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The Erotic, Maternal, and Warlike Agency of Women in the Byzantine and Slavic Epic

1. Introduction

The present paper examines and historicizes the roles and levels of autonomy of women in the Byzantine romantic epic *Digenis Akritis* and related Greek and South Slavic folksongs. It is based on a study of the techniques of oral-formulaic composition and an analysis of gender-based differences in speech as they are employed in individual manuscripts of this epic. As the Byzantine romantic epic is not a part of the Western literary canon, we provide a few definitions. Byzantium is the conventional name for the medieval Eastern Roman Empire, which survived for a thousand years after the fall of the Roman Empire in the West. *Digenis Akritis*, compiled in

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1 *Digenis Akritis* (Digenes Akrites, Digenes Akritas) is preserved in six Greek manuscripts (Escorial, Grottaferrata, Trebizond, Athens, Paschalis, Oxford) in three main redactions: two medieval and one early modern. For the medieval E and G, we use the text and translation in Elizabeth Jeffreys, *Digenis Akritis: The Grottaferrata and Escorial Versions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Verses from G are cited by book and line number (1.135 refers to book 1, line 135), while verses from E, which has no book divisions, are cited by line number alone. The early Slavic translation of *Digenis Akritis*, sometimes called the *Devgenievo deianie*, is found in three manuscripts (Tikhonravov, Titov, Pogodin) and excerpts of a fourth (Musin-Pushkin) in two main redactions: medieval (RI) and early modern (RII). The translations of RI and RII are based on Jack V. Haney, “The Deeds of Devgenii,” accessed February 2, 2016, [http://nauplion.net/Devgenii-Akrit.html](http://nauplion.net/Devgenii-Akrit.html) (for RI) and Hugh F. Graham, “The Tale of Devgenij,” *Byzantinoslavica* 29 (1968): 51–91 (for RII). Passages from RI and RII are cited by folio number as follows: Tikh for RI, Pog for the first three pages of RII, and Tit for the remainder of RII. Thus, 31v in connection with RI refers to folio 31 verso of manuscript Tikhonravov.

2 The foundational study of oral-formulaic theory (Parry-Lord hypothesis) is Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*.

twelfth-century Constantinople, has been identified as “Byzantium’s only epic,” but recent scholarship has shown that it was oriented toward the romance in all stages of its Greek tradition. The akritai (sg. akritis) were the border guards of the empire: in the time in which our work is set, they guarded the frontier with the Muslim Arabs. Digenis means “of two origins” or “of two peoples/ethnicities.” Indeed, Digenis’s mother is the daughter of a Greek Christian general, and his father is a Muslim Arab Emir who converts to Christianity out of love. The work is devoted to the hero’s “warlike and amorous exploits along the lonely Byzantine border.”

Digenis Akritis, compiled from medieval ballads of Anatolian border guards, has formulaic echoes in post-medieval heroic songs, in particular the Greek Akritic and South Slavic Marko Kraljević cycles.

In recent years, gender studies on Byzantium have drawn considerable scholarly attention. In the spirit of such studies, we will argue that three female archetypes in Digenis Akritis—the girl, the mother, and the Amazon—have differing degrees and kinds of agency, largely isolated from one another. These archetypes are rooted in sociocultural reality and in myth. Of these archetypes, only the most active, the Amazon, is not entirely isolated. Despite the patriarchal context of the epic, the Amazon is able to affect the most passive archetype—the girl. Focused on contemporary questions of gender, our paper nonetheless makes use of traditional philological methodologies. We will test our thesis using the oral-formulaic theory of Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord and the discourse analysis of Ruth B. Bottigheimer. We will also introduce material from post-medieval Greek and South-Slavic oral epics for comparative purposes.

2. The Audience of Digenis Akritis

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4 Jeffreys, i.
6 Ševčenko, 21.
7 For a recent overview of the state of the field, see Garland.
Digenis Akritis, like any work of its time, contributes to cultural stability by presenting patriarchal expectations of female characters. But did it communicate these expectations to an exclusively male audience, or were women listening as well? The source material of Digenis Akritis was the oral-traditional epic of the tenth-century Byzantine border guards, which Ihor Ševčenko imagines was performed “around the campfire of the Anatolian frontier, or [in] the retainer’s room of the feudal castle.” There are many descriptions of arming and combat even in the later, literary Digenis. C. M. Bowra attributes epic detail of this sort to the fact that the “the audience knows about weapons and will listen attentively to any mention of them.” One can thus be certain that the audience of these source ballads would have been composed of professional male soldiers, to whom these descriptions appealed.

After the Battle of Manzikert in 1071, these epic songs would have migrated to the Byzantine capital along with the displaced Anatolian elites at whose castles they were once performed. Current scholarship agrees that the written Digenis Akritis was compiled in Constantinople in the twelfth century. The basic content of this compilation comes from the tenth-century ballads, but (as Roderick Beaton has shown) it has been reformed in the spirit, and using the conventions, of the romance novel. It has been hypothesized that the ancient romance had a female audience, perhaps predominantly so. Because of the hybrid, epic-romantic nature of Digenis, we argue that it too could have appealed to a broader audience that included elite women. In the twelfth century, “male rhetoricians regularly performed for audiences that included

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8 See Rowe, 209–226, esp. 210–211.
9 Ševčenko, 4.
10 Bowra, 191.
11 See Jeffreys, xvii.
13 See Hägg, 95–96.
women” at the theatron, a literary performance held “in the throne rooms or reception halls of [aristocratic] houses.” It is easy to imagine a version of Digenis such as the highly romanticized Grottaferrata text performed in front of a mixed audience at the theatron.

The Slavic translation of Digenis was produced in fourteenth-century Macedonia, according to the most convincing theories. Macedonia was the southernmost part of the Empire of Serbia and Romania of Stefan Dušan (1346–1355) and his son Stefan Uroš V (1355–1371). This empire was of mixed Slavic and Greek population, and Macedonia, today partitioned between Greece and the FYROM, was thoroughly bilingual and bicultural. The Slavic Digenis ignores much of its source’s romantic content, as the medieval revival of the Greek romance was limited to Constantinople and never reached the borderlands. But as the entire South Slavic area had a living epic tradition, the translation is marked by a greatly amplified epic style.

What was the milieu of this translation, and who was its audience? We propose that the Slavic Digenis was produced at a bilingual Macedonian court. Courts in Dušan’s empire regularly produced official documents in both Greek and Slavic and therefore must have served as a gathering place for educated bilinguals. The presence in the text of a number of untranslated Greek words for luxury items further points to such a setting. We also hypothesize that the Slavic Digenis could have reached a mixed male-female audience, for among these educated bilinguals

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14 Neville, 30.
15 Pypin believed that the translation was Bulgarian, perhaps of the thirteenth century; Speranskii made the case for translation in Kievan Rus, no later than the thirteenth century; while Vaillant argues convincingly that it was produced in fourteenth-century Macedonia. See Graham, 52, 65–66, 69.
16 See Ševčenko, 16.
at court were elite women such as Milica Hrebeljanović, née Nemanjić (in holy orders Jevgenija) and Jelena Mrnjavčević (in holy orders Jefimija).  

The Slavic *Digenis* would have been experienced in one of two ways: as oral performance or individual reading. Unique to episodes of the Slavic *Digenis* are short, prayerful postscripts known as *doxologies*, which suggest reading aloud (RI 33v, 16, 19). They would seem to challenge our hypothesis of a mixed audience, as they address only “brothers” (RI, 16). In all likelihood, the doxologies were added later in a monastery where the text was copied. One might also entertain the possibility that they were added at a Serbian court. The second doxology states that *Digenis* “was made famous throughout all the world with the aid of our Lord Jesus Christ” (RI, 16). Fame and glory would more likely be valued by aristocrats at court than by monks at a monastery. Moreover, it is possible that female elites were simply subsumed into this male audience. Ultimately, it is impossible to come to a definitive conclusion, and we leave open our hypothesis of a mixed audience for the Slavic *Digenis*.

3. Comparative Material

Along with comparing manuscripts of our romantic epic, we make use of comparative material from ballads. *Digenis Akritis* and later Greek ballads, in particular the Akritic cycle, share the same oral-formulaic material. Each episode of *Digenis* probably corresponds to a separate tenth-century ballad, while the later ballads, in turn, employ themes that make up episodes of *Digenis*. For example, the theme of a hero defeating a whole army can be found in “The Lay of Armouris.” Despite being the transcription of an oral song rather than a written text, “The Lay of Armouris” contains all the elements of the theme.

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18 See Gavrilović, 72–90.
We also introduce South Slavic comparative material in the form of the Marko Kraljević cycle of folksongs.\(^{19}\) We have located many themes from the Marko cycle in both Slavic versions, if not in the Greek as well. These themes include “description of a hero” (The Sister of Leka Kapetan), “girl hidden away in a fabulous setting” (The Sister of Leka Kapetan), and “bride stealing/gate crashing” (Marko and the Moor, The Marriage of Djuro). It is disputed where the first Slavic version was translated from the Greek; however, the number of shared themes between the Slavic manuscripts and the Marko songs is striking and illustrates the significant connections between the two. This overlap is further evidence for the theory that the Slavic Digenis was compiled in the South Slavic area (Macedonia).

4. Methodology and Characters

Three female archetypes, each with specific characteristics, societal roles, and varying levels of agency, interact in Digenis: the girl, the mother, and the Amazon Maximou.\(^{20}\) Without a name or identity, the girl has the least amount of agency throughout the work. Nameless young women identified simply as “the girl” are characterized mainly by their beauty and are consequently given a limited amount of erotic agency over men. Mothers throughout the work are given more autonomy than girls, as they command their children to perform tasks and are generally feared. The Amazon is unlike any other female character in Digenis and is therefore granted a name: Maximou. She is the model of the warrior woman, “the opposite of female domesticity”: she has personality traits, she can command men, and she is portrayed in a similar fashion to that of the male hero.\(^{21}\)

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\(^{19}\) See Low. We discuss two ballads specifically in this paper: “The Sister of Leka Kapetan” and “Marko and the Moor.”

\(^{20}\) “The term ‘archetype’ does not claim to have any particular psychoanalytic or mythic connotation, but serves only to indicate a pre-established and frequently reappearing narrative situation.” Eco, 200–201.

\(^{21}\) Lefkowitz, 82–84.
In our study, we focus on two episodes: the “Lay of the Emir” (G 1–3; E1–609; RII 342v–343v, 172–179v) and the Maximou section of the “Exploits of Akritis” G 6.311–805; E 1316–1605; RII 181v–183v). The “Lay” is valuable for its omniscient narrator, which allows us to analyze the direct and indirect speech of all characters and their objective (formulaic and thematic) characterization. The “Exploits” is the only episode in which the Amazon Maximou plays a role. At times, we supplement our analysis with material from the episodes of Aploravdis’s daughter (G 5) and the elopement of Digenis (G 4.254–855; E 792–1065; R 1–14; RII 183v–188).

5. Methodology: Oral-Formulaic Theory and Discourse Analysis

The formula has been defined by Milman Parry, a scholar of oral-traditional poetry, as “a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea.” For example, BCS (Serbo-Croatian) epic verse is performed in a strict ten-syllable line with a caesura (break) after the fourth syllable, and formulas must fit within a half-line or a line, i.e. they must consist of four, six, or ten syllables. Albert B. Lord gives the following examples:

“[I]n the tower” can be expressed in the first half of the line by A na Kuli [“and in the tower”], with the conjunction a [“and”] as a filler; in the second half line by na bijeloj kuli, “in the white tower,” and in the whole line by Na bijeloj od kamena kuli, “In the white tower of stone.”

Lord and Bernard Fenik have identified formulas in the Greek verse texts of Digenis. But as Lord first remarked, formulas are also found in the Slavic Digenis, which is in prose. Moreover, we have found that the same formulas can be borrowed between epic poetry and prose. For example,

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22 Lord, Epic Singers and Oral Tradition. 15–37, esp. 18.
23 Lord, The Singer of Tales, 35.
24 See ibid., 207–220; and Fenik, 25–75.
25 See Lord, Epic Singers and Oral Tradition, 188–190.
in the fifteenth-century Byzantine ballad “The Lay of Armouris”\(^{26}\) we have located the verse formula “lest they maintain that I came on them when they were unarmed,” which is almost identical to the formula “so that you might not say that I stole her like a thief” in the Slavic prose version (RI 11v, RII 185v). In our work with Digenis, we have observed that formulas serve to describe and characterize *dramatis personae*: they tell the reader or listener who the character is in the most general way.

In 1976, Paul Kiparsky proposed a definition of the formula that explains its appearance outside of poetry. For Kiparsky, formulas are characterized by arbitrarily limited distribution and are thus a special case of bound expression. They can be divided into fixed formulas, further characterized by their frozen syntax and non-compositional semantics, and flexible formulas, which can be inflected, separated, transposed, etc. An example of a fixed formula is *Kraljeviću Marko*, “Prince Marko,” always found in this form.\(^{27}\) A flexible formula is “drinks wine,” sung as either *vino pije* or *pije vino*,\(^{28}\) and which in principle could be separated by “cold,” “red,” etc. For Kiparsky, any formula is characterized by the syntactic and semantic relationships of its parts: it consists of closely grammatically related units (e.g., adjective plus noun, verb plus object, etc.).\(^{29}\)

As defined by Lord, a *theme* is a “group of ideas regularly used in telling a tale,” held together by a “tension of essences”\(^{30}\) (which seems to refer to the invariability of ideas and their ordering), “a repeated passage with a fair degree of verbal or formula[ic] repetition from one

\(^{26}\) Ricks, 170–183.
\(^{27}\) Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 34. The vocative case is used for the nominative and, moreover, “Prince” is merely an epithet: in the songs, Marko belongs to the peasant class.
\(^{28}\) Ibid., 34, 72.
\(^{29}\) See Kiparsky, 73–123.
\(^{30}\) Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 68, 97.
Examples of themes are the “arming of the hero” in the BCS oral epic and the repeated actions and speeches of characters in folk wondertales such as “Rumpelstiltskin” and “The Three Little Pigs.” Roderick Beaton and Bernard Fenik have explored the theme in *Digenis*, limiting their study to the Greek texts alone, while we are extending our view to the Slavic texts. As distinct from the formula, which expresses who the character *is*, the theme delimits the actions available to the character; it tells us what the character can *do* in a particular circumstance.

Our methodology for analyzing discourse in *Digenis Akritis* derives from Ruth Bottingheimer’s study of female characters’ speech and silence in the Grimms’ fairy tales. Silence as a form of indirect speech exists on two levels. First is “muteness which grows out of the narrative itself” when a character is emotionally distraught. Second is “a silence within the text which results from the author’s and editor’s choice in distributing direct and indirect discourse,” that is to say, when characters speak in their own voice or are spoken for by the narrator. Agency in speech is also indicated by lexical cues that mark speech as licit or illicit by the verbs that introduce discourse. For example, when characters “speak” a phrase, their speech has more power than if they were to “cry” that same phrase. Likewise, when male characters “ask,” their speech gains more autonomy than the female counterpart who “answers.” In the present study we especially focus on the first two categories of indirect speech but also note lexical cues introducing direct speech as they play a role in formulas.

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31 Ibid., 26 n.18.
32 Ibid., 86–88.
33 See Beaton, “‘Digenis Akrites’ and Modern Greek Folk Song: A Reassessment,” in *From Byzantium to Modern Greece: Medieval Texts and Their Modern Reception*; and Fenik, 25–75.
34 Bottigheimer, 115–131.
35 See Goldgof and Shelton.
The study of direct versus indirect speech helps us begin to quantify the agency of a character. A character’s gender roles, assigned by sex, determine this distribution. Male characters in all versions of *Digenis* employ direct discourse. In accordance with the patriarchal bias of this text, however, female characters are limited to indirect speech almost as often as they employ direct speech. For example, in the Grottaferrata “Lay of the Emir,” male characters have fifty-six instances of direct speech and only eleven of indirect. Women have thirteen instances of direct speech and five of indirect. While 38 percent of female speech in the “Lay” is indirect, only 19 percent of male speech is so, emphasizing how much the narrator speaks on behalf of female characters.


In his *Strategikon*, an eleventh-century Byzantine manual of military, political and domestic affairs, Kekaumenos declares that unmarried girls are to remain sheltered, isolated and silenced: “Keep your daughters as prisoners, confined and inconspicuous.” His contemporary Eustathios (Romaios) the Magistros furthermore emphasizes virginity and beauty in a legal opinion accompanying a case of abduction. In twelfth-century Byzantium as well, elite girls were expected to be beautiful, pure, and cloistered until marriage. Characters called “the girl” in *Digenis* are a combination of the archetypal heroine from the ancient Greek romance and contemporary Byzantine expectations. These expectations are refracted in the theme of “the girl in a fabulous setting.” After the girl is kidnapped by the Emir, her brothers journey to find her. Eventually they discover her in a tent (the Emir’s tent in the Greek version; a separate tent in the Slavic: G 1.309,

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36 See ibid.
37 “Women in Byzantine Society.”
38 See Laiou, 109–219, esp. 175–176.
39 Beaton, “‘Digenes Akrites’ and Modern Greek Folk Song,” 32–34.
E 169, RII 175v); in the Slavic version, her face is covered with a veil (RII 175v). In this theme, the worth of the girl is clearly delimited: she is only characterized by her beauty (concealed in the Slavic version) and, in Escorial and the Slavic text, her virginity. In Grottaferrata, her brothers even declare that her beauty “has kept [her] alive” (G 1.325). In Escorial, it is said that if the girl’s beauty had faded it would be a “disaster,” causing “humiliation and folly” (E 186). In RII, the brothers’ first and only concern is whether their sister’s virginity is intact (RII 175v). The girl has little agency and her fate lies with the men who lay claim to her. Only in her beauty does she find any amount of power.

If themes delimit the actions available to *dramatis personae*, formulas describe and characterize them. For example, the Emir is said to be “exceedingly boastful” before his single combat with the brothers (G 1.191). He can be seen to have personality traits, whether positive or negative, virtues or vices. The girl, for her part, is characterized by her beauty and great emotion, as is typical of the heroine in the romance.40 She is described on multiple occasions as “lovely” (“lovely girl” G 1.161, “lovely voice” G 1.242, “lovely sister” G 1.1253, “lovely woman” G 1.298), and her figure is “delightful” (G 1.241, 1.336). Her eyes may be “drenched with tears” (G 1.314), and the Emir too remarks that “her tears are wasting him away” (G 1.300). The brothers, who have been charged with the task of rescuing her from captivity, claim ownership of her twenty times in the “Lay of the Emir,” calling her “our sister” instead of the pronoun “she” or by a name (which she is never given). In other words, formulas describe who a male character *is* actively but what a female character *experiences* passively: they specify a male character but generalize a female character.

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40 See Hägg.
Both male and female characters will at times be silent instead of speaking. Masculine silence is often associated with a rational response to specific emotions, such as grief, terror, or shame. For example, in Grottaferrata, when the brothers accuse the Emir of trying to leave for Syria, we read, “The Emir could make no denial and remained utterly silent, full of shame, fear and distress” (G 2.171). By contrast, feminine silence appears as an irrational response to unspecified strong emotions of any kind, causing a total loss of faculties. For example, in book two of Grottaferrata, the narrator informs us that “[w]hen the girl heard [the Emir’s accusation], she became dumb, completely unable to utter a word; she remained despondent for many hours” (G 2.204). In Escorial, the girl’s silence is even likened to insanity: “When the girl heard this, she sighed deeply, her tears sprang up and she went out of her mind” (E 311–312). In support of Bottingheimer’s findings, “masculine rationality” allows for a rational, specific choice of silence, while “feminine irrationality” imposes an irrational, undefined silence.

While it may seem that the girl has little control over herself and others, she does have erotic agency and power over men. The narrator claims that her beauty breaks up armies (G 1.336–337, E 214) and causes the Emir to convert to Christianity (E 177, G 1.306) and proclaim that he is under her power (G 2.189, E 357). Similarly, her brothers fall under the spell of her beauty and purity, crying and kissing her when they are reunited (G 1.315, E 180). Outside of such romantic conceits, the sibling relationship as such is also stressed. In all versions, the brothers say to the youngest, “Since you came forth from our mother’s womb together with your little sister, you and your sister cannot be separated” (RII 174v; cf. G 1.121–123, E 129–132). Finally, in one of the closing lines of the “Lay of the Emir,” it is stated that “it became well known throughout the entire world that an exceedingly high-born girl, with her delightful beauty, had broken up the famed
armies” (G 1.336–337). In the world of *Digenis Akritis*, the girl’s greatest triumph is that she has gained a masculine attribute—worldwide fame, “a serious matter for young men” (1.43).

7. Maternal Agency

The second archetype of a female character found in *Digenis Akritis* is the mother. Peter Hatlie has described the “values and virtues associated with her…role” in Byzantium as follows: “A commitment to the process of learning, an instinct for nurturing and disciplining others, unwavering piety, and an uncompromising, almost indomitable, spirit.”

In various literary genres, she appeared in order both to represent “the actual character and actions of real mothers” and to highlight “particular virtues of the mother's offspring.” If in the romance the role of the mother tends to be negligible, then in the epic the mother “embodies the generalized principle of heroic motherhood, providing a moral anchor for her son,” according to Tatyana Popović. Such a “strong influential mother” guides her son, the epic hero, toward bravery, generosity, penitence, and moral betterment. This image “expressed typical behavioral conventions within the patriarchal society” of the Balkans and Byzantium.

A typical theme associated with the mother in *Digenis Akritis* is the “Threat of a Mother’s Curse.” This theme is used twice: when the Greek mother commands her sons to rescue their sister from the Emir (G 1.80) and when the Emir’s mother demands his return to Syria after his conversion (G 2.98, E 291). The authority of this threat is acknowledged by one of the brothers in

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41 Hatlie, 56.
42 Ibid., 55.
43 Ibid., 44.
44 In the Hellenistic novel either the heroine does not give birth to a child, or she fades into the background as soon as she does give birth. Cf. Hägg, 148.
45 Popović, 75.
46 Ibid., 75, 77, 87.
47 Ibid., 87.
48 Beaton, *Folk Poetry of Modern Greece*, 34.
Escorial: “Don’t fear death rather than your mother’s curse” (E 2). The mother’s curse is not merely a literary theme but apparently a “widespread phenomenon”\(^{49}\) in the Balkans, “the firm weapon of a mother. If her authority was denied, a mother could always avail herself of this extreme and terrible curse.”\(^{50}\)

If the mother has moral authority, why does she need to threaten a curse? Strange as it may seem, the curse is an example of the mother’s moral role in compelling her son to virtue. In a heroic context, women in general are considered weak and possess little authority. The mother’s specific authority must be viewed against these patriarchal expectations: an effective way to command her sons to heroic deeds is to present herself as helpless and to threaten them with her curse. The girl’s mother begs, “Pity your mother, whose soul is afflicted and who is about to die,” (G 1.70–71) and the Emir’s mother pleads, “Do not send me in my old age to Hades in sorrow” (G 2.90). She relies on, indeed promotes, a patriarchal view of women as weak in order to assert her will. Curiously, the element of the curse is absent in the Slavic version, where the mother is able to compel her sons without its threat. In RII, the brothers simply state their willingness to sacrifice their lives: “at the bidding of our mother let us lay down our heads for our little sister” (174v). Her power, rather, is expressed in her blessing in both Slavic versions (RI 14v, RII 183).

Of all the female characters in *Digenis*, mothers have the most direct speech, which is correlated with their agency. In “The Lay of the Emir” in Grottaferrata, mothers have one hundred and one lines of direct speech, while the girl has thirty-two.\(^{51}\) In the same episode of Escorial, mothers have seventy-six lines of direct speech, while the girl has twenty-four. As the Slavic text is written in prose, we count clauses, separated by modern editors’ punctuation. In RII, mothers

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\(^{49}\) Popović, 81.

\(^{50}\) Ibid., 89.

\(^{51}\) See Goldgof and Shelton.
have forty-one clauses of direct speech, while the girl has twenty-eight. This amount of direct speech correlates with the presence of the “threat of a mother’s curse” theme; this theme is not only the tool with which she “provides a moral anchor for her son,” but it also provides her with a voice in the first place. A woman’s agency is thus directly related to her role in the lives of male characters. Indeed, the mother of Digenis plays an especially important role, as she is the mother of the god-like hero, making her akin to the “unconquerable Mother of God”—Mary, mother of Jesus (G 1.18).

While the mother is granted considerable agency through the threat of her curse, she is nonetheless often presented as greatly dependent. First, she is genealogically bound to a man’s line. In Grottaferrata, the girl’s mother is described as belonging to the family of Constantine (G 1.267). By comparison, the father, who descends from the Kinnamades (G 1.266), is described by his paternal lineage. Moreover, lamentation and a longing for death overcome the mother in almost every scene in which she appears, especially when she is separated from her children. In Grottaferrata, the girl’s mother “wishes to die” (G 1.109). In the Slavic version, the Emir’s mother formulaically “tear[s] the hair from her head and [tears] her face” as an externalization of her suffering (RII 343, 177, 178v). Finally, she is not permitted or expected to save her daughter herself and must rely on her sons, who heroically display the “virtues of the mother’s offspring.” Nonetheless, and especially when set against the figure of the girl, Popović’s evaluation stands: “In her dignified status as a great hero’s mother, [this character] developed into such a perfectly rounded epic figure that, in comparison, no other woman could have lived up to her standards.”

52 Popović, 87.
8. Warlike Agency: Maximou the Amazon

Our final female archetype, and at the same time the most individuated female character in the work, is the Amazon Maximou (Maksimijana in the Slavic), “a descendent of the Amazon women whom the emperor Alexander had brought” (G 6.386–7). For the ancient Athenians, “Amazons’ customs reverse[d] the model…according to which citizen men and women were supposed to conduct their lives.” Mythical Amazons rejected traditional domestic passivity to become “independent, unattached warrior women,” engaged in the masculine pursuits of “war, politics, business, and pleasure.” How does the Byzantine Maximou compare to her ancestors? Maximou preserves the basic warrior model of the Amazon, but there are important differences: several mythical traits of her people are absent (e.g., the practice of mastectomy, the enslavement of men, etc.) and most crucially, she leads men (apeletai or guerrillas, the enemies of Digenis) rather than women into battle. In her characterization, speech, and behavior Maximou most closely resembles Digenis. No other character, not even a male, is depicted in a manner so like the hero.

As early as Strabo, Amazon customs were perceived to be “monstrous and beyond belief. Who could believe that an army or city or nation of women could be organized without men?” The perceived monstrosity of Amazon customs shows how terrifying the reversal of gender roles was for a male audience. If Maximou’s presence in this text surprises present-day readers, one can only imagine how a twelfth-century Byzantine audience (or a fourteenth-century Slavic one) would respond to her.

Maximou is described much like male warriors of epic poetry, and it is other male fighters who offer the descriptions. The guerilla Philopappous calls her “our kinswoman,” which focuses

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53 Tyrell, 40.
54 Lefkowitz, 82–84; Tyrrell, 44–45.
55 Tyrrell, 44.
on lineage: she has “inherited the greatest vigour from her ancestors” and is no one’s possession (G 6.375, 388). Her skills as a warrior have earned her great respect from her allies and opponents. Philopappous mentions her “picked troop” (G 6.377), a formula for elite warriors similar to one found in the “Lay of Armouris” (line 62) in reference to the Saracen army. Digenis’s father the Emir says, “The maiden Maksimijana is likewise [strong and brave] and has many troops” (RII 182: the narrator agrees that she “has manly bravery, her army also”). The father attempts to discourage his son from fighting her: “It is too early for you to think of battle; you have not been in victorious battles” (RII 182).

Maximou’s agency partakes of elements from the archetypes of the girl and the mother. Like the girl, she is a virgin, while her ability to compel men to action echoes the mother’s power. Yet her agency is far greater than theirs. She has the power to command men not because of her beauty or maternal role but because of her masculine (“manly”) bravery. As is often the case with such mythical characters, her masculine skill as a warrior is connected to her virginity.

The masculine aspects of Maximou’s agency are most visible in her thematic characterization, in which she is presented as a double of the hero. Digenis’s and Maximou’s preparations for battle in Grottaferrata (also seen in Escorial) are practically identical. In a detailed arming theme, the horses, the warriors’ outfits, and their shields and spears are described in turn. Maximou is depicted as seated on a “black, most noble steed” (735) and Digenis on a “starred chestnut horse [with] excellent spirit for brave deeds” (717). She is wearing a surcoat “of pure purple silk” (736), while he is wearing “a marvelous very light robe” (737). Maximou wears a

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56 Ricks, 175.
“green turban embroidered with gold” (715), and Digenis wears a “red cap of curly fur” (716). In the oral-formulaic composition, these characters are equal.57

Maximou is the only female character to be granted a full voice, with little indirect speech. The few times her speech is made indirect by the narrator are when she gives orders to her men, as is the case with other, male characters. Most notably, Maximou speaks almost as much as Digenis. In RII, Maximou speaks for twenty-six lines while Digenis speaks for twenty-seven.58

According to Grottaferrata, Maximou has “always considered battle to be her life and delight” (182v). Rejecting feminine erotic and maternal agency, the character is devoted to the masculine pursuits of battle and fame.

Although the Amazon is unique to *Digenis Akritis*, there are other female characters who defy patriarchal expectations in epic songs. One example is the maid Rosanda, the titular protagonist of “The Sister of Leka Kapetan.” A “marvel” for whom “there was not [one] like for beauty in the whole world,” Rosanda was cloistered by her brother Leka in expectation of marriage. She refused all suitors, however, for “in all [she] found some fault / and shamed her brother.”59

When Rosanda rudely rejects the proposals of Marko Kraljević and two other heroes, calling them “a Turkish minion,” “foaled by…a grey Arab mare,” and “a bastard” whom “a gypsy suckled,” Marko cuts off her right arm and blinds her, leaving her “mutilated [and] wailing.”60 As one can see, such female characters do not fare well in the heroic world of the epic.

Something similar happens to Maximou after her proposal of marriage and military union is rejected by Digenis. Her “archetype” suddenly shifts from Amazon to girl: she “[throws] off her

57 See Fenik, 52–55.
58 See Goldgof and Shelton.
59 Low, 39.
60 Ibid., 45.
surcoat…reveal[ing] her breasts”; she is now “young and lovely, beautiful and a virgin” and greets her “master” Digenis. After having sex with Maximou, Digenis soon kills her (in the Grottaferrata manuscript only) to relieve his guilt as a husband (G 6.798; cf. 784–786). In the Slavic version, the Amazon suffers an even worse fate. Digenis sentences her to a lengthy sentence of housekeeping alongside his mother, telling Maksimijana, “If you offend [my mother] with even a single word, this day you cease to live” (RII 183v).

9. Conclusion

In his study of the myth of the Amazon, Tyrrell questions this figure’s purpose in the text and inquires whether she is representative of behavior that is modeled or a myth. In Athens and possibly in Byzantium as well, the Amazon and other non-traditional female characters generally did not encourage women to behave according to patriarchal norms, but rather warned men of the dangers of autonomous female behavior.61

In the Greek versions of Digenis Akritis, both Maximou’s achievements and her ultimate fate work to reinforce patriarchal structures. Yet in the Slavic text, these structures are destabilized in a surprising way. Through oral-formulaic reconstruction of the text, the girl, so passive and pretty in the Greek version, adopts certain masculine attitudes of the Amazon. At the beginning of the Maximou episode, we learn that “Filipap is brave and very strong and has great force; the maiden Maksimijana too has manly bravery, her army also” (RII 181v). Similarly, in the episode in which Digenis abducts the general’s daughter, “[the general] is brave and strong, and his sons, and the rest of his army…. [The general’s daughter] herself has manly boldness” (RII 184–184v). At the end of the episode, Maximou says, “To me have come many tsars and kings, brave and strong in much strength, but no one has dishonored me with a single word; all have been conquered

61 Tyrrell.
by my hands” (RII 183v), while the general’s daughter says, “For many have laid down their heads on my account, even without seeing me and never having spoken a word with me,” and, “Many have been unable to overcome me” (RII 184v, RI 10v). Maximou’s attitude turns out to be infectious even in such a conservative milieu.

The girl is also masculinized through the act of cross-dressing, found in Grottaferrata and the Slavic Digenis. Traditionally, this transformation takes place when a woman defies social expectations around coupling: it can function as a punishment for premarital sex or as a romantic convention in the case of elopement. A fourteenth-century Novel, or legal code, of Andronikos II declares that if a girl “should give herself willingly” to a man before marriage, she will “be chastened by having her hair shorn.”62 Meanwhile, in Xenophon’s Ephesian Tale of Anthia and Habrocomes, the heroine of a framed story cross-dresses not as a punishment but to elope with her lover undetected.63 For one or both of these reasons, an abandoned girl in the Grottaferrata Digenis cross-dresses to set out after her lover, “changing [her] appearance and dressing as a young lad, for it was in that disguise that [she] had left [her] country” (G 5.121–122).

Cross-dressing in the Slavic Digenis is primarily a function of elopement, and yet its performance is uncharacteristic for the girl. Here the general’s daughter says to Digenis, “But why must you abduct me? I wish to go off with you myself, only dress me in men’s clothing. For I have the daring of a man! If they catch up to me along the way, I will not disgrace myself. Many have been unable to overcome me” (RI 10v). As we have already seen, these are the words of Maximou: the girl, the most passive character in the text, seems to be modeling the Amazon. Is it possible to imagine a socio-cultural context for this change? In the patriarchal societies of the western Balkans

62 Laiou, 109–219, esp. 143.
63 See Hägg, 25.
eldest daughters without brothers were able to take a vow of chastity, dress in men’s clothing, and adopt masculine roles. These “sworn virgins” (BCS ostajnice or tobelije) engaged in blood feuds, owned and inherited property and wealth, and acted as heads of households.\textsuperscript{64} These are very much the pursuits of the mythical Amazons as Tyrell lists them: “war, politics, [and] business.”\textsuperscript{65} This Balkan phenomenon may well have allowed the Amazon to become a productive model for other female characters in \textit{Digenis Akritis}. This, however, is a task for future research.

\textbf{Works Cited}

\textit{Primary Literature in Translation}


\textit{Themes/Formulas}


\textsuperscript{64} “The Last ‘Sworn Virgin’ of Montenegro.”

\textsuperscript{65} Tyrrell, 44–45.


**Sociocultural Topic of Women**


Speech Appendix