Encomium for his mother

Introduction

Psellos' *Encomium for his Mother* is one of his longest, most rhetorically complex, and personally revealing narrative works after the *Chronographia.* No less than the latter work, it is also highly idiosyncratic (in ways that we will discuss below) and was studied and admired by later generations of Byzantine writers. "The most wise Psellos" is cited as a model in a treatise on composition attributed to Gregorios Pardos, bishop of Corinth in the early twelfth century and author of various technical philological treatises (including one on the dialects of ancient Greek). Pardos ranked the *Encomium* among the four best orations ever written (along with works by Demosthenes, Aristeides, and Gregorios of Nazianzos).[1] Anna Komnene, in her well-known digression on Ioannes Italos, compared him unfavorably to his teacher Psellos, who had "attained the peak of all knowledge" and "become famous for his wisdom," though this achievement, she notes, was in part due to his mother's prayers to the icon of the Theotokos on his behalf.[2] This is certainly one way of reading the *Encomium,* one that Psellos seems to have encouraged; below we will consider some others.

1. Gregorios Pardos, *[On Composition]* 31–33, 36, 38 (Donnet 320–322; see 110–111 for this work in general). For a sympathetic attempt to explain Pardos' choice, see J. Walker (2004).

2. Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* 5.8.3 (Reinsch and Kambylis 162); at 5.8.5 Anna misdates Psellos' tonsure to the reign of Michael VII (probably assuming that he fell out of favor only once).

Content. The work is at once an encomium and a funeral oration for Psellos' mother Theodote (who is named only once, at 22d). Theodote is one of very few Byzantine women we know something about who was neither an empress nor a saint (though, as we will see, Psellos tried to depict her as a saint). Roughly, the *Encomium* focuses first on her domestic and then on her ascetic life, at all times linking her to Psellos' own educational and spiritual development. But unlike other works of this genre, this oration has a wider cast of characters, including Psellos' unnamed father and sister, who, like Theodote, are praised in similar terms and given extended and dramatic death scenes followed by Psellos' own laments (cast as his reaction to the events at the time). The work is therefore unique in that it constitutes a laudatory "family portrait" as well as a kind of literary mausoleum. Nevertheless, everything—except Psellos' extended list of his own intellectual interests at the end of the work (27–30)—is arranged around the family life, conversion, and death of Theodote.

The *Encomium* is not an "autobiography," as its last editor enticingly albeit inaccurately entitled it. It does, to be sure, contain many autobiographical elements, but this is only to be expected given Psellos' relation to its subject and the reasons and circumstances that impelled him to write it in the first place. For instance, it affords us precious glimpses into private domestic life in Constantinople as well as a firsthand account of childhood education; these, however, are precisely what modern psychology valorizes and encourages us to regard as more deeply confessional than, say, a political *res gesta*. However, no ancient or Byzantine author would have accepted this set of priorities (with the possible exception of Augustine).[3] The *Encomium* tells us little or nothing about Psellos' career at the court, his friends, or his enemies. This may be due in part to the possibility that the events recounted in the oration do not extend past Psellos' teenage years. For these other aspects of his life, which at the time that he wrote the *Encomium* he would surely have considered more important, we must turn to his other works, each of which presents us with a different "Psellos." There may come a time when we are in a position to synthesize them into a more or less coherent portrait; for now, however, we still are a long way from understanding each individually.

3. For autobiography in Byzantium, see, in general, Angold (1998) and Hinterberger (1999) esp. 41–43 for the *Encomium*; also idem (2000) 141 for the difference between autobiographical texts and an autobiographical mode.

The following outline of the contents of the *Encomium* has astutely been divided into thematic sections by its editor, Criscuolo.

1:	exordium
2a–3c:	Theodote's parents, birth, physical and spiritual virtues
3d–4d:	her marriage to Psellos' father and their children
5–6:	Psellos' childhood and education
7–8:	Theodote's virtues and spiritual qualities
9:	her husband's qualities
10:	her encouragement of Psellos' studies
11–12:	her asceticism and charity
13–14:	Psellos' sister, her conversion of a prostitute, and her pregnancy
15:	his lament for his sister's death
16a–c:	his sister's death described in retrospect
16d–17d:	Theodote's conversion and pious longings
18:	Psellos' father as a monk
19:	his father's death and Psellos' lament
20:	Psellos' vision of his saved father
21–22:	Theodote's asceticism
23:	her formal consecration into the religious life, and her death
24:	Psellos' lament for his mother's death
25:	Theodote as saint and martyr
26:	Psellos' different conception of philosophy
27–30:	his philosophical and scholarly interests
31:	his plea to be released from the court

Date, Occasion, and Purpose. Psellos wrote the *Encomium* at the very end of the reign of Konstantinos IX Monomachos (1042–January 1055), probably in late 1054, immediately after he had accepted monastic tonsure in an effort to escape from the crumbling regime of the ailing and weak emperor. The year 1054 had been an eventful one for Psellos in any case (he was thirty-six years old at the time). The circle of "intellectuals" that had enjoyed the emperor's favor from the mid-1040s—including Psellos' friend Konstantinos Leichoudes, his teacher Ioannes Mauropous, and his colleague Ioannes Xiphilinos—had, for reasons that remain unclear, gradually lost its influence: one by one they were either dismissed from the court or retired "voluntarily." The emperor's position had moreover been shaken by the rise of the ambitious patriarch Michael Keroularios

and the events of the so-called Schism of 1054. Also, in the last years of Monomachos' reign Psellos' faith was publicly questioned. The emperor demanded a signed confession to silence the critics, who may have included the patriarch himself. Psellos had in any case always been defensive about his philosophical pursuits and had probably always been perceived as flirting with paganism, Neoplatonism, theurgy, and astrology.[4]

In the chapters of the *Chronographia* devoted to the final months of the reign of Monomachos, written in the early 1060s, Psellos attributes his decision to become a monk to the instability of the emperor's character (6.191–203). He, Xiphilinos, and one other man who cannot be safely identified, made a pact to retreat from the court in this manner. Xiphilinos was the first to go through with it. Thereupon, Psellos very conveniently became sick and used the possibility of his imminent death as a pretext to follow the same course. The emperor, he claims, at first tried to dissuade him with promises and threats but finally acceded when the deed was done. To be sure, in one passage (6.199), Psellos notes that he had wanted to embrace the monastic life since his childhood, but this we may take to be nothing more than a passing nod to the lies he must have told at the time to make his decision more credible. There was little in monastic life that would have appealed to Psellos: soon after Monomachos' death he fled from Bithynia and returned to the capital, where he again took up court intrigue, philosophy, and teaching.[5] But at the time, and for a while thereafter, he had to keep up appearances. These are reflected, for instance, in the *hypomnêma* concerning the dissolution of the engagement of his daughter to Elpidios, where sickness is cited as the sole reason for his tonsure (see below, p. 151).

The *Encomium,* which is in all likelihood the first text we have from Psellos' hand after his tonsure (excepting perhaps certain letters), was written between his "recovery" and his departure from the capital. Yet he makes no mention here of his sickness and presents his decision to become a monk as the natural outcome of his mother's lifelong saintly influence. In the final paragraph, he indirectly begs the emperor, who apparently wanted to retain him at the court despite his tonsure, to cease disputing with his monastic superiors

4. For the regime of the intellectuals, see Lemerle (1977). See Hondridou (2002) on the reign of Monomachos in general (Hondridou speculates that the intellectuals were linked to Zoe and lost power after her death in ca. 1050). Accusation against Psellos: Garzya (1967); the text is now *Theol. II* 35.

5. For Psellos' view of contemporary monasticism, see Kaldellis (1999a) ch. 10 and passim.

and allow him to depart (31a).[6] It is here that we gain a glimpse of the immediate intended audience of the work. Psellos has throughout maintained the appearance (or the fiction) that the *Encomium* is a funeral oration being addressed to relatives and others who wish to know about the saintly qualities of his mother (e.g., 1c–d, 7c, 17b). Only at the end do we realize that it is a political document that has as much if not more to do with Psellos' career than with his family. Theodote's refusal to moderate her asceticism or change her way of life in response to the threats and blandishments of her spiritual father seems to highlight and justify Psellos' refusal to do the same in response to the emperor's threats and blandishments (22a). There is, moreover, a passage (29a) in which Psellos aims the defense of his intellectual pursuits at those who would question them, invoking his saintly mother in defense of his philosophical motivation. We are dealing, then, with a text written at a time of personal crisis that reflects a specific image that Psellos was keen to propagate in order to respond to the circumstances of the moment, an image that he later discarded when it was no longer convenient. We should therefore approach this oration with considerable caution and even skepticism (as, indeed, we should every text written by Psellos).

It has escaped the attention of most scholars that the *Encomium* effectively canonizes Psellos' mother. At her funeral, Psellos has her spiritual father pronounce her both a saint and a martyr (24b), a judgment that Psellos immediately goes on to defend in his own voice (25c: she was martyred in her fatal struggle with the tyranny of matter).[7] This family hagiography would later be complemented with a more playful autohagiography: after his brief withdrawal from political life, Psellos wrote a new version of the *Life of St Auxentios,* in which he reworked crucial details of the saint's life to match those of his own![8] But the intent of the *Encomium,* at any rate, is serious. By focusing throughout

6. In my view, the passage does not suggest that he is asking the emperor to intercede on his behalf with his monastic superiors: J. Walker (2004) 64–65. Arguments against the proposed date of 1054 rest on the assumption that Psellos wrote the *Encomium* at Olympos; it seems, rather, that he is here pleading with the emperor to allow him to depart for Olympos by *ceasing* to exert pressure on his monastic superiors. Besides, no alternative date better fits the tenor and hints of the oration. Psellos' alleged "incarceration" in the monastery of *ta Narsou* during the years 1059–1064, taken seriously by Walker, is based on a single letter misunderstood by Joannou (1951) 287.

7. Cf. Hinterberger (1999) 92.

8. Kazhdan (1983); see also Hinterberger (1999) 233–234, and 230–238 for autohagiography in general; idem (2000) 147 for the *Life.*

on his own close relationship to his mother, he effectively appropriates her sanctity for himself and wraps himself in her piety. This is perhaps why he refers to her by name only once, and that only tangentially in a vision seen by a third party (22d), ensuring that she would be remembered less as Theodote than as "Psellos' mother," a term used throughout and most emphatically in the first words of the oration. In this way, Psellos hoped to counter the suspicions that were certainly being raised at the court regarding the sincerity of his conversion. This oration would silence those doubts, while a proclamation of filial piety on his part would dampen the accusations of cynicism and heterodoxy. In fact, with the *Encomium* Psellos hoped to kill two birds with one stone. In addition to its exaltation of ascetic ideals, the oration constantly traces the origins of Psellos' own intellectual pursuits to the initiative and piety of his mother (5b ff., esp. 6a, 10a–d, 24b). As we will see below, Psellos makes it clear that his own brand of philosophy was not the same as that of his mother, but her sanctity is meant to protect his eccentric and broad interests. That is why the *Encomium* ends with the long and defensive list of his own studies (27–30), which follows his accounts of her death and posthumous appearance to Psellos in a dream.

In short, the emphasis in the *Encomium* on asceticism and the justification of Psellos' own philosophical studies closely tallies with the pressures to which he was subject in 1054. This suggests that political worries were more important than filial piety in prompting its composition. Let us note that a similar argument has already been made regarding one of the orations that Psellos used a model, Gregorios of Nazianzos' *Funeral Oration for his Brother Kaisarios.* Gregorios goes out of his way to present his rather unsaintly brother as a saint in order to strengthen his hand in dealing with officials who were investigating some irregularities in Kaisarios' will and estate.[9]

There are additional reasons why skepticism is in order, beyond even the fact that Psellos does not ascribe any miracles to his saintly mother. First, the ideals to which Theodote devoted the later and saintly portion of her life were precisely those that Psellos himself opposed in a variety of works not subject to severe political and ecclesiastical pressure. Second, it seems that Theodote had died some time before 1054, making her *Encomium* a belated and therefore somewhat opportunistic work. To be sure, Psellos gives no indication of the date of her death, only that it happened some time after the death of his sister in 1034

9. McGuckin (2001) 33. For Psellos' models, see below.

(22d). But this omission probably means that it was not recent. Accordingly, the grief expressed in the work is set entirely in the past, at the time of her death, and not in the rhetorical present. We should also note that Theodote's own mother, Psellos' grandmother, was still alive at the time of Theodote's death (24d) but not when the *Encomium* was composed (2a–b). This establishes only a relative temporal framework, but militates against a recent bereavement.[10]

Third, the narrative of Theodote's monastic career is unconvincing. Psellos would have us believe that she had ascetic aspirations as a child (3c), resisted the idea of marriage initially (3d), and began to contemplate retiring from the world even before the death of her daughter in 1034 (11b), though she did not want to separate from her husband. It was the death of her eldest child that strengthened her resolve (16b–d) and enabled her to persuade her husband to do likewise. But now the logic breaks down. Theodote made sure that her husband was tonsured first (16d) and, curiously, though he died soon thereafter (18b), she herself was not properly consecrated until long afterwards (21a, 22d), in fact immediately before her own death. At that point she was almost too weak to go through with the ceremony; more to the point, she *knew* then that she was dying (23a). One can be skeptical of this narrative. Why did she wait so long for something she had allegedly desired since childhood? It is more likely that she and her husband, like so many other Byzantines of perfectly ordinary faith, took monastic vows only when they perceived that their end was near (and her husband had grave doubts about this decision even at the very end: 18b, 19b). Monasteries for such affluent families served as homes for the retirement and care of the elderly and infirm. But Psellos, for purposes of his own, has worked his family up into an assembly of saints, transforming, in accordance with the rules of rhetoric, minor virtues into a full-fledged encomium.[11]

In doing so, moreover, he has adapted traditional hagiographic motifs. The hagiography of female saints in Byzantium followed a curious trajectory.[12] Beginning with the martyrs of the persecutions, it moved on to women who broke with their families and social expectations in order to suppress their femininity through extreme asceticism or by dressing as men and joining monastic communities. But the years after ca. 800 witnessed the rise of the pious housewife, who had monastic aspirations but largely conformed to social

10. So too J. Walker (2004) 65.
11. Cf. *Chronographia* 6.161 and Kaldellis (1999a) 136.
12. See Patlagean (1976).

conventions regarding marriage and childbearing. In the *Encomium,* we witness the reversal of this process: Theodote begins as a pious housewife but gradually gives rein to her ascetic impulses and ends up denying her femininity by an excess of renunciation. In terms of the saints of Lesbos, Thomaïs has turned into Theoktiste. Finally, at her death she is proclaimed a martyr to the flesh. To the learned Byzantine reader, the *Encomium,* even beyond its rhetorical strengths, is a masterpiece of typological allusion.

Literary models and Psellos' originality. It is clear upon a first glance that the *Encomium* combines aspects of various genres, especially panegyric, e.g., in the title, in the disclaimer of the orator's ability (1c), and in the mention of Theodote's ancestors (2a); *epitaphios* (this requires no illustration); hagiography, e.g., in the description of her asceticism and funeral; consolation, especially in the visions that attest to the salvation of his loved ones; and lament (*monodia*), especially in the three major laments that Psellos attributes to himself upon the deaths of his sister (15d), father (19b–d), and mother (24b) (another can be found toward the end of the *Funeral Oration for Styliane*: 79–82).[13] The standard rhetorical models for non-imperial subjects were the funeral orations by Gregorios of Nazianzos for his father Gregorios, brother Kaisarios, and sister Gorgonia (which also refer to his mother Nonna often along the way), and for Basileios of Kaisareia (*Or.* 7, 8, 18, 43). Psellos used these directly, to judge from the frequency of his borrowings from them throughout the *Encomium.*[14] As with most of the literary works he used there, these allusions will not be marked in the translation, for that would clutter the text and make it difficult to read (though it should be borne in mind that the effect of multiple allusions cluttering the text would surely not have been lost on the very educated Byzantine reader, probably the only kind who could read a text as difficult as the *Encomium* in any case). Those who are interested in the specific passages in question should consult the apparatus of Criscuolo's edition, where they are conveniently listed.

Other models included Gregorios of Nyssa's *Life* of his sister Makrina and, a much later text, Theodoros Stoudites' funeral oration for his mother Theoktiste (*Or.* 13, in *PG* 99, cols. 883–901). But generic analysis, for all that it is both easy and popular, reveals little about authorial intentions and strategies. It is

13. For questions of genre in response to death, see Agapitos (2003).
14. For this question, see Criscuolo 29–44; for a few case studies, see Vergari (1987b).