

CHRISTOPHER LIVANOS

Justice, Equality and Dirt in the Poems of Christopher of Mytilene

In *Change in Byzantine Culture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*, Alexander Kazhdan and Ann Wharton Epstein have observed that Christopher of Mytilene (c. 1000 – c. 1050) was a poet ‘extremely sensitive to the inequities of the existing social order.’¹ Their work has shown that the eleventh century was a time of social change, when certain groups of people rapidly attained higher standing in the social hierarchy. Ascension to higher social rank is almost always the privilege of a fortunate few, and every period of social change and perceived progress will produce not only successful social climbers but also curmudgeons who make it their job to point out the injustices that remain. In several of his poems, Christopher of Mytilene adopts the role of the social gadfly in pointing out that, even in the rapidly developing society of eleventh-century Constantinople, most of the poor remain poor and many of the prosperous elites are insufferable snobs. Christopher himself had a relatively successful career as a government official, but he wrote about the social changes of his times from the perspective of a cynical observer who sympathized with the masses of humanity left behind as certain segments of society attained positions of privilege previously unavailable to them.

A concise yet broad introduction to Christopher’s life and work is found in an article by Nicolas Oikonomides entitled ‘Life and Society in Eleventh Century Constantinople,’² which focuses entirely on this single poet. As Oikonomides’ comprehensive-sounding title suggests, Christopher’s 145 surviving epigrams and fragments deal with a vast range of subject matter pertinent to life in his native city. This article

¹ A. P. KAZHDAN and A. W. EPSTEIN, *Change in Byzantine Culture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*. Berkeley 1985, 210.

² N. OIKONOMIDES, *Life and Society in Eleventh Century Constantinople*. *Südost-Forschungen* 49 (1990) 1–14.

will be dealing mostly with his cynical, embittered side. The biting, satirical wit apparent throughout his epigrams is usually directed at life's injustices. 'Christophoros... tries to comfort the sick,' Oikonomides tells us, 'questioning the competence of doctors he does not hold in high esteem (p. 3),' though we might add that the poet's point seems more to injure the doctor than to help the patient. Having acknowledged the caustic quality of Christopher's verse, Oikonomides goes on to write:

But on the other hand his poems concerning pleasant things are by far more numerous. He writes about fruit or sweets or perfumes, or wine, or utensils or even luxurious decorated textiles (K 28, 42, 43, 45, 87, 88, 94, 99, 105, 110, 115, 117). He glorifies the relaxing pleasures of the bath (K 53). He sings the praises of the opposite sex: a certain *Eudocia*, 'The most beautiful of all women.'³

Since little has yet been written on his poems, I have cited the above passage from Oikonomides so as to avoid painting a misleading portrait of our poet. He wrote about pretty things; they just will not figure in this paper.

I will examine a longer epigram by Christopher on social inequality, and then turn to two shorter poems in which Christopher continues to discuss justice and equality and also brings up the related theme of dirt. He seldom writes of social inequities without also writing of dirt. As he equates fear of mixing with the lower classes with fear of physical contagion, he emerges in his more significant works as a prophetic yet ironically self-effacing voice frustrated by the imposition of purity codes onto a Christian society which ought to be based on apostolic equality.

The theoretical focus of this article will be work on purity and defilement by Mikhail Bakhtin and Mary Douglas.⁴ Bakhtin's work on Rabelais is famous for its discussion of scatology, carnivalesque humor, comic violence, and utopian egalitarianism – all of which are important topics in Christopher's work. Margaret Alexiou's use of Bakhtin in her work on twelfth-century Byzantine literature has helped elucidate how satire, vernacular borrowings, and abusive language serve not only to degrade their targets but also to regenerate

³ OIKONOMIDES, 3. The numbers refer to the poems' sequence in the standard edition of Christopher's poems, ed E. KURTZ, *Die Gedichte des Christophoros Mytilenaios*. Leipzig 1904.

⁴ Cf. *infra*, n. 18 and 31.

society.⁵ Engagement with Bakhtin in the study of eleventh-century literature can help us appreciate Christopher's importance as a forerunner to twelfth-century developments. The Russian theorist's division of the carnivalesque into three forms, spectacle, parodic composition, and Billingsgate or abusive language provides a useful approach to discussing Christopher's place in the history of humorous literature in the Byzantine Empire. His poems are an important witness to the existence of carnivalesque spectacle and while vernacular insults do not appear in his work, his use of language that simultaneously debases and regenerates places him in an important relationship to those twelfth-century texts which Alexiou has analyzed. Parody, strictly speaking, is likewise absent from Christopher's oeuvre. However, parody is the literary equivalent of comic spectacles such as those he represented in verse. The parody and the spectacle in which paupers portray men of great estate are both humorous representations of serious subjects, and therefore Christopher's verses on parodic spectacle are an older relation to parody *per se* as it appeared in later Byzantine literature.

My engagement with the work of Douglas and Freud is an effort to build upon the theoretical framework provided by Alexiou's application of Bakhtin to Byzantine literature. Bakhtin deals extensively with the carnivalesque as an alleged tool for subverting social orders, but he seldom touches upon questions of how social orders are structured and maintained. Douglas helps explain the use of purity codes in the ordering of society, although she has been criticized for not adequately accounting for the disgust caused by exposure to the impure. Such disgust, as it is felt by the 'upwardly mobile' toward the poor, is a significant theme in Christopher's poetry, particularly in the case of several snobbish characters who fit Freud's description of the anal personality – 'obstinate, orderly, and parsimonious.' Alexiou's application of Bakhtin to twelfth-century texts has greatly enhanced our understanding of the scatological references in Byzantine literature, but Freud's studies on the connection between money and excrement provide insights beyond those we gain from a Bakhtinian reading. The final section of this article will discuss psychoanalysis, addressing Freud as well as Martha C. Nussbaum's attempts to use

⁵ M. ALEXIOU, *After Antiquity: Greek Language, Myth, and Metaphor*. Ithaca and London 2002, 96–148, especially 97.

psychoanalytic theories of disgust to improve upon Douglas' understanding of purity codes.

Christopher's poems express an attitude toward the social changes of his times that corroborates Paul Magdalino's assessment:

"The legislation issued by Romanos I, Constantine VII, and Basil II to prevent the purchase of peasant landholdings by the 'powerful' has traditionally been seen as a brave but failed attempt to save the state from the creeping tide of feudalism. I would prefer to see it as the beginning of the development whereby the state itself joined in the process of feudalism... What cannot be doubted is that this legislation added a new and permanent strand to the nexus of ties between finance and justice, because it defined landownership according to fiscal categories, and discriminated in favor of the category of landowners that the fisc could most easily exploit."⁶

Christopher was not a political analyst and did not arrive at anything like the complexity of Magdalino's economic analysis, but his poems show an acute sympathy for those who felt the sting of forces such as Magdalino describes. His observation that people were being divided into categories and discriminated against prompted the composition of a poem addressed to Christ, numbered 13 in Kurtz's edition, in which the speaker complains of the insurmountable gap between rich and poor.⁷ The speaker laments that no matter what upheaval God might bring about to shake up the existing order of things, the rich would stay rich and the poor would stay poor:

Δίκαια ταῦτα, δημιουργέ μου Λόγε,
 πηλὸν μὲν εἶναι πάντας ἀνθρώπους ἕνα
 καὶ χοῦν τὸν αὐτόν, ἀλλὰ καὶ φύσιν μίαν,
 τελεῖν δέ πως ἄνισον αὐτοῖς τὸν βίον;
 Ναὶ ναὶ στάσιν τὰ πάντα πάντως οὐκ ἔχει,
 ἐναλλαγὴν πλὴν πραγμάτων, πῶς καὶ πότε;
 Κἄν γὰρ δεήσῃ συστραφέντα τὸν βίον
 κύκλους ἐλίττειν βακχικῆς ἀταξίας,
 ἐν μὲν χιλίοις πλουσίοις ἢ μυριοῖς

⁶ P. MAGDALINO, *Justice and Finance in the Byzantine State, Ninth to Twelfth Centuries*, in: *Law and Society in Byzantium, Ninth to Twelfth Centuries*, ed. A. LAIOU and D. SIMON. Washington D.C 1994, 93–115, here 108.

⁷ ΟΙΚΟΝΟΜΙΔΕΣ 2: 'It has long been remarked that in the Grottaferrata manuscript the poems are arranged in chronological order.' The same sequence is followed in Kurtz's edition, in which this epigram is number 13.

εἷς δυστυχήσας συγκάτεισι τοῖς κάτω·
 ἐν δ' αὖ πένησιν ἀθλίους τρισμυριοῖς
 τρεῖς εὐπραγοῦσι καὶ γίνονται τῶν ἄνω.
 Τῷ τοῦ δικαίου τήκομαι ζήλω, Λόγε,
 καὶ ταῦτα πρὸς σέ φθέγγομαι τὸν δεσπότην·
 σὺ δ' ἄλλ' ἀνάσχου μακροθυμῶν, ὡς ἔθος,
 καὶ τῶν ἐμῶν ἄκουε νῦν γογγυσμάτων.
 Μὴ τὸν μὲν αὐτὸς οὐκ ἔπλασας χερσὶ σου,
 τούτου δὲ πλάστης ἄλλος; Ἦ τί λεπτέον;
 Οὐκ ἔργα τῶν σῶν πάντες εἰσὶ δακτύλων;
 Ἄλλ' οἱ μὲν αὐτῶν οὐκ ἀναγκαίων μόνον
 κατατρώφωσιν, ἀλλὰ καὶ πολλῶ πλέον
 καὶ τοῖς περιττοῖς ἐντρώφωσι τοῦ βίου,
 οἱ δὲ γλίχονται καὶ μονοβλώμου τρώφους
 ἢ μᾶλλον εἰπεῖν καὶ τραπέξης ψυχίων.
 Δίκαιε, ποῦ δίκαια ταῦτα τυγχάνει;
 Ἔως πότε στήσειας ἡμῖν τὴν κτίσιν;
 Σύσσεισον αὐτὴν ἢ κατάκλυσον πάλιν·
 μηδεὶς κιβωτοῦ δευτέρας αὐθις τύχοι,
 μὴ Νῶέ τις γένοιτο καὶ πάλιν νέος·
 οἴχοιντο πάντες, λείψανον μὴ μεινάτω.
 Εἰ δ', ὡς ὑπέσχου, μακρόθυμε Χριστέ μου,
 τὴν γῆν ἑσαῦθις οὐ κατακλύζειν θέλεις,
 καὶ γὰρ φυλάττεις – οἶδα – τὰς ὑποσχέσεις,
 Ἄτλαντα χειρὶ σῇ βαλὼν ἐκ τῶν ἄνω
 τὴν πᾶσαν αὐτῷ συγκατάστρεψον κτίσιν,
 μὴ γνῦς πόλον γῆ καὶ τὰ πάντα συμφύρων·
 οὕτω γὰρ ἂν γένοιτο πάντων ἰσότης.⁸

Is this just, Creator, Word of God,
 That though all men are from a single clay,
 One nature and one common heap of dust,
 They get unequal pay somehow from life?
 Yes, yes, in every way all things lack stasis,
 But how and when do they exchange affairs?
 So what if you implore life to revolve,
 The disks of Bacchic disarray to spin?
 For all the myriad thousands of the rich

⁸ KURTZ 8–9. Translations from Christopher's verse quoted in this article are my own.

Bad luck would join just one to those below.
 In turn, for all the countless struggling poor,
 Three would do well and join a higher rank.
 O Word, I melt with zeal for what is just,
 And therefore, master, I cry out to you.
 Magnanimous one, bear with me; it is your way.
 Now listen to these grumblings of mine.
 Perhaps you made some men with your own hands,
 While Someone else made others? What should be said?
 Is everybody not your fingers' work?
 In any case, some laugh in opulence
 And mock the needs their luxuries surpass,
 Exulting in the excesses of life
 As others strive for bits of broken bread –
 Crumbs off the table-tops, in other words.
 Where is it, Just One, that such things are just?
 How long will you save creation for our sake?
 Shake it apart, or flood it clean again,
 But make sure no one gets a second ark.
 Do not let some new Noah come this time.
 Let everybody vanish with no trace.
 If, as you promised, my magnanimous Christ,
 You do not wish to flood your earth again,
 (I know, of course, you keep your promises),
 Then cast down lofty Atlas with your hand,
 Turn all creation upside down with him,
 Kneading, confounding, and mixing all heaven and Earth.
 That would bring equality to all.⁹

It is difficult to assign this poem to any established literary genre. It has elements of the *prosopopoieia* or 'personification,' a term the Byzantines used for anything written from the point of view of a character other than the author. Particularly toward the beginning, the speaker seems to assume the role of a prophet calling down the wrath of God; but whatever prophetic quality the opening invective against economic injustice might contain is undermined by the word

⁹ In translating Christopher's poetry into English, I have consulted the Italian translations by Carmelo Crimi in *Christophoros ho Mytilenaios, Canzoniere*. ed. C. CRIMI and R. ANASTASI. Catania 1983, and the translations in R. CANTARELLA, *Poeti Bizantini, a cura di F. CONCA*. vol. II. Milan 1992, 682–697.

goggysma in line 16. Lampe's *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* gives 'murmur' and 'grumble' as the first two definitions of *goggyzo*, neither of which seems an appropriate tone for prophetic speech.¹⁰ This shift in tone makes the poem one of Christopher's most subtle and appealing, as the wit that savaged the world in a series of sometimes gratingly malicious epigrams, is here turned inward. The would-be prophet slyly calls himself a whiner in one of several tonal shifts that divide the poem into distinct sections. The juxtaposition of these sections – the prophetic opening, the religious doubt, the grumblings, and the clever 'solution' to the world's problems – makes us see each section in an ironic light. The opening verses are in the style of an Old Testament prophet, full of righteous indignation and the implication that the speaker holds the right to call down the wrath of God on a sinful world. According to Oikonomides (p. 7), 'Church activities are constantly present in Christophoros' poems; but it is their social rather than spiritual functions that seem to dominate. The poet was not a particularly devout person.' Oikonomides is right to point out the importance of social concerns in Christopher's work, but perhaps too eager to make biographical conclusions. Especially in this poem, the religious and the social are linked. Social injustice and inequality are an affront to the just God who made all men equal.

The murmurings (*goggysmata*) of the social discontent are then subverted at the end of the poem by a biting irony; passivity turns to passive aggression. As the prophetic utterances of the opening give way to passive murmurings in the middle of the poem, the murmurings in turn give way to a more assertive wit in the closing lines; but this is not to say that the righteous indignation at the beginning and the impotent frustration in the middle are thoroughly invalidated. The tense coexistence of prophetic indignation, powerless frustration, both tempered by an overarching irony, make this poem one of Christopher's most emotionally complex works.

Oikonomides, curiously, has called this poem, 'a youthful cry of protest of no consequence,' and gone on to comment:

"In spite of the fact that the objections towards the rich had not disappeared (K134), Christophoros, who in the meantime had also made a good career, turned towards philanthropy and lauded the ad-

¹⁰ G.W.H. LAMPE, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*. Oxford 1961, 321. I thank Wolfram Hörandner for pointing out that the verb *goggyzo* is used in Exodus 17.3 of the people's murmurings against Moses for bringing them out of Egypt.

vantages of the hospitals that not only cured diseases but also – and above all – cured the effects of poverty (K130). Moreover, his rebellion was conceived within the framework of pure orthodoxy; it did not deviate towards heresy nor did it contest any fundamentals of Byzantine society. These limitations meant that, although the economic and social aspects of social inequity were perceived and expressed, and an ideological framework was being sought, no realistic solution was proposed.”¹¹

I believe Oikonomides overreaches in positing a link between the thematic development of Christopher’s poetry and what little we know of his life. Such arguments can be dangerously circular, since most of what we ‘know’ about Christopher’s life is extrapolated from his poems. Fundamentally, I agree with Oikonomides’ interpretation of Christopher as a poet of sound Orthodoxy, though the poet at times seems to test Orthodoxy’s limits, as when he suggests to the almighty that he use a loophole in his own Holy Writ. The sentiment behind these closing verses can best be understood as an example of the Byzantine religious concept of *parrhesia*, or freedom of speech before God. Oikonomides is correct that the poem contains nothing blasphemous. However, it does contain a striking boldness. For the Byzantines, the intimacy of the believer’s relationship with God gives him or her the right to speak candidly with the supreme being, as one would to a family member.

One of the most significant and illustrative examples of *parrhesia* – the concept as well as the word – occurs in the ‘Lament of Mary at the Cross’ by Romanos the Melode (6th cent.), when Mary chastises Jesus for telling her to accept the inevitability of his death.¹² Before being persuaded by Christ’s message, Mary tries to convince her son not to accept death on behalf of mankind. Thus, the greatest saint is permitted to tell God not to perform his greatest miracle. The boldness with which Mary questions her Son’s judgment is reminiscent of Christopher’s implied suggestion that the Noachide covenant was a mistake, yet Christopher’s seemingly flippant remark that God should find a loophole in his covenant is no more outrageous (perhaps it is more outrageous in tone, but not in doctrine) than Mary’s attempt as portrayed by Romanos to talk Christ out of going through with his own

¹¹ OIKONOMIDES 14.

¹² *Sancti Romani Melodi Cantica: Cantica Genuina*, ed. P. MAAS and C.A. TRYPANIS, Oxford 1963, 142–149.

crucifixion and the subsequent redemption of mankind. Romanos' 'Lament of Mary at Cross' ends with a direct address by the speaker to Christ

σὺ παρέσχες τῇ σεμνῇ
παρρησίαν κράζειν σοι·
'Ὁ υἱὸς καὶ θεὸς μου.'¹³

You granted the pious woman
the parrhesia to cry out to you
'O my son and my God.'

It was thus the intimacy of Mary's relationship with Christ that allowed her earlier in the poem to exclaim:

τί οὖν τρέχεις, τέκνον; μὴ ἐπείγου πρὸς σφαγὴν
μὴ φιλήσ τὸν θάνατον.¹⁴

Where are you running, child? Hurry not to the slaughter.
Be not in love with Death.

In these lines, Romanos strikingly shows the significance of parrhesia in traditional Byzantine culture. Neither Mary's near-perfection nor Christ's majesty prevents the holy virgin from speaking her mind in a spirit of candor. Most significantly, since she is the most perfect human being other than her Son, there is no hint in the text that her words are blasphemous or deserving in any way of castigation.¹⁵ She doubts the usefulness of Christ's mission, and tells him not to go through with it in a tone verging on that of a concerned mother reprimanding a wayward child engaged in dangerous activities. Throughout the poem, Christ explains his mission to Mary and finally convinces her to accept it.

Christopher of Mytilene and Romanos both show that, while parrhesia does not allow one to break a divine commandment, it allows one to express his or her unhappiness with it. Saints have to obey God, but they do not have to deny their human feelings. 'Parrhesia,' in a

¹³ Ibid, 149.

¹⁴ Ibid, 145.

¹⁵ Whether or not she is 'without sin' is another question. If we define sin, *hamartia*, in the etymological sense of 'missing the mark,' she is quite sinful. She misses the mark completely. There is no suggestion, however, that her missing the mark makes her worthy of any blame. Many scholars believe that Byzantine notions of sin do not involve guilt in the judicial sense. For more on the topic see T. WARE, *The Orthodox Church*, 2nd edition. New York and London 1993, 224–225.

secular context, can also refer to the right of an advisor to speak openly to the emperor,¹⁶ and Christopher again seems to express this concept as he steps into an advisory role and urges God to find a way to cast down the proud, shake up the world order, and bring equality to mankind without violating his own sacred promises. The poet seems to speak as a courtier suggesting to the emperor how he might deal harshly with troublesome subjects yet still find a way to maintain his reputation for justice.

Religious parrhesia is taken to the extreme when the speaker even asks if there might be some truth to the un-Christian idea that different classes of people were made by different gods in a passage reminiscent of the dualistic theology of the Bogomils, whose teaching – that one god created good and another created evil – was apparently gaining ground in Constantinople in Christopher’s lifetime.¹⁷ Oikonomides calls it ‘far-fetched’ (p. 14 n. 45) to interpret this passage as a dualist departure from the right faith. I agree, but I also wish to emphasize that we cannot simply dismiss the suggestion of dualism. Christopher does in fact suggest the possibility of dualism; but only as a frustrated Orthodox Christian troubled by doubt, not as a convinced dualist preaching his own dogma. Exclaiming, ‘What should be said?’ Christopher leaves the question unanswered, and his frustration at the world’s inequalities prompts him to ask God to send a second flood to wipe out creation one more time, but this time not to let a second Noah escape. In keeping with the spirit of this poem which candidly admits religious doubt yet always falls just short of blasphemy, the speaker soon recognizes that his suggestion contradicts God’s promise.

The poem’s concluding plea for power structures to be subverted and order to be overthrown expresses the sort of Utopianism Mikhail Bakhtin saw in the Western medieval carnival:

¹⁶ Elizabeth M. JEFFREYS defines *parrhesia*: ‘Literally, ‘freedom of speech.’ In a secular context this came to mean (from the 4th C. onward) the license allowed a privileged official or orator to offer cautious advice or reproof to an emperor, and so, by extension, the right to have access to the emperor. In a religious context the term comes to mean a confidence in dealing with God and men that is drawn from faith and a righteous life, and that belongs to particular saints.’ ODB, vol. III, 1591.

¹⁷ It has been argued that dualism expanded notably in urban areas in the eleventh century. See E. WERNER, *Geschichte des mittelalterlichen Dualismus: neue Fakten und alte Konzeptionen*. *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 23 (1975) 538–551, 542.

‘The suspension of all hierarchical precedence during carnival time was of particular significance. Rank was especially evident during official feasts; everyone was expected to appear in the full regalia of his calling, rank, and merits and to take the place corresponding to his position. It was a consecration of inequality. On the contrary, all were considered equal during the carnival. Here, in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age. The hierarchical background and the extreme corporative and caste divisions of the medieval world were exceptionally strong. Therefore such free, familiar contacts were deeply felt and formed an essential element of the carnival spirit. People were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations. These truly human relations were not only a fruit of imagination or abstract thought; they were experienced. The utopian ideal and the realistic merged in this carnival experience, unique of its kind. This temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created during carnival time a special type of communication impossible in everyday life’.¹⁸

Modern discussions of the carnivalesque have led to the formation of two scholarly camps, one agreeing with Bakhtin that Carnival subverts all social orders, and the other arguing that the temporary and controlled expression of subversive feeling during the Carnival ultimately serves to maintain the status quo. Carnival can be seen either as subversion or as containment of subversion. Christopher’s epigram stands in jaded agreement with the latter viewpoint. While social equality may have seemed a coming reality in Bakhtin’s revolutionary times, it could be no more than a prayer for Christopher of Mytilene. For Bakhtin, it is an article of faith with Rabelais as its prophet. Oikonomides asserts that Christopher’s poetry is full of social dissatisfaction but lacking social or religious radicalism. It has been argued that Bakhtin projected his own revolutionary agenda onto Rabelais and the medieval carnival tradition in general. In an admiring yet critical study of Bakhtin, Richard Berrong describes the context in which the Russian theorist worked,

“While the ‘folk’ began to figure as an important element in socialist realism, and Soviet iconography in general (CH 310), certain aspects of folk culture most certainly did not. ‘In 1932–34, when guide-

¹⁸ M. BAKHTIN, *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Hélène Iswolsky. Bloomington 1985, 10.

lines for socialist realism were being formulated, official spokesmen cautioned writers against the literary practice of showing sex and the bodily functions, which was euphemistically called 'naturalism' or 'zoologism.' In consequence, explicit sex relations were virtually taboo in Stalinist novels.' Stalinist society was marked by an ever-increasing puritanism and idealization, an 'emphasis on transcending the physical body' (CH 312)."¹⁹

Against this backdrop, Bakhtin was creating a vision of a carnival which, in Michael Holquist's words, 'is revolution itself... not [to] be confused with mere holiday.' As Holquist interprets Bakhtin, 'The sanction for carnival derives ultimately not from a calendar prescribed by church or state, but from a force that preexists priests and kings and to whose superior power they are actually deferring when they appear to be licensing carnival.'²⁰

There was no true 'carnival,' strictly defined in Byzantium, since Lent was preceded by moderate fasting rather than festive indulgence, but the Byzantines had other celebrations which can be termed 'carnivalesque.' Bakhtin divided the carnival into three categories: ritual spectacle, comic verbal compositions, and Billingsgate or abusive language.²¹ The first of these is depicted in Christopher's work. The latter two developed in Byzantine literature shortly after his time, and his poetry contains significant antecedents to them. Christopher provides one of our more significant literary sources of information on the Byzantine carnivalesque spectacle in a poem, now surviving only in fragmentary form, describing a procession on the feast of Sts. Markianos and Martyrios in which, 'even the poor wear royal purple,' and a fool masquerades as the emperor.²² Such imagery and language are reminiscent of the 'suspension of hierarchical precedence' Bakhtin describes. For Christopher, the masses have little hope for anything more than a 'mere holiday,' although the holiday in honor of Sts. Markianos and Martyrios seems to provide them considerable solace. Students of festivities and their social importance find much of interest in Christopher's oeuvre, both those poems commemorating spe-

¹⁹ R. BERRONG, *Rabelais and Bakhtin: Popular Culture in Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Lincoln 1986, 106. 'CH' designates Berrong's citations from C. CLARK and M. HOLQUIST, *Mikhail Bakhtin*. Cambridge 1984.

²⁰ Prologue by HOLQUIST in BAKHTIN, *Rabelais and His World* xviii.

²¹ BAKHTIN, *Rabelais and his World* 15–17.

²² KURTZ 91–98.

cific feasts and those which are “festive” in the broader sense that they deal with carnivalesque themes.

By “comic verbal composition,” Bakhtin is referring especially to light-hearted parodies of the liturgy. The genre was as common in Byzantium as it was in the West, but Christopher does not seem to have been able to broach the subject without moving to Bakhtin’s third category of abusive language, as we find in K114, on a corrupt monk named Andreas who has amassed a horde of dubious ‘holy’ relics. The language of this epigram is harsh and condemning, its sarcasm biting in contrast to whimsical tone of the parodies found in later Byzantine literature, such as fourteenth- or fifteenth-century “The Akolouthia of the Beardless Man,” and “The Synaxarion of the Honorable Ass.”²³ Christopher’s epigram on the swindler Andreas is satire rather than parody, but religious parody certainly existed in early Byzantine culture. Procopios relates that Theodora had eunuchs mock supplicants coming to her court using phrases derived from the liturgy. In a case like this it is difficult to maintain a distinction between the first and second of Bakhtin’s divisions of the carnivalesque, the spectacle and the written travesty. The latter is largely a literary representation of the former. Part of what Procopios says he finds so scandalous about the matter is that Theodora behaves in the imperial court, “as if she were on stage in the theatre.”²⁴ Such travesties are attested in writing, but only from much later periods. It is difficult to determine if the later texts simply had better chances of withstanding the ravages of time or if, in later centuries, the genre became more socially acceptable and hence more likely to find its way onto the written page. We can, however, conclude that our earlier written sources for ecclesiastical satire and parody indicate a caustic, mocking intent unlike the light-heartedness of parodies from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Only the greatest prude could have found “The Akolouthia of the Beardless Man,” or “The Synaxarion of the Honored Ass” blasphemous.

²³ Ed. H. EIDENEIER, *Spanos: Eine byzantinische Satire in der Form einer Parodie*. Berlin-New York 1977. Ed. W. WAGNER, *Συναξάριον τοῦ τιμημένου γαδάου*, in: *Carmina Graeca Medii Aevi*. Leipzig 1874, 112–123. The *Συναξάριον τοῦ τιμημένου γαδάου* also appears in *La satira bizantina dei secoli XI–XI*, ed. R. ROMANO. Torino 1999, 621–50. ROMANO, 179–195 also includes Christopher of Mytilene’s satirical invective against the corrupt monk Andrew with an Italian translation.

²⁴ Procopius, *Anecdota* 15.24 (ed. with English translation by H.B. DEWING, *The Loeb Classical Library*, vol. 290. Cambridge 1935, 183).

mous or offensive. The tone of both pieces is mirthful. In the sixth century, Procopios portrays the travesty staged by Theodora as both sacrilegious and relentlessly cruel. In the eleventh century, Christopher attacked the monk Andreas with mocking yet righteous indignation. The abuse dished out by Theodora and Christopher, however, is not what Bakhtin means by “abusive language,” which, for the Russian critic, uses “the language of marketplace,” rather than that of liturgy, as in Theodora’s case, or of the classical poets, as in Christopher’s. The vernacular is not used in Byzantine verse until the twelfth century, with the appearance of Ptochoprodromos’ poems on poverty.²⁵ The invention of novel insults is characteristic of this type of humor, and Christopher was too much a linguistic purist to use the vernacular expressions that would begin adding new color to Byzantine literature a century later. As different as Christopher’s polished wit and high linguistic register are from what Bakhtin identified as ‘the language of the marketplace,’ Bakhtin’s theories of laughter can help us understand Christopher’s important place in a tradition that speaks increasingly from the viewpoint of the lower classes. He is a few generations removed from humorists who began peppering their works with vernacular terms, but his interest in the lower classes and attempts to represent the world in their terms mark him as an important antecedent to the use of lower registers of language in twelfth-century writings.

Christopher’s refined wit seems removed from the crudeness of Rabelais which so delighted Bakhtin. Likewise his apparent malice. If Christopher uses laughter primarily as a weapon, in a Bakhtinian framework his humor would be considered that of the higher classes. Bakhtin asserts that higher-class humor uses laughter merely to destroy while that of the lower classes uses it also to create. We need not agree entirely with Bakhtin’s deliberately provocative, sweeping claim to appreciate his analysis of how subversive humor creates as well as destroys. Though many of Christopher’s epigrams seek merely to insult his enemies, as Oikonomides has indicated the poet seeks to comfort the afflicted as well as to afflict the comfortable. For all his urbane wit, there is a strong element in Christopher’s work which we might call populist. Furthermore, in addition to comforting the victims of

²⁵ For a study of the language and ideology of Ptochoprodromos, see M. ALEXIOU, *The Poverty of Écriture and the Craft of Writing: Towards a Reappraisal of the Prodromic Poems*. *BMGs* 10 (1986) 1–40.

snobbery and discrimination, certain of Christopher's poems suggest the possibility of redemption of his elitist targets through the recognition that all human life, for rich as well as poor and unlearned as well as educated, is sustained by base materials like excrement and dirt. His humor is therefore what Bakhtin would term 'carnavalesque' in that it is regenerative rather than purely negative, as he explains in a significant passage:

"The slinging of excrement and drenching in urine are traditional debasing gestures, familiar not only to grotesque realism but to antiquity as well. Their debasing meaning was generally known and understood. We can find probably in every language such expressions as 'I shit on you' ... This gesture and the words that accompany it are based on a literal debasement in terms of the topography of the body, that is, a reference to the bodily lower stratum, the zone of the genital organs. This signifies destruction, a grave for the one who is debased. But such debasing gestures and expressions are ambivalent, since the lower stratum is not only a bodily grave but also the area of the genital organs, the fertilizing and generating stratum. Therefore, in the images of urine and excrement is preserved the essential link with birth, fertility, renewal, welfare. This positive element was still fully alive and clearly realized in the time of Rabelais."²⁶

This observation of Bakhtin's sheds valuable light on the following epigram (K 85), addressed to an arrogant doctor:

Ἴατροέ, μὴ δίωκε τὸν τυφὸν μάτην
 εἰ γὰρ σκοπήσας ἀκριβῶς ἀνακρίνης
 ὄθεν πορίζῃ τὰς ἀφορμὰς τοῦ βίου,
 αὐτὸς σεαυτὸν καὶ μυσσαχθήσῃ τάχα,
 τροφῆς χορηγὸς οὖρα καὶ κόπρους ἔχων.
 Χρῆν οὖν ὄφρὸν ῥίψαντα τὴν ἐπηρομένην
 κόπρων σκάφας βλέπειν σε καὶ τὰς ἀμίδας,
 ὄθεν τραφήσῃ καὶ πόρους ἔξεις βίου...²⁷

Doctor, do not pursue such pride in vain;
 Should you perform a close examination
 Of how you find the means to make a living
 You'd be disgusted likewise by yourself

²⁶ BAKHTIN 148.

²⁷ KURTZ 54. The rest of the text, which contains lacunae, seems to refer to Job 2.8, in which Job is forced to rest on a dunghill.

Since you procure your food from dung and urine.
 You would do well to lose the haughty sneer
 When you survey the chamber pots and jars
 From which you'll feed and take the means of life...

This doctor is simultaneously renewed through the use of dung and urine – although he seems not to realize it – and debased through the poet's witty reference to these very materials. Here, in fact, the simultaneity of debasement and renewal is much easier to support than it is in Rabelais. It is frequently easy to see how characters in *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* are debased by human waste but difficult to see how they benefit from it.²⁸ Christopher, in contrast, directly states that dung and urine nourish and endow life to the physician whom he caustically insults. As the reference to the doctor's 'haughty sneer' makes clear, this epigram has an egalitarian message typical of Christopher's work as a whole; the doctor should realize that he has no right to look down on his patients – or anyone else – since the very things he finds most repulsive are those that sustain his own life. The link between excrement and the doctor's life, conspicuously unmentioned by name in the poem, is another of the poet's favorite topics – money. Feces produce money and therefore the necessities of life. Christopher implies but cleverly avoids directly stating the obvious fact that, through use as fertilizer, excrement also directly sustains the life of everyone. By using his poetry to establish links that his readers would otherwise overlook and unite categories normally perceived as separate, Christopher thus 'kneads' the fabric of creation together as he wishes the creator would do in reality. Physician and farmer are linked through their use of nourishing excrement.

In a Byzantine context it is likely that Christopher's poem would make the doctor seem lower than the farmer, since fresh samples of human waste were among the primary diagnostic tools in Byzantine medicine, while farmers were urged to wait until excrement had aged considerably before using it to fertilize their fields. In the mid-tenth century, Constantine VII had issued the *Geoponica*, with the following advice for farmers enriching their soil with human waste:

κάλλιον δὲ διὰ τὸ μυσαρὸν τοῦ πράγματος τῆ πρὸς τὰς ἄλλας γούν κόπρους μίξει παραμυθεῖσθαι... πρὸ δέ γε πάντων ἐκεῖνο παραφυλάττειν προσήκει, ὅπως μὴ αὐτενιαύτω κόπρω χρήσονται οἱ γεωργοί. αὕτη γὰρ

²⁸ BERRONG 23–4, 26.

ὠφελεῖ μὲν οὐδέν, πρὸς δὲ καὶ βλάπτει, καὶ θηρία πλεῖστα γεννᾷ. ἡ δὲ τριετής, καὶ τετραετῆς σφόδρα καλή.

It is recommended so as to mitigate its noxiousness to mix it with other dungs. Above all else, one should carefully ensure that ploughmen not use any dung less than a year old; for, it would be of no use, not to mention the damage it might cause, given that it is such an excellent source of food for beasts and snakes [sic, see footnote]. Three-to-four-year-old dung is best because the passage of time will have dissipated its stench and whatever was hard in it will have softened.²⁹

So, as long as one follows the advice approved by Constantine VII, it is the doctor, not the farmer, who is in contact with feces in their dangerous form. In a manner that makes Christopher an appealing subject for Bakhtinian readings, it is normally authority figures and other people in high places whom Christopher subjects to debasing yet renewing associations with ‘unclean’ materials, as in the following fragment (K 132) addressed to an Imperial Notary named Constantine:

Πηλὸν βδελύττη καὶ μένεις ἔνδον δόμου;
Καὶ μὴν ὁ πηλὸς οὐδαμῶς ἄπεσί σου,
κᾶνπερ προέρχη, κᾶνπερ ἐν δόμῳ μένη·
ὄλος γὰρ αὐτὸς πηλὸς εἶ, Κωνσταντίνε.
Τὸ συγγενὲς γοῦν μὴ βδελύττεσθαι θέλη,
σαυτοῦ γνώσκων πηλὸν οὔσαν τὴν φύσιν...³⁰

Do you abhor the mud and stay at home?
The mud will never keep away from you

²⁹ The Greek text is taken from *Geoponica sive Cassiani Bassi Scholastici de re rustica eclogae*, ed. H. BECKH. Leipzig 1895, 65. Translation quoted in D.-G. LAPORTE, *History of Shit*, translated by N. BENABID and R. EL-KHOURY. Cambridge 1993. French edition originally published in 1978 under the title “Histoire de la Merde”. The citation, not given in Laporte, is *Geoponica* 2.21. Laporte offers an interesting interpretation of this passage, arguing that it is the life principal itself in the excrement which must be allowed to depart. He also finds a biblical significance in the reference to snakes, which appeared in the 16th-century edition of the text most relevant to his immediate field of interest but is not found in Beckh’s critical edition. Laporte also accepts without comment Constantine VII’s authorship of the *Geoponica*. For a recent study of Constantine’s role in the text’s production, see B. KOUTAVA-DELIVORIA, *La contribution de Constantin Porphyrogénète à la composition des Geoponica*. *Byz* 72 (2002) 365–380.

³⁰ KURTZ 90.

Whether you leave the house or stay inside,
 Since, Constantine, you are all mud yourself.
 Wish not, then, to abhor a relative,
 But know thyself – by nature thou art mud.

The reclusive Constantine is driven to agoraphobia by a maniacal fear of dirt. The reference in line five to ‘abhor a relative,’ reinforces the idea that fear of dirt is connected to fear of other human beings – especially the unwashed lower classes to whom Constantine apparently feels superior. Such paranoia and snobbery are quite out of place, the speaker suggests, in a Christian society where everyone ought to be brothers and purity codes have ostensibly been rejected. The character Constantine has gone to excessive lengths to order his world (bring *kosmos* to his *kosmos*) and ensure that everything remain in its proper place – particularly that dirt and the dirty lower classes remain locked out.

The word *pēlos* occurs both in the opening lines of both the poem to Constantine the Notary and the longer poem (K13) on equality which we have discussed above. In K132, the word clearly means ‘mud.’ In K13 it can be taken in the same sense, but with a strong allusion to one of the word’s other meanings – ‘clay.’ Such a double meaning gives added force to the sense that the mud which Constantine abhors is the very clay from which God formed the human race. The Greek word I have translated as ‘abhor,’ *bdellyssomai*, has a particularly strong connotation. The noun *bdelygma*, from the same root, is the word used in the Septuagint for ‘abomination.’ Constantine takes social snobbery to the level of a pseudo-religion, and the poet’s opposition to his insistence on viewing God’s creation as an abomination carries resonations of the Christian abolition of Old Testament purity codes exemplified by the scene of Peter’s vision in Acts 10:11–15 (New Revised Standard Version):

“He [Peter] saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ But Peter said, ‘By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.’ The voice said to him again, a second time, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ ”

Through use of the term *bdellyssomai*, Christopher characterizes Constantine’s snobbery as a rejection of the New Testament. The word *pēlos* suggests that the Imperial Notary’s Old Testament creden-

tials are not much better, contemptuous as he is of the clay from which God shaped the human race. Generically, the poem on Constantine and the poem on the arrogant doctor are much easier to categorize than Christopher's longer poem on justice. Both are exemplary *psogoi*, or blame-poems. It is not easy to reconcile the place of these poems in the sequence with Oikonomides' opinion that Christopher became less indignant about social ills later in life. His invective is even more scathing and personal in these later poems.

In her work on purity codes, concepts of order, and threats of contamination and contagion, Mary Douglas argues that, by dividing reality into categories and then preventing certain categories from mixing, purity codes provide a necessary way to make sense of the world.³¹ Douglas' study is broadly diachronic, asserting that certain general characteristics occur universally in the purity codes of all cultures. She observes, 'We find in any culture worthy of the name various provisions for dealing with ambiguous or anomalous events' (p. 40). We may pause to wonder what may be a culture that is not 'worthy of the name,' but in any case Douglas' theory of purity is helpful in understanding Christopher's poem of the snobbish doctor, whose aversion to the anomalous event of sickness, like Constantine's aversion to dirt, expresses the need to establish rules that order society and allow it to function. It is Douglas' recognition of the inevitability of purity codes that makes her work useful in discussing the frustration expressed in Christopher's poem. Like Douglas, the poet acknowledges that human beings need to devise systems by which to order their reality, and he goes on to observe that processes of ordering will always result in certain people being unjustly pushed to the bottom of the social hierarchy and therefore labeled unclean.

Neither Christopher nor any pre-modern writer is concerned with what we would call 'hygiene,' although, as Douglas notes, 'the resemblance between some of their symbolic rites and our hygiene is uncannily close.'³² If we use Douglas' work as a way to approach the theoretical discussion of Christopher's poetry, we may agree with Douglas that the notion of hygiene has some relevance but does not sufficiently explain the aversion to anomalous material. The traditional Jewish interpretation of purity codes, which would have been familiar

³¹ M. DOUGLAS, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London 1966.

³² DOUGLAS 33.

to Christopher at least through the biased filter of Byzantine anti-Jewish polemics, was ‘that what is forbidden to the Israelites is forbidden to them solely to protect them from foreign influence.’³³ If we take Christopher’s use of the term *bdelygma* in the context of this traditional understanding, the poem associates social segregation with a type of ethnic segregation that (according to Christian polemics) Jews practice and Christians have rejected.

So both the hygienic interpretation and the traditional Jewish exegetical interpretation have some validity. Douglas posits another way of understanding purity which takes these two interpretations into account but does not contradict them outright and which, I believe, provides a useful theoretical basis for discussing Christopher’s poetry. ‘Uncleanness is matter out of place,’ she writes:

“Uncleanness or dirt is that which must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained. To recognise this is the first step towards insight into pollution. It involves us in no clear-cut distinction between sacred and secular. The same principle applies throughout. Furthermore, it involves no special distinction between primitives and moderns: we are all subject to the same rules. But in the primitive culture the rule of patterning works with greater force and more total comprehensiveness. With the moderns it applies to disjointed, separate areas of existence.”³⁴

In Douglas’ view the function of purity codes, above all, is to maintain a pattern. This does not contradict the hygienic interpretation, and it is quite compatible with the traditional interpretation since protection from outside influence is in itself a form of pattern-maintenance. Christopher’s poem K13 is both a recognition that a social pattern has emerged and a plea to have its maintenance discontinued. ‘[Spin] the discs of Bacchic disarray,’ is a cry for the order of things to be loosened; and the poem ends with evocative language difficult to reproduce in English. The word *symphyrō* can mean ‘to knead,’ ‘to beat,’ or ‘to confound or confuse.’ To knead and to confuse, respectively, undermine what for Douglas are two distinct functions of purity codes: to place a physical control over anomalous events and to reduce ambiguity.³⁵

³³ DOUGLAS 49.

³⁴ DOUGLAS 41.

³⁵ Douglas gives five functions: 1. To reduce ambiguity; 2. to control anomaly physically; 3. to avoid anomalous things and strengthen the definitions to which they

In K13, Christopher calls for the total disruption of a regimented system, and in K132 he lampoons a government official whose insistence on rigid, systematic control manifests itself in agoraphobia and obsession with cleanliness. Dirt equals mud equals clay equals humanity for the poet/speaker, but for Constantine the Notary, dirt is an anomaly that does not belong in an ordered system. Yet, 'where there is dirt, there is system,' Douglas tells us, 'Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements.'³⁶ Douglas helps explain why people like Constantine cannot ever escape the filth which they regard as an abomination. The more they order and classify their world (recalling the double meaning of 'kosmos'), the more by-products they will create which do not fit in. Ultimately, Constantine's obsessive orderliness in K132 and the poet/speaker's rebellion in K13 are represented as equally futile. Constantine is himself made from the same *pētos* as everyone else, and Christopher recognizes that social orders will always reassert themselves despite whatever upheavals may take place. He recognizes that the extremes of order and disorder are self-defeating, but reveals a strong emotional preference for the latter.

In spite of the type of Byzantine cultural elitism that Christopher ridicules in K85 and K132, there was also in Byzantine society a strong religious tradition linking poverty and holiness. Jesus and his apostles were all poor. Christopher's poems serve as a reminder that the poor are blessed according to the gospel. Like other things associated with poverty, dirt can even take on spiritual qualities and excessive concern with its eradication can be detrimental to one's spiritual well-being. A preminent scholar of poverty in Byzantine culture, Evelyne Patlagean, writes, 'Le bain, dont le confort difficile et précieux fait l'ornement de la civilisation urbaine, est depuis toujours un puissant adjuvant de la sociabilité, dont l'attrait est parfois jugé dangereux.'³⁷ The place

do not conform; 4. to label anomalous events as dangerous; and 5. to enrich meaning or call attention to other levels of existence. See DOUGLAS 40–41.

³⁶ See DOUGLAS 36.

³⁷ E. PATLAGEAN, *Pauvreté économique et pauvreté sociale à Byzance 4^e–7^e siècles*. The Hague 1977, 107–108. Patlagean is describing an earlier phase of Byzantine civilization than that in which Christopher lived, but her observations are nonetheless significant as the early centuries of Byzantium provided the narrative in which later Byzantines like Christopher understood the constructs of poverty and holiness. PATLAGEAN discusses the development of Byzantine ideas on poverty

where dirt is eliminated is thus the same place where social structures are reinforced, as Douglas' theoretical work and Patlagean's culture-specific work both show.

In the final section of this essay I would like to posit a reading of the term "Bacchic" in verse eight. It is significant that the adjective Christopher chooses to denote chaos and disorder is one rich in mythological suggestion. An equally important passage in K13 is the image in the second-to-last line of creation as a great lump of dough which has apparently become misshapen and must be kneaded again by God. Bacchus was a god associated with *omophagia*, the eating of raw foods,³⁸ which calls to mind Levi-Strauss' observation:

"The conjunction of a member of the social group with nature must be mediatized through the intervention of cooking fire, whose normal function is to mediatize the conjunction of the raw product and the human consumer, and whose operation thus has the effect of making sure that a natural creature is at one and the same time *cooked* and *socialized*."³⁹

Christopher's reference to the god of *omophagia* in his appeal for the removal of social constraints, like Levi-Strauss' remarks cited above, stress the connection between cooking and socialization. Bacchus is also related in other ways to the relaxation of social norms. He is a festive god, of course, associated with revelry, ecstasy and the City Dionysia.⁴⁰ Like the medieval carnival, the festival of Dionysus was a time when young and old, men and women (simultaneously but at times separately), Greeks and foreigners all participated in ecstatic celebrations. Such is the description of Dionysian revelry in Euripides' *Bacchae*, which Christopher most certainly knew. The tragedians were significant role models for the Byzantine epigrammists, whose standard meter – the dodecasyllable – was an adaptation of tragedy's iambic trimeter to the evolving Greek language.⁴¹ As the god in whose honor all ancient tragedies were performed, Bacchus had a tremendous

throughout the empire's history in her essay *The Poor*, in: *The Byzantines*. Ed. G. CAVALLO. Chicago 1992, 15–42.

³⁸ For a discussion of *omophagia* in the cult of Bacchus see E.R. DODDS' introduction to his edition of Euripides' *Bacchae*. Oxford 1960, xvi–xx.

³⁹ C. LEVI-STRAUSS, *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology: I*, translated by J. and D. WEIGHTMAN. New York 1964, 336.

⁴⁰ DODDS xx–xxv.

⁴¹ See the section on iambic trimetre and dodecasyllable in M. L. WEST, *Greek Metre*. Oxford 1982, 182–185.

formal importance for Byzantine epigrammists, and Christopher gives him a thematic significance as well by referring to ‘Bacchic disarray’ and thereby alluding to the god’s associations with *omophagia*, ecstasy, and the relaxation of social hierarchies.

In presenting a Christianized version of Bacchic disarray, Christopher writes not of the eating of raw meat, but of the kneading of uncooked dough. The word *symphyrō*, with its double meaning, suggests bread – specifically leavened bread such as the Byzantines used in their liturgy. Even more intensely than his references to the common clay from which all human beings are made, this comparison of the universe to leavened bread implies the sacredness of creation and the dignity and holiness of all creatures.⁴² To use Levi-Strauss in analyzing the poem’s apocalyptic closing lines, kneading implies a later cooking, a cooking still associated with socialization – but in this case the society is that of the Heavenly City rather than the inequitable civilization of man.

Christopher envisions a world where impurity has disappeared not because it has been washed away but because the pure and the impure have been mixed together to the point where they are no longer discernable. Douglas provides a theoretical framework in which to discuss the social ordering that leads to the poet’s wish for *ataxia*, but she has been criticized for failing to explain the disgust commonly felt toward what is perceived as unclean. Martha C. Nussbaum writes that Douglas’ ‘theory proves inadequate as an account of the core notions involved in disgust,’ and argues that Douglas fails to consider that, ‘The core or primary objects of disgust are reminders of animal vulnerability and mortality.’⁴³ Applied to Christopher’s poems, Nussbaum’s work helps account for Constantine the Notary’s loathing of dirt. The poet’s insight, ‘by nature thou art mud,’ suggests that Constantine, like all humans, will return to mud again – that we are all vulnerable, mortal beings.

Constantine’s obsession with cleanliness and order – both physical and social, brings us to the realm of psychoanalysis. Wealthy and ‘upwardly mobile’ people in Christopher’s work exhibit the qualities

⁴² For another discussion of food imagery in Christopher’s work see P. MAGDALINO, *Cosmological Confectionary and Equal Opportunity in the Eleventh Century. An Ekphrasis by Christopher of Mytilene (Poem 42)*, in: *Byzantine Authors: Literary Activities and Preoccupations*, ed. J. W. NESBITT. Leiden 2003, 1–6.

⁴³ M.C. NUSSBAUM, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*. Princeton 2004, 94.

of what Freud called the ‘anal character type.’ Such people ‘are especially *orderly, parsimonious, and obstinate,*’ Freud writes in ‘Character and Anal Erotism;’⁴⁴ and later in the same essay he remarks, ‘The connections between the complexes of interest in money and of defaecation, which seem so dissimilar, appear to be the most extensive of all.’⁴⁵ Freud gives many examples from folklore and mythology of the equation of money and excrement; Christopher’s observation that the doctor impressed with his own education and social status nourishes himself on human waste is a particularly acerbic instance of this topos. Bodily excretions are especially powerful reminders of our vulnerability and mortality (Nussbaum, pp. 94–97).

Some of Christopher’s themes continued to appear in Byzantine writing for many hundreds of years. Comparing him to twelfth-century writers, we see that he anticipates the medical satire of the *Ti-marion* and the class-consciousness of the ptochoprodromic poems.⁴⁶ Love for the poor, to be sure, is an ancient theme sanctioned by the Bible and the Fathers, but Christopher is unusual for suggesting, however briefly, that poverty might be banished from the Earth. While he ends by accepting that ‘you have the poor always,’ (John 12.7), he is remarkably grudging in his acceptance. Many Christian writers of earlier generations expressed love for the poor and contempt for wealth, but none surpassed his dissatisfaction with the status quo. His questioning of social hierarchies is an important precedent to the work of Byzantine thinkers who attempted to find real and permanent ways to alleviate all poverty. Even in the fourteenth century, the writer Alexios Makrembolites composed a *Dialogue Between the Rich and the Poor*, arguing that the only solution to society’s unceasing class-conflict was for rich and poor to intermarry until economic privilege disappeared.⁴⁷ As we see in the following observation by Evelyne Patlagean, Makrembolites shared many of Christopher’s concerns:

⁴⁴ Quoted in ed. P. GAY, *The Freud Reader*. New York 1989, 294.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 296.

⁴⁶ For a critical study of these texts and their place in Byzantine letters, see M. ALEXIOU, *After Antiquity*, especially chapter 4, ‘New Departures in the Twelfth Century,’ 96–150.

⁴⁷ A study of Makrembolites with special concentration on his apocalyptic ideas and the connection between spirituality and social justice has been undertaken by, S.I. KOUROUSES, *Αἱ ἀντιλήψεις περὶ τὸν ἔσχατον τοῦ κόσμου*, *EEBS* 37 (1969–70) 223–40. An edition of the work with both the original Greek and an English translation has been done by I. ŠEVČENKO, *Alexios Makrembolites and his ‘Dialogue between the Rich and the Poor’*. *ZRV* 6 (1960) 187–228. Oikonomides has also noted the

“The poor are close to angels and to God, morality is on their side; the rich live in a state of excessive accumulation; equilibrium should be restored, and the poor should again assume their role as intercessors... One becomes rich, the author continues, through knowledge or trade, by saving or by pillaging, and for many through power or an inheritance.”⁴⁸

The closeness of the poor to God is one area of particular interest to Christopher as well as to the later writer Makrembolites, who may have been influenced by him. One of the more significant differences between the two authors, however, is that Christopher never proposed any solution. His dark view of human nature makes it doubtful that he would have found Makrembolites’ optimistic social-engineering plan workable. He was an observer, not an activist, whose work formed a central part of the blossoming of dodecasyllabic verse in the eleventh and twelfth centuries; and his plea for God to solve the world’s problems not by *katharsis* but by *mixis* examines, with wit and sensitivity, social and religious problems that would continue to trouble Byzantine thinkers for the rest of the empire’s existence.

thematic similarities between Makrembolites and Christopher of Mytilene. See OIKONOMIDES 14.

⁴⁸ PATLAGEAN (1977) 39.

