

**Ioannis Polemis, *Theodore Metochites: Patterns of Self-Representation in Fourteenth Century Byzantium*. I. B. Tauris, Bloomsbury Publishing. 2024. 208 pp.**

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Anna Alexia Markouizos

***Book Review***

Known for his renovation of the Chora Church, political affairs under Andronikos II Palaiologos, and various scientific and literary works, Theodore Metochites is an important figure when studying the Late Byzantine Period. Though his achievements are well known, there is limited scholarly work regarding his self-representation in his own texts. However, with Polemis' recently published book, readers discover a more in-depth analysis into the mind – and masks – of this fourteenth-century Byzantine thinker.

**Introduction: Life and Work at the End of Empire**

Before diving into the purpose and state of the art of his monograph, Polemis equips his readers with a history of the Eastern Roman Empire at the time of Metochites, followed by a succinct background of Metochites. It is critical to be mindful of the historical context in which Metochites is producing literature to interpret it appropriately and effectively. Polemis delineates the chronology of Metochites' works and even discusses the consistency and simultaneous inconsistency with certain themes, some of which are elucidated throughout his book. The objective and methodology of his book are then clearly explained: through a critical evaluation of Metochites' literary compositions, he seeks to “examine the ways in which Metochites self-represents in his poems and orations.”<sup>1</sup> Polemis explains the way in which Byzantine scholars tend to write fictitious pieces when referring to themselves by way of *personae*. The idea of elusiveness is referenced, which sets the stage for the upcoming chapter where the many “masks” worn by Metochites are identified, explored, and justified.

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<sup>1</sup> Polemis (2024), 8.

An academic, however, cannot begin his quest on such a topic without an assessment of the existing scholarship pertaining to this line of research; and Polemis does precisely that. Our author gives us recollection of past scholarly work and his own insight about the arguments of renowned intellectuals such as Hans-Georg Benc, Herbert Hunger, Ihor Ševčenko, Markos Kermanidis, and Sophia Xenophontos. Polemis, then, urges us to keep in mind that Metochites is cognizant of the fact that his contemporaries hide themselves behind their written word and intended on writing in a series of inconsistencies.

## **Part I: Metochites' Representations of Himself and Others**

### **Chapter 1: Metochites on Himself: Inner Ambiguity**

Polemis dedicates Part I to how Metochites portrays himself in his works and how these “masks” function. The first version of Metochites is that of a public servant and servant of God based on the lines of Poem 1 and Poem 2. Polemis concisely remarks how Metochites presents himself as an intellectual and servant in a couple of his texts intended for different audiences. In this way, Metochites wears different “masks” dependent on not only his assumed role but also his readers. Polemis also provides evidence regarding Metochites depicting himself as an author, oscillating between being humble and proud of his writing capabilities.

Polemis identifies three rhetorical devices Metochites employs: soliloquys, heterotopies, and *figurae*. Soliloquys are a tradition already solidified within the confines of Byzantine literature, which allow Metochites to have a profound dialogue with his soul in a couple of his works. Secondly, Polemis defines heterotopies as:

“[...] a social, political or sometimes psychological laboratory where the laws of life that the people have come to know are replaced by different laws introduced by those who control the utopia, mildly or possibly radically transforming those who live in it.”<sup>2</sup>

Metochites' heterotopies are Constantinople (*Byzantios* and Poem 3), the Hagia Sophia (*Byzantios*, Poem 11, Poem 13), the Chora Church (*Byzantios* and Poem 2), and his home (Poem 19). Lastly, Metochites' employment of *figurae*, which are interpreted as allegories as well, assuming the position of actual figures, but not limited to locations, of history, in his last seven poems. The *figurae* enable Metochites to not reveal his true feelings and views, all the while giving him an opportunity to reflect upon himself.

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<sup>2</sup> Polemis (2024), 38.

## Chapter 2: Metochites on Others: Mirror Images of Himself

When elucidating the “masks” of Metochites, Polemis deems it imperative to consider the male figures who he believed mirror various aspects of his beliefs and life because “they exhibit most of the characteristics [Metochites] attributes to himself in the self-portraits he created in his works.”<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, Polemis dissects Metochites’ elusiveness in relation to Gregory of Nazianzus and Joseph Rhakendytes (also known as Joseph the Philosopher), who are referenced. There is also a brief mention of St. Demetrius and his four *politeiai* (πολιτεΐαι). Alongside the patron saint of Thessaloniki, Polemis alludes to how Metochites identifies himself in his literature through specific characteristics of Joseph the Philosopher as a way of simultaneously unveiling and concealing his true self. Polemis encourages his readers to interpret the literary and symbolic masks of Metochites as those used in theatrical productions, where the world is the theatre, and the masks are a medium, or object, through which one can preserve his sanctity.

## Chapter 3: Coda – Disposing of Oneself: A New Way of Being?

In investigating the elusiveness of Metochites, Polemis further emphasizes how our historical protagonist is torn between the contemplative and active life. This becomes evident with an extract provided by our author derived from Poem 2, in which Metochites claims he wishes to have dedicated his life to being a monk of his beloved Chora.<sup>4</sup> Despite this internal battle, evidence of his aspiration to achieving a political career in his younger years can be detected in his writings. Nevertheless, Polemis justifies this contradiction due to Metochites not wanting to disclose a distinct opinion between the two ways of life and imitate the elusiveness of Joseph the Philosopher. With this tug-of-war between the contemplative life charming Metochites and his political career fulfilling his childhood ambition, the ambiguity of Theodore prevails.

## Part II: The Quest for Novelty: Innovation Versus Tradition in Metochites’ Representation

### Chapter 4: Not Everything Old is to be Revered

While asserting how important being an intellectual is for Metochites, Polemis demonstrates how being an innovator was also a priority for the fourteenth-century statesman. Polemis, in addition to mentioning the level of formality in Metochites’ texts, provides us with another layer of this scholarly revolution: Metochites’ overt criticism of “seniority and tradition.”<sup>5</sup> Despite being progressive for his time, one of Metochites’ contemporaries, Nikephoros Choumnos, was the scholar of tradition, with the former being an advocate for literary innovation. Throughout the chapter, Polemis details both sides of the story with respect to Byzantine writing, where, regardless of Choumnos’ preference of the contemporary writing system, Metochites is openly in favor of

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<sup>3</sup> Polemis (2024), 45. FOOTNOTE

<sup>4</sup> Metochites: Poems, 104, Greek text 2, 365-84; Metochita: Carmina, 65.

<sup>5</sup> Polemis (2024), 65.

scholars modeling their literature after intricate and ornate styles of past intellectuals. This is an opinion, which in consonance with Polemis, indirectly informs his fellow scholars that he disagrees with them following the contemporary conventional (and banal and restrictive) rules of Byzantine authorial style.

### **Chapter 5: Oration 6, on Gregory of Nazianzus: A Response to Men like Choumnos?**

Notwithstanding the brief reference to the Metochites-Choumnos controversy in the fifth chapter, Polemis intends this section to detail Metochites' appraisal and literary reception of Gregory of Nazianzus to advance the argument that he is going against the long-established Byzantine writing style. In tandem with endeavors of Metochites to imitate the lofty and graceful writing style of Gregory of Nazianzus, to quote Polemis, the fourteenth-century scholarly statesman reprimands his contemporaries for not even aiming to recreate compositions mimicking Gregory's rhetorical style and opting for simpler syntactical techniques.

Following astute observations and careful considerations of the role of Gregory of Nazianzus in Oration 6 in indirectly voicing an opinion of his contemporary savants, Polemis dives into how Metochites' perception of Demosthenes and Aristeides' use of rhetoric in their works provide models of writing for his fellow intellectuals. Although Metochites criticized those who imitated Demosthenes in the preceding chapter, Polemis intuitively and insightfully delineates:

“Metochites' views on the ideal style remain unchanged despite his recommending a different author as the personification of his literary ideal in each speech.”<sup>6</sup>

Polemis makes an intriguing conclusion as per another “mask” of Metochites: in spite his mixed reviews of Aristeidis, he and Metochites are both heavily involved with epideictic rhetoric, an oratory mode that permeated the late Byzantine intellectual realm. In this regard, Metochites, as Polemis shrewdly denotes, is cognizant of the restrictions forced upon his orations and that of his peers.

### **Chapter 6: Coda – Metochites on Rhetoric: Veiled Criticism of Late Byzantium Discursive Culture**

Further modeling himself as a philosopher like Gregory of Nazianzus, Metochites also acknowledges the significance of incorporating lessons of rhetoric in the contemporary Byzantine curriculum. By Metochites inconspicuously expressing his rhetorical dissimilarity with his fellow intellectuals, Polemis explains how the patron of the Chora Church wears masks of previous ancient writers. Through these comparisons, which prove contradictory as these the writing styles

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<sup>6</sup> Polemis (2024), 83.

differ and serve varying purposes, Polemis' argument is strengthened as Metochites' elusiveness as an intellectual is illuminated.

### **Part III: *Vita Contemplativa* Versus *Vita Activa*: Their Ambiguous Relationship and the Inner Ambiguities of Metochites' Self-Image as an Intellectual**

#### **Chapter 7: "The Greek Seeks Wisdom:" Poem 6, for the Three Great Prelates, and Poem 5, for St. Athanasios: Theology, Greek Learning and the Quest for a Humanist Monastery**

Although the chapter title mentions Poem 5 and Poem 6, the primary focus is Oration 10, known as *Ethikos*, where readers gain insight about Metochites' relationship with the contemplative life and idea of nature. Polemis incorporates them as 'foil poems,' so to speak, in the first stage of literary analysis of Metochites' tenth oration. In the work of *Ethikos*, Metochites seeks to abandon the active life to unite wholly with the contemplative path. Before dissecting the "mask" of Metochites in *Ethikos*, Polemis outlines the content of the Byzantine scholar's tenth oration. In a clever way, it is as if Polemis discreetly hands us the appropriate knowledge and background for us to finally come in contact with Metochites' seemingly eternal struggle, finding himself between the contemplative life and active life. In investigating this internal strife, Polemis goes into detail about the conceptualization of *theoria*, which can be defined as 'spiritual contemplation,' 'knowledge of God,' or even 'philosophical speculation.'<sup>7</sup>

Polemis refers to the idea of intellectual pleasure sought by Metochites, where he suggests the consolidation of Greek education and Christian ideology. Polemis labels Metochites as a Byzantine humanist for also being an advocate of the *vita contemplativa*. Nonetheless, Metochites does seem reserved in other parts of *Ethikos* with regards to the contemplative life – another "mask" Polemis notes – where he is hesitant about assuming a life of contemplation. Even though Metochites seems to believe in a life devoted to action, such as a political career in this case, it is not a source of his own happiness and satisfaction, however, he does argue on behalf of those who chose that path. In this regard, Polemis continues to illustrate the elusiveness of Metochites and his contradictory "masks".

#### **Chapter 8: Oration 11, *Byzantios*: The Secular Body of the City and a Secular World Contemplated**

Polemis scrutinizes Metochites' Oration 11, *Byzantios*, in his eighth chapter, in which he provides us with a brief contextual overview, that reads as a short story recounting the unique geography, rich history, and indistinguishable beauty of Constantinople. Subsequently, Polemis elucidates how Metochites rhetorically situates the glorious Byzantine city within a context of nature. The author also takes the time to study *Byzantios* and *Ethikos* comparatively in order to highlight the struggle between *vita contemplativa* (*Ethikos*) and *vita activa* (*Byzantios*) troubling Metochites. Polemis states Oration 11 comes off as a secular piece due to Metochites employing Stoic and

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 107.

Platonic philosophical undertones to designate the world as a living organism, in which Constantinople has seized the throne of God's heavenly kingdom.

Equally, Polemis discusses one striking aspect of *Byzantios*: the absence of the Byzantine emperor, despite Metochites having praised him in previous works. Nevertheless, due to Byzantine emperors being considered divinely ordained and having a privileged relationship with God and the presence of the rapid decline of the Byzantine state, Polemis reassures readers it would only seem consistent to not mention God's intermediary on Earth. The "mask" of Metochites in *Byzantios* is one that Polemis argues is perhaps his most authentic, where the fourteenth-century statesman consolidates his active and contemplative lives.

### **Chapter 9: Coda – Nature and Being: Elusive Concepts**

In his ninth and final chapter, Polemis analyzes Metochites' elusive employment of the word *physis* (φύσις) in his literary compositions and examines the way in which the prominent patron of the Chora Church conveyed his views about nature. Although *physis* is used in primarily positive contexts, Polemis points out human nature is an instance where the term is employed negatively, particularly in his hagiographical works. Human life is perceived as a theatrical performance and dream, one from which man should wake up as soon as possible to find himself in heaven, lest he live out a miserable existence. Such a pessimistic view of humanity is hardly striking, for as Polemis reminds readers, ancient writers such as Sophocles and Euripides also believed man's presence is so wretched that dying is the only solution. Polemis concludes the utilization of *physis* allows us to comprehend even Metochites struggled to find himself, and as a result, viewed life as a steppingstone to salvation in the afterlife.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Polemis sets out to expound the elusive personality of Theodore Metochites in a myriad of literary works. The subject matter is undeniably enigmatic, but Polemis, in my view, successfully explains each topic and clarifies any incongruities that may arise from the ambiguous nature of Metochites' self-representation. Filled with necessary contextualizations, valuable citations, and philosophical discussions, Polemis makes his work accessible to a larger demographic than simply experienced scholars on the Late Byzantine Period. As someone who has found herself rereading pages containing profound philosophical ideologies which are not rationalized and explicated sufficiently, it was refreshing to read a piece of academic literature with ease and genuine pleasure.