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Gendering Politics – The Female Authorial Voice of Anna Komnene¹

Abstract: Through perspective of a feminist narratology, I have tried to answer some crucial questions on the issue of unique medieval woman's text and its distinctive mode of enunciation. Feminist criticism seeks to reassess the modern narratological theories in term of gender, social and power relations. The main issues that concern feminist narratologists are voice, context and narrative level of a specific women's text wherefore I have chosen to deal with this pivotal narratological elements in relation to Anna Komnene's Alexiad. My final aim was to present in which way Anna conducted a peculiar 'genderization' of her narrative and how these crucial elements were shaped and moulded according to the authoress' gender and her gender-related views and interests.

Key words: Feminist narratology, medieval women, Anna Komnene, Alexiad, women's text

The voice of a narrative agency is an issue of great concern in the field of literary criticism, and it gives an individual power of authority. As Genette has pointed out, there are three crucial components in narratology: tense, mood and voice.² As the subject of our inquiry already suggests, I will address an important aspect of an

¹ This study presents results from the project "Christian culture on the Balkans in the Middle Ages: Byzantine Empire, the Serbs and the Bulgarians from the 9th and 15th century" (No. 177015)

² For this division see Genette Gerard, *Narrative Discourse, An Essay in Method*, Translated by Jane E. Lewin, Cornell University Press 1980 [First edition: Paris, 1972]

authorial voice³ of a specific Byzantine source from its gender⁴ perspective, which is an additional, if not crucial, category for contextualizing a literary work written by a woman in an androcentric medieval society. A voice as ‘a trope of identity and power’⁵ is crucial for our understanding of female expressions or ‘speaking up’ in a society where the *voice* was considered an exclusively male dominion. A *female voice* in particular should be considered in the scope of Lanser’s definition – ‘When feminists talk about voice, we are usually referring to the behaviour of actual or fictional persons and groups who assert woman-centred points of view’.⁶ One cannot discard the importance of this approach since all scholars that have addressed the issue of the *Alexiad* have dealt in some way with the question of female authorship.⁷ In this regard, if we start a discussion from the reader’s perspective, one of the first cognitive processes is the attribution of sex and gender to narrators.⁸ It is enough to quote some passages from recent publications on Anna Komnene and her work to delineate this matter of importance:

³ For the authorial voice of Anna Komnene cf. Gouma-Peterson, Thalia, “Gender and Power: Passages to the Maternal in Anna Komnene’s *Alexias*”, in: *Anna Komnene and Her Times*, Edited by Thalia Gouma Peterson, New York and London 2000 (further in text: Gouma-Peterson, Th., *Passages to the Maternal*), p. 107-125; Neville, Leonora, “The Authorial Voice of Anna Komnene”, in: *The Author in Middle Byzantine Literature*, Edited by Aglae Pizzone, De Gruyter 2014, p. 263-277 (further in text: Neville, L., “The Authorial Voice of Anna Komnene”); Vilimonović, Larisa, “Deconstructing the Narrative, Constructing a Meaning – Why was the *Alexiad* written?”, in *ZRVI* 52 (2015), forthcoming

⁴ In the complex sociological discussions on the definitions of ‘gender’, I lean towards the basic conception that “gender refers to a system of social practices that constitute women and men as different and unequal.” – Wharton, Amy S., *The Sociology of Gender: An Introduction to Theory and Research*, Blackwell 2005, p. 23 (further in text: Wharton, A.S., *The Sociology of Gender*).

⁵ Lanser, Susan S., *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice*, Cornell University Press 1992 (further in text: Lanser, S.S., *Fictions of Authority*), p. 4.

⁶ Lanser, S.S., *Fictions of Authority*, p. 7.

⁷ To name only recent studies – Macrides, Ruth, “The Pen and the Sword: Who Wrote *Alexiad*?”, in: *Anna Komnene and Her Times*, New York and London 2000 (further in text: Macrides R., “The Pen and the Sword”); Reinsch, Diether R., “Women’s Literature in Byzantium? – The Case of Anna Komnene”, in: *Komnene and Her Times*, New York and London 2000; Hill, Barbara (further in text: Reinsch, D. R., “The Case of Anna Komnene”), “Actions Speak Louder than Words: Anna Komnene’s Attempted Usurpation”, in: *Anna Komnene and Her Times*, New York and London 2000 (further in text: Hill, B., *Anna Komnene’s Attempted Usurpation*); Gouma-Peterson, Th., *Passages to the Maternal*; Neville, Leonora, *Lamentation, History and Female Authorship in Anna Komnene’s Alexiad*, in: *Greek Roman and Byzantine Studies* 53 (2013), p. 192-218, Vilimonović, Larisa, *Struktura i osobine Aleksijade Ane Komnin – Nastanak jedne lične istorije*, Beograd 2014 (doctoral thesis) (further in text: Vilimonović L., *Struktura i osobine Aleksijade Ane Komnin*); Riehle, Alexander, “Authorship and Gender (and) Identity, Women’s Writing in the Middle Byzantine Period”, in: *The Author in Middle Byzantine Literature*, Edited by Aglae Pizzone, De Gruyter 2014, p. 245-263

⁸ *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, Edited by Herman, David, Jahn, Manfred and Ryan, Marie-Laure, Routledge 2005, p. 290

‘She [Anna Komnene] was a strong and a powerful lady. She was also highly intelligent and well educated; she has distinction of being the only secular woman historian of the European Middle Ages, and a historian of the highest caliber.’⁹

‘In later life, Anna suited her actions to her words, believing so firmly in women’s right to decision making about the succession that she attempted to seize the imperial throne for herself and her husband after her father’s death in 1118. Given her deeds, it is difficult to argue against Anna’s faith in women’s prerogative. [...] She was certainly unusual in Byzantine society, an intellectual in a world which valued domestic virtues in women.’¹⁰

‘Anna Komnene, the good daughter of both her mother and father, has inserted her feelings (*pathos*) and her authority as historian into the text of her father’s reign [...] Existing within the context of a number of contradictory roles, she was able to speak from within the context of a number of contradictory roles [...]’.¹¹

All these scholars’ observations indisputably bring forth Anna’s gender as one of the crucial peculiarities of the *Alexiad*’s authorship. It is important to stress that these are the conclusions of modern scholars, which are intermittently connected with modern gender and feminine discourses, and therefore represent evaluations of scholars that have chosen to stress Anna’s gender as the most important characteristic of the *Alexiad*’s authorship. In this regard, I would address a question by Barbara Hill – Was Anna Komnene a feminist? – as a starting point in my discussion. Although tempting, this terminology jeopardises the methodology of historical contextualisation and inevitably leads into anachronistic interpretations of different historical phenomena. The main problem lies in the methodology that is applied in search for an answer. We cannot pose questions to Anna Komnene’s behaviour that are only applicable for the contemporary concept of the feminism. Nevertheless, I think there is possibility to address this matter, but only through lenses of medieval conceptions of women and their social constructions of gender expected behaviour its boundaries and limitations. From modern perspective, we are actually in search of a proto-feminist behaviour. This term appears more convenient for overcoming unintentional anachronisms, and delineates precise boundaries of our investigation. In regard to this, I would reverse Hill’s question and ask – In what sense is Anna Komnene’s authorship and literary endeavour important for our perception of the proto-feminism, and also, concerning the modern theory of feminism, how can her authorship help us in our understanding of the gender issue and its forms of representation throughout history? Or even more tempting, in which ways did

⁹ Laiou, Angeliki, Introduction, in: *Anna Komnene and Her Times*, New York and London 2000, p. 1.

¹⁰ Hill, B., *Anna Komnene’s Attempted Usurpation*, pp. 45-46.

¹¹ Gouma-Peterson, Th., “Passages to the Maternal”, p. 120.

Anna Komnene's *female voice* influenced her entire work and did it assert specific political agenda?¹²

One cannot discard the importance of gender even in the medieval epoch, since it is an inseparable part of human identity.¹³ Nevertheless, its political implications concerning mainly women's emancipation in society simply do not correspond to the Byzantine society. We cannot pose a question about Anna's feminism and then discard it on the basis that Anna 'never took the important step of asking why her society thought the way it did', and that 'she chose the married life in a society which considered the husband the head of wife.'¹⁴ This is a simplification of complex phenomena which we need to take into consideration when dealing with the 12th century Byzantine society. Also, I do not think we should avoid modern terms as an interpretive vehicle for historical contextualisation, since its essential foundation lies in a constant dialogue between synchronic and diachronic readings of narratives.¹⁵ In case of Anna Komnene, we are dealing with an extraordinary woman that was aware of her gender and the political limitations imposed on her by the omnipotent male discourse that prevailed in all sections of the Byzantine social strata. Anna's history is especially important for the argument that she was transgressing the boundaries of her gender in order to promote her own political ideology. Even when considering only this issue, we are dealing with a woman that was involved in politics, interested in politics, and that used a powerful medium for propagating a personal ideology that inevitably dealt with the gender – related issue, but measured through medieval

¹² This question is connected with Susan Lanser's basic concept that the female narrator's voice was crucial in relation to its claim for public authority, since the public voice was precisely the one that women from the 18th century onwards, when the first women's novels in England appeared, were deprived of. See Lanser, S.S., *Fictions of Authority*, p. 8.

¹³ What is especially important to stress here is that when dealing with the matter of gender in the Medieval epoch, we are certainly talking about social constructions, since gender as a 'system of social practices' that influences and 'organises' the relations of differences and inequalities was and still is 'being continually produced and reproduced'. – Wharton, A.S., *The Sociology of Gender*, p. 7. Nevertheless, when speaking of individuals, and of organising relations of inequalities in a society, one must take into consideration the race, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, religion, etc. – Wharton, A.S., *The Sociology of Gender*, p. 37. The question that we pose is where on the scale of social constructions of 'differences' and 'inequalities' should we place the category of gender and where the category of social class or religious affiliation, which were the basic organising principles of a medieval society. When referring to the social class, in regard to the Byzantine epoch, and particularly the Komnenian epoch, we should always consider the stratification of the Constantinopolitan social elites, who were part of the ruling imperial house. Gender was an inevitable part of an individual's identity, since it entailed a number of behavioural implications and social limitations. But also, in the same manner, the positioning of an individual in relation to the ruling emperor was of key importance for the relation between 'differences' and 'inequalities'.

¹⁴ Hill, B., "Anna Komnene's Attempted Usurpation", p. 56.

¹⁵ In this sense, I am referring to the wide conceptions of narratives, not only those that are written, but also painted, constructed and built, since they contain stories, agents and messages that were transmitted through various media dominant in different epochs.

discourses. Even the elementary conception of Anna Komnene as a female writer encompasses possible anachronistic interpretations, since when denominating her history as a literary work we are not referring to *belles lettres* or a work of fiction.¹⁶ Therefore I suggest that Anna Komnene was a **woman historiographer**, which implicates a whole new set of issues, related to the conceptions of history as a genre, considered as a narrative representation of the omnipotent male discourse, a field where the ‘male-oriented plots’¹⁷ dominated completely.¹⁸ In this sense, at the very beginning of our discussion, we encounter female usurpation of the male discourse sphere. This basic notion of an author of a historical work in the 12th century Byzantium calls for serious reconsiderations of female self-consciousness. The *Alexiad* represents a narrative space for the construction of a completely new discourse that was inevitably ‘gendered’. My aim in this paper is to present the narrative levels on which this creation of a new discourse was established.

¹⁶ Here I refer to the modern terminology that we use in our assessments – of the Byzantine literature in general, and the *Alexiad* in particular. That can sometimes leave a distorted picture of the literary categories we deal with. The denomination of the *Alexiad* in terms of ‘women’s literature in Byzantium’ can especially lead us astray from its main feature. This is the case of women’s historiography in Byzantium. Even though it is the only one, it is still inevitably peculiar and unique. The terminology that is in use is not incorrect, but it can entice distorted premises about the generic value of the work and especially the implications that come from the perspective of its authoress’ gender.

¹⁷ This is actually one of the key premises of the feminist narratology, which tends to reassess the narratology from the feminist perspective, taking into account texts written by women, with the focus on the voice, context and plot. In this sense, a ‘male plot’ presents the discourse of male desire recounting itself through the narrative of adventure, project, enterprise, and conquest” – see Lanser, S.S., *Fictions of Authority*, pp. 9-24.

¹⁸ And because of this occurrence, James Howard-Johnston concluded that we should not consider the *Alexiad* Anna Komnene’s work, but her husband’s. “The main components, **military** and **political**, of the *Alexiad*, which have been attributed to Nikephoros, from the opening account of the Komnenos-Doukas *putsch* through to the 1116 campaign against the Turks. present **well-ordered** narratives. It is plain that they have been shaped by an author (Nikephoros) who combined plenty of detailed knowledge with a **good understanding** of high politics, diplomacy, strategy and tactics, **before they came into Anna’s hands.**” (Sic!) – Howard-Johnston, James, “Anna Komnene and the *Alexiad*”, in: Alexios I Komnenos. Edited by Margaret Mullet. Papers of the Second Belfast Byzantine International Colloquium, 14-16 April 1989, Belfast 1996, (further in text: Howard-Johnston, J., “Anna Komnene and the *Alexiad*”) 260-302, p. 292-293. – I have intentionally bolded the crucial elements of ‘male plotting’ and the highly gender-biased assessment of Anna Komnene’s narrative, since such qualifications as ‘well-ordered narrative’ and ‘good understanding’ of social power relations *must* be, according to Howard-Johnston, ascribed to Nikephoros, Anna’s husband. For a counter-argument see especially Macrides, R., “The Pen and the Sword”, *passim*. For an interesting analysis of Bryennios’ and Komnene’s histories see Stanković, Vlada, *Nikephoros Bryennios, Anna Komnene and Konstantios Doukas. A story about different perspectives*, Byzantinische Zeitschrift 100-1 (2007), 169-175; For Anna’s ideological ploys with the narrative on the subject of the Crusaders and Turkish campaigns see Magdalino, P., “The Pen of the Aunt”, pp. 23-29 and pp. 33-36

In this regard, feminist narratology¹⁹ provides us with a set of important questions – Does the author’s gender influence on the way the narrative was constructed, or on the choice of the discourse that shapes the story? What are the feminine modes of discourse in this work? Are there specific discursive elements in the *Alexiad* that can indicate its author’s gender? Can we at all talk about the elements of feminist narratology in relation to Anna Komnene’s work? Can the form, content and context of a narrative be related to their author’s gender? Or, simply, we should investigate the gender-aware narrative poetic from the perspective that ‘accommodates both women’s writings and feminist concerns.’²⁰

The question of gender is a matter of identity, that is, of the social, cultural and behavioural expectations of the society and the epoch we are dealing with. We are certainly able to discern the elements of female authorship in case of the *Alexiad*. They vary from the story to the discourse level, and are also obvious at the author/narrator level. When it comes to the narrative structure, it is difficult to discern the female authorial practices, since we do not have at least one similar source for comparison. No other woman in the Medieval epoch authored a complex historiographical work, so we cannot engage in the analysis of the ‘genderization’ of narrative structure, but we can certainly talk about the female authorial voice, and present the peculiarities of this kind of authorial venture.

The most visible sign of Anna’s venture into the ‘male sphere’ was her decision to write history, which was an exclusive field of ‘male-plot’ narratives, where the author’s voice was inevitably claiming the authority over the public.²¹ This peculiarity leads to a controversy about the *Alexiad*’s authorship, originated by James Howard Johnston in his provoking article on Anna Komnene and her work.²² What is especially important for our argument is that Johnston was the one led by androcentric and gender-related views, presupposing that a woman could not write about war operations, which occupy the largest part of the *Alexiad*. This statement

¹⁹ A path-breaking essay in feminist narratology is Lanser, Susan S., “Toward a Feminist Narratology”, *Style* 20, 341-362; For an extensive survey on this matter see Lanser, Susan S., “Gender and Narrative”, in: *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/gender-and-narrative> (29.09.2015.) (further in text: Lanser S.S, “Gender and Narrative”)

²⁰ Lanser, S. S., “Gender and Narrative”, paragraph 7; Some of these issues were addressed in the recent paper, such as whether Anna’s history “was different because she was a woman writer or did her woman-voice affect her writing?” – Neville, Leonora, “Lamentation, History and Female Authorship”, in: *Greek, Modern and Byzantine Studies* 53 (2013), 192-218 (further in text: Neville, L., “Female Authorship”), p. 194.

²¹ As Leonora Neville correctly observed, ‘As history writer, Anna was narrating and commenting on the male domain of politics and warfare.’ – cf. Neville, L., “The Authorial Voice of Anna Komnene”, p. 266-267. She implies a model of analysing ‘feminine’ texts as different from ‘masculine’. This opposition can be interpreted within a hierarchical framework of power relations, where the recovery of ‘feminine’ alternatives is seen as a form of cultural revision. – Page, R, *Feminist Narratology*, p. 9.

²² Howard-Johnston, J., “Anna Komnene and the *Alexiad*”, *passim*.

is, to say the least, incorrect and prejudiced. Anna's historiographical endeavour was not built on her husband's literary work. Rather, it was constructed as all other 'classicising' histories – and above all, as Psellos' *Chronographia* – with abundant citations and allusions from rich literary tradition whose mannerism was based on the phenomenon of *mimesis*. And even though the *Alexiad* is in its greatest part a detailed account of Alexios' war operations, it is, nevertheless, coloured with a specific gender discourse that makes this work highly idiosyncratic in its literary mannerism and narrative poetics.

The most important trait of the feminist narratology in relation to the classical narratology is that feminism calls for a contextualisation of the narratives, while the classical narratology seeks to establish universal typology and terminology embedded only in language and text. In this sense, the approach that I use is one of feminist and contextual narratology,²³ since narrative poetics is absolutely dependable upon the historical, religious, social and cultural contexts. And dealing with the medieval narrative, written by a woman, all these aspects inevitably arise as the pivotal tenets of understanding the narrative poetics of the *Alexiad*.

My conceptual interests of the 'gender discourse' of the *Alexiad* are following:

1. Does Anna Komnene's female authorial voice implicate a power of the public authority?
2. 'Gendering' of the plot: Is there a clear and intransitive line between the 'male' and 'female' plots in the *Alexiad*?
3. Are there any constructions of female heroes in contrast to male heroes and what are their political implications?
4. What are the tenets of Anna Komnene's gender discourse?

Voice and discourse

Anna's personal discursive mannerism has been situated in the rhetoric of lamentation. Ever since Georgina Buckler's austere judgement of Anna's lament as her 'hysterical bombast',²⁴ there have been various interpretations of Anna's lament,

²³ The phenomenons of contextual narratology and 'intersectionality' are recent developments in narratology that pertain to the wave of post-classical narratology. (Lanser, S.S., "Gender and Narrative", paragraph 11-13; See also Alber, Jan, and Monika Fludernik (Editors), *Postclassical Narratology: Approaches and Analyses*. Columbus Ohio 2010) The main weak spot of the feminist narratology was that it was based on the Euro-American, white, upper-class female individuals that were writers of fictional literature in the last two centuries. This further implicates that the important aspects of race, ethnicity, social class, or even religion, are not considered in general theories of feminist narratology. Thus, for example, social implications of motherhood differ across spatial and temporal spheres, and highly depend on class, religion, culture, politics and all other social vectors.

²⁴ Buckler, Georgina, *Anna Comnena. A study*, London 1929, p. 46.

which was very recently analysed in detail.²⁵ I would refer also to Diether Reinsh's observation on idiosyncratic elements of the *Alexiad* in relation to other Byzantine histories, where he concluded that 'no other author makes the emotions that arise in a given passage the very subject of the account in such an intense way and in so many passages'.²⁶ Leonora Neville argues that Anna's lamentation was deeply rooted in classical traditions of 'the mourning women of the Attic tragedy and the *Iliad*',²⁷ and that this specific rhetoric was also used in this lament as a self-abasement tool, especially since she was a woman writer.²⁸

The inevitable conclusion that imposes itself is that the lament was a specific discursive marker for the female identity of the author. Therefore, our discussion must take this observation as the opening argument for the ways in which a female authorial voice features in the *Alexiad*, and what the crucial elements of Anna Komnene's female discourse are. I agree that lamentation was Anna's tool for adhering to her gender, but in an interesting and complex ploy of irony and political insinuations.

Firstly, I strongly disagree that we should avoid political readings of Anna Komnene's work²⁹, since it is an essential part of the contextual narratology, and of our reading, understanding and interpretation of each historical work. Therefore, the premises of the 'classical narratology,' on the search for the meaning of a text within a text solely, must be discarded in the case of Byzantine literature, and historiography in particular, since the text itself, without measurement through the scale of social vectors, cannot be historically contextualised. Therefore, I would again address the important issue of the political background of the *Alexiad*, and the alleged conspiracy against John II Komnenos.³⁰ Neville stressed that Anna's lament was usually interpreted from the standpoint of the princess' alleged political disappointment, and that this kind of approach should be reassessed.³¹ I agree with this observation only in the sense that Anna's lament is not a direct manifestation of her failed ambition. I consider this inference a simplification of Anna Komnene's complex narrative poetics. Anna's discourse was undisputedly political, since the social vectors of her identity, such as birth and imperial origin, social and cultural position, and place within the ruling family, cannot be considered as 'apolitical'. Therefore, her discourse, or the

²⁵ Neville, L., "Female Authorship", passim; Vilimonović, L., *Struktura i osobine Aleksijade Ane Komnin*, pp. 124-140.

²⁶ Reinsch, D. R., "The Case of Anna Komnene", p. 95.

²⁷ Neville, L., "Female Authorship", p. 210.

²⁸ Neville, L., "The Authorial Voice of Anna Komnene", p.270-273.

²⁹ cf. Neville, "Female Authorship", p. 198.

³⁰ I would not define this whole issue as 'Anna's failed coup' – cf. Neville, L. "Female Authorship", p. 197 – as I believe that the key instigator was actually Eirene Doukaina, but that does not exclude Anna from the whole problematic conspiracy. For Eirene's political role and Anna's participation in her mother's ambition see Stanković, V, *Komnini u Carigradu*, p. 115-125; Vilimonović, L., *Struktura i Osobine Aleksijade Ane Komnin*, p. 140-242.

³¹ Neville, L., "The Authorial Voice of Anna Komnene", p. 274.

how of her narration, was inevitably political and constructed to convey a specific political agenda.

Anna's cry should not be perceived as her bewail over a failed coup against her brother John II Komnenos. Nevertheless, despite the possibility of her lament being an authorial voice of self-abasement and the convenient discourse for the female authorial voice especially, I contend that this lament was used as a rhetorical tool for promoting a specific political ideology. Written more than thirty years after the failed coup against her brother John II, the *Alexiad* was not aimed to be a political pamphlet against Anna's younger brother, although it bears significant political implications against his majesty. Anna used her narrative in order to promote her personal political ideology that is much more complicated than being defined as just a defiance of her brother John. Anna's ambitions were bolstered within the circle of her mother Eirene Doukaina, which is considered as a specific secluded unit within the imperial Komnenian *oikos* that promoted its own political ideology focused solely on the imperial prominence and legacy of the Doukai *oikos*. Therefore, the political ideology we come across in the *Alexad* is a multilayered and complex discourse which includes the elements of female power exertion, the dominant role of the Doukai and their imperial prominence, Anna's specific placement within both imperial houses and her relation with the two imperial branches, and the resounding silence about John Komnenos.³² All these elements were compiled in a complex ideological mechanism that served as a political tool for the promotion of both Eirene Doukaina and her daughter, Anna Komnene.

Anna's lament is, above all other features of her discourse, completely political. It is interesting how she chose the traits of 'typical female behaviour', extracted from the long classical tradition, and presented herself as an actant in an Attic tragedy, or as a bereaved Andromache deprived of her husband, a great hero.³³ The politically sensitive references in her narrative Anna chose to shape in the gendered, feminine rhetoric of cry. She used the ancient typology on female behaviour to express her emotions, and to make them a subject of her history. It is also interesting that she used the rules of composing a monody,³⁴ as its paradigms were, according to Menander Rhetor, found in the laments of Andromache, Priam and Hecuba.³⁵

The most specific trait of Anna's rhetoric of lament, concerning its gender aspect, is the perception and the use of the word 'cry', which shows the authoress' mastery in her word ploys and the ways she was manoeuvring around the conceptual

³² Vilimonović, L, *Struktura i Osobine Aleksijade Ane Komnin*, pp. 107-124; pp. 271-288

³³ Vilimonović, L, *Struktura i Osobine Aleksijade Ane Komnin*, p.138.

³⁴ Menander Rhetor, *A Commentary*, Edited by D.A. Russell and N.G. Wilson, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1981, (further in text: Men. Rhet.) pp. 171-178; pp. 200-206.

³⁵ Men. Rhet., p. 200-202. Although these rhetorical treatises were meant for male speakers in the public sphere, Anna moulded her characters according to the role models from the *Iliad* and the women's lament for the fallen heroes.

limitations of her gender. In the concluding chapter of Alexios' deeds, Anna said that men from the lands ravaged by Persians 'like women, shed bitter tears' (οἷα γυναῖκες θερμὸν κατέσταζον δάκρυον).³⁶ This is a confirmation that both the synchronic and the diachronic attributions of cry are exclusive for female characterisation. Therefore, Anna's lament is considered as a genuine discursive marker of her gender. Nevertheless, if we analyse the presence and the use of the word 'cry' or 'tears' (δάκρυον) in the *Alexiad*, it appears that they were not gender-bound, since we see them also in the characterisation of male characters. I would accentuate especially the syntagmatic structure 'Emperor's cry' which is used by the same reason as Anna's cry – to describe the mourning over the deceased. The Emperor cries because of his fallen soldiers. Other male actants that also cry are Italos, who firstly attacked his opponents in his dialectic quarrels and afterwards he felt 'repentance' and cried. Also, the Emperor's brother Adrian, used cry as a means of persuasion when he pledged Nikephoros Diogenes to give up his conspiracy against Alexios. In two other references cry is addressed in Christian categories, as a 'weep for the atonement of sins' of the rebels (male and female) and the Crusaders.

ProL 4,1 (95.14); 3 (30.32.34)	Anna's cry for Bryennios Anna's cry over her life story
I 12,3 (84.85)	Anna's cry over Constantine Doukas
III 5,6 (2)	Repentance of the rebels
V 8,3 (65); 7 (25)	Hot tears of Psellos' mother interceding for her son – θερμοῖς τοῖς δάκρυσιν ὑπὲρ τοῦ παιδὸς ἐκκαλουμένης; Italos' tears – ὅτι μετὰ τὴν πληγὴν κατείμπανε τοῦτον ὁ θυμὸς καὶ τὸ δάκρυον κατελάμβανε καὶ εἰς λαμπρὸν μετὰμελον ἤρχετο.
VI 14,4 (62)	The Emperor's cry – κρουνοὺς ἤφειε δακρῶν ἐφίλει γὰρ ἐξόχως τὸν ἀνδρα
VII 7,2 (42)	The Emperor's cry – ὁ βασιλεὺς δάκρυα θερμὰ ἐκχέων
IX 7,4 (5) 10,2 (16)	Adrian Komnenos supplicating Diogenes with tears – μετὰ δακρῶν ἐκλιπαρῶν αὐτὸν The Emperor's cry over Diogenes' destiny – καὶ δακρῶν ὠρᾶτο καὶ βύθιον στένων δι' αὐτὸν ἐξηκούετο
XI 6,7 (1)	'Weep for your sins with hot tears' – δάκρουνσι θερμοῖ τὴν μετάνοιαν ἐνδειξαμένους
XII 1,4 (52) 6,6 (33) 7 (48)	The Emperor's cry – θερμὸν καταστάξας δάκρυον Everyone was moved to tears because of Anemas The Empress' tears of compassion

³⁶ Annae Comnenae Alexias, eds. D. R. Reinsch, A. Kambylis, Walter de Gruyter 2001. (Further in text: Alexias), XV 10,5 (14)

XIII 3,6 (48) 7,1 (26)	The Emperor's cry – δακρύων τὸν καθέκαστον
XIV 3,6 (1)	Anna's cry – ἀλλ' ἐνταῦθα γενομένης προεκπηδῶ μου τοῦ λόγου τὸ δάκρυον
XV 10,5 (14); 11,8 (27); 12 (84); 23 (51)	Men shed tears like women – Eirene's cry – ἐχεῖτο μέντοι αὐτῆς τῶν ὀμμάτων τὸ δάκρυον Eirene's cry – Καί τοι ἀστακτὶ ταύτης κατέρρει τὸ δάκρυον Anna's cry – Με ποταμούς ἀπορρέειν δακρύων

Table 1. Presence of the word δάκρυον in the text (Reinsch 2001, Indices)

This ingenious ploy with the semiotic value of the word cry shows precisely Anna's ways of transgressing the boundaries of her gender, where she used a typical female trait for the characterisation of male actants too, and what is even more important, for the protagonist of her work, and her male hero. The Emperor cries over his fallen war compatriots in the same manner as she cries over her beloved ones.³⁷ Thus, cry holds a specific emotional value that can be ascribed to both genders equally, and to both protagonists of the *Alexiad*, Anna Komnene and Alexios Komnenos. Also, apart from Alexios, we see other male actants, or groups of people, expressing their emotions through tears. What is important to highlight in this regard is that Anna Dalassene does not cry at all. And this notion is crucial for our analysis of this key female figure of the *Alexiad*, who was adorned exclusively with male qualities.

³⁷ The Emperor's cry is certainly a reference from the *Iliad*, where we see Patroklos' cry described in the same manner:

‘Πάτροκλος δ’ Ἀχιλλῆϊ παρίστατο ποιμένι λαῶν
δάκρυα θερμὰ χέων’

(Homeri: Opera – Tomvs 2, Iliadis Libros I – XII
Continens, eds. Munro David B., Allen Thomas
W., Oxford 1920 (further in text: Il.) 16.2-3

Meanwhile Patroklos
approached Akhilleus his commander, streaming
Warm tears – like a shaded mounatin spring
(Homer. The Iliad, Transl. by Fitzgerald Robert,
Anchor Press/Doubleday 1974, p.377)

Nevertheless, Patroklos' cry is described as a **negative, feminine trait** in the following lines:

‘τίπτε δεδάκρυσαι Πατρόκλεες, ἥϋτε κούρη
νηπίη, ἢ θ’ ἅμα μητρι θεοῦσ’ ἀνελέσθαι ἀνώγει
εἰανοῦ ἀποτομένη, καὶ τ’ ἔσσυμένην κατερύκει,
ἰδακρυόεσσα δέ μιν ποτιδέσκειται, ὄφρ’
ἀνέληται:
τῆ ἴκελος Πάτροκλε τέρεν κατὰ δάκρυον εἴβεις.

(Il, 16.7-11)

Why all the weeping? Like a small girlchild
Who runs beside her mother and cries and cries
to be taken up,
and catches at her gown, And will not let her go,
looking up in tears until she has her wish: that's
how you seem
Patroklos, winking out your glimmering tears

(Iliad, Transl, p. 377)

Story level

This sophisticated narrative structure bears other important elements of female discourse. At the story level, we encounter the expected categories of a woman's behaviour within the family circle. Female protagonists act as mothers, wives or daughters. This would account for the typical 'female plot',³⁸ where we see women as actants in expected social categories. We also have explications of the authoress on the perception of an ideal wife and daughter, being herself a devoted daughter to her imperial parents. And although it might appear that we are dealing with typical female images or 'female-plots' that present women as confined within the boundaries of their houses and families, we have an important element that is attached to them at the narrative level, and that is **agency**.³⁹

Women act and perform significant political roles in the *Alexiad*. In the story of Alexios' rise to the imperial throne, the crucial figures are those of female members of the aristocracy. The most important character is Anna Dalassene, the mother of the Komnenoi. Her agency was bound to her role of a mother and her specific function of a widow in the role of a father. She was a sole foster of her five sons and three daughters. Anna Dalassene's political role was decisive in Alexios' rise to the imperial throne, but her significance as a character at the story level is typical only for the *Alexiad*. Anna Komnene sought to present the male aspect of Anna Dalassene's personality, and her prowess in political ploys, and afterwards, in rulership.

One whole chapter⁴⁰ is devoted to Anna Dalassene's agency in the tense moments of the Komnenian insurrection where she managed to outwit the imperial men and protect all female members of her *oikos*, including children. Anna Dalassene is the protagonist of this extensive passage, which surely represents part of Anna's personal concerns over the female members of her house and the way they were kept safe due to her grandmother's shrewdness and ingenuity. Also, Dalassene acted in favour of her sons before the emperor against the allegations on their conspiracy. Another character who takes part in this chapter is Maria of Bulgaria, *protovestiar* and mother of Eirene Doukaina. What is especially important in this chapter is that Maria is presented to the audience as a 'daughter in law of cesar John', and afterwards as

³⁸ On the issue of the 'female-plot narrative' see Page, Ruth. E., *Literary and Linguistic Approaches to Feminist Narratology*, Palgrave Macmillan 2006, p. 21-25.

³⁹ I insist on the issue of agency since it is usually bound to men. The most general conception about the male and female agencies would be following: 'In certain situations it might be that the ability to solve problems or achieve goals is restricted to privileging one gender above another, as in stereotypically represented heroes and heroines where it is only the male characters that are allowed to follow quest-like progressions [...]the possible correlations between gender and predictable patterns remain a factor that may also contribute to the alignment of high narrativity with 'male plots' and the relegation of 'female plots' to weak narrativity.' – Page, R. E., *Approaches to Feminist Narratology*, p. 27.

⁴⁰ Alexias II 5,1-9

‘mother-in-law of George Palaiologos’. Her agency is bound to her connection with the male members of her *oikos*, similarly as Anna Dalassene’s connection, as she performs her role of the ‘mother of the Komnenoi’. She acts in parallel with Anna Dalassene, as the cesar’s daughter in law. And afterwards she succeeds in persuading another important male member of their house to side with them against the emperor.⁴¹ In this case, a woman’s role is of essential importance, since George Palaiologos is one of the crucial characters of the *Alexiad* and Alexios’s closest war compatriot.

The events that were unfolding just before the final phase of the insurrection are presented through the perspective of women’s agency. We see Anna Dalassene protecting the female members of her house, but also addressing the emperor on the matter of false allegations against her sons, and thus acquiring the time they needed. On the other side, the focus is put on Maria, the cesar’s daughter in law, who joined Dalassene and other women and used her wealth to extract information on the events that had been happening in the city. The most decisive role was her persuasion of George Palaiologos, who eventually decided to support the Komnenoi because ‘he cared for women, his wife, Anna, and his mother-in-law, Maria’ (φροντίζει δὲ τὸ ἐντεῦθεν περὶ τῶν γυναικῶν. τῆς τε αὐτοῦ γαμετῆς Ἄννης καὶ Μαρίας, τῆς πενθερᾶς αὐτοῦ)⁴². Palaiologos’ case is interesting since he disobeyed his father who supported the emperor Botaneiates and sided with the Komnenoi ‘carrying for the women’. This reason for George’s support is, I suggest, Anna’s personal choice in constructing a gendered discourse, putting women on the prominent position in the Komnenian coup. According to Anna, George’s agency was provoked because of the women’s influence, wherefore the *αἰτία* of this plot pertains to the female members of the two aristocratic houses. Women perform actions simultaneously with male characters in the crucial hours of the Komnenian revolt, and their spatial setting is within Constantinople, the palace, church and monastery. As for the men, their final action starts beyond Constantinople, from the war camp. These two spatial spheres are typical settings for male and female agency. Palace is mostly reserved as a spatial setting for a female agency.

Women from the two houses – Komnenoi and Doukai – have the prudence, courage, persuasiveness and wealth to help the Komnenian coup. Neither role – male or female – is reduced. The characters are divided to women and men and they act simultaneously. The only difference is that the leader of the Komnenian *oikos* is a woman – Anna Dalassene – while the leader of the Doukai *oikos* is cesar John. That is why the female members of the Doukai’s house are presented in relation to the cesar, and act as his relatives. Women that appear in the story of the Komnenian revolt are Anna Dalassene, Maria of Bulgaria, Eirene, wife of Isak Komnenos, and Anna Doukaina, wife of George Palaiologos. Also, we have Eirene Doukaina present, but

⁴¹ Alexias II 6,2.

⁴² Alexias II 6,3 (44.45), 69.

she is devoid of agency in this story. She is not an actant, she is rather a reason for action, or the *aitia* of the conflict between two houses, between Anna Dalassene and cesar John Ducas. The main issue of concern was Eirene's coronation, which was delayed. The problem was finally resolved in favour of Eirene Doukaina, but her actual role was reserved for later books.

Another important character in the story of the Komnenian coup is empress Maria of Alania, whose agency is also based on her role as a mother. As the mother of the purple-born Constantine Doukas, Maria took part in the conspiracy and supported the Komnenian brothers for the sole reason of protecting her son's heirdom. Her spatial setting is a palace, and she is the main character of the actions that happened within the palace. Her adoption of Alexios was probably a political agreement between the two on their mutual support – Maria was the key figure in the palace, whereas Alexios was the crucial figure that would ensure Constantine's imperial succession. All these events that were happening before the coup are tentatively blurred and make us unable to create a clear picture of Alexios' relationship with Maria of Alania. But this issue is not so important for our theme. What we tend to stress is the role women performed in the Komnenian revolt, which is surely due to specific 'genderization' of narrative that tentatively presented the events from a female perspective, that is, bestowing the agency upon female characters.

As we have already stressed, women act within the expected categories of their behaviour:

1. mother that helps her sons
2. mother that cares for her child
3. wife that cherishes her husband
4. daughter that loves her parents

Some might reproach that a woman's agency is an inevitable occurrence in the *Alexiad*, since the historical facts prove that Anna Dalassene was the actual leader of her *oikos*, and Maria of Alania did act in order to protect the imperial succession for her son. What I see as Anna's genuinely personal concept of constructing a narrative is the way female and male actants are divided by chapters and we follow their actions simultaneously. The role of women is in no way diminished in relation to the role of men, and in some parts of the narrative it is even dominant. In other sources, we do not have narratives that are focused on women's agency. If we try to reconstruct Maria of Alania's role in the Komnenian conspiracy, we have to turn to the *Alexiad*. Neither Ataleiates, Psellos nor Bryennios linger on the character of Maria of Alania, and her role in the aforementioned events. The conspiracy of the Komnenoi started in women's imperial chambers (γυναικωνίτις)⁴³, and also during Alexios' rule,⁴⁴ for which he was reproached – leaving the internal affairs of the Empire to his mother's

⁴³ Alexias II 1,4 (34)

⁴⁴ Alexias III 7,2 (12)

hands – but Anna’s dedication to present the male aspects of her grandmother’s ruling ability was directly in relation to the gendered criticism about the female rule conducted from γυναικωνίτις.⁴⁵

Very likely someone at this point would blame my father’s management in transferring the administration of the Empire to the woman’s apartments, but if he thoroughly understood this woman’s high-mindedness and knew what virtue and intellect and remarkable energy she possessed, he would leave off blaming and turn his censure into wondering praise.⁴⁶

Anna accentuated that under her grandmother the women’s chambers passed through complete transformation, when a place of court intrigues and love affairs had outgrown into a place of high respect and order, and strict, almost monastic lifestyle.⁴⁷ Thus, we encounter a change that happened not only in the male spatial setting, but also in the imperial female dwelling space.

All women’s roles in the *Alexiad*, of mother, wife and daughter, are stereotyped and expected for contemporary scholars. Nevertheless, Anna Komnene is an impressive literary virtuoso, as she plays with stereotypes and invests these roles with a political agency. Therefore, a mother is never defined as a biological mother, a passive figure deprived of agency, but as a **sign of agency**, and the way a specific character acts and performs his or her action. It is a notifier of an actant’s importance, influence and power. In a specific family-bound imperial ideology, as was a case with the Komnenian ideology, familial connections were the main predisposition for advancement and political influence in the highest social strata of the Empire. The Komnenian type of government conceived a unique political ideology that was encoded in the words denoting familial relations.⁴⁸ Thus, I contend, Anna Komnene’s female characters were not only actants at the story level, but they were also carriers of encoded political messages for the implied Constantinopolitan readers who perfectly understood the way political meaning was imbued in these words.

The three most prominent mothers in the *Alexiad* are Anna Dalassene, Maria of Alania and Eirene Doukaina. All three of them acted in favour of their children and all three of them were personally important to Anna Komnene: her grandmother as a pivotal example of a female prowess in rule; Maria of Alania as a woman that raised her and fought for her son’s imperial right, which, if it had had happened, would

⁴⁵ Anna used the stereotyped image of ‘women’s chambers’ from which the empire was governed, a common-place in Psellos’ *Chronographia*, as a sign of the weakened Empire which interpolates a gender transgressive picture of her grandmother and her male ability in ruling.

⁴⁶ Alexias III 7,2 (11.16)

⁴⁷ Alexias III 8,2 (64.71)

⁴⁸ On the peculiarities of the Komnenian philanthropy see a detailed analysis – Stanković, Vlada, *Komnini u Carigradu (1057-1185). Evolucija jedne vladarske porodice*, Beograd 2006, (further in text: Stanković, V., *Komnini u Carigradu*) pp. 148-179.

have also potentiated Anna's rise to the imperial throne; and Eirene, her mother, who favoured her first born daughter above all her other children.

Ann Komnene's image of herself as a perfect daughter is replete with political insinuations. She used the most prominent Komnenian imperial epithet – 'father-loving' (φιλάτωρ) – to describe her filial devotion. Alexios was the first emperor that was denominated as 'mother-loving' (φιλομήτωρ). This custom was accepted by his successor John, who was 'φιλάτωρ'.⁴⁹ As parts of imperial denominations, these epithets were politically very sensitive, and their usage in the *Alexiad* was a clear signifier to the Constantinopolitan 12th-century audience that Anna was verging on the imperial prerogatives. What is even more striking in Anna's case is that she attributed to herself both Alexios' and John's epithets, being simultaneously mother-loving and a father-loving. Thus, she was connecting herself exclusively both to the Doukai and the Komnenoi, nibbling on the idea of a double legitimacy, which she defined through the symbolism of her filial devotion to her parents.⁵⁰

Anna's self-presentation of a good daughter was an important political symbol in the Komnenian epoch. The connection with emperor Alexios was crucial for his descendants who sought to represent themselves just as exclusively bound to their father emperor, and thus competing for his succession.⁵¹ Anna's choice of the political tool for presenting this specific connection was the *Alexiad*. In its essence, it is a story of a devoted and good daughter that dedicated all her life to this literary endeavour, and it should be considered as her **political endowment**.

The same pattern was applied to her connection with Eirene Doukaina, where Anna tried to present herself as the most beloved daughter by her mother in order to tie herself exclusively to her mother's political legacy which was not deprived of its influence in the time of the Komnenian establishment. The house of Doukai was celebrated by Theodore Prodromos, who constructed the term 'Komnenodukikon', to assert the prominence of Eirene's paternal *oikos*. The power of the Doukai's political legacy is, I contend, most noticeable in the *Alexiad*.

The *Alexiad* was written by a woman, and it was also ordered by a woman. At the beginning, all credits for the inception of this history go to Anna's mother, Empress Eirene Doukaina. In the last book, Anna stressed again that it was Eirene's idea to commemorate Alexios' rule, and that she even came to that idea during Alexios' lifetime.⁵² This place is important because, together with the information on Anna's

⁴⁹ For a comprehensive survey on this terminology see Stanković, V., *Komnini u Carigradu*, pp. 150-166; cf. Vilimonović, L., *Struktura i osobine Aleksijade Ane Komnin*, pp. 114-117.

⁵⁰ On Anna's ways of connecting with both of her parents as an aspect of her 'double legitimacy' see Stanković, V., *Komnini u Carigradu*, p. 202-209; Orlov, Larisa, "Ana Komnin – autobiografske beleške", in: *Vizantijski svet na Balkanu, II*, Edited by B. Krsmanović, Lj. Maksimović and R. Radić, Beograd 2012, 349-364; Vilimonović, L., *Struktura i osobine Aleksijade Ane Komnin*, pp. 111-118; pp. 221-242.

⁵¹ Magdalino, P., "The Pen of the Aunt", pp. 18-24.

⁵² Alexias XV, 11,1 (25.29), p. 494.

writing impetus from the prologue, it leads us to the extradiegetic level (relation between the author and the audience through text) of the *Alexiad*, of which the most dominant trait was female authorial agency. Although Anna refers to the *Material for History* of her husband Bryennios, and relates her literary endeavour to his inability to fulfil his zeal, it is a fact that the history of Alexios' deeds was written ἐξ ἐπιταγῆς τῆς βασιλίδος.⁵³ The history of Alexios' deeds came from the narrow circle gathered around Eirene, which was predominantly feminine, but its main political trait was the focus on Doukai's imperial legacy. Anna's work is ideologically complex, since it encompasses both Eirene's and Anna's political agendas. The first was the celebration of the Doukai in relation to the Komnenians, and the latter was the construction of a double legitimacy through the usage of encrypted imperial vocabulary in relation to John Komnenos and his establishment of the dynasty.

Characterisation of female heroes

The *Alexiad* shows remarkable transgressions of binary gendering in the characterisation of female characters. We can observe how the social construct of gender was reframed through the focus of a female author. Anna Komnene was vacillating the seemingly predetermined boundaries of gender, and moulded some of her female characters through the categories of male behaviour.

A typical Byzantine bifocal conception of a woman as either Eve or Mother of God is weaved into the characterisation of two important female characters – Maria of Alania and Eirene Doukaina. The positioning of their descriptions in the text is very important since they are presented linearly in a sense that they are directly connected and follow one after another, but in relation to the male figure and protagonist, Alexios Komnenos. The description of Maria of Alania is given in the second chapter of Book III.⁵⁴ As a prelude to her physical appearance, Anna told a story about how cesar John persuaded emperor Botaneiates to marry Maria of Alania instead of any other choices because of 'her ancestral prominence and the her physical beauty' (περί τε τοῦ γένους καὶ τῆς τοῦ σώματος ὄρας)⁵⁵. The progeny and physical appearance were the two most important aspects in the characterisation of protagonists in the Byzantine literary tradition. These traits were especially important for rulers and their suitability for the imperial throne.⁵⁶ What we have here particularly is the insistence on Maria's physical beauty, further elaborated in detail:

She was as slender of stature as a cypress, her skin was white as snow, and though her face was not a perfect round, yet her complexion was exactly like a spring flower

⁵³ "On the order of the Empress" – Alexias Prolog. 3,2 (60), p. 7.

⁵⁴ Alexias III 2,4 (21.37), p. 91.

⁵⁵ Alexias III 2,3 (19.20), p. 91.

⁵⁶ Orlov, L., "Autobiografske beleške", p.355, n. 35.

or a rose. And what mortal could describe the radiance of her eyes? Her eyebrows were well-marked and red-gold, while her eyes were blue. Full many a painter's hand has successfully imitated the colours of the various flowers the seasons bring, but this queen's beauty, the radiance of her grace and the charm and sweetness of her manners surpassed all description and all art. Never did Apelles or Pheidias or any of the sculptors produce a statue so beautiful. The Gorgon's head was said to turn those who looked upon it into stone, but anyone who saw the Queen walking or met her unexpectedly, would have gaped and remained rooted to the spot, speechless, as if apparently robbed of his mind and wits. There was such harmony of limbs and features, such perfect relation of the whole to the parts and of the parts to the whole, as was never before seen in a mortal body, she was a living statue, a joy to all true lovers of the beautiful. In a word, she was an incarnation of Desire (ἡμερος) come down to this terrestrial globe.⁵⁷

A whole chapter on Maria of Alania begins with the rumours of the nature of her relationship with Alexios, which Anna refutes but soon after in the text, she delivers this peculiar physical description of Maria that is imbued with carnal and sensual. The focus on the beauty of Maria's body, which is seductive and irresistible, contradicts Anna's dissent from the alleged relationship of her father and the empress. Maria's beauty is captivating, and this whole passage actually confirms the rumours since no one can resist upon seeing her, their mind and soul beguiled by her beauty. At the end of the passage, Maria is described as a personification of an exciting desire. In this sentence, a motive of lust between Helen and Paris is evoked:

‘as now I love thee, and sweet desire layeth hold of me’
(ὥς σεο νῦν ἔραμαι καὶ με γλυκὺς ἡμερος αἰρεῖ)⁵⁸

The beauty of the empress (τῆς βασιλίδος κάλλος) was unspeakable and her character (ἦθος) was alluring (ἐπαγωγόν). All these traits are detailed elaborations of a single stereotype – of a beautiful woman that bedazzled spectators with her physical appearance, and influenced them by means of her beauty. In this sense, it seems completely incomprehensible that Anna, in her refutation of the alleged relationship between the empress and her father Alexios, used this specific, eroticised vocabulary. What is even more striking is that in the following chapter Anna gives us a description of her mother Eirene, who is an antipode:

On the other hand, Irene, the Empress and my mother was only a girl at the time for she had not yet completed her fifteenth year. She was the little daughter of Andronicus, the eldest son of the Caesar, and of illustrious lineage, for she traced her descent from the famous houses of Andronicus and Constantine Ducas. She was

⁵⁷ Alexias III 2,4 (20.37), 91.

⁵⁸ II 3.446.

just like some young, ever-blooming plant, all her limbs and features were perfectly symmetrical, each being broad or narrow in due proportion. [...] Whether there has been an Athena as they have invented in ancient times, the poets and writers, I do not know; I hear about her only as a myth that has been repeatedly told. But if anyone had told of this Empress that she is the Athena, which at that time appeared among the human race or had glided down from heaven in heavenly brilliance and unapproachable splendour he would not have been far from the truth. The most surprising feature, seldom found in other women, was that she humbled the audacious, and by a single glance gave fresh courage to those crushed by fear. Her lips were generally closed, and thus silent she resembled a living statue of beauty, a breathing pillar of grace.⁵⁹

The ambiguity of these two descriptions is obvious. Maria of Alania and Eirene Doukaina both lie on the opposite poles of the imagined ideological axis of the Byzantine perception of women. The former was closer to the image of the fallen and carnal Eve while the latter was closer to the image of the Mother of God. What is interesting is that Anna Komnene did not use Christian models of female behaviour, but instead chose from the pagan Parthenon, where we actually encounter the personifications of carnal Aphrodite and virgin goddess Athena. Seen through the lens of the *Iliad*, these two goddesses were mutually opposed starting from their competition to win Paris' favour. Paris chose love and Aphrodite, wherefore Athens turned toward Menelaus. What is especially important for our case is the characterisation of women that were presented through the established canon of typical feminine traits – pleasing, proper, permissible and befitting. Still, this 'canon' was multifaceted. While Maria of Alania was represented through the stereotyped canon of a beautiful woman whose agency mostly relied upon physical traits, Eirene Doukaina's traits were not strictly feminine, and some were even transgressing the boundaries of her gender. Therefore the goddess Athena was certainly the more convenient model for comparison, since she was **the companion and protector of heroes**, a role that suited the role Eirene had in the later years of Alexios' reign, where we see her accompanying him on his war campaigns, caring about his health and protecting his life.⁶⁰ The choice of Athene as the divine model for the characterisation of Eirene Doukaina served to denote the role of the empress in connection to the hero protagonist. The same interpretative tool should be used for the characterisation of Maria of Alania, where we see her as the incarnation of Desire, and therefore, probably not accidentally accused for being in a relationship with Alexios. In addition, the characterisation of the two empresses is an important clue for the concept of power exertion. The main issue was not of

⁵⁹ Alexias III 3,3 (14.39), p. 94.

⁶⁰ On the political background of Eirene's role see Vilimonović, L., *Struktura i osobine Aleksijade Ane Komnin*, p. 232-241.

the nature of their emotional relationship with Alexios, but of the ways these women influenced the Empire's internal politics.

Regarding Eirene's characterisation, even though her role in the *Alexiad* is bound to her role of a wife, an important passage sheds new light on Anna's intentions to attribute 'male' traits to her mother too:

*[...] Then the Emperor immediately gave the Empress permission to return to Byzantium, and she was dismayed but hid her fear in her inmost heart and did not shew it either by word or manner. For she was courageous and steady-minded, like the woman sung of by Solomon in the Proverbs (ἀνδρεία γὰρ καὶ στάσιμος οὕσα τὴν φρένα καθάπερ ἢ παρὰ τοῦ Σολομῶντος ἐν Παροιμίαις ὑμνουμένη ἐκείνη γυνή), and shewed no feminine cowardice (οὐ γυναικῶδες τί ἐνεδίξατο καὶ ἀθαρσές ἦθος) such as we see so many women generally give way to directly they hear any terrible news. And even the colour of their face proves the cowardice of their soul and often too they utter shrill screams as if the danger threatened them closely. But although that Empress was afraid, her fear was for the Emperor lest an accident should befall him; and fear for herself came second [...]*⁶¹

Anna's construction of femininities, apart from the typical female vocabulary, encompassed also the significant discursive markers that stand for the tropes of male behaviour and character, of which courage, prudence, temperance and political ability were the most prominent ones. The most important female figure that was bestowed with all these qualities was Anna Dalassene, the authoress' grandmother, and a female hero with a man's qualities. She was important for Anna Komnene as her direct political role model whose art of governing remains incomparable to anything.

Therefore in all daily business [Emperor Alexios] he did nothing, not even a trifling thing, [overstatement] without her advice, [dependence of the Emperor upon his mother] but made her the recipient and coadjutor of his plans, and gradually he stole a march upon her and made her a partner in the administration of affairs, sometimes too he would say openly that without her mind and judgment the Empire would go to pieces. (ἄτερ τῆς ἐκείνης φρενὸς καὶ γνώμης ἀπολείται τῆς βασιλείας τὰ πράγματα) [discursive marker – statement about women's prowess in rule] [...]

Thus her mother-love (τὸ τοίνυν μητρῶον πάθος) constrained her [discursive marker – political background of familial relations – a manner of female power exertion] and she ruled conjointly with the Emperor, her son, [discursive marker – the power of interfamilial relations within the Komnenian oikos] and at times even took the reins alone and drove the chariot of Empire without harm or mishap. [discursive marker – focus on woman as a sole ruler] She was of extraordinary intelligence and had a truly imperial disposition (βασιλειαὸς γνώμη), [discursive marker – characterisation – aptness for rulership] successfully governing the Empire..⁶²

⁶¹ Alexias XV 2,2 (3.13), p. 464.

⁶² Alexias III 6, 1-2 (10.35), p. 100.

The Golden Bull in which the Emperor entrusted the government of the Empire to his mother is described in detail.⁶³ Of the few documents that were incorporated in the narrative of the *Alexiad*, the Golden Bull is certainly most striking one, considering the amount of actual power that was confided to a woman. The document shows that we are dealing with a situation where the mother participated equally in Alexios' rule as he. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that Alexios' brother was also given a prominent role in the internal politics, but the focus of the *Alexiad* in this book is solely on the virtuosity of Anna Dalassene's role, and especially in relation to her gender. We owe this to the gender focalisation of our author, whose female authorial voice dominates the lines that immediately follow the Golden Bull:

*Such were the words of the Golden Bull. Men may perhaps marvel that my father, the Emperor, should have shown so much honour to his mother in it, [discursive marker – Anna's justification for the surprising political situation before the audience – the focus is on the gender and mother's role] and handed over everything to her, whilst he himself, so to speak, took his hands off the reins of Government and whilst she metaphorically drove the chariot of state, he only ran alongside and merely shared with her the title of ruler. [Anna elaborates further that the Dalassenes actually ruled the Empire] And this in spite of his having passed the years of boyhood and being of an age when characters like his are generally obsessed with the lust of power [discursive marker – stress laid on Alexios' youth and his immaturity to govern properly and on his own]. He did certainly himself undertake the wars against the barbarians and all the labours and difficulties connected with those, but the whole administration of affairs, the choice of civil officers and the accounts of the income and expenditure of the Empire he entrusted to his mother. Very likely someone at this point would blame [discursive marker – gender discourse – inconvenience that a woman should rule and the authoress' apologetic comment] my father's management in transferring the administration of the Empire to the woman's apartments [discursive marker – intertextual symbolic for weaker imperial authority], but if he thoroughly understood this woman's high-mindedness (*φρόνημα τῆς γυναικὸς*) [discursive marker – rhetoric of praise, appropriation of the imperial prerogatives to female characterisation] and knew what virtue and intellect and remarkable energy she possessed, he would leave off blaming and turn his censure into wondering praise. For my grandmother [discursive marker – the authoress stresses her familial relation with her protagonist – the appropriation of political prowess on the basis of being the direct female descendant of Dalassene] was so clever in business and so skilful in guiding a State, and setting it in order, that she was capable of not only administering the Roman Empire, but any other of all the countries the sun shines upon. [discursive marker – capability beyond spatial limits] She had a wide experience and knew the nature of many things, how each thing began and to what issue it would come, and*

⁶³ Alexias III 6,4 (44.95), p. 101-103.

which things were destructive of certain others, and which again would strengthen others; she was very keen in noting what should be done and clever in carrying it out to a sure end. And not only was she so remarkable intellectually, but her powers of speech too, corresponded to her intellect, for she was really a most convincing orator, not verbose or apt to drag out her speeches to a great length nor did the spirit of her subject quickly fail her, but she would start happily, and also end in the happiest way. [discursive marker – appropriation of male discursive agency] For imperial authority had devolved upon her when she was of a ripe age, just when the powers of thought are at their height, and judgment has matured, and knowledge of affairs is correspondingly at its height, and from these management and administration gain their force. [discursive marker – appropriation of male traits] People of this age can naturally not only speak with more wisdom than the young, as the tragedian says, but they can also act more expediently. In earlier days too when she was still counted among the younger women, it was quite wonderful how she seemed to have ‘an old head on young shoulders.’ [Even young, she was not ‘immature’] Anyone who had eyes to see could have gathered from her expression the fund of virtue and worth that lay in her. However, as I was saying, my father, [discursive marker – the authoress stresses her familial relation with the protagonist] when he had taken the sceptre, reserved for himself the contests and sweats of war [discursive marker – gender discourse – male agency] at which his mother looked on, but her he established as master (ἐκείνην δὲ δεσπότην καταστησάμενος) and like a slave he would do and say whatever she bade (ἐκείνης κελευόμενον καθάπερ δοῦλος ἔλεγέ τε καὶ ἔπραττεν). [word ploy – master and slave – dominance of mother above her son; Dalassene as a sole ruler]. The Emperor verily loved her [discursive marker – familial love as cause for political agency] exceedingly, and he hung on her counsels (so fond was he of his mother) and he made his right hand the servant of her wishes and his sense of hearing the listener to her words, and in every case the Emperor would agree or disagree according as she agreed or disagreed. To put it concisely, the situation was as follows, he indeed had the semblance of reigning but she really reigned-moreover she drew up laws, administered and directed everything; all her orders, written or unwritten, he confirmed by his seal or by word-and thus it may be said, he was the instrument of Empire for her, but not the Emperor. He was satisfied with everything his mother arranged and decided and not only was he very obedient as a son to his mother, but he subjected his mind to her as to a master of the science of ruling. For he was convinced that she had reached perfection in all points and that in prudence (εἰς φρόνησιν) and sagacity (σύνεσιν) of affairs she far surpassed all men of the time [gender discourse – women’s prowess in politics].⁶⁴

The chosen chapter is the most prominent example of Anna’s ways of gendering the politics and creating a specific feminine political agenda. Anna’s presentation

⁶⁴ Alexias VII 1-5, 103-105.

of female agency is not the expected antipode of male agency and although at first we come across expected categories of female behaviour, we still have significant alterations of female agency that transgresses the borders of their gender and are explicated through the interpretive tool of male characterisation. The most alluring examples of these discursive ploys are the characterisation of Anna Dalassene and Anna's interpretations of her grandmother's performance and execution of power. What is even more striking is that Anna Dalassene, through her role of a mother, is presented as the **impersonation of the imperial power**, while her son remains a blurred figure of a young lad infatuated by war operations. The actual power, according to Anna, was accumulated in the hands of Alexios' mother, a woman, capable of governing the empire above all other men. Anna's statement is gender-related, and testifies the importance of gender for Anna Komnene's personal political agenda for which she sought the most exquisite female role model. She found it in her grandmother. I contend that her characterisation of Anna Dalassene is in most part her self-reflective narrative construct. Her characterisation was invested with male traits which served as a persuasive model for a successful female emperor. At this stage, Anna's art of persuasion has created a specific gendered rhetorical discourse where we find a woman endowed with the traits from the encomiastic canon of Menander Rhetor.⁶⁵ The virtues that were prescribed only for the lauded emperors were those that Anna chose for the characterisation of her grandmother Anna Dalassene – φρόνησις and σοφροσύνη. The character of Dalassene was beyond the bifocal axis of Eve and Mother of God. It certainly transgressed the limits of expected woman's behaviour and Anna was aware of those limitations, which is crucial for our case, and insisted on the possibility of transgressing them. For this narrative ploy she chose the character of Anna Dalassene, compared her and even opposed her to her male co-ruler. In the concluding lines of Anna Komnene's political interpretation of her grandmother's ruling capability, she emphatically set the ruling scenario of female and male, mother and son, lord and slave. Anna's reason for this ideological setting was primarily political, and the appropriation of Dalassene's capability to herself is unmistakably apparent in the typical Komnenian symbolism of interfamilial relations where she announced to the audience that it was **her grandmother**, a true and only ruler that managed the Empire successfully.

⁶⁵ cf. Menander Rhetor, *A Commentary*, Edited by D.A. Russell and N.G. Wilson, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1981, pp. 84-92.

Gendering the narrative

In which ways did Anna finally conduct the interplay between gender and narrative? In regard to the narratological principles, the gendering of the *Alexiad* was performed both at extratextual (extradiegetic) and intertextual (interdiegetic) levels. Considering the extratextual level, or the level of non-fictional communication between author and reader, we have a female subject that produced a work imbued with gender connotations. That 'gendered' voice is apparent in Anna Komnene's metanarrative comments that, although featured as a part of text, are nevertheless a means of authorial communication with the audience. The most dominant feminine trait of these self-reflective utterances is Anna Komnene's rhetoric of lament. Another important trait of the gender-wise extratextual level of the *Alexiad* is its provenance. It emerged from the female circle gathered around Empress Eirene Doukaina, which is considered as an instigator of both Bryennios' and Anna's histories. The historical context of the *Alexiad* reveals an important feature of the work that emerged in the secluded circle within the ruling *oikos* that promoted its own political ideology, which was subversive to the mainstream imperial ideology.⁶⁶ Here, we should pose an important question: Was gender important as a prerequisite for political agency? It certainly was. Our modern considerations of gender and the preoccupation of contemporary society with gender is an inevitable part of our lives, since it defines our identity, power relations within the society and social relationships. Gender influences all aspects of our lives and still bears a significant amount of expected, permissible, but mostly learned categories of human behaviour. The binary division to male and female principles still prevails, although it is seriously being reassessed. Considering the medieval society in these terms, this division is quite applicable and convenient since a whole system of gender behaviour was established and it permeated with Christian theology. In reality, the borders of gender behaviour were constantly fluctuating and were sometimes even elusive. In the literary world, there was an established canon of male and female features, modes of agency and character traits. This is where we enter the intertextual level of the *Alexiad* where we observe the modes of presentation of the female actants in the *Alexiad*. Women are the protagonists, and especially Anna Dalassene, Maria of Alania and Eirene Doukaina. They are the characters in the plot, and the actants in the story. They are invested with agency and, although related to the male hero Alexios, they eventually turn out to be actants for their own political aims. This versatile literary ploy of Anna Komnene shows how she used the stereotyped women's behaviour in order to convey an ideology of female political mastery. For

⁶⁶ Magdalino P., "The Pen of the Aunt", *passim*; Stanković, V., *Komnini u Carigradu*, p. 121-126; Vilimonović L., *Struktura i Osobine Aleksijade Ane Komnin*, p. 145-150; 203-205; 271-284; Vilimonović L., "Observations on the Text and Context of Anna Komnene's *Alexiad*", *Belgrade Historical Review* 5 (2014), pp. 43-58

Anna Komnene, gender was important as a crucial sign of her identity, which also put limitations upon her political agency in real-life circumstances. Using her narrative, Anna tended to alleviate the constraints of her gender. She created a perfect role model for herself, interpreting and elaborating Anna Dalassene’s dominant role in politics and her unsurpassed political ability which she compared to male ability. Anna did consider gender as an important factor for opportunities for her own agency and she intentionally gave an ideal picture of a female ruler with male traits. In this regard, Anna’s rhetoric played a key role in constructing a *basilicos logos* for her grandmother, the female counterpart of the emperor, and his *despotes*.

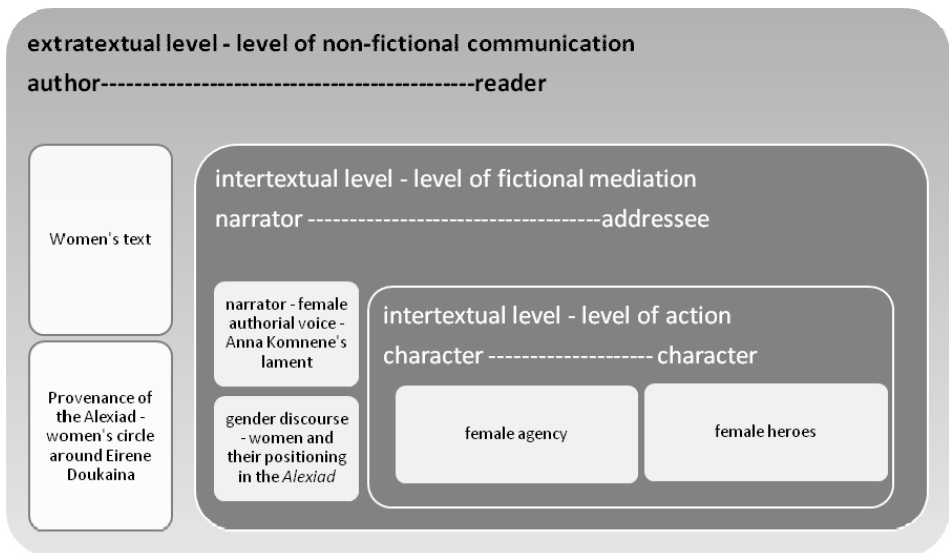


Table 2. The ‘gendering’ of the narrative; Based on the categories of narrative communication (Manfred Jahn, 2005⁶⁷)

Through the narrative ploys with discourse and story, we observe how Anna Komnene performed the ‘gendering’ of the politics. At the level of non-fictional communication between the authoress and her audience, we see how stereotypes and power relations based on gender difference⁶⁸ moulded Anna’s literary presentation as a means of creating a particular political agenda that inevitably contained elements of female discourse. The female authorial voice of Anna Komnene is dominant in the rhetoric of cry which she adapted as a source for her self-reflections. As for the gender discourse, it was shaped mainly through the familial categories of the po-

⁶⁷ Jahn, Manfred. *Narratology: A Guide to the Theory of Narrative*, English Department, University of Cologne, 2005. <http://www.uni-koeln.de/~ame02/pppn.htm#N2.3> (01.10.2015)

⁶⁸ *Feminist Narratology*, 16.

sitioning of women – of a loving mother, caring wife and a good daughter. Anna's ploys with stereotypes as we see them today and with the historical and cultural contexts of women's roles, their space and place in the Byzantine society, as seen through the medieval narrative patchwork, show her remarkable sense of curving the strait linear gender division for the transmission of important political insinuations. Even though her work is filled with stereotyped presentations of women, there are crucial transgressions to the 'male' sphere through appropriations of specific male characterisation typology in various narrative layers. Eventually, Anna also left us with a distorted picture of women's behaviour, personified in her grandmother Anna Dalassene, which was potentiated solely for political reasons and Anna's personal self-promotion. Politics was genuinely considered a sphere of male agency, and it was reserved for 'a male-plot narrative'.

We can certainly say that gender is an issue of modern concern, a crucial social discourse of our time. But one cannot disregard the importance of gender as either a biological or a constructed category of human identity. It was important for Anna Komnene that she was both a woman and a princess. Actually, in defining her womanhood, she positioned herself as a 'daughter'. This implies the importance of her association with the ruling couple, that is, with their families, the Komnenoi and the Doukai. This connection with both imperial branches was of essential importance to Anna Komnene. But her inseparable part was her female identity which dominates in the significant narrative aspects of the *Alexiad*. Anna was aware of her limitations regarding the possibilities of female power exertion. What is important for us is that Anna did not show openly the unpleasantness of being a woman writer in the 12th century.⁶⁹ Her rhetoric of cry has completely different implications than those of the expected categories of female behaviour. It is a discourse of ancient tragedy and its performance. The last chapters of the *Alexiad* end with an extended monody and Anna's weep over the great loss of the empire that came with Alexios' death. Anna's eschatological perception of Alexios' rule, with an ultimate ending that comes with his death, gives us an impression that the whole tragedy unfolding before our eyes was recounted by a female voice and staged by female characters left alone to weep. Anna's political implications through textual ploys were verging on the axis between her gender and her *genos*. These categories were the foundations of her self-presentation and her construction of a specific, gendered political agenda.

⁶⁹ For another interpretation see Neville, L., "Female Authorship", p. 213.

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Резиме

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Родна политика – женски ауторски глас Ане Комнин

Алексијада Ане Комнин представља врло комплексно дело са становишта наративне теорије. Главни литерарни елементи који су предмет наратологије, посебне научне дисциплине која се убрзано развијала почев од 60-их година 20. века, јесу аутор, текст и његови наративни нивои, читалац, односно публика, и жанр. Наратологија је током свог вишедеценијског развоја апсорбовала приступе структуралне лингвистике, семиотике, брисања аутора и питања дискурса. Осамдесетих година 20. века, наратологији је постављено ново научно питање, са становишта теорије феминизма – да ли је могуће говорити о феминистичкој наратологији и шта би та поткатегорија заправо подразумевала?

Расправа Сузан Лансер из 1986. године представља темељ феминистичкој наратологији која је позвала на преиспитивање целокупне наративне теорије и њених поставки, које су се заснивале на литератури коју су писали мушкарци, и у којој је у потпуности преовлађујући мушки дискурс. У том смислу се даље расправљало о томе шта је појава „женског текста”, карактеристична за британску *лепу књижевност* 19. века учинила за почетак еманципације жене и колики је значај женског ауторства у промовисању типичног женског дискурса у оквиру јавног и сведоминантног мушког дискурса. Тај *claim for public authority* кроз књижевност представља по становиштима феминисткиња једну од веома битних фаза у дугој историји еманципације жене, а *женски глас* једну од најзначајнијих еманација тог *новог* политичког дискурса. Сузан Лансер сматра да феминистичка наратологија, која изучава женски текст не мора нужно бити везана за период модерне историје и да би било чак веома корисно ако би се потрага за женским гласом у ранијим епохама испитала и анализирали. У том смислу, *Алексијада* Ане Комнин је искоришћена за нешто другачије читање овог средњовековног текста, и кроз призму феминистичке наратологије одговорено је на следећа питања – Да ли женски ауторски глас Ане Комнине подразумева присвајање јавног ауторитета? Шта представља типично женску фабулу и да ли је она стриктно раздвојена од мушке фабуле? Да ли су изграђени и женски хероји паралелно са мушким херојима и какве су њихове политичке импликације? Шта су основна начела родног дискурса Ане Комнин?

Детаљно је приказано, уз опсежне примере из самог дела и анализу појединих термина, у којој мери је овај *женски текст* јединствен и значајан, јер је већ по свом самом жанру у сфери мушког дискурса. Истраживачи су већ одавно приметили да је Анин ламент посебан облик њене наративне експресије и да је он показатељ ауторкине родне нелагодности. *Алексијада* је текст који је, осим тог дискурзивног лamentsа, као једног од главних елемената женског ауторског гласа, врло родно обојен и у коме су у кључним политичким тренуцима носиоци радње заправо женски ликови. Три главне протагонисткиње *Алексијаде* су три царице, које су биле лично важне ауторки историје. Ана Комнин је у својој историји веома значајне догађаје премоделовала у циљу истицања улоге жена у политици царства. И као најзначајнији аргумент читаве *Алексијаде*, Ана

Комнин је за модел идеалног владара оставила заправо слику једне жене, њене бабе, моћне Ане Даласин. Родни дискурс *Алексијаде* је врло значајан и кључан за разумевање социјалних структура средњовековног друштва. Феминистичка наратологија је отворила ново поље сагледавања комплексне наративне структуре *Алексијаде* и пружио нове одговоре на проблеме историјске контекстуализације дела Ане Комнин.