It is striking that, in Leichoudes' case, Psellos preferred to draw a sharp line between educational and spiritual contests. The aforementioned examples came from the first part of Leichoudes' life when he was a secular man. By contrast, Psellos tells us that Leichoudes abandoned such learning contests when he entered the priesthood: 'in the time before his priesthood he yielded to (παρεχώρει) no man at all in any matter that required the use of reason, but instead to tell the truth, everyone yielded to (συγκεχωρηκός) him by far'.[54] Afterwards he both became more open to asking others about things that he did not know and 'terminated his study of all such things belonging to the life of the body', including rhetoric and law, focusing now 'solely on the spiritual life'. The picture is further complicated, however, by the fact that although Psellos made this distinction in Leichoudes' case, his own scholarly identity seems to have been less affected by his tonsure, as he continued to use metaphors of physical prowess to describe his intellectual achievements even after becoming a monk.

Learning versus Violence

Psellos expressed admiration for the strength of warriors and emperors. He was impressed by physical features, such as being tall and robust, as well as

[52] A. E. Laiou, 'Life of Saint Mary the Younger', in *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints' Lives in English Translation*, ed. A.-M. Talbot (Washington, DC, 1996), pp. 239–90, at p. 254 (emphasis added).

[53] See, for example, Nikephoros Ouranos (d. c. 1010), a general who composed several poems and saints' lives, in D. Krausmüller, 'Fainting Fits and their Causes: A Topos in two Middle Byzantine *Metaphraseis* by Nicetas the Paphlagonian and Nicephoros Ouranos', *Gouden Hoorn*, 9:1 (2001/02), pp. 4–12.

[54] Kaldellis and Polemis, *Psellos and the Patriarchs*, p. 155; Polemis, *Orationes Funebres*, p. 105.

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by displays of bravery in the context of fighting.[55] We read, for example, about the early reign of Emperor Michael IV (r. 1034–41), that any barbarians (βαρβάροις) who might have been foolish enough to attack would have quickly realised their error, because 'in those days his body was blooming and he faced danger in a virile way (ῥωμαλέως); it was nothing at all for him to take up arms in a moment'.[56] Yet Psellos rejected such physical exertions for himself. Even in his *Chronographia* he expressed relatively little interest in participating actively in military affairs beyond his role as an advisor, while at the same time boasting about his knowledge of military tactics. An interesting example comes from the reign of Romanos IV (r. 1068–71), towards whom Psellos appears very hostile, at least after his downfall at the battle of Manzikert. Romanos got involved in several military expeditions, despite Psellos' advice against it, and seemingly out of vanity and desire to present himself as a military leader. In the second of Romanos' expeditions, Psellos was forced to play a more active role and to join in the campaign (1069).[57] The relationship between the two men was clearly antagonistic, and Psellos claimed to have outsmarted the emperor in terms of both scientific knowledge and strategy, boasting about his expertise: 'I had made a complete study of everything pertaining to military formations, the building of war-machines, the capture of cities, and all the other things that a general has to consider.'[58] According to Psellos, this led Romanos to become envious and to try desperately to outdo him in debates.

We can see, then, that even in this most military of contexts, Psellos is showing off his superiority through his learning – his theoretical knowledge of warfare rather than his practical use of war-machines or participation in military formations. This rejection of the physical for the intellectual permeates his writing and goes a step further from the metaphors we have already seen. From learning being described in terms of physical dominance, we now move to its rejection and the embrace of a fully scholarly persona.

[55] For references to stature, see *Chronographia*, Book 1, Section 15.

[56] *Chronographia*, Book 4, Section 41: ἤνθει γὰρ τηνικαῦτα τὸ σῶμα ἐκείνῳ καὶ ῥωμαλέως εἶχε πρὸς τοὺς κινδύνους, καὶ οὐδὲν ἦν ἐκείνῳ πρᾶγμα εὐθύς τε τὰ ὅπλα λαβεῖν.

[57] *Chronographia*, Book 7 Romanos IV, Section 15: κἀγὼ τῆς στρατείας πάρεργον γίνομαι· τοσαύτην γάρ μοι ἀνάγκην τοῦ συναπαίρειν τούτῳ ἐπήνεγκεν, ὅσην οὐκ ἐνῆν ἀπώσασθαι· ('I myself took a small part in the expedition. The fact is, he put such overwhelming compulsion on me to join him on the campaign that I could not possibly refuse').

[58] *Chronographia*, Book 7 Romanos IV, Section 16: με . . . τὴν τακτικὴν ἐπιστήμην ἠκριβωκότα καὶ ὅσα περὶ λόχους καὶ τάξεις, καὶ ὅσα περὶ μηχανημάτων κατασκευὰς καὶ ἁλώσεις πόλεων, καὶ τἆλλα ὅσα στρατηγικῶν εἰσι διατάξεων.

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In Psellos' encomium of his mother, this rejection is articulated early on in the description of a dream-vision he is said to have had as a child. In this vision, little Psellos found himself to be part of a hunt (θήρα), but his role in it was not immediately clear: 'whether I too was hunting I do not know'. He seemed to have captured 'two birds of those that sing' (ὄρνιθε δύο τῶν μουσικῶν): a jay (κίττα) and a parrot (ψιττακίῳ).[59] Their identification is important because as singing birds they symbolised the verbal arts which Psellos would have been studying at the time.[60] They were above dumb animals, and indeed in the vision itself they are said to talk and to set an explicit challenge to Psellos:

> Do not seek to tyrannise over us in so human a manner [ἀνθρωπικῶς], nor seize us by force [βίᾳ]. Rule [κυρίευε] us as a master [δεσπότης], as is right by law. Let us go and then converse with us logically [λογικῶς] and dialectically. If you persuade us, thenceforward you shall rule [ἄρξαι] over us.[61]

And that is exactly what Psellos went on to do. After an extended debate involving arguments, syllogisms and counter-positions, he came out victorious. This was an important phase in young Psellos' life, and he claimed that through these philosophical arguments for the very first time 'the shadowy mists were lifted with which birth had clouded [his] soul'.[62] In the same way that physical hunting was viewed as a rite of passage amongst the Eastern Romans, this different type of hunting marked out a step in Psellos' growth from boy into man into scholar. In contrast to the metaphors that we saw in the previous section, Psellos here goes the extra step and emphasises the superiority of the type of manhood he has chosen for himself. It is his type of hunting that can allow him to 'rule as a master' over nature.

We also see Psellos' disregard for physical dominance in one of the letters he addressed, in his capacity of *kharistikarios*, to his former student Pothos (KD 38), the *krites* of the theme where one of Psellos' monasteries, the

[59] Psellos, *Encomium of his Mother*, Section [6] (c) trans. in Kaldellis, *Byzantine Family*, p. 62; Criscuolo, *Encomio per la madre*, p. 98. On parrots, see also I. Spatharakis, *The Illustrations of the Cynegetica in Venice, Codex Marcianus Graecus Z 139* (Leiden, 2004), pp. 100–1, and M. Leontsine, 'Οικόσιτα, ωδικά και εξωτικά πτηνά. Αισθητική πρόσληψη και χρηστικές όψεις (7ος-11ος αι.)', in *Animals and Environment in Byzantium (7th–12th c.)*, ed. I. Anagnostakis, T. G. Kolias and E. Papadopoulou (Athens, 2011), pp. 285–317, at pp. 295–7, 298–300 which also discusses other birds associated with rhetoric and speech.

[60] For this argument and this vision more generally, see Walker, 'These Things I Have Not Betrayed', p. 91.

[61] Psellos, *Encomium of his Mother*, Section [6] (c) trans. in Kaldellis, *Byzantine Family*, p. 62; Criscuolo, *Encomio per la madre*, p. 98. For the gendered meanings of κύριος/κυριεύω, see Chapter 3.

[62] Psellos, *Encomium of his Mother*, Section [6] (d) trans. in Kaldellis, *Byzantine Family*, p. 63; Criscuolo, *Encomio per la madre*, p. 98.

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Trapeza, must have been located.[63] From the beginning of the letter, Psellos set up Pothos as a man in a position of authority who decides the fate of others, while he described himself as a philosopher who sits above the mundane things of everyday life ('But I know how to be a philosopher, sitting even above the clouds').[64] Despite Psellos' philosophical disposition, he had to do something he considered to be deeply unphilosophical: pay the tax that his ex-student required from his monastery ('But as for making a philosophical man subject to the tax – by Herakles, what a transgression!').[65] This payment was called the 'mule' (τὴν ἡμίονον), and, taking this name as a starting point, Psellos constructed an elaborate metaphor.

In this metaphor, the *krites* is transformed into a camp commander and a spear bearer, in charge of determining other men's contributions in battle. This includes Psellos, whom he could place in a subordinate position, leading him out on a horse or having him as one of the shield bearers of the phalanx, or to whom he could give the position of a new Nestor, having him march alongside him, taking his counsel. Psellos seems in this metaphor to be equating the subordinate military position with the payment of taxes, and the leadership position with his role as a teacher, in which he offered a different, non-monetary contribution. In the end, he states that if Pothos does not want to use him for counsel, he can take away his horse – a reference to an equid that takes the reader back to the question of the 'mule' payment.

What is of particular interest here is that in creating this elaborate metaphor, Psellos is happy to admit that he is incompetent with spear and bow, and useless on horseback, rejecting masculinity based on physical prowess:

> But I have become able [δεδύνημαι] neither to throw javelins nor to shoot accurately, but rather the horse upsets me terribly by whirling its shoulders on either side and making a wave out of its neck and often also pulling down on the bit. So, are you not scared that I might be seen to be a bad hoplite and I might rip apart the phalanx or, having thrown my shield over my back, drag many men behind me into flight? I testify to you that I do not fit in order in a phalanx and I do not know how the shield-wall is bound together, except in so far as I know the following from having heard it in passing from Homer when he draws up the battle formation of the Greeks: that the phalanx should be drawn up by phratries and tribes.[66]

[63] Papaioannou, *Epistulae*, pp. 577–8. See also Jeffreys, 'Summaries', p. 185.

[64] Papaioannou, *Epistulae*, pp. 578: Ἀλλ' ἐγὼ οἶδα φιλοσοφεῖν καὶ ὑπερκαθήμενος τῶν νεφῶν.

[65] Papaioannou, *Epistulae*, p. 578: Τὸ δὲ καὶ φιλόσοφον ἄνδρα ὑποτελῆ τῷ φόρῳ ποιεῖν; Ἡράκλεις, τοῦ ἀνομήματος!

[66] Papaioannou, *Epistulae*, p. 578: Ἀλλ' ἐγὼ οὔτε ἀκοντίζειν δεδύνημαι οὔτε εὔστοχα βάλλειν, ἀλλά με ὁ ἵππος, ἑκατέρωθεν τοὺς ὤμους δινῶν, καὶ τὸν αὐχένα ὑποκυμαίνων, πολλάκις δὲ καὶ τὸν χαλινὸν

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The use of the perfect for 'I have become able' (δεδύνημαι) is important. It is not simply that Psellos is not able to engage in physical military activities, he is not the kind of man who has learnt to do so at a previous stage in his life. When it comes to the javelin, we could say that Psellos 'throws like a girl'.[67] He has not trained his body to make full use of its spatial potentiality in the manner of military men, nor does he have the same relationship with horses that he describes with reference to many emperors in his *Chronographia*. There the horse often appears in perfect harmony with the rider as a natural continuation of the emperor's body.[68] Psellos, by contrast, has not developed the right posture, the right muscles that would know instinctively how to deal with the horse's whirling of the shoulders and waving of the neck. In this sense, his sheltered scholarly life means that his embodied experience of throwing the javelin is closer to that of women than to that of battle-worn warriors. Instead, what makes Psellos a leader is his erudition, his knowledge of Homer, his role as a teacher. In this capacity, as a new Nestor he is eager to 'march alongside' Pothos and to 'take the lead of the army'. It is his intellectual prowess that is his most valuable masculine characteristic, and he is so confident in its power that he is happy to admit his lack of physical prowess.[69]

ὑφελκόμενος, ταράττει δεινῶς. Οὐ φοβῇ γοῦν μὴ κακὸς ὀφθείην ὁπλίτης, καὶ διασπάσω τὴν φάλαγγα, ἢ μετὰ νῶτα βαλὼν πολλοὺς κατόπιν εἰς τὴν φυγὴν ἐφελκύσωμαι; διαμαρτύρομαι γάρ σοι ὅτι ἀσύντακτός εἰμι φάλαγγι, καὶ οὐκ οἶδα ὅτῳ τρόπῳ συνδέδεται ὁ συνασπισμός, πλὴν ὅσον Ὁμήρου διακούσας τὴν τῶν Ἑλλήνων τάττοντος στρατιὰν τοσοῦτον οἶδα, ὅτι δεῖ τὴν φάλαγγα τάττεσθαι «κατὰ φρήτρας τε καὶ φῦλα».

[67] I. M. Young, 'Throwing like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality', *Human Studies*, 3:2 (1980), pp. 137–56. See also A. Fausto-Sterling, 'Gender/Sex, Sexual Orientation, and Identity Are in the Body: How Did They Get There?', *The Journal of Sex Research*, 56:4–5 (2019), pp. 529–55, at p. 533: 'as children and even as adults, we can choose consciously from among the many cultural features of gender to embed new bodily habits into our sensorimotor (neuromuscular) system. Even without conscious choice, however, many cultural features of gender shape how our bodies function.'

[68] See, for example, what Psellos writes about Emperor Basileios II in *Chronographia*, Book 1, Section 36: καὶ τόν τε χαλινὸν τῷ ἵππῳ διδοὺς καὶ ἐπιρράσσων, ὄρθιος καὶ ἀκλινὴς ἦν κατά τε πρανῶν ὁμοίως καὶ κατ' ὀρθίων φερόμενος, αὖθίς τε ἀνείργων καὶ ἀνασειράζων τὸν ἵππον ὑψοῦ ἥλλετο οἷον ἐπτερωμένος . . . ('When he gave rein to his horse and dashed to attack, he was upright in his saddle and unswerving, whether he was riding uphill or downhill. Similarly, when he restrained his horse and reined it in, he would leap on high as if he had wings . . . ').

[69] The reference to Nestor has the double effect of associating Psellos with a celebrated hero of the *Iliad* and reminding Pothos of the lessons he taught him as a teacher and of the authority he wielded over him.

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Hegemonic Masculinity and Masculine Capital

What can all this tell us about Eastern Roman masculinity more generally? I will approach this question by making use of two related concepts: hegemonic masculinity and masculine capital.

Hegemonic masculinity was defined by Connell as an idealised type of masculinity that does not necessarily correspond to the actual personalities of most men, but which sustains their power and motivates them to lend their support to the maintenance of its hegemony.[70] It is relational as well as historically specific: 'hegemonic masculinity is constructed in relation to women and to subordinated masculinities', and these relations change through time.[71] But even at a given point, what counts as hegemonic masculinity cannot be neatly summarised as a list of characteristics because of its situational nature. Even if we assume, for example, physical strength as part of hegemonic masculinity at a global level, its power will not necessarily be the same in the military camp, the imperial palace, or the schoolroom. Although some characteristics appear to be more 'trans-situationally durable', what counts as hegemonic masculinity at any given time can vary in different social contexts or social 'fields'.[72] This is important to keep in mind as we try to evaluate what constitutes masculine, effeminate, or feminine behaviour and characteristics.

What is more, men do not need to engage in all masculine behaviours or only ever in masculine behaviours to be considered masculine. In the Eastern Roman context, it is possible, for example, for Psellos to describe Ioannes Doukas, a member of the imperial family, as 'weighty in soul' and 'stable in mind' (characteristics associated with masculinity) in the same breath as saying that he 'fell even into laments' when his wife was having difficulties giving birth (S 72).[73] In fact, we can think of masculine behaviours as a sort of 'masculine capital': the more a person engages in them, the more they are likely to be considered manly; and, conversely, once masculine capital has accrued from such behaviours it can be used to compensate for occasionally engaging in non-masculine behaviour (such as crying, in

[70] R. W. Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 183–8. On how this concept has been used, misused and amplified, see Messerschmidt, *Hegemonic Masculinity*.

[71] Connell, *Gender and Power*, p. 186.

[72] T. S. Bridges, 'Gender Capital and Male Bodybuilders', *Body & Society*, 15:1 (2009), pp. 83–107, at p. 92.

[73] Papaioannou, *Epistulae*, pp. 113–15. For a translation, see Papaioannou, *Rhetoric and Authorship*, p. 208.

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the aforementioned example).[74] It is such dynamics that allow for hegemonic masculinity to shift with time.

Thinking about the Eastern Roman context, and focusing specifically on the discussion in the first part of this chapter, it is possible to argue that education and learning were a form of 'masculine capital': they were associated with important milestones on the way to manhood and often excluded women, or were available to them as a sort of concession; they were also associated metaphorically with other manly activities, such as wrestling and hunting, which they mirrored or even surpassed. Given Psellos' success and the respect in which he seems to have been held by many of his contemporaries, it is also very likely that, within the field of his literary circle, his brand of masculinity, which exalted learning and rejected violence, was hegemonic.[75] If Psellos had been behaving in a way that blatantly transgressed intelligible gender, he would not have been embraced and promoted, but rejected and denounced. This is not to rule out that he occasionally pushed the gender boundaries, but he must have had enough masculine capital to do so. What is harder to argue is to what extent this type of scholarly masculinity was hegemonic at the global level. How transferable from the palace to the camp was the clout from Psellos' intimate knowledge of textbooks of strategy? Were warriors on the battlefield likely to consider masculine a man who could recite Homer but possessed no fighting skills?

On the other hand, we have here more evidence to argue that displays of physical strength, competitiveness and bodily dominance were part of hegemonic masculinity. Not only do we have examples of related types of bodies and behaviours being praised explicitly as 'virile', but it is also with reference to them that other types of activities, such as learning and asceticism, are described in metaphors. When a scholar 'wrestled' with his reading or a monk 'battled' with the demons, they implicitly expressed and

[74] For the concept of 'masculine capital' as defined here, see R. O. de Visser and E. J. McDonnell, '"Man Points": Masculine Capital and Young Men's Health', *Health Psychology*, 32 (2013), pp. 5–14. For the origins of this concept as part of the study of women and gender, see K. Huppatz, 'Reworking Bourdieu's "Capital": Feminine and Female Capitals in the Field of Paid Caring Work', *Sociology*, 43:1 (2009), pp. 45–66; K. Huppatz and S. Goodwin, 'Masculinised Jobs, Feminised Jobs and Men's "Gender Capital" Experiences: Understanding Occupational Segregation in Australia', *Journal of Sociology*, 49:2–3 (2013), pp. 291–308, at pp. 294–8. For its origins in the context of class, see P. Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital', in *Handbook of a Theory of Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J. E. Richardson and trans. R. Nice (New York, 1986), pp. 241–58.

[75] As Bridges reminds us, 'we do not exalt hegemonic masculinities because they are hegemonic; they are hegemonic because we exalt them'. See Bridges, 'Gender Capital and Male Bodybuilders', p. 91.

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maintained the ascendancy of physical as well as intellectual or spiritual prowess. The former seems to be more 'trans-situationally durable'.

What is more, emphasising these physical masculine characteristics contributed to the 'legitimation of unequal gender relations between men and women, between masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities', a key characteristic of hegemonic masculinity.[76] This is most obvious at the literal level: the original image of the masculine wrestler or fighter excluded women based on the assumption of bodily difference between them and men, and placed men in a position of superiority. The metaphorical uses of these images were more subversive. Psellos' scholarly athletes were all men, but they were not the men you would initially expect; this broader categorisation challenged the relationship between different types of masculinities. In the case of the religious, the challenge was even more pronounced: spiritual fighting allowed for the inclusion of the monk and the cleric, but also of the ascetic housewife, alongside the battle-hardened warrior. Yet the very reference to an image that was explicitly gendered masculine means that we are dealing with a sensitive balance: the metaphors work only because physical fighting, competitiveness and dominance were considered desirable male traits which were assumed to be inaccessible to women; at the same time as subverting hegemonic masculinity through their expansions and shifts, these metaphors relied on it for their success. They worked within the existing system to redefine it.

Keeping these ideas in mind, in the last section of this chapter I will revisit two of Psellos' most discussed letters in relation to gender, focusing on his expression of emotions.[77]

Learning, Masculine Capital and Emotions

As Papaioannou shows, many of Psellos' letters that appear to push the gender boundaries have their roots in the writings of Gregorios of Nazianzos. In one specific parallel in which both Psellos and Gregorios engage with the image of the 'fecund philosopher', Papaioannou notes a difference between them: 'Gregory portrays himself as "father" as well as "mother"' and 'Gregory's "maternity" is enveloped within a portrait of masculinity', while 'Psellos does not situate himself in the positions of

[76] Messerschmidt, *Hegemonic Masculinity*, p. 28.
[77] For a discussion of these letters, see Papaioannou, 'Michael Psellos' Rhetorical Gender', pp. 133–46, as well as chapter 6: 'Female Voice: Gender and Emotion' in Papaioannou, *Rhetoric and Authorship*, pp. 192–231. See also Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*, pp. 89–120.

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traditional authority'.[78] Although this is not one of the two letters I will be focusing on in this section, I mention this argument because it fits with my own. Papaioannou claims that it is possible for Gregorios to use the image of the mother without overly effeminising himself because he uses the image of the father in the same context. I argue that this is a strategy also used by Psellos in some of the letters that are more controversial in terms of his gender. By flaunting his education (among other strategies), Psellos accrues enough masculine capital to allow himself to incorporate emotional expressions characterised as feminine. At the same time, he masculinises these emotions by associating them with the philosophical life. Thus, he presents a challenge to the hegemonic ideal that it was primarily women who experienced and expressed strong feelings. In both cases, the role of education and learning is key.

The first letter under consideration was written in the mid-1070s and dealt with the birth of a son to Psellos' friend Konstantinos, nephew of Patriarch Keroularios.[79] Psellos strongly expressed in it his own experience and emotions about the birth of the children of his adopted daughter. He appears so affected that he finds himself becoming a baby all over again. For example:

> And the songs of the wet-nurse captured and enchanted me more than the Orphic songs or those of the Sirens. When she was about to swaddle and wrap the baby, securing its hands while fashioning gently the cloth around its head, holding and enveloping the entire body, I was shaken as if I was the one being wrapped, and I almost suffered the same thing as the infant.
>
> Now if this pertains to a feminine soul, I do not really know [Καὶ εἰ μὲν θηλείας τοῦτο ψυχῆς, οὐ πάνυ τι οἶδα]; at all events, my character has been stamped in this way all along, and my nature, just like a bit of wax that is soft and easily stamped, both retains the finest kinds of learning and is impressed by the charm of those who are dearest.[80]

Commenting on this, Papaioannou notes that 'Psellos, through his own projected *paideia*, identifies with the figure of the young child, and, through his softness, assumes the features of a fragile and impressionable creature, even, as he says, of a "feminine soul".'[81] Papaioannou rightly mentions the importance of *paideia*, but does not fully appreciate its

[78] Papaioannou, *Rhetoric and Authorship*, pp. 229–30.
[79] Papaioannou, *Epistulae*, pp. 332–7. It has been fully translated in Papaioannou, *Rhetoric and Authorship*, pp. 195–9.
[80] Papaioannou, *Rhetoric and Authorship*, p. 198; Papaioannou, *Epistulae*, p. 334.
[81] Papaioannou, *Rhetoric and Authorship*, p. 200. See also p. 206 where he adds that this admission of having a 'feminine soul' is 'made somewhat hesitantly' in this letter.

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association with masculinity, and more generally downplays Psellos' masculine presentation in the rest of the letter. Just focusing on this quotation, we can already draw attention to the mention of Psellos' soul retaining 'the finest kinds of learning' and its juxtaposition with his emotional openness; this is not accidental. It is there, along with the classical references to 'the Orphic songs or those of the Sirens', to maintain the balance, to remind the reader of Psellos' primary masculine characteristic before admitting to a more feminine aspect of his character.

We can also find in this letter an example of Psellos' attempts to explain his feminine affect as part of his philosophical disposition, bringing it, in the process, into the realm of the masculine:

> I want to be a philosopher in everything, in both words and actions. But my character convicts me of being disposed unphilosophically with respect to the natural emotions – or perhaps this is philosophical too: since to be otherwise is characteristic of Skythians.[82]

The 'philosopher' is an important image that comes up again and again in Psellos' writings. Although this deserves further study, I want to bring in here Bernard's understanding of this word in Psellos' letters, which agrees with my own: 'the label "philosopher" is to this polymath a title of prestige, conferring an immense symbolic capital, without necessary [sic] implying a method of thinking or research, not even an involvement with existing philosophical texts'.[83] Indeed, Psellos exploits the term's ambiguity and multivalence, using it to refer both to Christian philosophy (i.e. monasticism) and to pagan philosophy – with extra connotations of learning.[84] As we have seen, the self-control that stemmed from the fights of the learned philosopher or the ascetic religious man could confer masculine capital. Psellos uses this here to shift what we know about emotions.

[82] Papaioannou, *Rhetoric and Authorship*, p. 197; Papaioannou, *Epistulae*, p. 333.

[83] F. Bernard, 'Michael Psellos', in *A Companion to Byzantine Epistolography*, ed. A. Riehle (Leiden, 2020), pp. 125–45, at p. 140. On Psellos' ideas about the perfect mixture of philosophy and rhetoric, see S. Papaioannou, 'Rhetoric and the Philosopher in Byzantium', in *Essays in Byzantine Philosophy*, ed. K. Ierodiakonou and B. Bydén (Athens, 2012), pp. 171–97. On the concept of the philosopher according to Theodoros Prodromos, see L. Spyridonova, A. Kurbanov, and O. Y. Goncharko, 'The Dialogue Xenedemos, or Voices, by Theodore Prodromos: A Critical Edition, with English Translation', *Scrinium*, 13 (2017), pp. 227–75, at p. 232.

[84] For an example of what 'philosophy' and 'to philosophise' meant for women, see S. Constantinou, 'A Byzantine Hagiographical Parody: Life of Mary the Younger', *BMGS*, 34:2 (2010), pp. 160–81, at pp. 175–7. The term could be used for women to refer to virtues including humility; lack of temper, jealousy, or arrogance; philanthropy and voluntary poverty; engagement with prayer and the meditation of divine things.

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The general view seems to have been that exhibiting emotions was unphilosophical (and therefore unmanly), but Psellos invites us to think about this harder: to have no emotions is to become like a Skythian, who, as Psellos explains elsewhere, could lose fifty sons without expressing the kind of feelings that most commonly arise among his compatriots.[85] The comparison with foreign ethnic groups is telling and recurrent in this context. In the same letter, Psellos also brings up the Persians. While the Skythians were too insensitive to care about their new-born infants, the Persians were oversensitive and refused to embrace them or even see them shortly after their birth, because they feared that if the children then happened to die, they would not be able to cope with their grief. These two extremes led the Skythians and the Persians to the same behaviour: not engaging emotionally with their new-born infants in the same way Psellos did. Surely the reader knew better than to think that the behaviour of a Skythian or a Persian was preferable or more philosophical than that of Psellos. Such comparisons, along with plentiful mentions of philosophy, show that Psellos was portraying his emotions in a much more masculine way than it initially appears.

Indeed, another group that Psellos compares himself with are 'the so-called steely types, whether mountain people or still higher in mid-air'.[86] This is a reference to people such as Michael Keroularios, whom Psellos has accused elsewhere of being too harsh and uncompromising.[87] The contrast with philosophers is spelled out:

> But if they are hard in character from earliest birth, and their will has been resisting impression since they were born, then these people neither pursued philosophy nor even improvise it; indeed, they should not even be called 'philosophers', but rather stony and hardened men.[88]

It would seem that we have here our answer to the profession of doubt that Psellos started with: 'Now if this pertains to a feminine soul, I do not really know'; it does not. To display emotions in the way that Psellos did is to be a philosopher, and to be a philosopher is to be manly. By maintaining this association, while questioning the real meaning of the philosophical life, Psellos can gently reshape the boundaries of acceptable masculine behaviour.

[85] Kaldellis and Polemis, *Psellos and the Patriarchs*, p. 68.
[86] Papaioannou, *Rhetoric and Authorship*, p. 198; Papaioannou, *Epistulae*, pp. 334–5.
[87] See, for example, Psellos' letter to Keroullarios, trans. in Kaldellis and Polemis, *Psellos and the Patriarchs*, p. 42; Papaioannou, *Epistulae*, p. 245.
[88] Papaioannou, *Rhetoric and Authorship*, pp. 198–9; Papaioannou, *Epistulae*, p. 335.

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Similarly, in an earlier letter to Ioannes Doukas, Psellos had recounted the birth of his own grandson (around 1060–7).[89] According to Papaioannou this is a letter in which 'Psellos is more affirmative about his novel gender'.[90] Yet, as Papaioannou admits, the letter opens with an assertion of Psellos' and the baby's masculine identities: he is 'a father-figure' and the 'prototype' for his grandson, who also finds himself at birth in an active and violent situation: 'a brave warrior, red with blood, returning from battle'.[91] The gender trouble comes in the next paragraph, and again involves a juxtaposition of Psellos' education and his emotions:

> As I profess philosophy, I should not be acquainted precisely with these things: what is the womb, what are birth or a new-born child; I should, rather, be attached only to the 'golden chain' of heaven. I do have, with regard to learning, perhaps a more masculine disposition, yet with regard to nature I am feminine [πρὸς μὲν τὰς μαθήσεις ἀρρενωπότερον ἴσως διάκειμαι, πρὸς δὲ τὴν φύσιν θῆλύς εἰμι].[92]

Similarly to his strategy in the previous letter, Psellos uses the masculine capital that he gains from his education to justify other more unconventional aspects of his presentation, with the reference to the Neoplatonic interpretation of the Homeric 'golden chain' (*Iliad* 8.18) emphasising his status as a scholar.[93] Here, too, he has recourse to the concept of the 'philosopher'. On the one hand he admits that his emotions come from his feminine nature, but on the other he exclaims, 'For I am not a Skythian in my soul, nor was I born of oak and stone.'[94] These references, which correspond directly to his discussion in the aforementioned letter, suggest that Psellos wanted his reader to think that it was not as simple as it might have appeared to determine the right behaviour for a man. Both alternatives, given here in a binary form, seem unenviable: a woman or a Skythian. As Papaioannou acknowledges, Psellos further masculinises himself at the end of the letter through a comparison with the recipient.[95] He writes to his addressee:

> You, the great one, weighty in soul, stable in mind, when your bride was having a difficult labour (as I have heard from one of your people), fell even

89 Papaioannou, *Epistulae*, pp. 113–15. 90 Papaioannou, *Rhetoric and Authorship*, p. 206.
91 Papaioannou, *Rhetoric and Authorship*, pp. 208–9.
92 Papaioannou, *Rhetoric and Authorship*, p. 208; Papaioannou, *Epistulae*, p. 114.
93 D. Jenkins, 'Michael Psellos', in *The Cambridge Intellectual History of Byzantium*, ed. A. Kaldellis and N. Siniossoglou (Cambridge, 2017), pp. 447–61, at p. 451.
94 Papaioannou, *Rhetoric and Authorship*, p. 208; Papaioannou, *Epistulae*, p. 114.
95 Papaioannou, *Rhetoric and Authorship*, p. 209: 'Psellos claims to be more philosophical and thus manlier.'

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> into laments. By contrast, I suffered deeply and passionately, yet I did not cry. Thus, I am at least more philosophical than you inasmuch as I do not shed a tear when my soul is in hardship.[96]

Psellos seems to be positing a difference between talking or writing about one's emotions and physically expressing them in the form of tears.[97] He also emphasises his recipient's masculinity, his weighty soul and stable mind, to highlight his own even more masculine response. Papaioannou stresses here a difference between the two, in that Doukas only 'temporarily becomes effeminate', while Psellos 'is declared to be feminine by nature'.[98] Although the distinction seems an interesting one at first sight, it is in fact much more complicated than the juxtaposition allows. Psellos uses the term φύσις in varied ways in his texts, but for our purposes, it is enough to note that 'nature' was not the only or the main factor in determining what constituted gender, nor was it given the same sort of meaning which we might imagine today based on juxtapositions between 'nature' and 'nurture'.[99] As Psellos explains in one of his treatises where he analyses 'How Some Become Intelligent and Others Stupid' (a treatise which also explains how unexpected genders can come about), there were three factors that affected how one's soul integrated with one's body, thus creating identity: 'education, habit and nature' (παιδείαν, ἔθος καὶ φύσιν).[100] It is not enough to simply assume that because Psellos admits to having a female 'nature' we can dismiss his other strategies for promoting his masculinity, especially when they have to do with education, which he himself posits as an important factor in the process of identity creation. Φύσις ('nature'), ἔθος ('habit') and παιδεία ('education') are all terms that deserve further study in the context of gender. This chapter has taken a step in this direction, emphasising the importance of representations of learning and education as masculinising strategies.

[96] Papaioannou, *Rhetoric and Authorship*, p. 208; Papaioannou, *Epistulae*, pp. 114–15.

[97] On tears in Byzantium, see M. Mullett, 'Do Brothers Weep? Male Grief, Mourning, Lament and Tears in Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Byzantium', in *Greek Laughter and Tears: Antiquity and After*, ed. M. Alexiou and D. Cairns (Edinburgh, 2017), pp. 312–32; 'Part II: The Gender of Grief', in S. Constantinou and M. Meyer (ed.), *Emotions and Gender in Byzantine Culture* (Cham, 2019), pp. 35–110.

[98] Papaioannou, *Rhetoric and Authorship*, p. 209.

[99] For some examples of Psellos' uses of φύσις, see Papaioannou, *Rhetoric and Authorship*, pp. 147–52.

[100] In this treatise it was trans femininity which was presented as inextricable from 'stupidity'. The treatise describes a dynamic process, which even in the case of 'nature' includes elements, such as illness, which develop throughout one's life. See D. J. O'Meara (ed.), *Michaelis Pselli Philosophica Minora*, vol. 2 (Leipzig, 1989), p. 90: τριττὰ οὖν εἴδη τῆς ἐξαλλαγῆς αὐτῶν ἐγὼ θεωρῶ, παιδείαν, ἔθος καὶ φύσιν. προσθήσω δὲ καὶ τέταρτον τὰς τῶν νοσημάτων ἐμπτώσεις ἢ τὰς τῶν συμπτωμάτων ἐπιβολάς, ἃ δὴ ὡς περὶ τὴν φύσιν θεωρούμενα εἰς τὴν φύσιν καὶ αὐτὰ ὑπαχθεῖεν.

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